



# The Gifted

By

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## Chapter One

## Proclamation

The small cadre of guards fought the crowds to bring their prisoner to the platform. Locked within their tight circle, the figure which was causing such controversy looked too defenseless to be the reason behind the mass hysteria overtaking the hundreds of people in the plaza.

The guards were having a difficult time getting the young woman to the place where her sentence would be carried out. Pelted by debris and fists, they endured the scorn and hatred from the mob that was growing steadily worse. Already their prisoner, clad only in a simple worker's shift, bore bruises and other signs of abuse from both her jailers and the guards.

"May the heavens fry out your eyes!" someone screamed from the masses.

"Put THEM in the pod!"

"Yes! POD THEM!"

Freshly enraged, the crowd pressed closer to the cadre. One man shoved his face directly into one guard's and growled, "How can you do this to one of your own? How can you live with yourself?"

The guard lowered his eyes but maintained his grip on the woman's arm, determined to carry out his orders.

A short distance away, two men looked down at the scene from the safety of their balcony. As the mob jostled and hampered the guards' progress toward the launching ramp, one man turned to his superior. "I still believe this is a mistake. You're making a martyr out of her, and they won't soon forget. The people adore their Gifted."

"I had no choice," the other man replied tersely. "She was becoming too popular. You know as well as I that the other Gifted were listening to her, and were on the verge of rebelling themselves."

"And you thought that by issuing the Condemnation Proclamation on her, that it would dispel the rebellion?"

Angrily, the man turned to face his accuser. "We've gone over this worthless argument before," he hissed. "She's a traitor. With her gone, she won't be able to talk to them. She won't be able to set an example with her refusals and abstinence. The Proclamation has been set, and within the hour she'll be launched into orbit to serve her sentence." He straightened and brushed out the wrinkles in his jacket. In a quieter voice, he continued as he watched the near-riot below them. "Once the sentence has been fulfilled, I'm going to approach the Judiciary and ask for a Cessation of Interment."

"You're WHAT?"

The other man sighed heavily. "You heard me the first time. Must I repeat everything?"

"You *cannot* refuse the people having her body brought back for public display! Roha Non! Listen to yourself! Do you want a major civil war on your hands?"

"I can't afford to bring it back from orbit," Roha Non snapped. "Once her body is put on display, they'll use her as a rallying point. No, it's best she be removed from here as soon as possible and remain out of the public's eye forever."

A massive swelling of noise from below drew the two men's attention back to the crowd. The guards had reached the platform and now held their prisoner ready to ascend to the ship awaiting her.

With the help of a few people, a young man managed to break through and fall at the feet of the prisoner. A guard started to level his hands at the man, prepared to use his Gift to fight back the encroaching figure, but was stayed by a pleading look from the woman. Shaken, the guard allowed her to kneel and help the man back to his feet.

"Go with our hearts," he whispered to the prisoner, clasping her hands in his and pressing a kiss to her thumbs. He stared deeply into her eyes. An unspoken signal passed between them. Then he was gone, swallowed up by the jostling mob.

The woman shivered and pressed her fists to her chest. Glancing back at the guards, she barely nodded she was ready, then lowered her face to hide the tears that began to spill. She didn't want them to see her cry, but she couldn't stop the flow.

Her robes of state had been stripped away, along with her title and any authority she'd been granted. Her once thigh-long hair had been shorn to just above her shoulders, an even greater abasement than losing her uniform. The only thing they couldn't remove from her was the signet of her power, a permanent mark in her flesh that would remain with her for her entire life.

She was a condemned outlaw, a rogue Gifted—a rare but extremely dangerous being. Worse, because she was a Gifted, and one of the most powerful of her kind, the guards and Council kept her under heavy sedation to prevent her from using her abilities to escape her sentence. Listless and semi-conscious from the drugs, the woman stumbled up the platform, unable to present any picture of honor or bravery to the thousands of people who'd come to the Presentation to protest her sentencing.

At the top of the platform, they were met by the head of the Judiciary. Raising his arms for silence, he patiently waited for the masses to quiet down enough so he could pronounce judgment on the prisoner. A stiff wind had sprung up, forcing him to strain to be heard.

"Sah'Reena, do you understand the crimes by which you have been found guilty?" he asked loudly.

Somewhere inside herself, the young woman managed to find the strength to straighten up and present him with a steady gaze. Bloodied, scarred, and almost broken, she was still a picture of beauty and power. The wind whipped her loosened hair about her face and shoulders, but all she could focus on was her sorrow and the pity she had for the insignificant man before her. He was just a pawn for the Judiciary, made to utter their rhetoric because the main governmental body was too frightened of her to do it themselves in person. "I know what I have been accused of. If they are crimes, it is by your belief, and not those of the people."

A roar of approval followed her statement. The Judiciary motioned again for quiet. "Do you understand the sentence that will be carried out because of your crimes?"

"I know the punishment that has been pronounced on me by those who fear me, who fear my power, and who fear the righteousness that I believe and stand by." A sudden surge of anger bubbled up from deep within her soul, and in a surprisingly strong voice, she raised her arm, palm bared to all, and called out, "I WILL NOT BE A WEAPON!"

The crowd screamed and pushed forward. Alarmed, the Judiciary stepped back, nearly falling off the platform as the guards shoved the woman into the ship in their hurry to escape the now out-of-control mob. The door closed with a hiss, and the enraged people beat on the outer hull and door with their fists and pummeled the view ports with debris and rocks.

Caught in the crush, the Judiciary went down, a victim to the anger and hatred of the people he was supposed to serve. From their balcony, the two men watched as the helpless official died and was left in a crumpled pile at the side of the platform.

The Deathship powered up and rose quietly, pausing to hover less than fifty feet above the crowd. A minute later it angled upward and continued to rise into the sky, toward space. When it could no longer be seen by the crowd, the people began to disperse to their homes and businesses. They never looked back at the lifeless body they'd beaten. An undercurrent of hostility rumbled like a soft growl.

The two men watched and waited until the plaza had nearly cleared, then Roha Non sent a message to have the Judiciary's body removed from the platform and taken to an interment chamber.

"You should have sent in more guards," Sor Set told him. He was unable to tear his eyes away from the fallen figure.

"The guards are of the Gifted. There weren't many we could trust to carry out her sentence."

"Still ...."

Roha Non turned away from the window and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Sor Set.

"To the communications center. I want to be kept in contact until the moment they launch the pod. I want to be absolutely certain ...."

"You're that afraid of her, aren't you?" Sor Set whispered.

Roha Non pivoted to stare at his assistant. Several seconds passed as he glared at the man before answering. "I'm afraid of what she can do," he finally said, squaring his shoulders. "I'm afraid of what our world would become if what she preached and believed in became the rule for our way of life. I'm afraid of her, yes."

"She's only a Gifted," Sor Set began to protest.

"No! Not just a Gifted. Had her powers been allowed to gestate, she would have been capable of destroying everything. *Everything*. Do you understand?"

"Everything," the man echoed.

Roha Non nodded. He exited out the door followed closely by his assistant and they headed for the building where they could keep in contact with the ship that was heading out into the darkness of the universe, preparing to dump its human cargo like so much unwanted refuse.

## Chapter Two

## Anomaly

Stuart Mallory burst through the reception room as he headed for the inner door. The petite secretary, however, was faster, rounding her desk and intercepting him before he reached the other office. Barricading the door with her body, she held out her arms to bar him from going any further.

"I charge ten dollars for interlopers without an appointment," she teased good-naturedly, but the underlying threat was clear.

Mallory stared into the woman's crystal blue eyes and recognized the bulldog tenacity that was well-known about her. Her loyalty to her boss and her protectiveness of him were traits many wished their own assistants possessed.

"C'mon, Jack. Give me a break. I need to get these charts to him!"

"That's Jacqueline to you, bud. And what charts? Mitchell didn't mention anything about charts, and I was just on the phone with him not ten minutes ago."

"Oh, gimme a break, Jacqueline!" Mallory half-whined. "There's something on them I want him to see. I saw it first. I want credit if it's what I think it is!"

Jacqueline Campbell gave the young scientist another stern glare and lowered her arms. "I'm going over to my desk now and buzz him. If I see you take one step toward the door, or even reach for the doorknob without my expressed, written consent, I'm nailing your hide and your charts to the bulletin board in the cafeteria so everyone can see what I do to office-busters." Turning her back on him, she walked over to her phone and picked up the receiver, pressing the inter-office button.

"Rob? I have Stu Mallory here with some charts he wants to show you. Shall I send him in or serve him up as an entree in the cafeteria? Okay, just checking. Thanks. Okay, Mallory, you've been reprieved. Go on in."

Giving her a salute, Stu opened the door and went in.

Robin Dickenson looked up from the report he'd been editing and gave the man a sympathetic smile. "What 'cha got there?" he asked with a small nod.

"I need you to look at these star charts I just got from the observatory. Hey, man, you don't feed your guard dog enough. She almost took my head off!"

"Which is exactly why I pay her the big bucks," Robin laughed. He held out a hand. "Show me what's so important that you're willing to risk your life for it."

Mallory pulled the sheets from their protective envelope. He spread them out over the desk as the other man cleared a space. "Okay. Remember me telling you about that anomaly around Antiphides?"

Robin pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. Picking up one chart, he held it up toward the ceiling lights. "You called it a highway of some sort, didn't you? A strip of space that flowed faster through regular space like a current in the ocean."

"Yeah! That's it! Well, I think we finally got our first pictures of it." Mallory leaned over the other scientist's shoulder and pointed to a barely visible distortion on the chart. It definitely was there, though, and it didn't look like 'normal' space.

"It's moving, Rob. I'll swear on a stack of bibles. It's highly erratic, constantly changing courses, which could explain why we've never seen it before."

"Have you tracked its projected course, or can you even pinpoint one?"

Mallory nodded. "But it isn't easy. Its variables are too random. Even on its present course it gets wider and narrower. It twists and turns like a snake, almost as if it's alive."

"Could it be alive?"

"No. No way."

"Then it's not exactly like an ocean current?"

"Oh, no," Mallory shook his head. "It's more mercurial. Less stable."

"Anything at HEASARC?"

"Couldn't find a thing, but that doesn't mean there isn't any other reference to it in the archives. I have a couple of people reading through them, though."

Robin nodded. "Where is it now?"

"Roughly? About half a light year from our galaxy, but it's headed our way."

Robin turned to look at the man. "That's too close. Will our path take us closer to it?"

Mallory shrugged. "It's too unstable to be certain. Between it moving our way, and us moving toward it ...."

"How fast is it moving?"

"We estimate approximately forty thousand miles per second, give or take a couple thousand. At least its speed is a constant, thank God. But that's not the most incredible thing about it. Rob, *it* may travel at that velocity, but its center core we think is like a bloodstream inside a vein. I'm willing to stake my reputation on that."

"You mean you think the interior travels at a greater speed?" Robin tried to clarify.

Stu nodded, licking his lips in preparation to drop the bombshell.

"How about ... four *hundred* thousand miles per sec?"

He got the effect he'd wanted. Robin's eyes glazed over for a split-second, but there was no doubting he'd made his case.

"Any theories what causes it?"

"Who the hell can tell at this point? I've been arguing its existence for the past three months and nobody's listened to me until now." He traced a line directly from the distortion to the outer parameter of the galaxy. "My educated guess is it'll go right past the moon and maybe swallow up Venus. If we're lucky."

"What if Earth passes through it instead?"

Mallory backed away from the desk, hands in the air. "Hey, I don't even want to go there. I'm not into chaos theory, thank you very much."

Robin looked at the other two charts and sighed heavily. "You've got Palomar and Adrian Peak here. Who else are you using to triangulate this thing?"

"Right now? I don't. That's why I'm here. I'd like to bring in one of our satellites, but I'll need your clearance."

"What's our window?"

"Five weeks, maybe seven at the most. It could crack like a whip and brush past us, or hit us dead on."

Robin muttered an obscenity under his breath.

"Yeah," Mallory nodded, understanding. "*Liberty*."

Getting to his feet, Robin slid the charts back into their envelope. "I'm taking these to Overmeyer."

“What do you think he’ll say?”

Robin paused with his hand on the doorknob. “What he’ll say and what he’ll probably do may be two different things. If he’s smart, he’ll postpone the mission.”

“But you don’t think he will,” Mallory commented.

“For a new top secret spy satellite and a fifty million dollar launch? What do you think?”

Robin opened the door. “Jack, call Overmeyer’s office and let them know I’m on my way. I have a priority two they need to review before the launch.”

Mallory hurried over to the door. “Need me to do anything?”

“Yeah. Keep your eyes on this thing. I want updates on its progress every thirty minutes and a new chart every six hours.”

“You got it,” the man promised and left the office.

Jack watched the scientist leave then turned back to her boss. Her face mirrored her concern. “Bad news.”

Robin made a face. “Could be. Hope not. We don’t need anything to happen to this project.”

“Need me to do anything after I call the general?”

“Yeah. Get a fresh pot of coffee going. Looks like we’re going to be putting in some overtime.”



## Chapter Three

## Podded

Once the Deathship reached a stable orbit above the planet, the guards went to retrieve their prisoner from her holding chamber.

As the door slid silently open, Sah'Reena slowly raised her head to look at the men standing in the doorway. The last dose of restraining fluids had been injected into her a few minutes earlier and were already beginning to take effect. Her vision was blurry, and she could barely feel her arms or legs. Her tongue clogged her throat. She desperately needed a drink. Four days had passed since her initial incarceration. Since then she'd had little to eat or drink, and even less sleep. Her body ached from the abuse it had endured, and still bore bloody welts and lacerations in many areas. Her back was the worst. Any touch against it sent unrivaled pain throughout every muscle and nerve.

A senior guard checked her to make sure the drugs were working. Signaling for two others to take her, the prisoner was lifted into their arms and half-carried through the narrow corridors toward the pod bay.

Inside the massive launch area, the rest of her accusers stood waiting to see her sentence carried out. Quietly they watched as the guards took the limp young woman and placed her into the narrow, coffin-shaped container sitting in the middle of the bay. Quickly, efficiently, they pressed her into the small compartment. When they were finished, they stepped away from the pod. Slowly the layers inside the tiny vehicle formed around the prisoner's limbs, solidifying upon contact, locking against her skin and clothing as if she, too, were made of the same substance.

The senior guard checked the bonding to make sure she couldn't raise her hands and try to escape. Even if she somehow managed to break the seals, the drugs stupefied her, thus suppressing both her will and her ability to escape her destiny.

He looked down at the woman whom he had admired for so long and took a deep breath. "Sah'Reena, it is my duty to pronounce you exiled from Murrall. Do you understand your sentence and accept it?" he intoned loudly enough for the accompanying witnesses to hear.

With difficulty, the woman managed to respond. "I understand it, but I do not accept it." Struggling, she was able to focus on the guard who stood over her and recognized him. In a softer voice she asked, "How long?"

Am Eron shuddered. He detested every moment he had to stand there, detested his being assigned to the task of sending her away, and he prayed for her forgiveness. "Two days, Gifted. Perhaps three if you're strong."

Sah'Reena closed her eyes, resigned. "So be it. I do not blame you, Am Eron. I know you're only here because of your duty." Sighing, she took her last look around the bay, at the small crowd that had gathered to witness her removal. "This is not over, you know," she whispered. "My death will not stop what has begun."

"I hope not," he whispered back. "I, too, abhor being a slave of another man's taste for cruelty." He reached over her and pulled down the pod door. A soft hiss echoed as the lid sealed shut. From the tiny window set in the upper section of the lid, he could see her eyes

looking back at him. Giving her a small sign of goodbye, Am Eron stepped back and nodded toward the guard standing near the launch platform.

The crowd watched as the pod was lowered through the floor, into the small launch tube below. The panel in the floor closed and a small siren signaled the outer hull door opening. Moments later, the pod was jettisoned into space.

"It is done." The crowd murmured the final sentence before dispersing. After the pod's trajectory was finalized, the Deathship would return to the planet to await the next condemned prisoner.

Am Eron stood near the large window and watched the small cylindrical object soar through the blackness, homeless, and disdained by so many. His heart ached with guilt, but more than that he hated himself for his cowardice. He had been given the chance to join the small but rapidly growing militia that had become a part of the group of dissidents, but fear of retribution had kept him from going to their meeting that fateful night. He had a family, and he knew well the horrors that would be inflicted on them if he was discovered.

A group of nearly twelve Gifted soldiers had burst upon the rebels and quickly brought them to their knees, except for Sah'Reena, who had continued to fight. However, her own personal code had prevented her from harming or taking a life, and she'd finally been doused with the strong repression drug before being taken into custody.

Ever since that night, Am Eron had sworn to do whatever he could to aid the rebels in their cause. He had a direct link to the main Judiciary and would be able to notify the dissidents of any further raids, but their forces now were mostly depleted, and their hopes and spirits had been crushed with the capture of their most influential leader. It would take months, maybe years to build up a strong enough resistance that could again challenge the main government.

"Hope go with you," he whispered to the barely visible burial vehicle, "and thank you for your forgiveness. I will not let you down again."

\* \* \* \*

The pod sped through the velvety void, propelled by the launch mechanism from the Deathship. Sah'Reena watched through her tiny viewport as she went literally nowhere.

There was just enough air in the pod to last her two or three days, but she had no food and no water. The drugs in her system slowed her metabolism and kept her from becoming hysterical or panicky, but they would wear off long before her time was up. Her hands were bound by her side. Even if they were free, there wasn't enough room inside the pod to even raise them to her face. And even if she could move them, what good were her powers to her now? Would she have the ability to take her own life, and thus avoid the chance of a more torturous death? Could she abandon any fragment of hope she might live?

*Live where? And how?* her inner voice berated. *What is there out here?*

She wished she could feel for the tiny piece of plastoid hidden under her wrist. The young man who'd fallen to his knees before her and grasped her hands before she'd entered the ship had pressed the chip to her palm. Once inside her holding room, she had examined it and found it to be a miniaturized star chart.

Tears rose into her eyes. Her people still held out hope. They had defied the death sentence imposed upon her and believed she could return, *would* return, to finish what she had started. *What she had started* ....

A tear escaped and floated up to where she could barely see it from the corner of her eye. Even with her Gift she could not escape where she was. The pod was at the mercy of the great universe. If she was lucky, she would die in her sleep. She couldn't move, couldn't do anything

except breathe ... and think ... and watch ... and wait.

The teardrop touched the edge of the viewport and froze. Sah'Reena watched the moisture crystallize and realized how cold the outer hull had become. The pod wasn't heated, but her tightly wrapped and bound body somehow managed to retain enough warmth. That, too, would soon be gone.

Two days, perhaps three. Death by dehydration, starvation, asphyxiation, or hyperthermia. And it was quiet—so very, very complete in its total absence of sound. There wasn't even the soft noise of her own breathing to keep her company.

Her wrist pressed against the green chip. She wished she could see it. She wished she could hold it up to her eyes and compare the placement of stars and planets with what floated past her self-contained cell.

Closing her eyes, she thought back on many things, much of which she had reflected upon during her four days of torture. She wondered about her friends and hoped they did not have to pay as brutally for her crimes. She wondered about her allies against the Judiciary. And she wondered about her fellow Gifted, those who had called her friend, and who had provided her with their powers whenever she'd needed them.

The one thing she couldn't dwell on was her future. She knew her time was measured now in every breath she drew and with every beat of her heart. She was completely helpless to stop her course, but she couldn't allow herself to remain on that subject.

Regret, shame, sorrow, and fear—all emotions now were useless. Calling on them would only lead her to madness. All she would allow herself was to watch the universe float by. And when she grew tired, and when she could think no more, to sleep.

The cylinder wobbled through space, indiscernible against the backdrop of stars and neighboring galaxies, a nearly invisible drop of life in an infinite sea almost devoid of life. Unless it crashed into another object it would continue on its course for the rest of eternity, as space did not impede.

\* \* \* \*

Far away, unseen, unknown, and unsuspected, a distortion in the universe twinkled as it wriggled through the void. To the anomaly the death pod was no more than an insignificant speck of sand in a galaxy-sized desert. It licked the minuscule ship before whisking it along on its tail. In less than the time it took for her tears to freeze, Sah'Reena was no longer part of her own solar system.

Mindlessly the fluctuation lazily headed toward a little-traveled and inconsequential cluster known as the Milky Way.

## Chapter Four

Rozon

The anomaly undulated from one galaxy to another, sometimes circling a star or planet. At other times it washed over a helpless moon, dragging it a million light years from its mother planet before throwing it back into the void.

It looped around black holes and threaded nebulas with abandon—a lifeless entity with a body but no soul. Derelict spaceships from long-dead alien races were caught in its whirlpool and sucked along for eternity. Other species found themselves inadvertently caught in its grip, trapped after finding out that no amount of power could pull their vessel away and out of its path.

Lazily drifting past an icy comet, it had encountered a small planet revolving around a blue dwarf sun, along with four sister planets. Not far outside the planet's atmosphere, a minuscule object had moved slowly but surely away. The anomaly pulled it into its embrace as smoothly as a caress, and the creature inside the object never awakened from her nightmarish sleep.

By now the pod was moving at an incredible rate. Light years passed in mere minutes. The anomaly was yet unknown to most sentient beings. For although it moved itself at a steady pace throughout space, its interior contained time distortions, and ripped to shreds all the laws of physics. It was a worm hole and a black hole. It was a window and a door and a universe all unto itself, but there were also brief slices of time when it was also an ephemeral garbage disposal where things were sucked in to collapse and never to be seen again.

It was a creature unknown to most species. Those few that were aware of it feared it, shuddered in horror at what it could do if it swallowed their home world, terrified at what would happen to them if it distorted any part of their tenuous existence, if it took a moon, a neighboring planet ... or a sun.

No one knew what the ribbon of unreality really was, or where it had originated. It was like the Universe itself, with no known history. No beginning or end. It simply existed, and it *moved*. Yet, it wasn't alive, or so it was believed.

The Seekers and scientists of Murrall had known about the distortion for only the past seventeen or eighteen generations, ever since the first outcast was shoveled into orbit around the planet. Back then, the great Seeker Tol'Berra had discovered a wavy line of space moving past their world, looking like a waving wall of water against the black backdrop of stars. At times it was wide. At others it twisted and appeared thin, almost invisible. That was when she gave it the name of the Rozon, and theorized it was like a road. But instead of a traveler using it to go from one place to another, the Rozon moved the traveler. Unfortunately, the traveler had no idea where his final destination would be. Or when.

When the heretic Gifted Sah'Derek had been pressed into orbit, the Rozon appeared to reach out and touch the tiny craft. One moment, the silver pod was there. The next, it was if it had never existed.

There had been a brief discussion by the Council on whether to send up a relay ship to try and search for the pod. But since Sah'Derek had already been floating for more than eighteen

cycles, it was determined that it would be a waste of time and energy to look for a dead man, even if he was a Gifted.

That had been the only time the Rozon had been seen, although it had been thoroughly noted in the annals of the Council. That had been many, many, many cycles ago.

Now ... it was back.

Bor Paal raced down the terraced steps toward the main gateway leading to the Council chambers. A guard stopped him just long enough to realize who the scientist was, then waved him on in.

The elderly astronomer pressed himself beyond his normal endurance to reach the main hall just as the Council session was ending. Giving up a quick blessing, he made himself known to the Regent's assistant before collapsing at the man's feet.

Sanderan was a thin, flat-faced man, known for his tenaciousness and his honesty, which was why he was a valued assistant to the Council, and especially its leader, the Regent. But more than anything he was known for his level thinking. He could tell immediately if a projected or impending 'disaster' was worthy of attention, or whether it was something concocted out of thin air and needed nothing more than a dose of assurance to the masses.

Seeing the determinant scientist nearly passed out before him, he quickly called for several of the Council members to help him lay the man in a more comfortable position until he could relay what had sent him to the hall. It had to be something important. Bor Paal had a reputation for being a firm and authoritative figure.

Once the scientist had regained his breath, and his face had resumed its normal color, Sanderan knelt next to him. "I value your judgment, Bor Paal. This is important?"

"We must speak in private," the scientist insisted.

"Very well. My rooms are nearby. Can you manage on your own?"

The elderly man managed to get to his feet and with a little help from the assistant, hobbled to the offices of the statesman.

Once inside, Bor Paal took advantage of the comfort couch to rest. Sanderan brought him a mug of *orso*, patiently waiting for the man to relay what he had come to say.

"My many thanks," the scientist said.

Sanderan inclined his head, accepting the offer. "We've seen little of each other these past few cycles. Did you seek me out specifically?"

"I sought out someone who would listen to me," Bor Paal gasped, his breath still coming in short pants. At least he felt better. "Tell me, Sanderan, have you heard of the Rozon?"

The assistant gave him a blank look. Bor Paal shook his head.

"I thought not. Then I will give you the brief explanation. It is a force. A part of space that can destroy whole planets, or just pick them up and carry them untold clusters away, then drop them."

"Like a comet? Or a meteor?"

"No, nothing like that. It could be alive, but we've no proof."

"Alive? Since when?"

"We have records dating back seventeen archivists' entries. However, I would not be surprised to find that the Rozon is as old as the universe itself."

Sanderan made a face. "Nothing can live that long."

"Nothing *we* know of," Bor Paal argued. "The Rozon is not from Murrall. It simply is. And it's back."

"I don't understand."

"It travels through the universe. Perhaps it even travels through time. It takes or eats or swallows anything in its path, and sometimes it regurgitates what it takes in part or in whole farther down the path."

"This is truth?"

"More than truth. Seventeen generations ago our sister world had two moons. Two. Shoah and Stahoah."

"Allurrall has Shoah. One moon," said Sanderan.

"It used to have two."

The assistant stared at the noted scientist resting on his couch. Without a doubt, he knew the man would not tell him such a thing unless he had irrefutable proof to back him.

"What happened to the second moon? The Rozon?"

"Yes, the Rozon. The moon was moved."

"Moved?"

"Our Seekers found it six generations later. It is in a quadrant cluster so far away that it would take our ships hundreds of revolutions to reach it. But we found it."

"How could they be certain it was the other moon? Sta ..."

"Stahoah. We had set up communities there. We were farming it for its resources. Those communities were self-sufficient, their energy sources unlimited due to the power they derived from the stars. Our Seekers found evidence of those communities. We found Stahoah."

"Why did we never send ships to rescue our workers there?"

"The Council determined it was too risky. No more has ever been said about it," Bor Paal told him.

Sanderan mulled over everything he'd been told. Crouching before the renowned elder, he laid a hand on the man's arm. "You said the Rozon was back. Does it pose a threat to us?"

"That, I cannot say. It moves like a living creature, although we have no way of knowing if it really is alive. But it's close. Very close. Too close. And it's coming closer."

"How can you be sure this is the same Rozon? Perhaps it's another Rozon, a less threatening one."

"You know better than I that you cannot make assumptions like that. We must get our people into shelter in case the Rozon swallows Murrall. We must prepare for the worst and then pray it never happens. That is why I came myself to the Council, because I knew they would have to hear it directly from me or they would never believe it. As did you."

Sanderan understood fully. The man was right. Now, time was imperative.

"It will take me some time to gather the Council together. I will need you here to present your findings. Where are your Seekers?"

"Back at the Temple. They will not leave until this crisis has passed."

Silence passed as both men contemplated the importance of their discovery, and the measures that would have to be taken soon. Gathering his courage, Bor Paal voiced what he'd been wanting to say ever since the Rozon had been verified.

"Sanderan."

"Yes."

"There is no Gifted on our world who can remove this threat from our world. Not ... anymore."

Sanderan's face darkened with the realization. There *had* been a Gifted more powerful than any being ever recorded in their history, a Gifted who could have been powerful enough to eliminate the Rozon. But now they would never know. They had condemned her not one cycle

ago, and sent her up into space to die.

“We need her back,” Bor Paal whispered.

“We ... can’t.”

“The Council must convince the Judiciary to reverse their decision. We must bring her back. By sending her away, they may have sealed our doom.”

“No heretic has ever been recalled. No traitor has ever been brought back and reprieved. Not even a Gifted.”

“Not even Sah’Reena?” The scientist reached up and grabbed a handful of the assistant’s robe of state. Pulling him so close that they were nose to nose, Bor Paal gritted his teeth.

“They’re no longer sacrificing one life. They’re sacrificing a whole planet, all for the sake of their pride.”

“She was leading a revolt of the Gifted! She would have changed our entire way of life! Our government! Our laws!”

*“But we would still have our lives!”* Bor Paal shouted.

Jerking the man’s hand from his robes, Sanderan stumbled backwards. His head was pounding and he needed some time to think. Everything was happening too quickly, and already they had wasted too much time. Yet, the scientist again had raised an issue that was as sensitive as it was unavoidable. By sending the Gifted to her death, they may have very likely insured their own.

Turning toward the door, the assistant gave the scientist one final glance. “You’ve made your case with me. I will notify you when you can make it with the Council. If I were you, Bor Paal, do not mention Sah’Reena. Not if you value your position and your own life.”

“We soon may not have any positions or lives to worry about,” the scientist commented dully.

Sanderan left the man alone with his prophecy ringing in his ears.

## Chapter Five

Icarus

“Houston, this is Sunny Side Up.”

“*Liberty*, this is Houston. What’s the weather like up there, Eggles?”

“Houston, we would like to speak to Icarus.”

Frank Wharton nearly dropped his mug of coffee into his lap. Scrambling for his console, he adjusted the volume a minute setting on the dial and asked for a verification. “Say again, *Liberty*?”

“We need to speak to Icarus.”

Training took over and Wharton flipped the switch that relayed NASA communication with the space shuttle to the broadband satellite in orbit. People watching the telecommunications on their television sets or computers were suddenly without sound or picture.

“Affirmative, *Liberty*. You are in relay.”

While Wharton reached for the phone, his other hand flipped the appropriate toggle switches. All were smooth, unthinking moves ground into him from constant drills.

In the phone tree of command, Robin was fifth down the line. When the line lit up, he answered it himself, seeing that one of the other lines was tied up, meaning Jack was already busy.

“Astrophysics. Dr. Dickenson.”

“Icarus,” said the strange voice. One word, no explanation. It didn’t need one.

Robin bolted for the door, grabbing his notepad from where he’d left it near the coffee pot. Jack looked up and gave him a questioning look. He patted his beeper riding on his hip, meaning he would be in contact later if he needed her. Because of government security, cell phones were prohibited onsite.

Down the hallway he spotted Truez heading for the elevator. “Hold up, Carlos!” he yelled, and the astronomer obliged by keeping the doors open until Robin could slip inside. “What are you doing on this side of the world?” Robin asked conversationally. It was no secret where Truez was heading. Both were aiming for Building Thirty and Mission Control.

“Dropping off some star charts to Felling. Lucky I remembered my pager.”

The elevator stopped to let them out. Together they hurried out of the office building and began jogging toward Thirty. It only took them a few minutes to reach the hub of the space center and a couple more to go through clearance before being allowed into the control center.

Already the small room was in organized chaos, filled with the dozen or so workers already assigned to the space shuttle. The additional scientists, nearly two dozen more, made for very crowded conditions.

The glass windows surrounding the room had been neutralized, preventing anyone unauthorized from outside from seeing in. The tours from the space center across the highway had been diverted, as per regulations.

“Any idea why they called an Icarus?” Truez muttered.

“I’m as in the dark as you are,” Robin admitted.



It wasn't long before Brigadier General Francis Overmeyer stepped to the front of the room where the screens were located and waved for everyone's attention. He wasted no time getting to the point.

"At ten-sixteen hours the space shuttle *Liberty*, under the command of Captain Gerald Egges, issued a code Icarus. At the moment we are under a Level Blue alert. I repeat, a Level Blue alert. There is not a problem with the shuttle or the crew as we know at this moment. We temporarily lost communication with the shuttle and are waiting for transmission to be resumed. Again, I repeat, there is not a problem with the shuttle, nor with the crew as--."

"Houston, this is *Liberty*." The giant screen behind the General grew lighter, but just barely. The picture was blurry, almost like the snowy picture of an old-fashioned television screen.

"*Liberty*, this is Houston. We copy. What is your emergency?" Wharton's voice was calm and modulated, although Wharton himself was beginning to sweat bullets. Too much was riding on this mission, too much money had been invested in the space shuttle's mission. The last thing anyone needed was an emergency to bollix up the work.

The screen cleared enough to where Egges' and Rojovic's faces were distinct. Both men look worried but not frightened.

"Houston, no emergency. Not yet, anyway. At least we're praying up here that it doesn't turn out that way."

Overmeyer stepped up to the screen. "Gerry, what's the problem? You called an Icarus alert."

"Yes, sir, I did. Have your guys been watching the stars out this way lately?"

The General turned and spotted Robin standing among the crowd. "Dr. Dickenson, I believe that's your expertise."

"I got your back, Egges," Robin replied directly to the astronauts. "If you're referring to that anomaly that's heading in our direction, we've been keeping a close eye on it."

"Well, you should see it from this side," Rojovic responded. Although Vaslav Rojovic had only joined the American space program five years before, he seemed to have been born an astronaut. He had a grandfather, two uncles, a cousin, and a brother involved in one fashion or another with space exploration, he himself being third generation transplanted Ukranian. He was small, compact, fast, and brilliant. He was also probably the smartest man currently on the space shuttle.

Robin crossed his arms over his chest. "Talk to me, Rojo."

While the little man rattled off a series of numbers and trajectories, Robin made note on his notepad. The astronauts had an advantage over the earth-bound—they could see from the other side of the moon. They also had an unobstructed view of the universe.

Around Mission Control activity went up a notch. *Liberty's* true and primary mission was to launch the new spy satellite for the military—very hush-hush. And while launching a space shuttle in secret was an impossibility, NASA often found ways to explain the mission by adding what was referred to as a Mardi Gras. A Mardi Gras was a member of the shuttle crew who was trained to perform a specific function on board. That function was to be the focus of the mission and where the attention of the news media would concentrate. Mardi Gras was not a frivolous gesture, not when a billion dollars worth of shuttle, equipment, and man power were at stake, but served as a suitable smoke screen for anything that needed to be accomplished without notice.

Vaslav Rojovic was the Mardi Gras, sent up to help map out the dark side of the moon.

Little did anyone expect the scientist to become the most crucial member on board.

“... giving it a projected trajectory of six point six two degrees.”

Robin started and looked back up at the screen. “Repeat that trajectory?”

“Six point six two degrees,” Rojovic stated.

“Can’t be.” Robin shook his head. A nervous little smile crossed his lips. “I’ve been tracking that anomaly myself for the past week. Just yesterday it was on a nine nine point oh two trajectory.”

Rojovic looked off to one side, apparently double-checking the readings from his instruments. “Can’t be, Doc. From this side of the world it looks like it’s heading straight for us.”

Overmeyer stepped up, along with Fulton, Director in charge of Mission Control. “What’s the argument here, fellas?” Fulton asked with deadly seriousness.

Robin pointed toward the screen. “We’ve been triangulating with Palomar on the position and trajectory of the anomaly every six hours for nearly seven days. By all calculations the anomaly was going to bypass Earth, cut through her orbit, and miss the moon by several hundred thousand miles. Now, that may sound like a long distance to you, but in galactic terms, it’s a bullet graze.”

“Yet, by my readings I’ve just taken not two hours ago, trajectory shows the anomaly heading straight for us. No near miss. A dead-on hit,” interjected the astronaut.

Fulton stared at one scientist, then the other, in confusion. Both men were superior in their field. Both men would swear on their findings. However, only one of them could be right.

Or ... maybe they were both right.

“Rob, you said your findings are, what, twenty-four hours old? And you found the object to be parallel to Earth and traveling outward. But, Vaslav, your findings show it to be perpendicular to Earth and on a collision course? That makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. An object cannot change direction like that ...”

“Unless it’s either a space ship or a life form under its own power source,” Robin finished for him.

“Are we under threat of alien invasion?” Overmeyer blurted out. Although the question seemed ludicrous, it no longer seemed unlikely. There simply was no other way to explain why the oncoming object had changed directions.

Normal, attributable space objects like meteors and comets were predictable right down to their content, speed, size, and destination. Planets and suns could also be labeled to the nth degree. Even undependable and lesser known phenomena such as black holes and vortex fluxes followed definite patterns. But this anomaly, which seemed to be weaving its way through the universe like an intergalactic snake, was even more terrifying. Not only could they not get a handle on what it was or what it was made of, but there was no way to determine where it was heading. It was like being glued to the middle of a four-lane highway with a runaway semi-tractor trailer heading toward you, and with an inebriated imbecile with a blood alcohol content of .20 behind the wheel.

“Dickenson! Are we being invaded by aliens?” Overmeyer barked, repeating his question.

“That would be a best-case scenario,” Robin replied.

“I don’t understand.”

“At least the aliens would stop once they arrived. I don’t think this thing is going to stop,” Robin predicted.

"Then what is our next step?" asked Fulton. "How do we protect ourselves from it?"

"*Can* we protect ourselves?" interjected Truez. "Where would you set up the protection, for that matter, if the object is this unpredictable?"

"Good point," Fulton nodded.

"We need to inform the President," Overmeyer stated. "He needs to be aware of the threat."

"Whoa, whoa." Robin held up a hand to stay that stream of thought. "We don't even know if there *is* a threat."

"Well, right now, that thing is heading right for us!" the General argued.

"Yes, and twenty-four hours ago it was running parallel to us," Fulton reminded the man. "What's to say it won't change course again a few hours from now?" Turning back to the two astrophysicists, he inquired, "Let's suppose this anomaly stays on course at the same speed we've observed these past few hours. Let's suppose it doesn't change direction, but remains heading toward us. Where will it hit? And when?"

"I don't have that information at the moment," said Truez. "Rob?"

"Give me a couple of hours and I can get you some possibles. You realize, however, these projections will have no better than a forty to seventy percent accuracy rate?"

"Understood. I just need something tangible to use as a base. General? Once we've gotten those figures, you're welcome to notify anyone in Washington you need to warn. Until then, we stay at Code Blue. Egges?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're running the show up there. You and Rojovic stay in communication. I don't want you signing off until we get a handle on this thing."

"What about the satellite?" Egges inquired. "Do we still launch?"

"What's the ETA?"

The astronaut checked his records then his watch. "We'll reach intended trajectory for orbit in four hours and sixteen minutes. We should then reach dark side in seven hours and fifty-three minutes." He looked up from his clipboard. "We could wait until the next pass around, Sir."

"That is not an option," Overmeyer interrupted.

"It's an option if there's no way we can get the bird in orbit this go-'round," Fulton snapped back. "My men come first. When I'm certain they're okay up there, *then* we'll continue the mission. Dickenson, Truez, I want those figures in two hours."

Both scientists concurred and hurried from Mission Control.

"Think it's an invasion?" Truez asked the man jogging beside him. The weather was turning cold. The exercise felt good and kept them warm.

"Let's hope not," Robin answered.

"What if it does turn out to be little green men?" the other man wondered.

"Let's just cross that bridge when we come to it, okay, Carlos?"

Truez laughed as they reached their building and went inside.

Two hours later they handed their answers to the Director, who studied their independent findings. Oddly enough, even though both men had come up with what could be termed educational guesses at best, both had narrowed the trajectory down to within a few hundred miles and less than an hour of each other.

If the anomaly remained unchanged in speed or direction, it would hit around the western edge of South America, either in Peru or the Pacific Ocean, by midnight tomorrow, Houston

time. The United States was safe from direct impact, but that left little hope for the rest of the world.

## Chapter Six

## Collision

“MY GOD! HOUSTON, WE’VE BEEN HIT!”

Mission Control erupted into turmoil as the scream came over the speakers.

“Eggles! Report! *Liberty*! What the hell is going on?” Fulton grabbed a headset and tried to raise the crew of the space shuttle. Seconds before the cry for help, the big screen at the front of the room had gone snowy, a casualty of the three-second delay between Earth and the orbiting craft.

“Eggles! Rojovic! Foxx!” The director turned to a technician sitting in communications. The tech yelled out an answer before Fulton could voice the question.

“We’re trying, Sir!” He spoke into his headset at invisible help at the other end as they tried to re-establish contact.

“Go to Code Red,” Fulton barked. Immediately the wall of windows behind Mission Control went black, preventing any tour group from seeing into the room. The group that was already on site would pass through within minutes. Well-trained tour guides would recognize the situation, and the tourists be told personnel was on break, and hurried on to the next building. After that, Building 30 South would remain off limits until the Code Red was lifted.

Robin got to Mission Control less than five minutes after contact was lost with *Liberty*. Security guards checked identification of every person coming through the door, turning away anyone who didn’t have at least a Level Blue clearance, regardless of who they were or what function they performed.

He walked into controlled pandemonium. However the tension in the air was like a cloud of thick, rank air that was difficult to breathe and even more difficult to subsist in.

The screen was still snowy. Neither was there any audio. All technicians were trying to raise some signal from the craft in any method possible.

“What happened?” he asked the security guard standing just inside the double doors.

“Someone yelled they’d been hit, then the screen went out. That’s it.”

“Do we have any way of knowing what hit them or where they were hit?” He managed to make it over to a far corner of the room where a small console sat manned by a single worker. In Control lingo it was known as TELCOM. In actuality it was Houston’s direct link to every main telescope in the world. The woman sitting in front of the extremely technical-looking bank looked frazzled. Her nametag read Sobczek.

“I can get you Castro on the toilet. I can get you in on a girly show in an outdoor bazaar in Tel Aviv. But five guys in a space shuttle ... we’re in deep shit city here, Doc.” She paused, hand to her ear, then adjusted her headset. “Roger that, Mauna Kea. Please hold. COMM 1! We have a visual on *Liberty* through Mauna Kea!” she yelled to the Director.

“Can you patch it onto the screen?”

“Done!”

The image was grainy and distant, but slowly growing closer and more in focus with a little fine tuning. Sighs of relief echoed in the room. *Liberty* was not destroyed, as they’d feared. However there was little doubt that something had happened.

"Can we get a better picture?" Fulton asked.

"*Liberty* is due to go behind the moon in three minutes," another tech called out.

"Count it down!" Fulton ordered him.

"Mauna Kea is doing its best," Sobczek told them.

"Do we have another telescope that has a visual?"

"Negative that. *Liberty*'s position is making it difficult."

"How about a satellite? What's up there in that vicinity?"

"PorSat Six, DEGAS One, EterStar Six, and BoROS. Only DEGAS has a camera, but it's fixed. Won't swivel in that direction," came the answer from another area of the room.

"Doesn't BoROS have a receiver?" Truez questioned.

Robin immediately saw where the astrophysicist was going. "That's right. Fulton, what if we set up a Morse Code relay to *Liberty*?"

"A two hundred year old system, and sometimes the original method becomes the only choice," Fulton muttered aloud. "SATCOM, can we rig up a relay that'll reach the shuttle?"

"Already ahead of you," the tech replied.

"Two minutes until far side!"

"Sir?" Sobczek called back.

The image on the screen had gotten larger, the focus clearing as the immense Hawaiian-based telescope zeroed in on the disabled craft. Now the shuttle was sharp enough to read the emblems on the side.

*Liberty* had not lost its orbit. Against the black velvet backdrop it sat calmly as if awaiting docking. That visual told the scientists that either whatever had hit the shuttle did not have enough force to knock it out of its assigned path, or that the shuttle's thrusters had not been damaged, allowing the astronauts to put the craft back into position.

"Contact reestablished with the onboard computers!" the station cried out.

"Full readout!" Fulton barked. "I want to know what's happened, and what's going on right now!"

"All life signs stable if somewhat agitated. They've been frightened and they're still in flux," MEDCOM answered.

"O2 levels have dropped but are stable. Cabin pressure is low." The tech looked up. "The crew is in their suits. Hull's been breached."

"Morse Code relay has been patched through."

"Call 'em."

"Uhh . . ."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't tell me ...."

"Allow me, Sir." A young tech who had been sitting at the MEDCOM console assisting took the chair next to COMM 1. He glanced briefly at the bare wire handed him, then deftly began to tap out a code on the metal plate.

Fulton growled something unintelligible about jury rigging and went over to stare at the readouts at MEDCOM.

"Sixty seconds until far side!"

"Think they'll get the message?" Truez whispered aside.

"The bird will have contact long enough to get it through. But it's going to be a long wait to see if they respond," Robin answered. His eyes had remained glued to the front screen, trying to find some sign of damage. From this side there was nothing obvious although information coming in bespoke of a hole in the hull.

His first guess was that it had to be a meteorite of some sort. Even the tiniest fragment could pierce the skin of the spacecraft like a bullet through sheet metal, and minuscule chunks of debris were always floating or flying around space. It was a constant source of danger to the astronauts whenever the men took their walks out in the unknown.

But something else told him subconsciously that it was bigger than a meteorite. It had to have been something large enough to see, something that gave them enough time to scramble into their suits without a second thought. And something that was hard enough to create a major impact.

"We have far side."

In one movement, the whole of Mission Control pulled back from their stations and expelled a collective sigh. There was nothing they could do for the next eighteen minutes—if by some miracle the ship was still traveling at its original speed—until *Liberty* emerged from the back side of the moon. Nothing except analyze the data they'd retrieved in the last few seconds and pray for the safety of the crew.

Twenty-one minutes later the news they had been waiting for came over the speakers.

"We have *Liberty*."

Everyone had resumed their positions just prior to the eighteen minute mark. By twenty minutes things were once again beginning to get tense. As the first gleam of the shuttle craft came into focus, the ground crew knew there was still hope.

". . . -ston . . ."

"COMM 1," Fulton snapped.

"Working on it," the tech called back almost simultaneously.

"Houston, this is *Liberty*. Come in, Houston."

"*Liberty*, this is Houston," began the communications officer until Fulton took the headphones from him.

"Eggs? Is everyone okay? What is the situation up there?"

"We're okay, Houston. But we have a small problem. Or rather ... *you* have a small problem."

"Explain."

"We were hit by another space craft. Came out of nowhere and sideswiped us. Punched a hole in the shuttle but we've managed to repair it enough to get us back down to Earth."

The room was dead silent. Fulton tapped his earpiece to double-check it.

"Repeat that, *Liberty*."

"You heard right the first time, Chappel," Eggs reiterated. "We were hit by a UFO. But a small one. It came out of the area of that anomaly we'd been tracking, and sideswiped us. It pushed us out of orbit but we managed to correct. The other craft went into a weird spin, like a top rotating on its axis." There was a brief pause, and the astronaut continued. "Hope you guys are sitting down for this."

"There's more?"

"Much more. We extended the RMS and managed to capture the craft. It's sitting now in our payload bay."

"Holy crap," Truez whispered in awe.

"We're prepared to bring it back with us," Eggs told them.

Robin looked around the control room and finally realized what had been nagging him for the past half hour. "Where's the General?" he asked the other scientist.

"Didn't he fly up to D.C. this morning?"

Shrugging, Robin turned his concentration back to what the astronauts were saying.

Fulton walked into the middle of the room as the screen in front switched from the telescope's distant view to the cameras on board. Eggles was staring back through the faceplate of his spacesuit.

"Can you switch the camera to the bay?" Fulton questioned.

"I haven't told you all of it." The astronaut gave a little giggle of nervousness. "There's something in the craft."

It was as if someone had suddenly turned up the volume in the room. Fulton tried to quell the questions and rising trepidation in order to hear what else the men had to say.

"Something? As in life form?"

"Can't tell. Our equipment here can't penetrate the hull, and we don't have the proper tools to do anything further with it. I couldn't tell you what the craft is made of, nothing. However there is a small window, like a viewport, inset in the hull." Eggles held up a gloved hand. "Don't even ask what's inside. The thing is iced over. Can't make out anything."

"Then what makes you think there's someone inside?"

"*Something*. I said *something*, not *someone*. Come on, Fulton, why would any civilization send up an empty space craft?"

"Why not a robot craft?" someone called out.

"Negative that, Houston. There's something *living* inside it. We're willing to bet our bottom dollar."

"Are you certain beyond a doubt it's not from Earth? Maybe it's ...."

"It's not from Earth. You can look at it and tell."

The camera in the payload bay swiveled around until the end of the strange spacecraft became visible. At the top of the screen the people in the control room could see the open bay doors. A distant slice of Earth hovered in the upper right-hand corner. In the center of the screen sat the object in question, but from that angle nothing could be made of it.

The Director took a deep breath and uttered what they all were thinking. "How big is that thing?"

"It's six meters in length, slightly less. Four meters in circumference. Shaped like a bullet with rounded ends. The viewport is about one meter from one of the ends and measures approximately one inch by six inches. Weight? I'm making a calculated guess at four hundred pounds, but don't hold me to it. Remember, we aren't equipped up here to do this type of study."

The Director wiped the cuff of his long-sleeved shirt under his nose. Despite the weather and the relative chill in the room, he was sweating profusely. "All right. Let's use Directive, uhh . . ." A technician held up a small manual and pointed out the appropriate page. Fulton grasped the book and quickly scanned it. "Directive Four. We're bringing in the unknown craft. Gerry, your men know you're now under strict quarantine until further notification?"

"Acknowledged. Just get us home safely."

Fulton turned around to face everyone in the control room as the screen behind him went black. "Okay, people. We're now under Directive Four. If you don't remember the whys and whynots associated with it, I suggest you check your manuals for the specifics. This mission has been shunted into Code Two, Level Yellow, so if you don't have proper clearance, you'd best get your butts out of here and request it. If request is denied, you will be called in for debriefing within the hour. Dickenson! Truez!"

Both physicists straightened. "Sir."



“That thing came out of the anomaly. I’m holding both of you personally responsible. Find me anything you can on where it could have come from, and I especially want to know if there could be any more like it on its way.”

The scientists nodded and exited the room, heading for their offices. Neither one said a word to the other in the cold mid-morning air as they half-walked, half-jogged the short distance. Only when they had to stop to wait for the elevator did Robin finally venture a question.

“Think there’s someone in it?”

Truez shrugged. “For all we know it could be last week’s garbage.”

“Think it’s human?”

“What are you asking me for? Who do you think I am? Someone with x-ray vision?”

Both men broke out into nervous laughter as the elevator doors closed before them.

\* \* \* \*

Up in the space shuttle, Brighton and Foxx checked the straps holding the space pod and made sure it was secured for the reentry. For the umpteenth time Rojovic wiped away dust and ice crystals from the tiny window and tried to peer inside.

“Give it a rest,” Foxx admonished him. “You didn’t get anywhere even when you used a penlight.”

“This find is going to put us in the history books,” Murray said.

Eggles gave him a stern look. “Yes, but how? As heros? Or as casualties? Let’s strap in, guys. Foxx, make sure the bay doors are closed and sealed. Rojovic, you got your end ready?”

The astronaut nodded.

“Very well.” Turning to the pilot, Gerry Eggles slapped him on the shoulder. “Start the procedures, Murray. Let’s take it home and see if Mother will let us keep it.”

## Chapter Seven

## Brainstorm

Twenty-one hours later, *Liberty* touched down at the Landing Facility at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida without any further difficulties. The members of Mission Control watched on closed-circuit television as the huge shuttle was brought around and shut down, allowing the astronauts to disembark into a waiting bus.

As the craft rotated, everyone finally got a clear view of the damage done to the starboard side of the ship. Gasps of shock and surprise filled the room. Nearly the entire side of *Liberty* had been side-swiped, leaving a furrow from tail to nose. By guess alone it had to be a good thirty feet long, and at least six to eight inches deep. The breach, they found out later, had been from cracks in the hull created by the impact. The fact that no holes had punched through the skin was a miracle in itself.

“How soon can we get it over here?” Bishop, one of the ground techs, called out.

“It’s being prepped for shipping now. Should be here before morning,” came the reply from somewhere in the room.

As the media focused on the returning astronauts, a half-dozen technicians surreptitiously removed the alien pod from the cargo area, loaded it onto a transport truck, and covered it with a tarp. Their actions were not suspicious. Many times valuable experiments and specimens were taken from the shuttle before it could be taken back to be unloaded, disinfected, and repaired. Those experiments would then be shipped to labs for analysis, for study. Having the crew there did not arouse undue attention, thus making the tech’s mission easier to complete. Under cover as a portion of the current mission, the pod was rushed to the small airfield located at the far end of KSC. From there a small cargo jet flew it to Houston Space Center for analysis.

Robin was at his desk when Jack buzzed him.

“I just got a call from Overmeyer’s office. He wants you over in Six One pronto.”

Robin frowned. “Six One?”

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” Jack replied dryly. “Better put your winged shoes on.”

Closing his notebook, Robin grabbed his yellow pad folder and hurried out of the office, heading for the elevator.

Building Six was considered an ‘unsanctioned’ building. On maps of the space center it was unmarked. It was bypassed by the tour groups and, to all intents and purposes, was invisible to outsiders.

Building Six was also a holding area. Sometimes people were put into decontamination chambers located inside its cavernous belly for cleansing. At other times certain elements or experiments were kept under tight security there until decisions regarding their usage or disposal could be determined. But most of the time what happened in Six remained under extremely tight guard.

So it was with extreme curiosity that Robin trotted over to Building Six. He presented his badge to the security guard posted just inside the main door in the entryway, out of sight of tourists venturing away from their designated areas on foot.

In the entryway, four large-sized double doors lined along the wall. Above each set of

the steel construction locks were the numbers one, two, three, and four. After getting a nod from the guard, Robin took the card key he was given and swiped it through One. The lights turned green, and he levered down the handle to let himself in.

Another guard met him and verified him. This time there were just three sets of double doors, and they were labeled with the alphabetical letters A, B, and C. "General's waiting for everyone in C," he was instructed. Again he was given another key card, and again Robin let himself into the adjoining room.

There were surprisingly few people gathered in C when he joined them. A couple of the faces he recognized, but the rest were new. Robin surmised they were from Kennedy and had accompanied the pod on its trip to Houston.

One of the unfamiliar faces separated himself and raised his arms, calling for attention. Robin strained to hear what the man would say. C had a nasty habit of echoing all sounds.

"May I have everyone look this way? Thank you. Thank you. My name is Dr. Sam Wright Miguel. I'm the head astrobiologist at the Kennedy Space Center. My colleagues and I traveled here with the alien pod that I believe you've already heard about.

"We brought the pod here because Kennedy is not equipped for the kind of decontamination and study we'll need in order to investigate this phenomenon. You gentlemen have been brought here because of your fields of study, which will be of great asset to the study of this history-making phenomenon."

A hand raised from within the group. Miguel nodded. "Dr. Wa? Gentlemen, Dr. Wa Ding Cho, physicist. Some of you may know him as one of the architects behind the space station Freedom. You had a question, Dr. Wa?"

"What efforts are being made to protect us against alien contamination?"

"Too numerous to count, Doctor, but let me elaborate on a couple. This building, this room contains a free-standing hyper baric chamber. It's being readied now for the space pod as soon as it lands, which should be in just a few hours. The pod will go through all our decontamination methods, and then it will be opened within the inner core."

"What's your initial reaction of its possible contents, Dr. Miguel?" The question came from another strange face in the crowd. "Do you believe there's an alien inside?"

"What I do know, after talking with the astronauts, is that there *is* something inside the pod. There is a glass-like window, but so far no one has been able to make out what the window is for. Even myself and those who came with me have been unable to make out anything."

Robin raised his hand.

"Yes, Dr. Dickenson?"

"What steps are being taken to insure that the pod is not an advance scout of some kind? That there's not a bigger mother ship waiting out there somewhere, perhaps around the other side of Mars, waiting to hear back from this pod?"

A small wave of tittering followed his question. Even Dr. Miguel smiled. "This is not one of your Saturday morning sci-fi movies, Dr. Dickenson. This is real life."

"Well, sounds like real life just collided with every Saturday morning sci-fi movie I've ever seen," Robin responded. "We have no idea what is inside that pod. For all we know, it could be from another country here on Earth, and we haven't been told."

"What is your point, Dr. Dickenson?" Miguel interrupted irritably. "Your field of expertise is in space phenomena. You're here because this thing is from space, and it's phenomena. Last time I checked your credentials, you were not employed by Hollywood."

"The point is this," Robin said, taking a step forward. "To my knowledge, and I'm

betting this goes for everyone else in this room, we have never worked nor planned for any scenario that involves having an object or creature from another planet brought in to be studied. Oh, sure, there are enough movies and television shows out there that depict aliens as being everything from gentle little balls of fur to gigantic flesh-eating monsters. We've all seen the plotlines from aliens-take-over-the-earth to aliens-come-and-leave-without-notice. But when it comes down to it, we don't know the first damn thing about how to deal with the real thing ... *because we never expected to ever deal with it directly!*"

"I agree!" Dr. Wa spoke up. "We cannot anticipate treating this object as though it were something we have encountered in the past. We have to think beyond normalcy. Beyond the box. We have to expect something that has never existed before now. We have to be visionary."

"As in how?" asked Dr. Truez. Robin hadn't noticed him until he spoke up.

"We're treating this thing, this pod, as if it were a piece of space garbage. Bring it in, spray it down, irradiate it for a couple of hours, then bring in the can opener. It's suicide!" Robin insisted.

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Miguel challenged.

A soft wave of muttering around him told Robin that he'd revealed a possibly fatal flaw in the center's plan of action. But, to be totally honest, he didn't know what they should do because he wasn't totally current with the technology that might be available for use.

Shaking his head slowly, he admitted, "I'm not quite sure. Maybe put a double airlock on the chamber just in case something dangerous needs to be contained. Maybe instigate a Biosafety Level Four hazard warning, like they do over at the CDC."

Level Four was the highest hazard warning used by the Center of Disease Control. Level One applied to agents that ordinarily didn't cause any human disease. Level Two was for agents that did cause human disease, but whose potential for transmission was limited. Level Three was for agents that could be transmitted and could cause serious infection. Level Four was used in diagnosing exotic agents that posed a high risk of life-threatening disease, and for which there was no known vaccine or therapy. Level Four included all hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola.

The mention of Level Four was enough to send nearly half of the scientists gathered into loud discussion. Dr. Miguel tried to calm them.

"Don't you think your propositions are a bit too extreme?" the man challenged Robin. But Dr. Wa answered him.

"You can never be too extreme," the little Chinese scientist insisted. "It is better to be on our most defensive and be able to back away than to be too lenient and allow something catastrophic to happen. We are talking about risking all of mankind for the sake of sating our curiosity."

"I agree!" shouted Dr. Truez, along with several others.

It was then Robin noticed a woman standing off to the side. She wore the long white lab coat of a fellow scientist or technician, but he didn't recognize the face. She was frantically writing on a legal-size clipboard, and occasionally glancing up to look at Dr. Miguel. Curious, Robin strode over to see what she was up to while the others continued to argue their point.

He was nearly upon her when she caught sight of him. Flashing a nervous smile, she nodded in his direction. A quick inspection of her ID tag read 'Tavalik, J.', and she had Yellow clearance.

"Can I help you?" she managed politely as he got closer.

Without introducing himself, or explaining his actions, Robin reached out and took her clipboard with little resistance. The woman had been taking notes on their discussion, just as he

had suspected.

"You may not work for the press, but you have enough data there for a major New York magazine cover story."

"I'm here with Dr. Miguel," she said curtly. She held out her hand for the clipboard. "May I?"

"Co-worker or assistant?"

Seeing as he didn't volunteer to return her notes, she grabbed the board and jerked it out of his hands. "Excuse me, but I'm working."

"Either way," Robin continued, "but eventually we're going to have to learn to get along with each other. Work side-by-side." He held out a hand. "Robin Dickenson."

Tavalik ignored the invitation. Instead, she cradled the clipboard against her chest, in case he reached for it again.

"At least it's refreshing to know that we're all not just blowing smoke," Robin commented. He started to turn to leave when the woman spoke up.

"He's a good man. A brilliant man. And he does listen to what you have to say. If he didn't believe you were the best of the best, you wouldn't be here."

Pausing, Robin half-turned to listen. Tavalik saw the move as a positive one. She hurried to reassure him.

"He told me to write down everything that was said, every suggestion, every positive or negative remark."

"Why?"

"Because he needed you to brainstorm."

Robin waved toward the rest of the group. "Then why didn't he just call us in and sit us around a meeting room? Why gather us here and act like Herr Dictator?"

"Because Dr. Miguel believes that people act more like their true selves under pressure. He wants to know who will challenge him and not be just a 'yes' man. Who is strong enough in their beliefs to argue for them, and who sits on the sidelines to watch. He also believes that the best ideas come when he antagonizes. Dr. Dickenson?" Finally she graced him with a smile. "You were also brilliant."

"Thanks," he responded dryly. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Where are you going?"

"Tell Dr. Miguel I'll be in my office. He can call for me when the pod arrives. Oh, and if he wants any more good suggestions on safety procedures, tell him there's a copy of the manual in every director's office. But if he can't find one, I'll bring him mine. I'm sure he'll find it fascinating reading."

Definitely in a dark mood by now, Robin strode out of the building without looking back.

## Chapter Eight

## Discovery

Sometime in the middle of the night the pod arrived at the Space Center. It underwent full decontamination procedures, and by the time those were done a completed room with double airlocks was ready to contain it over in Six.

Waiting to begin examination was a team of eight scientists wearing biohazard suits. Outside the airlocks another dozen scientists, also wearing hazmat suits, were waiting, prepared for whatever they would find, and many hoping they would find something. At the least they were on pins and needles. The first run of x-rays had been rushed over not thirty minutes earlier, and what they saw on the fogged film was nothing short of mind-blowing.

Robin glanced over at the far wall where an illuminated light panel held the first half-dozen developed sheets. Between the bare light bulbs and the thick plastic of his helmet's faceplate, it was difficult to see the ghostly outlines that had sent everyone into a frenzy.

But he knew they were there. He knew what they contained.

Or ... what the *cylinder* contained.

He took a deep breath and was surprised to feel his heart beating wildly. He clenched his shaking hands and took a few more deep breaths, letting each one out slowly. His suit received a signal he was breathing harder than normal, and the controls adjusted automatically.

"Here it comes!" a tinny voice at his ear shouted. Everyone in the room turned to see the flatbed roll into the room. It pulled directly parallel to the chamber where two technicians climbed aboard to unbuckle the straps holding the object in place. Once the heavy mesh straps were thrown aside, the dark green tarp was pulled away. Everyone held their breaths.

In the glaring overhead lights the cigar-shaped object was a dark gray color of some non-reflective substance. Robin glanced back again at the light panel and unconsciously shivered.

This wasn't as much a spaceship, he realized, as it was a tomb.

There was a body in there, perhaps the body of an alien.

They were looking at a coffin from the nether reaches of space. And they were about to open it to see what it contained.

The pod slid out on its stainless steel tray until it was easily seated on the rolling table. The table was then wheeled directly into the chamber, and the airlocks engaged. Orange warning lights went on automatically, throwing a kaleidoscope of color around the interior walls.

Now came the tricky part.

Robin silently listened to the cacophony of noise over his headset as the scientists tried to figure out a way to open the ship without damaging it or its contents, and without placing themselves in any greater danger.

"Look, it has a seam all around it. So it's obviously halved."

"Want to try a chisel for beginners?"

"Singleton! Do we have the readouts yet for the interior?" That was Brewer, who was heading the investigation.

Outside the chamber Robin could see one of the suited techs check his bank of instruments. "We have a CO<sub>2</sub> saturation of ninety-seven percent. Uhh ... guys?"

Morrison, head of the security unit, stepped forward to check on what Singleton had brought to his attention. Flipping on his comm, he looked over at the scientists paused over the cylinder. "Brewer? Do you copy?"

"Yeah. What 'cha got for me?"

"We got ... life signs, Sir."

Every person in the building froze in place. The place became eerily quiet.

Robin heard Brewer swallow hard. "Repeat that?"

Morrison nodded. "We have life signs, Sir. A definite readout on what we're assuming is a heartbeat, but it seems to be fading."

"Are you sure you're not reading it wrong?" asked Wolfe, part of the chemical analysis team.

From a back table, one of the scientists lifted several sheets of x-rays from the latest scan and began to place them up on the lighted panel next to their partner scan from earlier. Robin watched the young woman react, turn around, and try to get someone's attention.

"Sir? Dr. Singleton?"

She went back to the x-rays, bending over to double-check. What she saw made her all the more agitated. "Dr. Singleton!"

"What is it?" Singleton almost growled.

The tech pointed toward the light panel. "Sir, you need to see this!"

"What is it?" Robin called out. "What do you see on the x-rays?"

"Something's different," the tech tried to explain.

"Different how?" asked Brewer.

By now Singleton had had a chance to look over what the tech was trying to explain. By his body posture, Robin could immediately sense something drastic had changed. The scientist turned back to the men in the chamber.

"Whatever's inside has moved. Or come awake."

Robin was moving toward the cylinder before he heard the next sentence.

"The thing inside has opened its eyes."

He reached the ship just as the hydraulics stopped at floor level. The horizontal ship was nearly up to his chest in height. He could see the small glass-like plate before him, and he reached over to wipe it clear. It had to be a portal for whoever or whatever was inside to see through.

Some invisible force grabbed him by the lungs and suddenly squeezed. The enormity of his next thought was so violent, at first his brain refused to comprehend.

*You don't send a dead body out into space in a ship with a view port. You send a live one ... so he can watch his death coming in the empty, soulless vacuum.*

*What kind of person would you commit to such a slow and horrible death?*

Unaware how rapidly his heart was thudding in his chest, Robin leaned over to look through the portal.

He could see ...

... a portion of a face. The closed eyes. The small arch at the beginning of a nose. A human-shaped nose. Human-like eyes.

*Eyes that opened to look directly back at him.*

Robin jumped back, gasping. "Oh, Jesus!"

"What?"

"It's alive! There's someone alive in there!"

*And dying, an inner voice screamed. Open up the pod!*

“What do you mean, someone? It’s not a creature?” Brewer frantically tried to clarify.

“It looks human,” Robin insisted.

“It can’t be.”

“Are we just going to stand around here and let it die? It looks human! What if it *is* human?”

The group of scientists instantly threw their collective strength into trying to open the ship. They were clearly torn between the need to rescue whatever was inside with the need for extreme caution. What if the thing inside was dangerous? What if, by releasing it, it would destroy them?

“We need two more crowbars!” someone shouted.

Already they were surrounding the capsule, using whatever tools they had to try and pry apart the bi-valved ship.

“Singleton!”

“Signs are getting weaker! It’s dying! Hurry!”

More voices shouted. The scene was quickly dissolving into chaos. Yet, somehow, Robin managed to gather his wits back around him. The capsule was slowly relenting a quarter-inch at a time. Already air was beginning to escape from the ship into the chamber with an ever-growing hiss.

Over against the far wall of the room several canisters were stacked. One of them was marked CO<sub>2</sub>. Carbon dioxide. Robin grabbed a mask, a roll of tubing, then rolled the canister over to the pod as the upper half lid slid upward another inch.

Brewer watched the cloud of smoke erupting from the ship and yelled to his techs, “Give me a readout on the chamber!”

“Oxygen at fifty-seven percent! Carbon dioxide is twenty percent!”

The CO<sub>2</sub> level was increasing, but that was to be expected.

“Vitals!”

“Still decreasing! We’re getting an irregular heartbeat!”

“Is the creature attempting in any way to escape?” someone shouted out. Robin turned to see Flanagan prying at the lid with a fire axe.

“There is some movement, but it’s hard to tell,” another technician answered.

*Can ... not ... move . . .*

He stepped back. For a second he thought he’d heard the thought. No. Not heard. *Felt*. It had to be his imagination. But if it had, how could he explain the sudden sense of overwhelming despair? He shook his head and tried to regain a grip on himself.

*Human-like eyes ... deep, deep, blue eyes ... eyes full of pain, reflecting a soul racked with grief and finality ....*

What was happening to him? Why did he feel the undeniable urge to reach out with his bare hands and claw the lid off?

Two more tugs brought the canister over to where the head of the capsule and view port were located. Robin quickly connected the hose to the mask and valve, readying it for whatever was inside. Brewer nearly bumped into him.

“What’s that for?” he abruptly asked.

“If the creature’s ship is filled with CO<sub>2</sub>, that means it has to be breathing it.”

Brewer paused for a split second before nodding. “Good thinking. We’ll need to make sure to mask her for carbon dioxide ....”



“It’s opening!”

As the call came, the lid made a loud sucking sound and slid upward another six to seven inches before stopping. By now all the air contained inside the cylinder had escaped out into the room.

As one body the scientists grabbed the lid and gave one huge push upward. Robin felt a slight hesitation as the upper portion met with one final resistance, then a loud pop cracked like gunfire in the room. They found themselves holding the lid free of the lower portion of the capsule. Robin heard grunting sounds as the men lifted the lid even higher and carried it away from the bottom portion, slowly revealing the cylinder’s contents.

Every person gasped in astonishment. Outside the containment field, those watching their displays also froze in shock.

“Christ Almighty!” someone was heard to whisper. “It’s a *girl!*”

No. Not just a girl. A woman. A woman encased in some sort of blue gel. From the edge of his faceplate, Robin could see Brewer poke at the gel with his gloved hand.

“This stuff’s like concrete.”

“Who the hell *is* she?”

“*What* is she? Is she human?”

From where he stood, feeling as if his feet were nailed to the floor, Robin’s gaze raked over the body of the creature lying inside.

It was a woman dressed in a tattered brown-colored dress. There was barely a visible rise and fall at her chest, but what held them in rapt horror were the all-too-real bloody bruises and marks on her body.

Someone had brutalized her before sending her off to her death.

The knowledge of such inhumanity sent a cold wave of anger through him. Grabbing the tank and mask, Robin pivoted it closer to the head of the capsule. For a second he paused, looking down at the face of the woman lying there. Her face was gray, thin, her skin almost flaccid in death. Her hair, what little he could see lying over her shoulders, was a flat whitish-gray. Despite her appearance, she was young. Inwardly, Robin groaned. It wouldn’t be an old woman who’d already lived out a long life before being sent into space to die with dignity.

Then her eyes opened. And focused on him.

They were a deep, dark blue, almost black like the universe. Within their depths he could see an intelligence. Intelligence. And fear. And ... hope.

“*Ki’ia?*”

Her black-tinged lips barely managed to speak when she suddenly gasped. Her body convulsed, sending the scientists into panic mode.

Reaching over the lip of the capsule, Robin placed the mask over her nose and mouth. She appeared to stiffen. Her eyes, wide with terror, locked onto his.

“It’s okay,” he hurried to assure her, then realized she wouldn’t understand him. Holding the mask firmly in place, he tried to let her know with his face, his eyes, that everything was going to be okay. They were there to help her, not hurt her any more than she’d already been hurt.

*You’ll be fine. We want to save you. Don’t be afraid.*

*Do ... not ... hurt ... me ....*

At his elbow Brewer checked to see what he was doing. “Think she’ll make it?”

Robin slowly shook his head, never breaking eye contact with this creature who was beginning to lose her fight against the mask. Her eyes continued to plead.

*I ... want ... to ... live ....*

"We got a few chips of that crap and sent them over to the lab. Hopefully they'll be able to figure out how to dissolve it so we can get her out," Rodriguez notified them.

Brewer nodded. "Tell lab to make it priority, around the clock," he ordered Morrison, who repeated the order.

"In the meantime, what do we do now?" a tech asked. It sounded like Purcell, but Robin couldn't be sure. The woman encased in the capsule was losing ground. Her eyelids were drooping, her vision glazing over. The voice in his head was fading, although it remained terrified and defeated.

*Please ... help ....*

"Keep her warm," he ordered tersely.

Although he had no overt authority in the chamber, two techs jumped at his command. One soon handed him one of the silvery thermal blankets commonly used by the astronauts when they went into space. It was very lightweight but durable. And it warmed quickly. He nodded, and the tech opened it to lay over the girl's exposed regions.

With the stranger's eyes finally closed, Robin felt as if an invisible hand which had been gripping his consciousness had relaxed its fingers. He blinked, taking a deep breath, and straightened up.

Purcell looked up at him from the other side of the ship. "What now?" she repeated.

"We have to get her out of this thing," Robin commented.

"Yeah, but how is the big question," Brewer muttered. He stood next to Robin, examining the inner details of what Robin now considered to be the girl's coffin.

"Yeah, looks like it, doesn't it?" Brewer agreed when he voiced his opinion. Running a gloved hand over the gel, the scientist sighed loudly. "Whoever put her in this thing didn't want her to escape."

"That still doesn't make sense," Robin argued. "Why place her in this stuff *then* shoot her out into space? Wouldn't being abandoned in the vacuum of space be enough to deter her from escaping? Listen to me. I'm not making sense as it is. What I mean is, why encase her if there was nowhere for her to go, even if she was able to get out of this thing? It was sealed so tightly, it took a small army of us just to get the damn thing open!"

"Maybe, maybe the stuff was to prevent her from escaping before they got the lid on?" Purcell wondered aloud.

Robin gave the young woman a small smile. "Now there's a thought!" The tech smiled back.

"Which still leaves too many questions unanswered," Brewer grumbled. "Singleton! Stats check!"

"Heartbeat still irregular and weakening! Vitals don't look good at all."

"Shit. What about the stuff that's surrounding her? Any word back from lab yet?"

"Will give out a yell the second we get something," Singleton promised.

"Damn!" Taking a step back, Brewer reconnoitered and considered his options, which he voiced aloud. "Okay. Here's what we do next. Let's get this lid over to the lab immediately. Keep it in stasis to prevent any contamination. Mercem, I'm putting you in charge. Kahn, you clear the way for anything and everything y'all can glean from it. As soon as we're able to free this ... this star girl from her coffin, we'll ship you the lower half. I want reports on my desk, Overmeyer's desk, and in Mason's hands every two hours."

Turning to Robin, Brewer gave him a lopsided grin. "For a physicist who deals with

space phenomena, looks like you've found yourself a real honest-to-God phenomena. Keep her alive, Dickenson. Got me?"

Robin nodded. He still held the mask over the ... star girl. The name was apropos. He was still holding the mask over the star girl's face until he figured out a way to keep it there. No matter. He would rather stay here than be anywhere else.

Looking down at her face, which looked grayer and sicker, he started to whisper to her when he remembered that the others on the comm would hear him, as well. A quick tongue on the button squelched his signal.

"Hold on, star girl," he was finally able to whisper, although he knew there was no way she could hear him through the helmet of his biosuit or over the hiss of CO<sup>2</sup> flowing through the mask on her face. But he continued to talk to her as if she could hear him and maybe somehow understand what he was trying to tell her. Or, if not understand, at least sense his feelings in what he was saying.

There was no way he was going to let her die. No way. She had become very, very important now to the scientific community.

With a shiver, Robin realized she had also become very, very important to him. It was a feeling he could not understand or explain. Only that he had to save her. And find out who she was. What she was. Why she was.

And why he was connected to her as surely as if she had tied a piece of herself to him.

## Chapter Nine

Hope

“Water!”

Robin looked up to see Purcell hurrying toward the containment unit as she tugged on the helmet of her hazmat suit. Beside him, Berger asked for clarification. It was Singleton who answered.

“Lab says to pour water on the stuff!”

Without waiting for an explanation, Berger raced over to the other side of the room where the fire hose was housed, coiled above a faucet. He grabbed the flat hose and tossed it to Brittner, who’d just joined them, as he twisted the handle to start the flow.

Robin stared as the water began to gush over the inside of the capsule, wetting the blanket until it floated up and away from the star girl’s body. The cement-like blue gel began to react almost immediately. Within seconds it turned opaque, and he could see the alien begin to sink down into the compound. He dipped his free hand behind her head to keep her from going completely under as her limbs were slowly covered by the now dark blue sludge-like stuff.

“Help me get her out of this!” he barked, letting go of the CO<sup>2</sup> mask to get a better grip on her.

Pulling her free of the gel was like pulling her out of quicksand. It clung to the woman as if reluctant to let go, making soft sucking sounds as bit by bit, arm by hand by leg was drawn away.

Once he managed to get her out of the stuff, he was able to draw the elastic band around the back of her head to keep the mask more secure. Purcell brought him another blanket, a dry one, and helped him wrap it around the star girl.

As he held the girl in his arms, the table containing the lower part of the capsule was trundled away. He could hear the hiss and blare of the outer two airlocks as decontamination procedures were followed, but his full concentration lay on the unique creature he held against his chest.

She was frail and lightweight. Her bones felt like brittle twigs. Even with his gloves on he was aware of how sick she was, how badly she’d been injured. How close she was to death.

Gently he lifted her in his arms and waited until the hospital bed was wheeled through the airlocks and into the chamber. Laying her out on the white sheets, lit by the harsh glare of the warming lights shining overhead, Robin could see her more clearly.

He stepped back as two scientists began to hook her up to a bed of monitors. One placed a blood pressure cuff on her. A fourth tried to start an IV, but backed off.

“Well, hell ...”

Brewer was at the side of the bed in an instant. “What?”

The intern shrugged. “Won’t go in.”

“What? What won’t go in?”

Robin walked around to the foot of the bed where he could watch without being in their way. The intern with the needle held it up. Brewer peered at it.

“Why are you using a defective needle? Get another one!” he barked. The intern

hastened to comply.

Silently Robin watched and listened as the doctors and scientists fiddled with switches and knobs and performed an endless myriad of tests—EKG, ECG, and a few others he made a mental note to ask Pete about.

But the problem with needles was proving to be both perplexing and mysterious. When the intern returned with a second intravenous tube and needle, the needle again would not penetrate the star girl's skin.

It simply ... *disappeared*.

Brewer ordered blood drawn, but the phlebotomist encountered the same dilemma. It was as if the stainless steel needle melted upon contact with the alien's skin.

No. Not melted. Just went away, as if that portion had never been manufactured in the first place.

"Send it down to the lab. I want to know what that thing is doing." Looking around at the sea of suited figures gathered around the bed, Brewer reminded them of what they were seeing, what they were experiencing, and the impact such a find would be. "It may look like a woman, but you have to keep repeating in the back of your mind 'she's *not* human'. Do you understand? Because the moment you forget it, you just might find a portion of your anatomy missing, just like the tip of these needles." He cast about a last iron-hard look before taking his leave. Soon thereafter, the rest of the scientists began to pack up their instruments and slides and samples, and left, prepared for around-the-clock studies of what little information they had acquired.

Robin remained rooted at the foot of the bed as, one by one, the others passed by him. As silence descended he continued to stare at the strange, wondrous, but potentially dangerous creature lying unconscious on the bed. Minutes ago he'd wanted to stop Brewer with a simple but potent truth. If touching her could be fatal, then how could they explain why he was able to carry her from the capsule to the bed? She was awake when he'd placed the gas mask over her face, yet there had been no retribution on her part. No struggle. No attempt to injure him.

But then ... how could he have explained the feelings that had gripped him when he'd tried to open the capsule? How could he explain those inner voices which had spoken to him once he'd seen her? When he had held her? When he had lifted her from her tomb? Robin had never believed in telepathy, but he did believe in the fact that there was more to the human soul than just its existence.

Something had called to him. Something, or *someone*, had reached out to him.

There was a connection, a thin, barely tangible connection. But it had been enough to keep him there by the bed staring at the figure struggling for life.

Outside the chamber the warning strobes were killed, plunging the containment unit into a semblance of dusk. Beneath the overhead lights the creature on the bed appeared even more ethereal and unreal.

Slowly Robin walked around to the side of the bed to get a better look at her face and features. Her ears looked human. She had eyebrows. Eyelashes. Lips. Nose. Cheekbones. At first glance she seemed no different from anyone else on Earth.

Reaching out, he cautiously lifted the thin blanket lying over her. At the neckline someone had clipped a section of the brownish dress she wore. They'd also taken a lock of her hair. Robin sighed loudly, replacing the blanket.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose, and he froze. His heart began racing as he willed his body to respond, to react, despite the sudden overpowering fear which had just gripped him.

Slowly, carefully, his eyes turned downward to where his right hand still held the edge of the blanket. His hand ... now held by the star girl's hand. Looking up, he once more met a pair of deep blue eyes. Pleading eyes. Eyes fighting whatever she had faced, whatever she'd been forced to see. Under the mask he saw her lips move again. They formed a word, and although he couldn't hear her, he knew what she was saying.

*"Ki'ia?"*

*Help me?* the voice inside him whispered tearfully.

The grasp on his hand tightened almost imperceptibly. *Ki'ia*. Her language.

Leaning over to where she could see his face more clearly, Robin whispered back, "How?"

And then ... he knew the word. He *knew* ... what to say.

Unable to question what made him so certain it was correct, he upped the volume on his external speaker and said, "*Mi'ilut?*"

The hand which had clutched his gloved one trembled, released him, and floated over to the mask strapped around her face. It tried unsuccessfully to remove the mask. Her face contorted. Just as suddenly she fell back against the sheets, as if someone had flipped a switch and turned her off.

Robin remained there, unable to move, unable to grasp the enormity of what had just occurred. He'd spoken to the star girl in her language. She had asked for help. He had asked her how. His heart was pounding in his chest, making breathing difficult.

How could he have known? *How could he have known?*

Outside the plexiglass wall several technicians observed the exchange. One flipped on the intercom in the room. "What's going on in there?" he asked.

Robin turned around. He didn't recognize the voice, which meant it was probably someone under Singleton's watch. With the light being the way it was and the bulkiness of his suit obscuring most of what he had done, he was certain the tech hadn't seen anything amiss. The last thing he needed was to get kicked off the squad because he was fumbling the ball. Tonguing on his comm, he replied.

"Adjusting the mask. Why? Do I have a time limit?"

"No, Sir. Just don't forget to shut the door behind you when you leave."

Robin nodded to show he understood. Go through all decontamination procedures, and don't scrimp on the scrub-down.

Glancing back at the creature on the bed, he found himself torn between leaving and staying. If he left, he knew he would be haunted with the need to know how she was doing. Yet, if he stayed, he might raise undue suspicion and possibly hurt his chances to come back into the chamber.

Laying his hand over the star girl's where it lay on the bed beside her, he leaned over so that her face filled the window of his helmet. "I'll be back. We're going to get you through this. I promise. Don't be afraid. You're safe now. No one is going to hurt you again, I swear to God. Never again."

Patting the hand, he straightened and headed for the airlocks, when that *feeling* came over him again. It was tenuous, but questioning. Frightened. And undeniably panic-stricken.

*Adi'iala.*

*Stay with me.*

To his surprise, he found himself shaking. "I can't," he whispered, praying she could hear him. "I'll come back. Soon. I promise."

*Tadisina. Meke'eka.*

*I will be waiting for you. Please do not be long.*

It took everything in his power to walk out of the chamber and away from her breath of hope.

## Chapter Ten

## Oxygen

The girl from the stars was dying. Robin knew it. The crew knew it. And if he had been a betting man, Robin would have sworn the alien knew it, too.

She had endured too much. Although her escape from the impossibly tiny space module had been nothing short of miraculous, she would be dead by morning, if not sooner. She was too weak to move, too weak to do anything except stare at her redeemers/captors with what appeared to be regret and mute pleading.

In the past few hours her coloring had gone from white to a brownish purple. Add to the fact that her anatomy was totally foreign to everyone, there was no way to tell what information the erratic readings from their equipment was giving them. But deep inside they knew she wasn't well. Far from. Now it was only a matter of hours, perhaps minutes.

Robin collapsed on the folding chair outside the plexiglass room. He pulled the air mask over his head and removed his glasses, rubbing his eyes against the cuff of his shirt sleeve. A glance at his watch told him it was a little after three in the morning. He needed to rest, but nothing could make him leave her side. He had to be there with her, even until her end.

It was as if she knew she could trust him. It was difficult to explain how he knew, but something inside him told him that she needed to see his face. She needed to know he was nearby. She needed that small comfort in the fact that there was someone who cared enough about her, although they were galaxies different, to stay with her until the very last.

"Oh, God," he muttered, rubbing his eyes once more. They burned. The hazmat suit was like wearing thermal underwear. Despite its cooling system, he had sweated a gallon of fluid, some of which had rolled into his eyes. He couldn't just reach up to wipe it away, not with the suit on.

Vaguely, distantly, he thought back on the past few hours. On the barrage of questions and suppositions that had been tossed back and forth as they tried to assimilate what they were seeing. What they were just beginning to understand.

*"The pod is full of carbon dioxide."*

*"Call supply and get another canister over here so we can keep her hosed up asap!"*

*"Give me a hand over here! She's fighting the mask!"*

*"Damn! Don't she know we're only trying to help?"*

*"The pod is full of carbon dioxide."*

*"How long has she been in this thing? Dear Mary, Mother of God ....."*

*"How long would she survive if we took her off the CO<sup>2</sup>?"*

*"The pod is full of carbon dioxide."*

She had reached for the mask. She had asked him for help, and he had asked her to tell him how. And she ....

*... she had reached for the mask.*

*"It's simple science, Robin. If you had studied your chapter like I'd told you to, you would know that trees breathe in our carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen. While we breathe in oxygen, we exhale carbon dioxide. That's why we need trees and grass and all the plant life*



*on our world to survive. Without them we would drown in our own poisoned air. Between humans and vegetation, we form the perfect atmospheric cycle."*

"Oh, JESUS!"

Robin bolted to his feet and raced back into the plexiglass room. He slammed the buttons controlling the doors, then pressed the EXIT levers, locking them into permanent OPEN status.

Alarms began to blare out the breach. Two technicians started to run toward him. Claxons sounded a level four, throwing the room into a cacophony of chaos.

Robin ignored them. Just as he ignored the bank of suits lining the wall. And ignored the strident automated voice calling out its warning. Instead, he cursed himself and his stupidity as he finally made his way into the interior room where the star girl was lying on her bed. She was a muddy, almost brownish color. She already looked dead.

He tore the mask from her face. Next he raced to the console at the end of the bed and hit the emergency button. Over on the wall, he found the control for the central air unit, and he turned it on full blast, activating the filters into sucking out the CO<sup>2</sup>. By that time one of the technicians had managed to get one of the hazmat suits on and was beginning to climb into the room with him. Robin grabbed the man by his zipper.

"Get me a canister of oxygen!" he yelled into the face plate. The effort sent him coughing as his lungs cried for O<sup>2</sup>.

"What?" Amid the noise of the emergency claxons, it was difficult to hear what was being said as Robin wasn't wearing a microphone.

Knowing he would lose precious time if he went after it himself, he made an 'O' with his hand, then held up two fingers. He mouthed the word 'oxygen' at the tech, who finally understood and nodded.

The second technician was trying to contain the breach by attempting to override the controls on the doors. Robin beat on the plexiglass to get her attention. When she looked up, he pointed to the speaker in the corner of the room, then drew a finger across his throat. The second tech reacted immediately and cut the alarm.

The sudden silence was deafening. It took him a moment to shake the remaining ghosts of noise from his head. The emergency lights still flashed their orange and crimson rotations, but he could easily ignore them. Somewhere from the back of the room he could hear others entering the chamber.

The first tech was returning with a familiar silver canister bearing an O<sup>2</sup> label. Robin jerked it from his hand and began attaching the mask he'd removed from the alien. He took two, three heaving drafts from the mask to be certain the gas was passing into it. Then he placed it back over the girl's head, cranked the valve all the way open, and prayed he wasn't too late.

Whirling around, he pushed the technician who'd been watching him out of the room ahead of him. Once he was certain the man was out of the area, he took an instrument cart and jammed it against the door to prevent it from opening, just in case someone managed to override the controls on the door.

"Dr. Dickenson! What the hell is the meaning of this? Guards! Contain the perimeter!"

Robin was surprised to see General Overmeyer still on the grounds. Apparently the man had been asleep in his office when the alarms had sounded. His coat was buttoned but his hair was still mussed. They stared at each other through the transparent barrier separating them.

"No need to contain the perimeter," Robin told him. He coughed again and took several deep breaths to clear his lungs.

From the corner of his eye he could see a couple of NASA guards trying to secure the

doors he'd locked on the plexiglass room. "Leave that alone!" he shouted to the men. He quickly turned back to the General. "Stop them, General. Let me explain."

Overmeyer gave the young man a long stare. It was only because of his trust in his own judgment that he nodded toward the guards, who backed off but remained beside the sealed doors.

"You got one minute," he said huskily.

By now more technicians and scientists were entering the room. Fortunately they all had Level Six clearance, which kept the alien's secret from being further exposed. To Robin's relief, Brewer was among them. Robin nodded in his direction.

"I had to open the room, General," Robin explained. "I had to get to her as quickly as possible. We were killing the alien life form."

"I was made to understand we were giving the alien life support," Overmeyer argued. His voice sounded thick through the barrier.

"Not by giving her carbon dioxide, we weren't."

"The pod she was in was filled with carbon dioxide," Brewer stepped forward to add.

"Yes!" Robin nodded, "because she'd breathed it *out*! That pod was a coffin. It was filled with poison because she'd used up all the oxygen contained in it."

Brewer blanched with the realization. "Poi- ... Ohmigod, how is she?"

"I don't know." Robin pulled back as the General signaled several technicians to enter the room. Suddenly he felt like a very old man. "I got her switched over to O<sup>2</sup>. I hope it was in time."

"That was a mighty big jump in logic you took," Overmeyer told him. "And a bigger chunk of chutzpah to take the initiative yourself."

"I should be fired for not thinking of it sooner."

"Seventy-two hours straight does that to a man. Tech?" the General called to the woman standing at the medical read-out board.

"Mitchell, sir," she replied.

"Mitchell. Give me the current stats," Overmeyer ordered.

The second tech who had initially tried to open the room's door looked up from her station. "The alien's vitals are remaining where they were before the switch to O<sup>2</sup>. No change."

"I may have been too late," Robin murmured aloud.

"Notify me the moment you see any change," Overmeyer ordered the tech. "Good or bad."

The tech nodded.

To the guards at the door, the General instructed them to let no one in without his permission. He included Robin and the initial scientists on the list of those allowed.

Looking back at the young man, it was apparent to him that Dickenson was on his last legs. "When was the last time you had some sleep?"

"When was the last time you slept in your own bed?" Robin countered with a smile. Being a civilian, he was not as intimidated by the General's rank as were most of NASA personnel.

Overmeyer chuckled. "Remind me not to challenge you in a game of poker. I take it you're wanting to stay? We could open the containment unit and get you thoroughly doused before letting you out. Or you could go ahead and put on one of the suits, and we could decontaminate you elsewhere."

"No, thanks. I'm staying until I find out one way or the other."

“Very well. I’m leaving our visitor in your trust. Try not to disappoint me.” The General turned to leave.

Watching the men retreating for the main doors, Robin muttered to himself, “It’s not you I’m worried about disappointing, General.”

## Chapter Eleven

## Communication

It was Brewer who shook his shoulder and awakened him from where he'd fallen asleep over in the far corner of the room.

"Hey, Rob."

Robin was instantly on his feet. Jerking the glasses from his nose, he ran a shirt sleeve over his eyes as he started toward the bed. The tech blocked his way and grabbed him by the arm before he could reach it. "Rob ..."

Stopping suddenly, Robin gave the scientist a quizzical look. His heart plummeted to his feet. "She's dead," he whispered.

"No. She's alive," Brewer whispered back urgently, his voice tinny from the exterior mike on his suit, "but we're far from being out of the woods."

"I want to see her." He started toward the bed when his friend stopped him again. "Rob, just give me a second before you go off on another tangent," the older man requested.

She was alive. Brewer needed to speak with him. Given the miracle of her survival, Robin shook off the last shreds of sleep and gave the scientist his full attention.

"Her color's back. The oxygen was the right answer, thanks to you. But that was just one hurdle. She's an alien, Rob. She's not a foreigner. Hell, I take that back. She's as foreign as you can get!"

Robin opened his mouth to speak but Brewer read his mind.

"Yeah, I've sent word to Overmeyer. He wants you to call him as soon as you have a moment. I ... told him you were looking over her charts."

Robin smiled his thanks. Military brass had a difficult time understanding such human frailties as exhaustion and sleep deprivation.

Brewer continued. "We have to think nutrition now. No telling how long she's been in starvation mode. Not to mention extreme dehydration. You know we can't IV her. I doubt we can intubate her. That leaves one last option. Oral consumption. Feed her by mouth. Even by alien standards she can't subsist on just O<sub>2</sub>. Question is ... what do you feed someone from outer space?"

A crooked grin crossed Robin's face. "Angel food cake?" he teased. "Okay, just kidding. Still gathering my wits. Where do I fit in?"

"You're the only person who's been able to have any kind of extended contact with her. You're possibly the only one who may be able to figure out what to feed her. But until then we need to work on the dehydration. I've ordered several bottles of spring water to get started. I want you to get her to start drinking them."

"How can we be sure her system will take ...." Robin cut himself short. Common sense, not scientific knowledge, told him that if she needed oxygen to breathe, she could intake an oxygen-based liquid. Water was the purest substance. "Never mind. I'll see what I can do," he promised.

Brewer released him, and Robin walked over to the bed.

The first thing he noticed was her coloration. A single bulb from a floor lamp lit the

room, and in the dimness he could not tell if she was comatose or merely asleep. Still, the muddiness was completely gone, replaced by a soft, ethereal skin texture that made his own breath catch in his throat. The canister hissed oxygen through the mask clamped over her nose and mouth, the only sound invading the room.

An assistant quietly entered the room behind him to set several pint-sized bottles of water on a nearby table. She left as softly as she'd entered without giving the girl in the bed a glance.

Robin approached closer, careful not to lean against the bed or jar it unnecessarily. Alone, he was able to closely scrutinize her features without interruption, although he knew the two cameras mounted in the corners of the room were recording every move.

Her hair was splayed out over the pillows. He lifted a lock and rubbed it between his fingers. It was grayish in color. Limp, lifeless, like strands of saturated thread. The texture was hard to describe. He wondered what it would be like when cleaned and she was in full health.

One hand was tucked beneath the sheet and thermal blanket. The other, however, lay alongside. Robin leaned over for a better look. Four fingers and one opposable thumb. The bone structure appeared almost identical to human.

A jolt of discovery ran like a small shockwave through him. She had no fingernails. No nail or cuticle portion of any kind were at the tips of her fingers. He resisted the urge to turn her hand over to inspect the palm. In fact it took a major effort not to reach out and touch her anywhere. Her hair had been almost second nature, but he'd quickly managed to pull back.

He started to straighten when a soft sigh surprised him. Glancing back to the head of the bed, he met a pair of dark eyes staring at him. It was several seconds before Robin realized not only was she awake, but she was fully cognizant. More importantly, she was seeing him as he truly was, without the fearful appearance of the hazmat suit to cloak him.

He gave her a gentle smile. "Good morning. I wish you could tell me how you feel," he softly greeted her.

Steady eyes remained on his face. There was no sign of fear or distrust. Oddly, there was no curiosity, either. Even more thankful was the fact that Robin saw no pain or discomfort. Given the fact she was under no medication, he wondered if she was past feeling anything, or if she was physically capable of suppressing what she had undergone. He waited, hoping that invisible thread of communication would come back to him. When it failed to appear, he shook his head with regret. Funny how something so tenuous could become so valuable. He leaned closer to her.

"You have to drink something. You know that, don't you?" He kept his own eyes trained on hers and willed she could understand what he was trying to tell her. He prayed she could read whatever thoughts or vibrations or waves he was willing her way. Would he ever get that feeling again, that *knowing* what she said before she said it, without even saying it?

"You've suffered so much. You've survived what probably no human could. You came here from a galaxy that may be billions of light years away, and I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you alive."

Crossing over to the table, he grabbed one of the bottles and made his way back to her bedside. He uncapped the clear plastic bottle and waved it slightly in front of her face. Her gaze locked on the liquid inside.

"I caught on to the fact you needed oxygen. Please trust me that I'm also right about this one."

Gingerly he reached under the pillow, muscles tense to react to any sign of aggression or fear. He knew that if she tried to bolt she couldn't go far, not with the current deterioration of

her muscles. Surprisingly she didn't resist his bringing her to a semi-sitting position. Her body felt too lightweight, and it frightened him.

The only time she resisted was when he started to remove the oxygen mask. She tried to stop him but she was too weak. Her eyes sadly pleaded but he shook his head.

And then it was back. Only this time he didn't fear what he heard, or what she had to tell him.

*Tui'ilis.*

*I hurt.*

"Trust me," he whispered again, and held the bottle to her lips until a thin stream of water touched her lips. As her tongue tasted the water, a look of desperation crossed her face and she tried to lunge for the bottle. Carefully, slowly, Robin let her take a half-dozen small swallows before stopping her. She tried to get more but found herself being gently restrained.

"No more. A little at a time or you'll get sicker." He kept his voice firm but soft as he kept her eyes locked onto his. This time another jolt of realization streaked through him, blazing all the way to the soles of his feet.

The pupils of her eyes had contracted, and in the glare of the seventy-five watt bulb, the apertures had shrunk into six-point stars. The irises were the deepest blue he'd ever seen, but the non-circular pupils only emphasized her many minute, non-human differences. His mind raced, wondering how many other ways her alienness would be manifested.

He continued to give her a few swallows of water in five minute intervals. Her lips would close eagerly around the rim. The sight seemed to fascinate him. For some reason he couldn't explain, that simple act seemed to affirm that all life forms had the basic need for survival.

Each time he would lift her head to help, then lay her back down on the pillows and replace the oxygen mask as her body fought to cope with the reintroduction of fluids. He waited for what he believed would be an inevitable regurgitation, but it never came. It was as if she were willing her tissues to absorb every drop of moisture.

By the end of the first bottle he noticed she was fighting sleep. She needed to rest and give her body time to get re-accustomed to nutrients. He capped the bottle after proving it was empty to her searching eyes.

"All gone. And so are you, if drooping eyelids mean the same to your species as it does to mine." He spoke soothingly, punctuating his words with motions to keep her at ease, tucking the sheet and blanket around her, making sure she was comfortable.

"The water was the first round. Tomorrow you graduate to food. I just have to figure out what. Which reminds me, I need to cash in a few favors over at the cafeteria. How would you feel about Mexican food? Don't know? That's okay. I can guarantee everything in that place but the pudding."

Her eyes followed his every movement. She appeared watchful but also reticent. However, Robin knew he could easily lose her trust if he made the wrong move. He was treading not just unknown territory, but unknown everything. Feelings, experiences, a complete spectrum of pasts, presents, and futures he couldn't begin to fathom. Where she was from? How old she was? Was she already married, or her planetary equivalent? He didn't even know her name.

He walked over to the doorway, stopping to look back at her. She hadn't moved from where she lay. "I need to get some rest. Now that I know you're going to be getting better, I have to take care of myself, or there'll be two beds in this room instead of one." He smiled

slightly. "I'll be back in the morning. I promise. In the meantime, I expect to see some improvement in you. Don't disappoint me."

*Tadisina. Meke'eka.*

*I will be waiting. Please do not be long.*

He exited through the doorway, sealing it behind him. Once he was out of the plexiglass room, he donned a hazmat suit left for him in the smaller entrance and finally exited the chamber, going over to where the scientists were seated along the console. From there he could see into the room where the alien lay. The video cameras zoomed in tightly on the bed. She still had not moved. Her eyes were closed. Robin looked at the medical display.

"These readings don't mean anything to me," he commented over his external mike.

The tech snorted in agreement. "Imagine the worst set of diagnostics that could happen to a human, and that's probably normal for her." She turned her head to glance at him over her shoulder. "Dr. Dickenson? May I ask something that's been bothering me? Confidentially, of course."

Robin nodded. His attention was on the charts which detailed every hourly readout since her arrival. He was only partially listening to what the tech was saying. It would take him a good hour, if not longer, to go through the entire decontamination series. Only until he got the crew's okay could he go home and rest.

"If she's an alien, how are we certain it's a she?"

It as if he had been hit across the temple with a brick.

"What?"

"Have you ever seen an art house movie? Some of the men can look quite effeminate. Maybe she is really a he." The tech waved toward the enclosure. "I mean, she's a whole new life form. And I know we have to call it something. I just wondered why they chose to use the she pronoun instead of he."

*. ... how we be certain . . . ?*

Before he could answer her, Robin dropped the clipboard and raced out of Six One C, heading for the decon lab. It was nearly seven a.m.. Day shift would be trading off with the night crew in thirty to forty-five minutes. Peter would be having his first cup of coffee in his office any minute now.

Robin hoped he was ready to field some questions.

## Chapter Twelve

## Differences

“Talk to me, Pete.”

“Good morning. Looks like day three in those same clothes, Son. Or is it day four?”

Robin strode over to the physician’s desk and began rifling through the paperwork, refusing to rise to the man’s verbal bait. It had taken him exactly seventy-four minutes to go through decontamination before he was given the thumbs-up to re-establish contact with the outer world. Added to his complete exhaustion and lack of decent sleep, he was in no mood for any of his father’s sarcastic albeit playful comments.

“If you’re looking for her folder, it’s in my briefcase. If you’re interested in a clean shirt, which is all I can offer, check the bottom left drawer.”

Robin threw him a sour look. “You’re awfully calm about all this,” he accused. The briefcase was sitting on the floor beside the desk as expected. The folder was inside. Robin plopped down in the seat and began reading the reports.

Peter casually sipped his coffee. “It’s because I’ve had a good night’s rest, which, as your personal physician and father, is what I fully recommend for you. That, a meal, and a *hot* shower. Coffee?” Lacking a reply, he went ahead and poured an extra cup, walking it over to the desk. “Can you at least take it over to the couch? I’d like to check my e-mails.”

Wordlessly, Robin moved his reading material to the couch against the wall and continued scanning the paperwork. Readouts, diagnostics, lab reports, MRI scans—the only thing missing was the blood work.

NASA’s head medical scientist, Alan Carl, had filed a four-page report detailing the whys and wherefores of everything he had observed so far. It was by far the most interesting set of papers in the file. Robin had to read it twice before everything started to sink in.

“Well?” Pete asked once he noticed Robin’s stare into space.

“Interesting analogy,” the young man commented.

“You said you wanted to talk. Were any of your questions answered by Dr. Carl?”

Robin looked up at him. “Have you had a chance to examine her?”

“I was with Carl during his initial examination. He did a second physical once the alien was settled in the observation room.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Pete frowned. “And when? And why? Come to think of it, why have you all of a sudden become so involved with this? Isn’t she a little out of your league of expertise?”

A sardonic grin crossed the young man’s face. “My expertise is space anomalies. Tell me how she doesn’t fit, Pete.” He looked up at the man. “Hand me my cup, would you? Then I’ll call it a night.”

“She’s still alive?” As requested, the physician walked the mug of coffee over to him.

“And taking water,” Robin told him. A yawn caught him off-guard. “God, I’m tired.” He handed over the folder in exchange for the coffee. “Thanks for letting me take a look.”

“I think by now you’ve got the level clearance to read it anyway,” Pete said, taking a seat



next to him. He held the folder out in front of him unopened. It contained a hundred answered questions, but raised about a thousand more unanswered ones.

“What did you mean, ‘interesting analogy’?”

“The Barbie doll reference. That her body was shaped like a Barbie doll’s, only without the details. Breasts but no nipples. Structure exactly like a human woman’s, yet she has no external apertures. How would she procreate? Or go to the bathroom?”

Pete shrugged with one shoulder. “Osmosis? What I find interesting is the inability to stick a needle in her.”

“You’ve seen it?”

The older man shook his head. “So strange. The needle just ... disintegrates.”

“Disintegrates? You mean melts? Disappears? What?”

“Disintegrates. The moment the point hits the skin, it’s gone. No puff of smoke or anything like that. Try to imagine it like an eraser. The further you press the needle, the more of it that’s ‘erased’. When you pull back the needle, that much of it no longer exists. The tip is sliced as cleanly as if it had been drilled off.”

“Have you examined the ends under a scope?”

“Just got that report this morning.” Pete went over to his desk and shuffled papers around until he found the lab document. He handed it over to Robin.

A minute or two passed as the young man quickly scanned the two-page report. He gave Peter a bewildered look. Pete let out a rush of air through pursed lips. “Déjà vu,” he commented. “I was in your shoes, scrunched eyebrows and all, not too long ago. It gets easier to swallow if you keep reminding yourself she’s an alien.”

“They used an electron microscope,” Robin pointed out.

“Yep.”

“The edge was sheered off *at the molecular level*.”

“You got that, too?”

“But I TOUCHED her! Why is my hand still attached?”

“Because it’s organic?”

“I gave her water out of a bottle. The bottle remained intact,” Robin persisted.

“She was conscious and therefore allowed the bottle to remain unscathed?”

“That conclusion can only be justified if you’re saying the disintegration is an unconscious act.” Robin rubbed his chin and for the first time became aware of the stubble. And when was the last time he’d brushed his teeth?

“Or ... a defensive act. Part of her self-preservation?”

Robin glanced back at the numbers on the chart. “What is this girl capable of?” he half-whispered, more to himself than as a part of their conversation.

“More frightening,” Peter added, “is the question ‘Will she use it on us?’ We don’t know the answers because we have nothing to base our questions on. We don’t know her or how she’s going to react an hour from now, a day from now .... She could die between now and Thursday week.”

“Why? What’s happening that Thursday?”

“Overmeyer’s trying to get her moved to a more controlled facility.”

“Away from the Center? That’s ludicrous.”

“That’s the military.”

“Is Mason going to stop him?” Robin referred to the director and top dog of the complex. Mason didn’t answer to Overmeyer, even though both men took their orders from the

Department of Defense.

"From what I understand he's going to fight it tooth and nail. But you know Overmeyer is going to play on the fear factor. Keep her under guard, under lock and key until she proves whether she's friend or foe."

"She's under our tightest security here. You have to have a Level Yellow badge and a retina scan." Robin tapped the report with the back of a hand. "Despite all that, if this is but a small part of what we can expect, Alcatraz couldn't hold her. And they want to move her Thursday?"

"Overmeyer expects an answer from the DoD on Thursday. But you can bet he'll have everything in place to move her out the same day if he gets an affirmative."

Robin got to his feet and replaced the report on Pete's desk. "I have eleven days."

"To do what?"

"Well, first I have to get some nutrition into her. She can't take an IV. And I dread to think what she might contract if I attempt to feed her by hand."

Pete also got to his feet and shoved his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. "Think back to the olden days, before there were such things as intravenous feeding tubes."

Robin paused, his mind racing. "Chicken soup?"

Pete pursed his lips. "Sound ridiculous? She can't tolerate anything solid right now. Would you like to see her x-rays?"

"What have you got?"

"Ah! That's where it gets interesting."

Walking over to the office door, Pete opened it slightly and stuck out his head. "Brenda, bring me those x-rays of our test group, would you, please?"

A muffled reply answered him, and Pete drew back his head before closing the door.

"Test group?"

"Go by your office sometime and read your memos," the physician suggested. "Our alien has been given the official name of Test Group. All under the aegis of Operation Cassiopeia."

"Cute. A star cluster."

"Not a star cluster. *The* star cluster. We've backtracked from the initial maps from when the space anomaly was first recorded. Check your notes. We're thinking she came from that direction."

"Irregardless, all of this is being funneled through the offices of advanced planning, right? Handled as if it were in the first stages of a future shuttle launch?"

Peter nodded. "Because they're treating everything to look like just another launch mission, it raises no eyebrows. Everyone coming in contact with the information, or who even looks at any of the reports, will think it's SOP. Business as usual."

"So anything Overmeyer gets approved won't raise any red flags, either."

"Nope."

"Sooo ... where does that leave me? Keeping her alive until she gets transferred to God knows where?"

"There's no guarantee she'll be moved," Peter restated. "Look. We've sent three other people to take care of her. A technician and two nurses couldn't do a thing. But you, you figured out about the oxygen. You managed to give her water. You spoke to her and she listened! That's why you were boosted to Level Yellow."

"I was?"

"Like I said before, check your mail. Jack probably has it. Anyway, you've proven

yourself to be invaluable. If anyone can pull her through, it has to be you.”

They were interrupted by a soft knock on the door. Peter accepted the large brown envelope with thanks and closed and locked the door behind him. He walked over to the set of windows behind his desk, pulling out the first radiograph to hold it up to the light.

“Okay, bright boy, tell me what you see.”

“My PhD is not in medicine,” Robin stated wryly.

“No, but you have common sense and you made a passing grade in biology in college. I should know. I got your report card,” Pete retorted. “Now, make use of it.”

Sighing, Robin pulled a pen from the breast pocket of his lab coat and used it as a pointer. “Okay, then. If I were to assume this was a normal human being, I would be looking at the lungs here. Heart here. Intestines around here, beneath the stomach. Liver. Kidneys. Here should be HEL-lo!” He peered closer at the x-ray. Not satisfied, he pulled off his glasses. He circled the object on the film and looked at Pete. “Bingo?”

“Bingo.”

“What is it?”

“An organ of some sort, or so we believe. There’s no metallic resonance, so we’re going to pretend it belongs there. In our bodies, something like that could fit just as easily in the same space. Only, she has one and we don’t.”

“Have one what?” Robin insisted.

“Beats the hell out of me. That’s what’s gotten everyone excited.” Pete pulled a smaller packet from a separate folder from his lower desk drawer. Robin recognized the images.

“The MRI scans.”

“Yessireebob. And this is where the fat hit the frying pan.” Pete laid the scans against the window sill in a precise pattern. Robin followed each picture with growing interest.

“She’s so much like us, but she’s so very different,” he murmured. He found his fascination growing with each revelation.

“She’s a better version of us,” Pete corrected him. “She *is* us, but further advanced evolution-wise. She’s what we could be in a hundred thousand, perhaps two hundred thousand years from now. She’s mankind without the needless little bits and pieces of refuse we’ve kept while climbing the evolutionary ladder.”

Robin glanced at him. “Like fingernails?”

“Like fingernails. And an appendix. And the tail bone at the end of her vertebrae. And toes, just to name a few.”

“Toes?”

“Take a gander next time you’re in there with her. She has great-looking feet. Full bone structure, complete set of tarsus and metatarsus. Just not individual toes.”

“Why the bones but not the toes?” Robin queried.

“For balance. We needed toes when we were climbing trees back in the prehistoric days. They’ve been defunct for that purpose for thousands of years.”

“All right. All right. So, the next thing you’re going to tell me is that she’s evolved right out of her reproductive organs? That they procreate through what? Simple cell division? That she’s a hermaphrodite or a he-she?”

“On the contrary. She has all the reproductive organs, just like a human female.”

“Without a few external necessities. You’re not making much sense, Pete.”

“Just quoting the results, Rob.”

“She’s a she? No doubt?”

"All woman. Believe me, Rob, she's built like a Greek statue, right down to the alabaster skin."

"Then what the hell is that?" He pointed back at the shadowy, unknown organ represented on the x-ray. The small, insignificant-looking organ nestled comfortably between the liver and the kidney.

"That's where we think she gets her power," Peter said. "One more thing. She has no gall bladder or rectum. She does not eliminate waste products ... ever."

"Then where do they go?"

Pete indicated the unknown organ. "Mendolf had a theory back in the 60s, back when UFO sightings were rampant and the government was progressing with Operation Blue Book, and millions of free-thinkers believed we would be invaded before the next millennium. He said that any beings capable of space flight would have to be technologically and intellectually superior to us. Therefore they would also have to be physically superior to us. They would have conquered disease, poverty, and all the other petty little things that keep us as a race from developing our own successful space program.

"I believe you're seeing exactly what he spoke of. I believe this alien, this 'star girl' as some are calling her, is representative of what our own bodies could become. Like taking by-products from what we've consumed and breaking them down to become an alternate energy source. Just think of it, Robin. Taking every bit, every molecule of whatever we've eaten or drunk, and creating energy from it. No waste. No discharge. Just pure efficiency."

Robin took a step back. His head reeled from trying to take in all he'd seen in the past hour. But no matter how amazed he was by the findings, one crucial bit information remained elusive.

"And speaking of eating ... I've got to find something for her to eat, Pete. She can't subsist solely on water, yet I'm afraid I'll make her ingest something that would kill her."

"I think you've made some very critical but correct decisions so far," the older man assured him. "That's why Overmeyer and Wendicoff have placed so much faith in you. You seem to have a connection with her, God only knows how or why."

He was answered with a soft chuckle. "I'm glad to hear someone's in my court."

"Okay, okay. Look. You just need a chance to stop and think back," Peter said. "Try to remember. What latched you on to the idea that she needed air and not CO<sub>2</sub>? She didn't show any of the symptoms we humans would have if we were suffocating. What clued you to the fact that she could tolerate water? Standard procedure in hospitals is a glucose solution, not plain water."

"*I don't know!*" Robin threw his hands into the air, backing away further from the lab reports. "Not for certain, anyway. Besides, it was Brewer who ordered the water." He rubbed the back of his neck with both hands as he paused to think. "She looked like one of us, so I guess I went with those assumptions. We need the basics in nature. Food, water, air ... Air is a combination of natural elements. Water is a combination of natural elements."

He stopped. Giving his father a wide-eyed look, his voice dropped almost to a whisper. "What foods are a combination of natural elements?"

"Any foods natural to this earth," Pete smiled back.

"Anything not containing any manmade chemicals or compounds," Robin finished.

Seconds later, he was out the door and heading back to Six One C. His luck was holding out when he found Goldman already on duty at his console before the plexiglass room.

"Seth! Hey, my man! Glad to see you on call!" Robin clapped the technician on the

shoulder, then grabbed the chair beside him and sat down. “Hey, I need a big favor from you.”

The lean young man peered over at his superior with curious interest. “Good morning, Dr. Dickenson. How can I help you?”

“You still have that allergy infection, right?”

An eyebrow ascended. The tech was not used to such an overly friendly display from the young scientist, much less have someone from outside his field suddenly interested in his health.

“Yeah. Why?”

“So your mother sent you to work with a thermos of her world-famous allergy-reducing, cancer-fighting homemade chicken soup. Right?”

“Soooo ... ?”

Robin leaned in close enough to whisper in the man’s ear. “So, how would you like to be instrumental in saving the life of an extraterrestrial?”

“With *soup*?”

“With *your* soup,” Robin said.

Goldman reached under the console where he normally tossed his backpack. He pulled the bright silver thermos from the depths, handing it over to Robin. “You’re really going to feed the star girl my mom’s chicken soup?”

“Your mom’s still cooking kosher, correct?” Robin checked.

“Until I sit Shiva,” Goldman promised.

“Thanks, Seth. I’ll get this back to you when I’m through with it.”

Robin got to his feet and had started for the airlock when Peter finally managed to catch up with him. He locked into step with his son. “What’s in the thermos?”

“Goldman’s mother’s chicken soup. Kosher and homemade. Not a scrap of anything unnatural in it. If our star girl can handle this, she may have a chance.”

They reached the airlock, only to be met by Dr. Wendicoff exiting from the room. Raymond Wendicoff was the closest thing to an extraterrestrial biologist at the Space Center. Before their alien visitor had arrived, his main job was to examine microbes and fragments of space rock and debris brought back from orbit by the space shuttles. Before then, he and his team examined samples from the missions to the moon and Mars. Needless to say, with the arrival of the star girl, his level of importance had shot up astronomically.

“Good morning, Dr. Wendicoff,” Robin greeted the man, then attempted to walk past him and into the next chamber.

“Dr. Dickenson. And where do you think you’re going?”

“To see the patient,” Robin replied casually.

“For what purpose? And what’s in there?” The mustached physician gestured toward the thermos.

“Chicken soup. I’d offer you some, but I’m hoping our visitor will take most of it.”

Wendicoff made a face. “You’re not thinking of feeding it to her?”

“Actually, I was wondering whether we could bathe her in it, and perhaps her skin would absorb the nutritional content,” Robin said. He refused to hide the sarcasm in his voice. Although Wendicoff had been tapped as head physician for the project, Robin’s position had been assigned through the offices of the Center’s Director. With Mason’s clearance, the young astrophysicist did not need the physician’s approval to visit the star girl. On the other hand, Wendicoff could temporarily quarantine the chambers, rendering him unable to visit her until the ban was lifted. It was definitely a scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours partnership.

“Another one of your hunches?” Wendicoff asked.

Peter spoke up. "More like an educated guess."

"If you'll excuse me," Robin added. He started to shoulder his way into the inner room when Wendicoff stepped in front of him.

"She's asleep right now. And you and I both know she needs rest."

"Her body has used up all of its reserves," Robin stated, trying to keep his temper checked.

"You don't know that," Wendicoff replied.

"I can get Epplain down here to discuss the physics with you," Robin said. "He'll tell you exactly how long it took for her lungs to convert every molecule of oxygen into CO<sup>2</sup>, and how long it took for her vehicle to completely fill up with the gas. Pete here can send you the reports stating how long it took for her tissues to become saturated with CO<sup>2</sup>, and how long it took for her to reach her point of dehydration. Unfortunately, I haven't had a chance to read those reports yet myself because I've been too busy trying to *keep the girl alive!*"

He took a deep breath, letting it out quickly. "You said she's asleep? Well, I'm going to have to wake her up then in order to feed her. A few spoonfuls now, a few more later. Try to remember back when you were young how your mother took care of you when you were sick."

Wendicoff gave him a long look, then grudgingly moved aside. Robin hurried into the inner chamber, once again disregarding the decontamination suits, and pushed through the airlock.

Outside the room, Wendicoff turned to look at Peter, surprise evident on his face. "Was he always this hard-headed when he was growing up, Dr. Gray?" he inquired of the older man.

Peter grinned. "I could tell you horror stories. If it's any consolation, he only gets this way about something he's truly devoted to. He wants that alien to live. You also have to take into consideration that, notwithstanding one or two hours' of sleep here and there, he's been up for more than seventy-two hours straight."

"I can see why Mason has given him carte blanche." Stepping down, Wendicoff pulled a pen and small spiral notebook from the pocket of his lab coat and began jotting down notes. "So tell me, Pete, does he know about the transfer?"

"I've told him. He's not happy about it."

"Doesn't surprise me."

"How does everything look right now?" Pete asked.

"You mean the star girl? I need to get my report written, but there's been an improvement. At least, we believe the readings are telling us she's getting better. Stronger? Mmmm, that's too iffy to call. Let's just keep it at 'better'. I'll be interested to see what kind of readings we get after his chicken soup experiment."

"You and me both," Peter admitted.

## Chapter Thirteen

## Sustenance

She looked young and vulnerable when she was asleep. In the muted light over the bed, the star girl appeared to be a normal human female, right down to the gentle rise and fall of the sheet covering her chest.

Robin advanced toward the bed. He was aware of the hiss coming from the oxygen mask. In the far corner, the video camera was almost invisible. The single red light below the lens betrayed its presence and purpose.

He set the thermos on the small table beside the bed. Unscrewing the cap, he undid the plug and poured a small amount of soup into the cup. The aroma drifted up to him, reminding him he hadn't eaten properly in some time, either.

Several utensil packets containing napkin, plastic fork, spoon, and knife, and condiments lay in a heap on the table. Robin took one and tore it open, extracting the spoon. Cradling the cup in one hand, he turned back to the bed.

Time passed. How much he couldn't say. He knew she needed as much sleep as she could tolerate, but she needed nutrition more. Yet there was something vaguely comforting about watching her rest. He couldn't explain why he felt safe around her. He couldn't begin to comprehend why, inside, he believed there was something promising in her being there. When he was away from her, he felt a tugging to go back to the plexiglass room. An inner voice kept whispering in his head to *stay with her. Be with her. Let her know you're there.*

He eased down on the mattress beside her. Leaning over, closer to her face, he spoke softly so as not to startle her. "Hey. Wake up. I have something for you. Hey, star girl."

Her head turned toward him but her eyes remained closed. Disregarding orders, Robin reached out to touch her face, hoping the contact would awaken her. Carefully, he placed two fingertips against her cheek.

She was warm. Her skin felt like silk. Mere inches separated them as Robin gazed closely at her features. It was then he detected a scent, her scent, enticing and pleasant. He couldn't match it to any known smell he knew, but he liked it. It marked her, making her seem more real than she'd been before.

He knew he would get thoroughly reamed for his next act, but he no longer cared. Leaning completely over her, Robin placed his cheek against hers and murmured into her small ear.

"I have something for you to eat. You need to eat if you're going to get well."

She moved against him. Her hair, less knotty looking, appeared to move of its own volition over her shoulder. In doing so, it brushed over his chin and jaw. He felt her swallow and take a deep breath.

Robin pulled back slowly to see her watching him. She didn't appear frightened by his closeness. In fact, he couldn't read any emotion in her dazed expression. She was still half-asleep, looking at him as if he were part of a dream.

Balancing the cup of soup on the bed next to him, he removed the oxygen mask from her face. She immediately smelled the food and her eyes brightened. Robin smiled.

"I hope I'm doing the right thing," he told her, bringing the cup close to her mouth. He lifted a partial spoonful to her lips and waited.

Tentatively she tasted what was in the spoon. He watched, fascinated, as the tip of her pink tongue tested the broth. The act was so human-like, it surprised him. When she made a face and drew her head back, he gave her a puzzled look.

"What? Don't like it?"

He lifted the cup toward him and sniffed. It was then he realized the thermos had done its job too well. The liquid was very hot.

"Ah. We can fix that," he assured her with a small smile. The light banter seemed to help keep a connection going between them. She appeared to want to hear him talk, and Robin could almost understand why. If she'd spent a fraction of the time they believed she'd been isolated in space, away from all humanity and sound and touch, then she mentally and perhaps emotionally craved contact as much as her body needed sustenance.

He held the oxygen mask over the soup to help cool it. His first impulse was to blow on it. Fortunately his common sense held that impulse in check. Touching her was one no-no; breathing germs on her would be automatic grounds for dismissal from the project.

When he thought it was cooled, he tried to give her another spoonful. This time the liquid passed the tongue test. She took her first mouthful, pulling back to hold it before swallowing it. Closing her eyes, she appeared to savor the taste. Robin watched nervously. She didn't seem to be undergoing any reaction to it. He used the napkin from the sterile packet to wipe her mouth. He couldn't keep his eyes from her full, velvety-looking lips.

He kept to the broth only. Introducing meat and vegetables at this stage was too soon, he believed, much less trying to cope with what her alien stomach could or couldn't digest.

She ate all that was in the cup before he stopped her. While she watched him every moment he fed her, he continued his light conversation, discussing the weather and impending cold front. Discussing the upcoming holidays and how he planned to spend them. Getting up from the bed, Robin wiped out the cup with the napkin then replaced it on the thermos, and threw away the spoon. Turning back to her he ordered her back to sleep. "You'll be awakened again in an hour to eat some more. Every hour on the hour, I'm afraid, until we can get you on a regular three-a-day meal schedule and I can get a better handle on what we can feed you."

She appeared to understand him. When that feeling he was anticipating, that connection that signaled they would be conversing failed to manifest itself, his disappointment lay heavily in his chest. Closing her eyes, she was asleep almost instantly, leaving him surprised and elated. So far, so good. He could only hope this was a portent of better things to come.

"I want her fed one cup of soup every hour beginning now," Robin ordered as he reluctantly exited the plexiglass room in the bulky suit. Two technicians stood to retrieve his orders. "Broth only. None of the meat or vegetables. I left the thermos of soup inside. Be sure to use a clean sterile utensil pack every time you feed her. Oh, and be sure it's not too hot. Use the oxygen mask to cool it off if you need to. And if she begins to show any adverse reaction, notify me immediately. I'm going home to get some rest, but I'll be back later."

"Rob, got a minute?" McNabb called from across the block. McNabb was currently in charge of room operations. Robin walked over to look at the read-outs beneath the scientist's console.

"What 'cha got for me, Danny?"

"Two things, neither one major. I need you to sign off on some papers so we don't get our butts in trouble with the higher-ups. Second, I need to know what to do with the O<sup>2</sup>. Do we



still mask her? You left it off just now after you finished feeding her.”

“Keep the mask nearby just in case. Unless she shows she needs it, let’s see if she can tolerate the current air pressure.”

“Oh, and, about that little stunt you pulled a moment ago?” McNabb gave him a telltale stare. “Brass would be furious if they saw you make physical contact.”

Robin shook his head. “I’ve been making physical contact with her ever since we unsealed her vehicle. Let them bark.”

“Not good, Rob,” McNabb insisted. “They may not be able to bite because of your current status, but they could do other damage that could jeopardize your standing and possibly even your clearance rating, not to mention your job.”

Robin handed back the clipboard with the papers he’d signed. “Duly noted. Thanks for the advice, Danny.”

McNabb grinned. “We brain trust types need to stick together. By the way, off the record?” His voice dropped. “What is she like up close?”

Robin cocked his head, searching for a word. “Different,” he admitted, then winked. “See you later.” He waved goodbye at the research team as he walked out of the chamber and headed directly for decontamination for the second time that day.

Once he was released, he bypassed going to his office and went to the parking lot. Stopping at his regular gas station to fill up, he phoned his office and left a message for Jack. Next he stopped at a fast food place for a quick burger before making it home.

For some reason he could not explain, he didn’t want to share his growing awareness and thoughts about the star girl. More than that, he was afraid to admit what was happening to him because of her. He had changed. The world had changed. She was the cause of it, and he was caught right in the middle of it.

Yet, it was an exhilarating, giddy feeling, not one of apprehension he knew he should be feeling. She was an existing alien life form. He should be scared out of his mind. He should wash his hands of the whole thing and walk away before the situation blew up in his face.

He should.

Only, God knew he couldn’t.

## Chapter Fourteen

## Realization

He awoke, feeling as if his body had been struck by a semi-tractor trailer. His first thought was that he was coming down with the flu. There were enough people walking around the center with stuffy noses. But he'd had his flu shot for the year, and he kept up his vitamin C.

His second thought was that he might have caught something from the star girl. At first the idea sent a cold fist clenching in his stomach. Rather than dwell on that possibility, he decided to shrug off his aches to exhaustion and stress. He hadn't put in a stretch like that since the space shuttle *Antioch's* thrusters had malfunctioned, and she had been caught in the backwash of O'Brien's comet, requiring everything be decontaminated and pass muster before the shuttle was allowed to land. Given the fact that it all had to be done within a forty-hour time frame or their oxygen would be depleted before they could be brought back into Earth's atmosphere, it had been a nerve-wracking experience he hoped he'd never have to face again.

Crawling across the tousled sheets, Robin grabbed the phone on the bedside table. He bypassed the main switchboard and called directly into his office. A glance at the clock showed it was a little after eight. The bedroom window confirmed it was the middle of the night.

There were three messages waiting for him. One was from Jack, giving him the straight number to Six C One. "Just in case you call when I'm not here," she informed him.

"Note to self, order that woman a dozen red roses," Robin muttered to himself, dialing again.

"Six," a crisp voice answered.

"This is Robin Dickenson. Is Wendicoff or Metcalf on duty in C?"

"Please verify I.D. number and password."

Password? A password had been issued? Since when? Robin cursed himself, remembering his father's advice to check his messages. He had yet to see his new level yellow clearance. The password was probably attached to it. "Damn." He gave the security guard his I.D. number. "I need to speak to whoever is in charge at this hour. This is a level yellow order."

"I'm sorry, sir," the guard replied, "but unless you have the correct password, I'm going to have to end this call. That is a level *orange* order."

Robin cursed under his breath and hung up. A second later he was phoning his secretary's home number.

"Campbell residence."

"Debbie? How are you doing? This is Robin. Is Jack around?"

"Hi, Uncle Rob! Just a minute. I'll go get her," said the little girl. Jack picked up the receiver almost immediately after.

"Let me guess. You need the password," she commented wryly.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Yeah, that and a dollar will buy me a Coke at the commissary. How you feeling, Sleeping Beauty?"

"Just this side of crappy. Could be the flu."

"Could be something else," Jack hinted. "Your password for today is 'blueberry pie a la

mode'. Don't forget the ice cream. Pie gets you into C block, but the rest will give you clearance to the star girl."

"Got it. Thanks."

"Tomorrow, a new password will be issued. You could call Mason's secretary and get it yourself, or ...."

"Would you, Jack?" he muttered through the ever-increasing headache. "What day is this, by the way?"

"Saturday."

"Oh, geeze," Robin breathed. He'd been out for almost two days.

"She was doing fine, last I checked," Jack hurried to reassure him. "One of the techs, Saijian, is a close friend. He keeps me updated."

"Then the chicken soup worked?"

"The chicken soup worked," Jack echoed.

"Saturday, huh? Explains why Aunt Jack is babysitting."

"Hush your mouth, Dr. Rob. You're a fine one to hint about me not having a date on date night."

"Look, I'm heading back to the center after I shower and grab a bite. Anything else in my 'eyes only' mail that I need to be aware of?"

"Not that I can think of off-hand. But you know where you can reach me."

"Thanks, Jack. Call you tomorrow and see you Monday." Having hung up from his secretary, he called back to Building Six.

"Six," said the same no-nonsense voice.

"Dr. Robin Dickenson. I.D. number vee, as in 'victory', two-two-three-one-three dee, as in 'David'. Password is 'blueberry pie a la mode'."

The next voice he heard on the line was McNabb's. "C One."

"Danny? This is Robin Dickenson."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Bring me up to date."

"That's right! You don't know! The chicken soup worked!" the tech almost crowed. "The patient is responding and doing well. Did you know Wendicoff contracted Goldman's mom to cook exclusively for her? Goldman's about ready to bust with pride."

Robin smiled to himself. He could mentally see the man's self-respect go up several notches, not to mention his importance in the eyes of others. Poor Seth Goldman had been the brunt of ridicule too often in the past.

The tech continued, unaware of Robin's ruminations. "They're going to try potato soup for the first time tonight. Mrs. Goldman makes it from scratch and promises to keep to just natural ingredients. There's also a memo asking if there were other soups you think would be safe to try. Like mushroom."

"No, not mushroom. There are too many varieties of mushroom poisonous to us. I don't want the off chance of her being sensitive to those that don't harm us. Let's keep to things less likely. If the potato works, we can look at some cream varieties, like cream of chicken. Maybe cream of celery. See what Mrs. Goldman is capable of, first."

"How about fruit? Bananas? Strawberries? Cafeteria's got apples."

"No strawberries. Many humans have strawberry allergies. I think bananas are safe. Nobody is allergic to bananas, right? Let's try that. It's soft. Anything else?" Robin inquired.

"Nope. Want me to beep you or call you at home if something develops?"

“Let’s play it safe and do both. I’m on my way in. Are you still going by hourly feedings?”

“As per your instructions, since you haven’t been here to change them. She’s coming due again in about twenty minutes.”

“Hold off until I get there. Has Wendicoff or any of the brass been by?”

“Negative. Be assured, though, that they have their flunkies on hand to keep them well informed.”

“I can imagine. Okay. I’m on my way. See you when I get there,” Robin told him, hanging up. He jumped into the shower, opting to shave with his rechargeable on the way there to save time. Forty-five minutes later he pulled up to the security booth at the entrance of the Space Center and was greeted by the night guard.

“You still driving that jalopy?” Parkhurst ribbed him.

“Hey! Sixty-five rag top! She’s cherry!” Robin laughed.

“She’s a gas guzzler,” the guard shot back.

“Beats that fix-or-repair-daily you haul back and forth,” Robin retorted.

“Did I just miss you the past couple of days?”

“Nope. Took some time off,” Robin said.

“Well, have a good time at the old grind. And get that exhaust checked. You’re destroying the ozone.”

Both men laughed and the guard waved him in. It was an old joke they had enjoyed sharing ever since they bumped into each other at an antique car rally some years back. Although they hadn’t formed a close friendship, they’d developed what was almost a ritual that both looked forward to at work.

Robin pulled into his assigned spot. He entered the building and made his way to the inner chamber without complications. McNabb was no longer on shift. Singleton had taken over. The moment she spotted him entering the room, she rose from her seat at the console and handed him the clipboard.

“Good evening, Dr. Dickenson. We held off the next feeding until you arrived, as ordered.”

“Thank you, Paula. It’s Paula, right?”

“Right,” the tech smiled.

“Star girl’s BP is up. So are several of her other readings,” he observed. “But they still don’t look like anything vaguely human. What does Wendicoff say?”

The tech shrugged. “It’s what he doesn’t say. He has no idea if the readings are good signs or bad signs. All we can do is observe and be on the lookout for any adverse reactions.”

Robin handed the clipboard back to her. “I would be interested to know what he would do if she did have a reaction. Considering you can’t put a needle into her to give her any medications. Who’s been feeding her?”

“McNabb took over when you left. We’ve been taking turns during our shift. I just came on duty and was going in when I read your orders.”

“Mind if I cut in?”

“I think she’s been asking for you,” the tech said.

Robin halted and gave the woman a searching look. “She what?”

“I mean, not out loud, but I think the star girl’s been waiting for you. Every time we go in to feed her, she’s watching the door. When she sees it isn’t you, you can’t help but notice the disappointment on her face. I-I think she’s missed you,” Singleton admitted.

“Thanks, Paula.”

It was a small bit of news, but he felt a brightness inside himself. She’d missed him? Did she understand why he’d been gone so long? Robin hoped she wasn’t upset or thinking she’d been abandoned. There was too much that had happened to her, too much past history that they couldn’t sweep under the carpet. She was starting a new life with them, yet everything they did was directly impacted by ghosts from her past. He had to keep that in mind.

Entering the airlock, he met another tech exiting with a bowl of soapy water. “Spit bath?” he asked the nurse.

“Wendicoff’s ordered a bathroom erected adjacent to the chamber. It’s almost finished, and she can start taking her own showers soon.”

Robin thanked her for the information and entered the inner room.

This time the star girl was not paying attention to the doorway. Instead she was busy watching the television set that had been brought in and hooked up. It was a combination television and DVD player, and a Sesame Street program was playing. Big Bird was singing about the short sound made by ‘a’. The alien remained totally focused on the screen, her lips moving slightly as if trying to form the words. A pile of disks was stacked next to the unit.

Behind the bed a curtain of semi-transparent plastic blocked off the nearly-completed bathroom. Robin could see a shower and tub and sink. The lack of a toilet was conspicuous. Shadows of workmen floated in and out, ignored.

On the table where he’d set Goldman’s thermos of chicken soup two days before, there was now a covered tray. He lifted the lid to see a bowl of potato soup and a bowl of sliced bananas. Good old McNabb.

A rustle of sheets and a small gasp came from behind him. He turned around to see that the star girl had noticed him. She was sitting up on her own and her face was alight with joy upon seeing him. Robin walked over and held out his hands to take hers.

“You are beautiful,” he told her, taking in the change that had occurred. The difference was astounding. She seemed to glow. Her skin had taken on a pearlescent quality. Even her hair gleamed, cascading over her shoulders like a flow of golden milk.

“Remind me to offer Goldman’s chicken soup to the cancer clinic. I’m convinced it can work miracles,” he told her. She grasped his hands and brought them up to her cheeks. He could feel her warmth, and it reminded him of the moment he’d touched her face with his. He found himself wanting to do it again, so he could breathe in her bodily perfume. Closing his eyes, Robin scolded himself and tried to firm his resolve. *You’re here to make her well. You’re here for her sake, not yours. You’re here to ....*

A softness touched his cheek. Silky hair tickled the corner of his mouth, and a scent he now knew he’d dreamt about was in his nostrils. That telltale tendril of their connection slipped almost unnoticed into his subconscious until a gentle word emerged in his mind.

*Sekanandi.*

*You came back.*

A pair of hands held his head as the alien caressed his face in the manner he’d done days before. A shiver ran through him. The urge, the need to turn his head and seek her lips was overwhelming, but he fought it. Robin realized she believed it was a gesture of greeting. Grasping her shoulders, he attempted to push her back, hoping that by separating the two of them he could get a better handle on his own emotions.

The room took on a new look, and a new and dangerous connotation. The star girl was no longer an object of curiosity. The chamber had changed from a detention cell to a sanctuary.

His assignment had taken a one hundred-eighty degree turn from captor to captive. And in one innocent movement to greet him, and to show him her delight in his reappearance, Robin realized his role had suddenly taken a wholly different slant. The knowledge terrified him. And the brightness inside him became incandescent.

*Oh, my God.* His mind still refused to accept it although every fiber of his being screamed the truth.

Moving away from her proved nearly impossible. He forced himself to start up his stream of light banter, in order to hide the betrayal of his heart. He brought the tray of food over to the bed and placed it on the covers in front of her. The reports stated she had just begun feeding herself, for which Robin was grateful. He knew that if he tried to hold a spoon now, the shaking of his hands would be disastrous. Besides, he needed the small barrier the tray offered between them.

The star girl lifted the lids off the food and began to eat. She kept her eyes on him, listening to him speak as if she hadn't heard a human voice in decades. Every so often she would glance at the television screen behind him.

"We're going to start you on a language program, to help you learn English. You appear ready. Actually, it's going to be a two-way communication, or so we hope. We'd like to learn all we can about you, where you're from, what you do ... why you're here. The guys over in the lab have been falling all over themselves, trying to analyze your vehicle. They can't seem to find the propulsion unit, and it has them totally baffled. We're also cur ...."

"Robin?" The voice came unexpectedly over the room's intercom. "Dr. Dickenson?"

"Yes?"

"Dr. Wendicoff would like to speak to you. Now."

"Tell him I'll be right there." Robin turned back to the star girl. "Sorry. I have to go. Keep eating and eat everything here. I'm hoping it agrees with you."

The alien looked panicked and reached out to grab an arm.

*Cambimilsi'ia?*

*Why not stay?*

By just her actions alone it was obvious she didn't want him to leave just yet. The plaintive echo in his mind he couldn't escape. The touch of her hand was electric. He shivered involuntarily. It took a great deal of self-control to remove her grasp from his arm.

"I'll be back," he promised, turning to leave.

"Woh ... beh ...." It was a sound full of sadness, totally taking him off-guard. He whirled around to stare at the alien.

"Woh-beh," she said again. She struggled with the phonetics and the texture of the word. Her voice shook. The hand she extended toward him also shook.

*Firinda'asi!*

*I am trying!*

In a daze, Robin stepped toward her, taking her hand and finding it reaching for his face. Silently she rose to stand. She struggled to make her legs obey. For a few seconds Robin believed she would be able to remain on her feet until she started to collapse. He grabbed her, pulling her next to him, holding onto her tightly as her arms encircled his neck for support. She leaned into him and buried her face in his neck. He was not as surprised to learn she was as tall as he was as he was stunned by the feel of her body against his.

"Woh-beh." She was saying his name. He felt dizzy, and he had to take a step back to brace himself to keep both of them from falling. He closed his eyes and sunk his face against the

warmth of her neck and softness of her hair. His lips found the satin curve of her shoulder, and he allowed himself the briefest freedom to press his lips against it, losing himself in her, in her heat, in her texture and scent, for a split-second.

*Kirindari'ilis a'abai'i.*

*Do not let me go. Touch me.*

One hand followed the length of her back, touching the soft skin beneath the part in the hospital gown. His fingers traced the ridge of her spine and she reacted to his touch with a soft gasp. As his hand continued upward, he tried to find words to speak—when a roughness rasped over his palm. Robin's head shot up. He pressed his hand over the hardness again, exploring the remains of the scar tissue crisscrossing her skin. A coldness washed over him, and somehow he managed to pull her away from him with great reluctance.

Sitting her back on the bed, he held her by the upper arms and bent over to look her directly in the eyes. "I'll be back," he promised. "Stay here. Wait for me." It sounded like an idiotic request. He knew without a doubt she would wait for him.

Robin cleared his throat and strode out of the chamber to put on the hazmat suit before exiting. Obviously Wendicoff would have seen the contact and would not be happy. After what had just happened, he would probably be furious. Robin steeled himself for the verbal onslaught. Fine. Let the man have his say. Because afterward, Robin was going to find out why he had been kept in the dark about the marks on her back. Some felt hard and old. Others were, without a doubt, freshly healed wounds. The star girl had been tortured prior to her arrival. To what extent he had no idea, but he was damned and determined to find out just how much he had not been told. And how bad things *really* were.

## Chapter Fifteen

## Banned

Wendicoff wasn't furious. He was livid.

"I'm revoking your clearance," were the first words out of his mouth the moment he spotted Robin heading his way.

"You're doing no such thing," Robin challenged.

"I had warned you about making physical contact. And I understand this isn't the first time you've disregarded orders. But I promise you, it's the last time. I don't know how you got to be such a big shot with the alien, but I'm pretty sure you can be replaced with no complications. Consider yourself banned from Six." The scientist turned to walk away, but Robin side-stepped in front of him, blocking his way.

"You're not pulling me off this assignment. You have neither the authorization nor the jurisdiction. I answer to Mason," Robin reminded him, trying to keep a tight rein on his own emotions. If it weren't for the hazmat suit, he was certain the man would have struck him.

Wendicoff gave him a squinty-eyed stare. "I strongly suggest you go read your mail, little boy. You've been gone for a while. Perhaps it's time you made yourself current to what's going on around here. Security! Escort Dr. Dickenson out of Six and over to Decon, immediately! I think it's time you got back to doing the work you were originally hired to do."

This time the man made his exit as a security guard approached with a rifle slung over one shoulder. Unobserved, a tech had come up from behind with a clipboard of reports she needed signed. Robin gave Parkhurst a quizzical glance.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

"This became a military operation as of thirteen hundred hours," she replied. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew." She handed him the reports, which he signed without reading.

Robin broke from the chamber before the guard could show him the way. He hurried over to perform decontamination procedures before heading to his own office building, hoping to catch his father at home.

Once inside the office he turned on his computer. While it booted up, he checked his phone messages and his IN box. His yellow security tag was there, as he'd expected. *A lot of good it'll do me now*, he muttered, dialing the Gray residence. To his relief Peter answered.

"Pete! I'm in a dilemma. My security's been revoked and Wendicoff has ejected me from the project."

"He what?" the man asked in a sleepy voice. Obviously he'd fallen asleep while in front of the television set, most likely while watching a rerun of an old television series.

Robin repeated what he'd said, adding, "Do I call Mason?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, you don't call Mason on a weekend at this time of night unless a meteor has fallen into the middle of the center. No. Stay your arguments for Monday."

"Military took charge of her as of one o'clock this afternoon. Can he do that to me? Considering it was Mason who assigned me?"

"I thought Military wasn't going to pull rank until later this week. Damn. Wonder whose strings they pulled? Fortunately for us we're not subject to their jurisprudence."



“But, Pete, I need to get back into the chamber. She needs me. She needs my support.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “She spoke my name, Dad. I have to get back in there.”

“She what?”

“She spoke my name.”

“She spoke? Oh, cripes, this *is* a breakthrough!” the older man admitted. “You’ve no doubt what you heard?”

“She’s ready to communicate,” Robin announced. “Only I’m willing to bet she won’t cooperate with anyone else but me.”

“That would give some credence to the fact that she started to feed herself because she didn’t want anyone else doing it for her.” Peter thought for a moment. “Let me make a few phone calls. Are you in your office?”

“Where else can I be, since I’m an anathema to Building Six?”

“Stay put until I call you back. Wendicoff may think Military has complete authorization, but medical can override any and all commands,” Peter assured him. “I’ll get back with you shortly.”

Robin hung up and leaned back in his chair, running his hands through his hair. Tossing his glasses onto the desk, he crossed his arms over his face and willed himself to calm down. *Think. Get yourself together. For the moment she’s safe and still on site. That means you still have a chance. Just try to settle down and think.*

He took a deep breath and felt a constriction in his chest as he realized his shirt sleeves still smelled of her. Suddenly it was if she was back in his arms, pressing against him, pressing her warmth to his as she shivered, not from the cold, but from happiness at seeing him. From fear, believing she would never see him again. From her desperate need to have him nearby.

*Kirindari’ilis a’aba’i.*

*Do not let me go. Touch me.*

He had touched her, just as she had touched him. Not skin to skin, but mind to mind.

Mind to mind, heart to heart. Emotion to emotion.

“And I don’t even know your name,” Robin murmured aloud.

The computer dinged, letting him know he had messages in his mail system. He typed in his password and began reading the half-dozen confidential memos when he remembered something he’d wanted to research. He still had his level yellow clearance. Wendicoff might have removed him from Six, but until Monday he could still access all files.

It didn’t take him long to find the restricted folders, including the complete medical work-up they’d done on the star girl. He scanned the pages, looking for reference to anything unfamiliar, when the paragraph hit him. As he’d expected, it had been filed by Alan Carl.

Subject has evidence of prior extreme physical abuse. There are at least two dozen keloid scars running diagonally and vertically across the back. Smaller scars, appearing to be burn marks, are along the arms, buttocks, and upper legs. These burn marks could be caused by fire or be electrical in nature. Due to their age, it is difficult to tell for certain. In addition, x-rays show knitted bone fractures. However, we cannot say whether these were caused by accident or on purpose. But because of the type, placement, and number of fractures, we feel it safe to say these were not self-inflicted. One additional note: most, if not all, of this abuse appears to have been caused all within a specific time frame and not spread out over the course of several days, months, or years. Therefore it is also reasonably safe to assume the victim was involved in a major traumatic event such as a natural catastrophe (earthquake, etc.), in a life-

threatening accident (involving a vehicle, etc.), or was subjected to extreme torture prior to being sent into space.

The report continued on for another four pages, but the one paragraph burned in his mind. Anger deep and red threatened to overwhelm him. Who would have tortured her? For what purpose? Dearest Lord in Heaven—who was this star girl that people feared her to the point of trying to destroy her?

“I have to establish communication with her. I need to find some answers.” He blinked as his mind raced. A possibility formed, sending cold chills through him.

“What if whoever did this to her is searching for her? To make sure she doesn’t survive elsewhere?” He leaned back in his chair. The beginning twinges of a major headache were forming around his temples. Reaching inside his desk drawer, he pulled out the bottle of acetaminophen he kept there, extracted three capsules, and popped them dry. They stuck in his throat as if they’d been glued there, forcing him to up to get a cup of water at the little sink on the other side of the office. At that moment his phone rang. The blinking yellow light told him it was an outside line.

“Johnson Space Center. Dr. Dickenson,” he answered.

“I think I found a crack in Wendicoff’s sidewalk,” Peter told him.

“Pete, I’ve been reading the confidential files online,” Robin said.

There was a brief pause. “What do you want to know?” the older man asked.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the scars?”

“Rob, right off the bat, let me say that I think you’re getting too close to this. Have you given thought to the fact that maybe you sitting back from this for a while is probably the best thing for you at this point?”

“You’re stalling,” Robin accused him, feeling his anger rise. “I never thought I’d see the day when you’d back away from your own beliefs.”

Peter sighed loudly over the phone. “I just spoke to Hathaway. He just got off the horn with Purcell.”

Robin then knew what Peter was about to say. “Purcell is working C tonight.”

“C is in pandemonium. They believe the star girl saw you being thrown out and now she’s barred the door. No one can get in, and no one can talk her into opening up the airlock.”

“What do you mean, she’s barred the door? There’s no lock on it. And the airlock locks on the *outside*.”

“Rob, listen to me. The star girl has a power and she’s using it. She’s protesting in the only way she knows. She’s dangerous. Now she’s become a liability. You know what the brass will do next.”

“Yeah. And I have to stop them.”

“No, Rob. You have to stop *her*,” Peter corrected.

## Chapter Sixteen

## Compromise

Apparently Peter hadn't been the only person to believe he had some pull with the alien. Halfway across the concourse, he saw Singleton jogging toward him.

"Rob! Wait up!"

"No need to fret. I was on my way over to C, anyway," he told her as the tech eased into step beside him. "Care to fill me in?"

"She's ... I dunno. Somehow she's barred entrance into the chamber. When we try to talk some sense into her, she just stares at us, as though we're the bad guys and she wants nothing more to do with us."

"Has Wendicoff tried to force the airlock?"

"Yeah. It won't budge. None of the controls work, even though diagnostics say they're online and functional. How do you think she did it?"

"Who knows?" Robin frankly admitted. He broke into a jog, with Singleton right behind him. When they arrived at Building C, it appeared security had already been ordered to give him clearance. He swept past as they opened the doors ahead of him.

Just as Pete had told him, C was in pandemonium. Inside the chamber, the star girl was sitting on the edge of her bed, one leg tucked beneath her as the other stretched to the floor. She was passively watching the frenetic anthill passing in front of her window. To the side, Robin could see the small knot of men gathered around the thick metal doors leading into the rooms. Because of the excessive amount of oxygen being pumped into the alien's environment, most cutting tools were out of the question.

He paused just beyond the perimeter and stared at her, studying her. She might appear passive at first, he realized, but there was a darkness hanging over her, as though she honestly didn't care if they could get inside to her or not. She looked resigned. Saddened. And very lost.

Taking a deep breath, Robin approached the window, not stopping until her gaze registered him and locked onto his face. Immediately her entire countenance changed. She scooted over to the end of the bed, waiting for him to get closer, as a smile erupted on her face.

Instead of returning the smile, Robin halted about twenty feet from the plexiglass and crossed his hands over his chest. He intended to make it very clear he was upset with her, although he wouldn't be able to explain to her why. All he could think of was the fact that if she continued to pull such stunts, Overmeyer would have more fuel to add to his fire. Somehow, somehow, Robin had to get the girl to stop using whatever power she had, and to stop immediately. If it meant hurting her emotionally ... *I'll make it up to you later*, he promised her to himself.

"What do you think you're doing?" he called out harshly, addressing her directly.

It was as if someone had thrown a switch. Around him, every tech instantly froze. The silence echoed inside the cavernous room.

A puzzled look came over the star girl's face.

"Yes, exactly," Robin continued, as if she'd questioned his meaning. Pointing toward the airlock, he demanded, "What did you think you were going to accomplish by shutting us out?"

Huh? How are we going to bring you food and drink if we can't get in?"

What happened next knocked everyone on their mental keisters, including Robin. The star girl glanced over at the airlock, then back to him.

"Ve'en ordelisi'iat!" she called out. *I do not want them in here!*

"I don't care if you don't want them in there," Robin replied. A heartbeat later he realized what he'd done. The tension in the room became palpable as the rest of the techs and scientists also became aware. "I cannot take care of you by myself. You must open the door and let the others assist you!"

"Geiali? Bo'orist ke'endiali, Woh-beh?" *Why not? Do you no longer want to be with me, Robin?*

Unconsciously, Robin sighed and shook his head. Uncrossing his arms, he placed his hands on his hips. "Yes, I do," he admitted in a softer tone of voice. "But I must follow orders. And my orders no longer include taking care of you."

"Ve'en Seinja!" *I do not care!*

"If I don't follow orders, I could be removed permanently. Can you understand that? Permanently!"

"Ve'en Seinja! Pomili'i ti'ila!" *I do not care! I will make them let you!*

By now there was no way Robin could deny whatever connection there was between them. Neither could the dozen pairs of eyes glued to them.

"Woh-beh."

"What?"

"Ki tolo vo." *I am hungry.*

Taking a deep breath against the throbbing pain that had come from nowhere to nest between his eyes, Robin shivered slightly. "A'a vit kelevilar," he told her, and stared directly into her eyes. "Open the door."

Someone dropped a clipboard in shock.

There was a split-second hesitation, then the star girl turned toward the airlock. She threw her arm out toward the door, opening her hand as if tossing something at it. At first Robin thought he saw something glitter, then it was gone. When she looked back at him, the sadness in her eyes was now a look of condemnation that tore into his gut. Lowering her head, the girl crawled back under the blanket and turned her back on them.

To all intents and purposes, she believed he'd cast her away, and it was more than he could bear. Quickly Robin strode over to the doors where two techs were awaiting word to try and open them. He gave the men a nod, and one man reached out to grab the lever.

The steel bar came loose in his hands, leaving behind a gaping hole.

"What the ...?"

The second tech reached inside the hole, got a firm grip, and tugged. The door slid open as smoothly as melting ice.

"Damn. The entire mechanism is ... missing."

"What the hell is going on? What was all that about, Dickenson?"

"The door is open now," Robin told Wendicoff as the man approached them.

"No." The scientist grabbed Robin by the shoulder and shoved, turning him around to face him. "I want to know how in the hell you learned to speak her language!"

"I ... Don't ... Know," he admitted, punctuating each word. "But thanks to you and the little show you put on earlier when you threw me out, she now thinks I've abandoned her. In my book, that puts everything we've accomplished so far back down near the bottom rung, it's going

to be a *long* climb up. Good luck on whatever else you have planned.”

He turned to leave when Wendicoff barked, “Where do you think you’re going?”

Robin paused. “Last time I checked, this unit was under Level Orange clearance. I’m merely a Yellow. So, unless you give me a boost, I need to leave if I want to keep my job.”

“Your job assignment and status have been changed,” the scientist told him.

An eyebrow went up. “By whose orders?”

“By mine,” Wendicoff grudgingly admitted. “As of ten minutes ago. Good God, Rob. I’m not an ogre. Neither am I blind or stupid. Whatever strides we were making with the star girl, we made because she had come to trust you. If we lock you out, we’re defeating our own purpose, and we’ll get nowhere with her.”

“What about Overmeyer?”

“You let me worry about the general,” the scientist told him. “Right now the secrets of a previously unknown galaxy are locked up inside that girl, and you have the only key.”

Robin shot a look at the open chamber. Decon procedures were now so much wasted effort. “She thinks I’ve abandoned her,” he quietly repeated to the man. “I’ve hurt her.”

“Then go in there and convince her differently.”

“Carte blanche?”

Wendicoff clenched his jaws, fighting reason against reality, and his ever-increasing jealousy that it wasn’t he whom the star girl had attached herself to. Giving a nod, he agreed, “Carte blanche.”

A small smile crossed Robin’s face, but it wasn’t one of triumph. “Thank you. In the meantime, she told me she was hungry. When is she scheduled to eat again?”

Gesturing for one of the techs, Wendicoff asked her to check. She quickly replied the meal should be arriving within the next quarter hour.

Pivoting, Robin entered the chamber and went directly into the inner room. There was a lot more at stake than winning back the alien’s trust and confidence, he knew. In his heart, he knew he had to win back ....

Standing in the doorway, staring at the still form on the bed, he bit his lip as his fists clenched at his sides.

*Ka rinn.* It meant ‘my life’, or ‘my soul’, or ‘my love’ in her language.

*Ka rinn. Jala’a vi.*

*Come back to me.*

## Chapter Seventeen

## Liability

He advanced slowly toward the bed and the quiet form lying with her back to him. Gently, he sat on the edge of the mattress and waited for her to acknowledge him. Minutes went by but she didn't move. Yet, he knew she wasn't asleep.

What little he knew of her language, it was only because she'd given it to him. In bits and pieces, in short phrases, it had come to him, sinking into his subconscious like so much flotsam and jetsam rising to the surface of his mental ocean.

Carte blanche. No restrictions. No rules. As long as she could be persuaded to do what they wanted of her. Answered whatever questions they asked of her. Gave them whatever they needed.

If he wanted to he ... he could even ....

*Dammit.*

He was going to see if he truly had a blank check.

Reaching over, he placed his hands on her upper arms and turned her over to face him. He started to see the whites of her eyes had turned powder blue. Turquoise-colored droplets limned her lashes and cheeks. She had been crying with sapphire tears.

Wordlessly, he pulled her toward him, into his embrace, and he held her there, against his chest as she rested her cheek on his shoulder. He could feel her shivering, but she kept her hands clasped between them, like a tight knot in the middle of his sternum.

Her creamy hair was pure satin against his cheek. Slowly, tenderly, he spread his fingers and trailed them down her back, drawing her closer to him, until his warmth chased away the last shreds of cold pervading her. She shivered slightly, and he could swear he felt her fingers flex, but she remained passive in his embrace. Not pulling away, but not fully accepting him, either.

"Teach me," he whispered against her. "Teach me how I can talk to you so you'll understand me. Teach me how to read what's inside you, so you can read what's inside me. *Ka rinn.*"

She moved, a small gesture of surprise, then pulled away just far enough to where she could look into his eyes. Her expression was haunted, but hopeful.

*"Iva?"*

*"Ivinn ... ka rinn,"* Robin whispered. "I'm sorry I spoke to you that way, but it was the only way ...." He stopped and took a shaky breath. "God, I'm working on pure speculation here. That's not me. I can't ...." Shaking his head, he sniffed, then realized he was also crying.

Gently, she reached up to touch his face, touch his tears. She stared in surprise at the clear droplet suspended on the tip of her finger. Then, to his amazement, she licked it. The saltiness took her aback.

*"Pla'andik."*

"Yeah." He managed a small smile. "Different."

Sighing, the star girl placed her cheek back on his shoulder, and Robin got the distinct impression she closed her eyes. Running his arms around her waist, he drew her as close as he could. Before he knew it, her hands were tracing his ribs, testing his warmth as they found their

way under his arms and around to his back. She spread her fingers against the hard muscles there, and pressed the firm surface of his skin.

It was a simple and natural thing, holding her, feeling her matching him curve for curve, giving her his warmth and security as surely as she gave him her trust. Their breathing slowed and unconsciously matched rhythms. Time became inconsequential, leaving just the two of them. Alone.

“*Ka rinn*,” he whispered again, to feel her tremble slightly. “*Ka rinn*.”

“Woh-beh.”

Rearing back once more, he cupped her face in his palms and looked into her exquisite face. “I don’t know your name,” he whispered. “Name? Uhh ... *julmo’ot*?”

“Sah’Reena.”

He stared at her. For some reason he got the impression the first part wasn’t her name, but yet it was. A title, perhaps? “Sah ... Reena?”

A clanking sound came from the other room, signaling the delivery of her dinner cart. Robin reluctantly got up to retrieve it and brought it back. As she lifted the lids to inspect the food, he gave her a small sign to wait. “I’ll be right back. Go ahead and start eating.”

She seemed to understand as she picked up the dinner roll and began to gnaw on it. Robin gave her the ‘hold on’ motion again with his hand, then retreated outside the chamber to where Wendicoff and his associates had been watching the entire time. The head scientist gave him a curious glare as he approached.

“Okay. I think I’ve managed to re-establish a rapport with her. And you can write down that she has a name. Sah’Reena, although, until I can find out for certain, I believe the first part is more of a title or designation. I’m not sure which.”

One of the techs busily wrote it all down.

“Anything else?” Wendicoff asked.

“I believe the next step will be to get her to learn our language. That way she can answer any and all questions put to her. My Murrallisian is a bit ....”

“Your *what*?”

Robin felt his face grow cold. Without realizing it, he turned to see the star girl calmly eating her dinner as she kept a guarded watch on what was going on outside the immense window. He knew, without a doubt, she was waiting to see if he would return as promised.

“Your ... what did you call it? Murrallisian?” the head scientist repeated.

“Yeah,” Robin softly answered, his eyes not straying from the figure inside the chamber. “My Murrallisian is too spotty for me to try and interpret. It would be better if she learned English.” He felt a chill go through him, and shivered involuntarily. “She’s from a world she calls Murrall. A twin planet. With a blue dwarf sun.”

“Go on.”

He shook his head. “It comes to me in bits and pieces. I can’t explain how or why. I just seem to ... to soak it up from her. But I was right about one thing.” Looking back at Wendicoff, Robin swallowed hard. “You won’t find a propulsion unit on that pod because it doesn’t have one. She was launched into space. To die.”

Wendicoff glared at him. “Why? Is she a criminal? What did she do? Murder someone?”

“You could say that.”

“How would *you* say it?”

Robin looked down at his hands, hands that had caressed her and found her too perfect to

believe. “I don’t know exactly know how to say it, but I can tell you this much. If I turn her away again, it will kill her. She ... she wasn’t the bad guy. Not this time. Give me more time, and I’ll let you know when I’m more certain.”

“And what are we supposed to do in the meantime? We could have an intergalactic criminal in there!” Wendicoff spat. He immediately backed off when he saw the sparks of anger in Robin’s eyes.

“She has not hurt or injured one person since she’s been here, although she’s had plenty of opportunities. You gave me *carte blanche*. Let me use it. I promise I’ll give you more information later, but it must be on *my* terms. Got that?”

When he was met with silence, Robin took it as acquiescence. “Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back in there to start her English lessons, beginning with dinner.” Turning his back on them, he returned to the chamber.

By the same token, Wendicoff found the nearest phone to call General Overmeyer. And by the end of their conversation, they both had come to the same conclusion.

Sah’Reena was quickly becoming a liability.



## Chapter Eighteen

## Lessons

A week became two. Two weeks became three. Every day, seven days a week, Robin spent as many as eight to ten hours working directly with Sah'Reena, teaching her how to read and how to speak English. Acquainting her with her new world, her new home. Geography, mathematics, social studies, science—any topic that came to mind was fair game. Any question she posed to him in her halting, heavily-accented English often became a point of discussion.

Each day Administration emailed him a list of questions. Every evening before he left for home, he replied with the answers she'd given him, regardless of whether he understood them or not.

In the meantime, her pod was taken apart piece by piece and run through a battery of tests. Now that they knew there was no propulsion unit inside, there was no longer any fear of accidentally triggering it, or triggering some kind of reactionary power that could cause possible harm.

It was during a break in their work when Robin was brought a small, greenish slip of plastic-like material that had been found encased in the blue gel Sah'Reena told them was called *foun di'ilim*. She explained the chip was a star chart that had been slipped surreptitiously into her hands moments before she entered the Deathship.

Robin stared, wide-eyed, at her. This was the first time she'd mentioned anything about the circumstances which had brought her to Earth. He watched in silence as she turned the chip over and over in her hands.

Deathship.

Her world had the ability enter outer space. That left a question begging to be answered. "Sree?"

The diminutive of her name had come from him one day, out of the clear blue, when he'd caught himself unconsciously slipping into his comfortable Texas drawl. But she liked the way he said it, like an endearment. She wanted to hear him use it, so Robin kept it just between the two of them.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye.

"Is there the possibility, the chance, that your people could follow you here? In one of their ships?"

"No." She tilted her head, rather than shake it. "My people gave up space travel hundreds of generations ago. It was too dangerous." She spoke in both Murrallisian and English, seesawing back and forth to whichever language gave her the best word or opportunity to clearly explain herself. Although her reading level was barely beyond first grade basics, her grammar was improving at a much more rapid rate.

Hundreds of generations? Robin made a mental note to put that in his evening's report.

She tossed him the green chip. "I was given this so I could find my way back ... home." She caught herself tripping on the last word. Silently, she lowered her head until her forehead touched the edge of the table, and retreated momentarily within herself.

Unable to stop himself, Robin reached out and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Before he was aware of it, vivid images melting in astoundingly sharp colors flashed into his brain, playing against the retinas of his eyes like a movie screen, until they appeared as real as if he'd been there to view them personally.

*Hundreds of thousands of screaming, sweating faces twisted in rage, crowding, crushing closer and closer to where she stood.*

*The bi't it was coated in dark pink blood. Her blood. And it came down again and again and again, biting and drinking every time it embedded itself into her flesh.*

*A tall, angular man with dark hair and thin eyes watching her with a face filled with disdain. And pleasure.*

*Dark, dark yellow bush-like buildings. A blue ground. A green sky. Creatures with long, vine-like hair covered in reddish flowers that opened and closed their petals like miniature mouths.*

*Hands. Covering her. Painful hands, clawing, pulling, tearing. Hurtful hands. Hands with the ability to chew their way into her very soul.*

Robin cried out, pulling his arm away as if retracting a stump from the jaws of a shark. When Sah'Reena caught his reaction, she reached for him, snagging his arm and sleeve with her fingers. The contact made him convulse, and he jerked away, stumbling backwards and nearly falling against the wall of the small meeting room where they had been studying.

"Robin!"

He threw up his arms to ward her off as the visions slowly oozed into his subconscious, but the damage had already been done. They would remain with him for the rest of his life, thanks to his innate mental ability to never forget whatever he saw or heard.

"Robin!"

She dropped to the floor next to him, afraid to touch him, yet terrified what might happen if she didn't. To her immense relief, he opened his arms, and she dropped into his embrace.

"Oh, God, Sree. What you've had to endure," he breathed into her hair.

She felt him shuddering, and she held him all the more tightly.

It was the first time he'd gotten these images from her, pictures of her memories. He could only assume it was because of whatever link she had begun between them was becoming stronger. Steadier. Surer. Now, he no longer had to wait for her to initiate it. He simply had to think or imagine something, and the answer was just *there*. Not in words. Not from any actual sound that passed between them. It wasn't mind-reading or mind-melding, nor did it have anything to do with any kind of telepathic connection.

But he knew without any further doubt it had everything to do with her *Utuli'ia*.

\* \* \* \*

There was a small meeting room just off of C with a telephone, a small table, and chairs enough for six. But there were no cameras and no microphones in it, and Robin made certain it remained that way. He had made Wendicoff swear to leave the room private. There were some things Sah'Reena would not divulge, even to him, he'd explained to the scientist, unless she was absolutely certain the information remained between just her and him.

And although he fudged a bit when it came to writing his reports in the evenings, he kept the core still secret. Regardless of what his job or orders required him to do, Robin found himself refusing to divulge every tidbit she'd professed to him. He cared too much for her to betray her. He cared too much for her to lose that tremulous trust she'd given him.

It was on one of their visits to the meeting room when they discovered another advantage to using the smaller, more private chamber. They discovered the intimacy factor.

Sah'Reena was wearing one of the astronaut training jumpsuits, one of the lighter-weight, short-sleeve kind, with the zipper running up from the leggings to the neckline. On this particular day, it was unzipped down nearly to the tops of her breasts, and for the first time Robin became acutely aware of her femininity. Uncomfortably aware.

She was sitting to his left, facing his right. He was at the so-called head of the table, listening to her read from the basal reader, when his eyes caught a small flash of something inside the jumpsuit. It was almost silvery-gold in color. Elusive. But it made his eyes trail down to the full mound just below it, and, without being aware of his body's response, Robin found himself unable to stop thinking about it. It ... and her breasts.

Declining to eat lunch with her, he'd gone back to his office to check the research, to find out what he could have seen. In one of Paul's reports he found a slight reference to a 'strangely-shaped scar directly below her left collar bone, above her scapula'.

"Sree, what is that below your left shoulder?" he asked when they were back inside the room.

She gave him an emotionless stare for a long minute before replying. "It is my *Utuli'ia*. My symbol of my power. My name." Seeing his confused expression, she unzipped her jumpsuit almost down to her stomach, and pulled the neckline over so he could see it.

It was directly below the clavicle—a ribbon of skin, much like a scar, but smoother. No more than two inches high, and about an inch wide, it glistened in the fluorescent lights. Silver, then blue, then white, depending on how she moved. A curved double loop with two lines and a comma.

Intrigued, he reached out and touched it with the tip of his finger. The contact between them was like a surge of pure, thunderous desire flooding every nerve. Sah'Reena gasped as her body went rigid. Robin felt every muscle in his body jump, and fire began spreading between his legs. It took a tremendous amount of effort to draw his next breath.

"Oh, dear God, what happened?" he managed to gasp, unable to believe the heavy ache still consuming him in the pit of his groin. Seeing her face as white as paper, he grabbed her hand and gave it squeeze. "Sree? Are you okay?"

To his shock, she began to cry as she reached for him. Robin pulled her from her chair and cradled her in his lap, holding her tightly against him as he rocked her in his embrace.

Lessons for that afternoon were brushed aside as she turned in his arms and held him more tightly. Before either of them was aware of their actions, they were stretched out on the floor, pressed hard into each other's bodies, matching curve to curve. Legs woven together. For Robin, it was the only way to find relief from the throbbing fire consuming his belly as her face found respite in the hollow of his throat.

One hand held the juncture of her thighs hard against his erection as he desperately tried to figure out what had brought about this kind of sexual response from him. But, from the way Sah'Reena moaned softly and moved against him, he realized she had felt the electrifying jolt of passion, as well.

It took several minutes before either of them were calmed enough to finally part and resume their seats. By silent, mutual consent, they brought their chairs closer together so as not to lose that intimacy that continued to fog their minds.

Holding her cold hands between his warm ones, he kissed the nail-less tips. She was brushing her cheek along his, letting her cool, incredibly soft hair caress his temple and jaw.

“What happened, *ka rinn*?” he breathed into her ear.

She answered him with another delicate caress to his face. “I do not know. I have ... I have never felt this before. I am unable to find words for it.” Her breath hitched in her chest, and she sobbed softly again. “Why am I su ... suddenly afraid of letting you go?” she managed to choke.

She pulled back slightly to look at him with soft blue eyes filled with unshed tears. “Do not leave me, Robin.”

He buried his face and lips against her hair, holding her against his shoulder and neck with one hand firmly at the back of her head. His fingers threaded through her silky tresses.

It was nearly an hour later when they were able to pull away from each other, and it wasn't but five minutes later when Powell knocked at the door and handed over the star chart they'd found.

Which had led to the discussion of the Deathship.

Which had led to his visions.

That evening, when Robin led her back to the chamber in time for supper, they had been reluctant to let go of each other. By now he was able to talk to her in her tongue with simple ease, although some of his pronunciations brought a smile or a giggle to her lips. When there were others around them, listening in, they would talk in Murrallisian, simply to keep something private between them.

And that night, as he lay alone in his bed in his apartment, Robin relived that moment when he touched her scar, that symbol of her power, whatever it really was. But whatever it was, it was strong. Incredibly strong, almost to the point of overwhelming. His manhood jumped with the memory, forcing him to seek a cold shower just so he could find enough respite to get some sleep.

For so long he'd been able to keep his perception of the star girl at the basic, detached, unemotional, professional-like level ... for what it was worth. The unemotional part was quickly heading into realms never before explored.

And now, so was his perception of her.

He kept repeating to himself that she was a Barbie doll. Smooth. Featureless. Inhuman. But she had those beautifully long, long legs. *My God, her legs go clear up to her neck*, he mused with a smile. Not to mention a pert butt. Plus those sweet hips that matched the curve of his hands whenever he put his arms around her. Without a doubt he knew her full breasts would be firm and soft and incredibly responsive if he somehow could manage to cup them in his hands ... *which will never happen*, he grimly berated himself. He would have to be satisfied with the vibrant feel of them against his chest whenever he held her.

He rolled onto his side and beat his pillow into an acceptable mass to rest his head on. It didn't work, but the beating part helped a little.

Shit. Where would this all end? With every day that passed, he was drowning deeper and deeper into the morass of emotions he couldn't handle or figure out. But rather than wanting an excuse to get away from them, he couldn't wait for the next day when he could be with her. To talk with her. To have the chance to touch her, even innocently. To look into those deep, dark, sparkling blue eyes and discover what other visions she could give him, good or bad. To have her teach him, and have him teach her.

He groaned loudly. She was innocent in all ways. In the reason why she was sentenced to die. In her objectivity. In her knowledge of even the most basic emotions.

In her body.

What did she know about sex?

Unable to take it any longer, Robin relented and sought out the painkillers he kept in his medicine cabinet. The ones he kept for when the migraines got to be too much to bear. The pills that would knock him out and keep him out for a good six hours, at the least.

It was the only way he could rest without his dreams.

## Chapter Nineteen

Cold

The night was cold. A sense of frost hung in the air, with the promise of a possible freeze before the next day arrived. Despite the heaviness and the chill, Robin and Sah'Reena stood on the concrete sidewalk on the back side of Block 6, gazing at the sky. The moon lay on the other side of the building, giving them a somewhat unobstructed view of the cloudless sky.

"Your moon is beautiful," she had smiled when she'd first glimpsed it.

"It's pretty impressive, especially around harvest time. At that time of year it gets so big and orange that it looks like it just might collide with us." Robin looked over at her and liked what he saw. Behind her look of delight he could see the kind of child she had been, full of wide-eyed wonder. Then he wondered what kind of childhood she might have had. There was so much still to learn about this fascinating woman, much more than what her world was like.

"Does Murrall have a moon?"

"Yes, one. We and our sister world, Allurrall, used to have two, Shoah and Stahoah. That is what our teachers tell us."

"You had two but now there's only one? What happened to the other one?"

"It ... disappeared," she admitted.

An unwanted thought immediately came to him. "Sree ... you didn't ...."

The star girl began to laugh, aware of where his question was heading. "No, it was not me. I can not remove a moon. My Gift is big but not that big. Stahoah left a long, long time ago. Our teachers and scientists do not know why it went away. Much of what we were told seems more like a story than real."

Robin watched her as she watched the stars. Two days ago the scientists had taken her into a more controlled facility to have her demonstrate her 'power', her ability to do what they knew she could do, but had never had the chance to scrutinize up close.

She had refused.

Even with Robin with her, she had balked at any demonstration. But she would talk about it. About how she could 'remove' things. Make them 'go away'.

He believed he knew why she kept her ability secret, and he didn't blame her.

She peered intently at the night sky. She tried to get her bearings, to catch sight of a familiar star cluster or constellation. Failing that, she turned a disappointed face to him. "Where did I come from, Robin? Do you know?"

"The best our current estimation can figure is your ship entered from the direction of the Cassiopeia system, although chances are good you may have come from beyond that."

"Where is ...?"

"Cassiopeia? There." He pointed to a spot at the far end of the Capricorn constellation. "That's where Gammamedes would be if we could see it. Cassiopeia is a bit to the right of it, but as it's more than forty million light years from us, and there's too much artificial light around, we aren't able to see it. But that's where it would be if we could."

Sah'Reena tilted her head to better follow his guide. Her glistening hair swirled across his shoulder, and he caught a whiff of her scent. Standing side by side and bundled in heavy

coats, they were as aware of each other as they were of the weather.

"Why is Gammamedes important to you?" she asked.

The first time she'd spoken aloud outside, she had been taken back by the puff of steam coming from her mouth. A look of fear had crossed her face when she'd turned to him for help or understanding. He'd quickly explained condensation. The knowledge, however, was not enough to sooth her next discovery.

She was *cold*. Worse, her hands were quickly becoming numb. Robin had rubbed her hands, then plunged them into the inner lining of her coat to further warm them. It was then he led her to the back side of the building and out of the wind. From there he pressed her closer to him, and they remained there for a quick astronomy lesson.

"It's a twin star," he answered. "There aren't that many that we know of. Hubble got a glimpse of it some months ago. I need to show you the images sometime. It's breathtaking."

"Bethtaking?"

Robin squinted at her in the near-dark. Even with her heavy accent, it sounded as if she were speaking through numb lips. "Is it becoming too cold for you?"

"A little," she replied.

"Isn't there cold on your world?"

"Yes, but not like this. Not this cold. Is it this cold much?"

"Fortunately, no. We suffer through more heat than cold. Although it's gotten much colder than it is right now."

"Colder?"

By now he could feel her shivering, even through the heavy coat. Keeping her bundled tightly, he helped her back into the building. Once inside he could see how pale her face had become, making her eyes appear almost ethereal. As he'd also expected, her lips were almost pure white.

"Here. Let's get you where you can warm up. I'm sorry about taking you outside. I never thought you'd succumb to the cold so quickly."

She gave him a small smile. "I did not either."

She allowed him to lead her into the nearest room, a combination conference and break room containing a large table in the center, a dozen or so chairs scattered around, and two vending machines at the far end. Once inside, he began to rub her hands to remove the initial stiffness, then helped her off with her coat to rub her arms.

He laughed softly. "You're like ice."

Her eyes had followed every path his hands had taken. Now they concentrated on his face. "Ice?" she repeated.

"Frozen water. Very, very cold water. So cold it's hard."

"Hard water?"

"Remind me sometime to show you. You've seen ice. It's just never been presented to you as such," he told her. "There. Feeling better? Warmer?"

"Yes. Some. Thank you." She continued to stare at him, their faces a foot apart. Her lips remained pale but she no longer resembled an ice goddess. A strand of hair, like a ribbon of smoke, clung to her forehead. Without thinking, he reached up to pull it off her face. His palm brushed her flawless skin, and again, Robin was intensely aware of how close they were in height. How close they were ....

He broke away, clearing his throat and rubbing his hands together as he removed his jacket. "Let me see if I can find you something to drink. Warm you on the inside, too."

One of the vending machines offered snacks, the other soft drinks. However, there was a microwave tucked away in an alcove hidden in a corner of the room. There was also a small sink and coffee maker. Above the coffee machine, behind a cabinet door, he found styrofoam cups, creamer, packets of sugar, and tea bags. Quickly he placed two cups of water in the microwave to heat.

"Have a seat," he invited. Minutes later, he carried the cups over to where she sat at the table. He pulled some condiments from his pocket and showed her how make herself a cup of tea. "It's not the way it's done in Britain, but it'll do in a pinch."

"Britain?"

"Another country. They drink as much tea there as we do coffee here." He watched as she took a tentative sip. They had to be very careful about what she could and could not tolerate. Fortunately, there were no unnatural ingredients in tea bags. "Well?"

She made a face. "Not good, Robin," she admitted. She spoke almost entirely in English now. Haltingly, but pushing herself for fluency.

"Okay. Try it with sugar. You can take sugar. Just avoid any sweeter in a blue or pink packet." He opened a couple of white packets and dumped the contents into her drink, stirring it with a straw. "Now give it a go."

"This is good. This is ... tea?"

"Tea. Made from leaves."

"From a tree?"

"A kind of tree. Not just any tree. A special tree. Don't go outside and think you can pick leaves off that oak outside. Won't work," he teased.

Sah'Reena gave him a cautious look before realizing he wasn't serious. She smiled back and took another sip.

They sat in comfortable silence as they drank the warming liquid, the only sound penetrating the room being the soft muffled tick of the clock on the far wall. When his pager went off, it vibrated gently against his hip. Robin checked the viewscreen. Quietly he walked over to the phone sitting at the far end of the table and punched in a number. That done, he picked up the receiver.

"Yeah, Mike. I got your page. Yes, she's still with me. I took her outside to look at the stars. She got a little cold but she's fine now. All right, we'll be there shortly. Yeah, I understand. 'Bye." He looked down the table as he hung up. "They're wanting to call it an early night," he told her. "I said I'd get you back to your room now."

"I have to go back now?" she asked softly. It was clear she wasn't happy with the idea. Robin checked the clock.

"It's nearly ten. I'm beat myself. It's going to be a long day tomorrow, and we both need a good night's rest." He had been walking back toward her when she rose from her chair and stopped him with a hand to his chest.

"Take me out of here," she breathed.

They were almost nose to nose. Robin took a deep breath. "I can't. I'm sorry."

"I do not like them watching me all the time. I feel ...." She searched for a word. Her eyes were haunted. Sad.

"Exposed?" he offered.

"What is that?"

"You have no privacy. No chance to be by yourself. No sense of peace or solitude. No chance to think alone."



"Alone. Yes, alone. Unless I am with you," she hastened to add. "I can think for myself when I am with you. When they are around, they look at me like I am ... *bislo'o*."

"A thing, not a person," he supplied.

Sah'Reena nodded, and her hair flowed about her face in waves. The ceiling lights gave her cheeks a strange pallor. He could see the pupils of her eyes trying to adjust to their fluorescence, the star-like apertures pulsating like a heartbeat. She had poorer vision in these rooms than when she was exposed to regular daylight or the iridescence from a light bulb. He figured it must be the fluorescent bulbs.

"Maybe," he told her, reaching up to clasp her arms, "maybe I can talk Don into moving you into a regular room. A room with solid walls, so you can have some privacy."

"The solid walls I would like, but I would not see you coming," she observed. She gave him another small smile. "I can have what I want, but lose what I want. Not always good."

Robin chuckled. "It's called 'caught between a rock and a hard place'. I hate being in that sort of dilemma, too." He grew acutely aware of her warmth beneath the thin sleeves of her blouse.

They had not spoken any more about the incident in the meeting room. Neither had he attempted again to touch the shiny, iridescent mark in her skin. Still, there was no denying the tightness he continued to feel in his body whenever he was around her.

He wanted to talk to her about it. Plumb the depths of her emotions to see if what he felt was strictly one-sided ... or not. But he chickened out every time as he told himself how lucky he was just to be with her. *Content yourself with that*, he roughly cursed himself. *It's more than you deserve*.

She looked up at him expectantly, although he knew it was not because of the same thing he was thinking about. She looked to him as a release of sorts, a person who took her away from the prying eyes and examinations of the scores of doctors who constantly poked and prodded and quizzed her endlessly though the day, whether or not he was with her. As she had said, she was a thing to them, not a being with feelings and emotions and expectations. To her, he was her sole release from the endless barrage of tests.

He stared down at the full lips now deep pink in color. They moved, and he almost didn't hear her next question.

"When will you come back?"

"Back? Tomorrow, I promise."

"Morning? And bring the paper you will read with me?"

"Yes, I'll bring the paper so we can read it together. You need to keep current of our world, even if most of it is bad news." He grinned. He looked down at her hands pressed to his chest. He was accustomed now to the fact that she had no nails. Actually, they looked quite natural without them. She had long, slender fingers, almost identical to human bone structure. Taken altogether, all of her alienness appeared to be contained in small, minor, basically inconsequential ways.

"I'll walk you back to your room, and then I need to go."

"Robin?"

"Yes?"

"When I am cold again, you will bring me tea?" Her plea was more than a question. It was almost as if she were needing affirmation of his being permanently there for her whenever she needed him. Or wanted him. It was basically the same question she asked of him every evening before he left.

“I will bring you tea any time you want it,” he assured her, giving in to the urge to pull her closer. He pressed her lightly against him, keeping his hands on her shoulders and resting his cheek against the milk-gold flow of hair. To his surprise, she leaned into him, fitting her form perfectly against his like two puzzle pieces. The connection was electrifying. He was aware of every curve of her beautiful body.

“Then I will ask for tea very much,” she murmured into his ear, her breath tickling.

The door to the room suddenly snapped open. Robin immediately took a step away, and Sah’Reena cast him a look of puzzled disappointment. David Sullivan glanced around and spotted them. “Mike said you were in here. Hurry up! He’s waiting for you, and he’s getting impatient,” the assistant snapped.

Grabbing up their jackets, Robin ushered the woman out of the room and they followed the assistant back to Six One C.

## Chapter Twenty

Apple

“The cat ... run ....”

“Ran.”

“Ran ... up the ... t ... tree.”

“Very good. Next page.”

Sah'Reena took a deep breath, willing to tackle just one more page of the reader. “Sam I-look ....”

“LookED.”

“LookED at Amy. ‘The cat ... can not ... st ... stay in the ... tree,’ he s ... said. Uhhhhh!” She let out a cry of frustration. “This is hard, Robin. Cat. What is the cat? Why is the cat in the tree? Birds go in the tree.”

“Sree ....”

Slamming the book shut, she pushed back her chair from the table. “I am tired. It is time to stop.”

Robin pressed a hand to his chin, knuckles against his lips, as he assessed her. “All right. I admit we’ve been pushing you a bit to polish your literacy. You’ve made tremendous strides in the past few weeks. You know a lot more English than I do Murrallisian, that’s for sure.”

“Can we go eat now? I want an apple.”

“AN apple.”

“Robin! You know what I want say but still you change it to make it better. Please stop. Give me time. I will learn.”

He smiled and tried to keep from laughing. She was earnest in her plea. At the same time, her vulnerability was touching. For all the information they’d gathered on her, the scientists had not touched the tip of the iceberg when it came to analyzing the data. To them she was the universe, the unknown with an unlimited power of immense proportions. To him she was a woman lost, abandoned, and in great need of protection.

In greater need of love.

“Okay. You want an apple. Anything else? A walk?”

“A potato. Can we walk there to get it?” She looked at him with expectation.

“You must be hungry,” he accused her teasingly. “Go get your coat. I’ll wait.”

“You will take me out? Alone?” Her eyes widened.

“You have one minute before I change my mind.”

The star girl jumped to her feet and hurried to get the heavy sweater jacket she used whenever she had to venture outside Building Six, which wasn’t often. All in all she’d been to other facilities at the center exactly three times before, each time to perform tests or to have tests performed on her that couldn’t be accomplished inside Six. And each time she’d been heavily escorted by security. Robin was not surprised by her excitement to venture away from the chamber with just him.

He helped her through the disabled airlock and past the guards, who merely saluted at their passing. Once they reached the main front doors, Sah'Reena was almost skipping. Outside

in the frosty air she paused to take in a deep breath. “Why is that?”

Robin sniffed, trying to ascertain what she meant. “You mean that smell?”

“No. That. Why does it make my nose hurt?”

“You mean the cold?”

“Yes. Cold. Why is it cold so much? Is it not hot, as well?” She turned to smile at him. The floodlight at the side of the building caught her face and hair, making both appear almost ethereal. Robin started to reach out to touch her, caught himself, and withdrew his hand.

“Yes, I told you we have hot weather. Just wait. Once our humid summers get here, you’ll be wishing for the cold again.” He adjusted his glasses on his nose. “What kind of weather do you normally have on your world?”

“We have cold. Not like this cold. I think I like it.” She took another deep breath and laughter like tiny silver bells escaped with the cloud of warm air from her lips. “Look! Robin, look! My breath again!”

“Condensation, remember?” he explained, pointing to his own mouth. “Try to say it.”

“Con ... duh ....”

He grinned. “Never mind. A scientific principle. You’ll learn more later about our sciences, our philosophies, our history ... what makes us us. Now, are you going to stand here all night, or are you going to walk over to the cafeteria with me?”

“A place where all the food is. Where you get to pick, right?”

“That’s pretty much the idea. But I’m going to have to help you choose. There are some things you haven’t tasted, and we have to be careful about which foods might not agree with your system.”

“They must be natural,” she repeated the phrase she’d heard many times.

“Right,” he bobbed his head. “Nothing artificial.”

They took their time, walking along the sidewalks that grided the space center complex. Personnel was at a bare minimum, which Robin preferred. The night staff on duty was a third of the day staff, more of a skeleton crew. In addition the astronauts didn’t train at night. Also, the visitors’ center across the highway was closed to tourists in the evening, meaning trams full of sightseers weren’t likely to be underfoot like they were during regular daytime tour hours. Add the cover of darkness, and Robin knew it was relatively safe to take Sah’Reena out exploring.

The cafeteria in Building Three closed its doors at ten p.m. Robin double-checked his watch. “We’d better hurry or they’ll shut us out,” he urged. He took her hand and together they jogged the rest of the way.

The cafeteria staff was oblivious to the rest of the center when it came to what was going on. Quite frequently the manager would complain that the only time he knew of any pending flights or arriving dignitaries was when he read the paper in the mornings. Robin knew that if there was any ‘safe’ place to take Sah’Reena, it would be in the large eating hall. If there was anyone there who knew of her, they would never let on.

Secrets were best kept on the base. Top secret agendas were invisible. Only a few dozen people out of the three hundred seventy-plus employed at Johnson knew of the alien’s existence. So to the cafeteria workers, the appearance of Dr. Dickenson with a female in tow only elicited a few raised eyebrows, given the young scientist’s past romantic history. The man was not known to play the field. Therefore the girl either had to be someone associated with the center, or family.

“Evening, Dr. Rob. How are the stars treating you tonight?” a hefty black woman smiled from behind the counter.

“Behaving themselves for once, Etta,” he quipped. “Nothing for me, thanks. But I think my friend here would like a baked potato. Any left?”

“None up front, but I can go check for you in the back,” Etta offered. She disappeared behind a pair of swinging doors leading into the kitchen. In the meantime, Robin showed Sah’Reena how to get a tray and a packet of utensils wrapped in a napkin. “Smile and nod if they ask you anything. Let me do the talking.”

“They will think my talk strange.”

“Not so much your talk, but your accent,” he said.

“Accent?”

“Shh. I’ll explain later.”

Etta reappeared with a baked potato on a plate, handing it to him over the counter. “Condiments are on the cart beside the drink refills. Who’s your lady friend?”

“She’s from out of town. I’m just showing her the sights. Thanks.” Robin hurried the star girl along the line. She wanted to ask him about all the different foods spread out before them. Some of the smells were tempting, others not so much. Again, Robin promised to tell her but at a later date. For this trip he got a cup of coffee. For her a bottle of water. He also grabbed an apple from the bowl on their way to check-out.

They found a table in a far corner, isolated from the handful of patrons scattered around the room at that late hour. Robin watched in fascination as Sah’Reena crumbled saltine crackers into her spud, then topped it with honey.

“You really like it like that?” he asked her. It didn’t look too bad, although the thought of how it must taste made him wince.

“It is good. Do you eat your potato this way?” Obviously she was enjoying herself. Her list of edibles was growing daily. There had been only one small setback when a jalapeno pepper had been inadvertently introduced. It took nearly a day for her fever to come down, topping 108 degrees at one point.

“Which would help define her high tolerance levels,” Peter had commented. “Either that, or it’s a natural part of her physique.”

Robin held his mug in his hands to help warm them. “I, uh, I like mine with different toppings,” he admitted to answer her question.

“What kind?”

“Butter. Cheese. Maybe some bacon bits. A little salt.”

She paused for a moment. “You will tell me what is the butter and other?”

“Promise. Anything you want to know.”

He watched her work her way to the bottom of the potato, scraping the insides and adding a few more crushed crackers to help finish it. She ate as if she hadn’t eaten all day.

“You don’t have to eat the skin, if you don’t want. I can get you another potato.”

“I am fine. I have the apple.”

“I didn’t know you were so hungry,” he apologized. “If I’d ‘a known, we would have eaten sooner. Or I could have called to have the cafeteria deliver.”

“No. No. I am happy we came here. It is ... strange?”

“Different.”

“Yes. Different.” He grinned again. “*Pla’andik*. Are you sure you have enough to eat?”

She offered him a small smile. “I am fine. You are here. All is fine.”

Seeing that she had finished, he got to his feet to signal they needed to be going. The cafeteria was closing for the night. Sah’Reena stood and let him help her put on her sweater

jacket.

"I am happy you bring me here," she said softly as he adjusted her collar.

"Change of scenery is good medicine," he smiled back.

She grabbed her apple and they left the building to walk back to Six. On the way, the star girl began to nibble on the fruit. "We do not have apples on Murrall," she informed him around a full mouth.

"Do you have fruit of any sort?"

"Not fruit. We have *sommus*. It is on the *fi'ijis*. We take it off the *fi'ijis*."

"*Fi'ijis*?"

She tried to explain, making it sound like a tall, thin creature with bulbous growths on its body, the growths being what were harvested and eaten. Robin shook his head, trying to lose the visual imagery.

"What does *sommus* look like?"

She glanced at the object in her hand, then took another bite. "It is like the apple. Not red. Blue. Big and big."

"Bigger? More big?"

"Yes. More big."

"Ah. Like a giant blueberry," Robin envisioned.

"Green inside. Soft. Many worms."

"Never mind," he added.

"The worms are good."

They walked side by side. Their arms would brush against the other as they slowly made their way back to Building Six. Both seemed reluctant to let the moment go by. For him, it was becoming harder and harder to leave her every evening. And even more difficult not to have her consume his thoughts at night.

"Robin?"

"Mmm?"

"I am learning good, right?"

"You're learning very well. For someone having to adjust to what you're having to face, I'm surprised you're taking all of this so well."

"I will have more lessons?"

"You've become quite conversant," he started to explain. Sah'Reena stopped him with a hand on his arm and turned to face him.

"If I am learning to speak right, you will say the words I can learn now," she admonished seriously but in a soft tone. "Do not give me the harder ones. Not yet. Later."

"Sorry. What I meant to say is you're using our words very well. You just need more practice, more chances to talk."

The corner street lamp cast its buttery glow over them, giving her hair a shimmer like newly minted gold. Robin stared at it, almost transfixed, and wished he could run his fingers through its silkiness.

"What are you thinking now?" she asked, seeing the distant look in his eyes.

Robin blinked. He didn't realize he'd drifted off, but apparently he had. Giving her an apologetic smile, he started to wave it off when he noticed a bit of apple clinging to the corner of her mouth. Without thinking, he reached up to brush it away. Sah'Reena tensed, eyes widening, and backed slightly away from his unexpected gesture. He hurried to calm her.

"There was a bit of apple on your face. I was going to wipe it off. I didn't mean to alarm

you. I'm sorry."

She visibly relaxed, immediately at ease once more. "I am sorry. I did not know you were going to do that. I reacted ... I am sorry. My training ...."

*My training ....* He'd caught the comment. Training for what? How to use those powers they had yet to witness more closely?

"Hey. I learn quickly from my mistakes." He smiled.

It was a unique feeling, having someone so unearthly beautiful standing nose to nose with him. She had so many secrets. And even though she had answered every question asked of her, she remained an enigma. Robin found her mystery a large part of her appeal. What interested him more, however, was how such an emotionally vulnerable woman could co-exist in the same skin with such an overwhelming power as they knew she must have. A power she steadfastly refused to show them, but Robin knew had everything to do with why she'd been banished from her world.

He reached upward once more, this time meeting no resistance. He brushed the bit away as his eyes lingered on her velvety lips. Words failed him as his gaze remained on their curve, their blushing color, their texture. Without a trace of makeup, she was incredibly beautiful.

"Robin?"

They had stopped less than a dozen yards from the front doors of Building Six. It was as if they had come to a mutual understanding that neither wanted to go inside, despite the nearly freezing temperature.

"Robin?" she repeated.

"Wh-what?" He pulled himself from his reverie, then mentally chided himself for it. That was twice within the span of less than ten minutes. What the hell was wrong with him?

"I ... I did not thank you for saving my life," she began, struggling to find either the words or the proper sentiment. "I overheard them talking today. I asked Ah-nee-tah about when you pulled me from the pod. She said you were the one who gave me life. You took me out of the *tira'asta*. You were the one who gave me air."

"What is ... *tira'asta*?"

"It is what I came here in."

"Oh. Your ship. Yes, I helped to pull you out. Whatever that stuff was in there that held you was like concrete. We were afraid we were going to hurt you."

It appeared she took a step closer. In the dim light, and amid the echo of his heartbeat pounding in his ears, it was becoming difficult to tell what she was doing. It was even harder to concentrate on what she was saying.

"You gave me air," she repeated softer. "You were the one in the mask, right? You helped me to live. I would not be here now. You did it." She looked aside, clearly frustrated. He could tell she was trying to thank him but her lack of enough understanding of his language was proving too much of a barrier. Robin decided to make it easier for her.

"I know you want to thank me for saving your life," he said. "Don't worry. I know exactly what you're trying to say. And you're welcome. I'm glad I was there to do something. I'm glad I was there to figure out what needed to be done. More than anything, Sah'Reena, I'm glad I'm here with you right now. You being here means a lot to me."

She looked back at him and searched his face, needing his reassurance, needing to hear his voice tell her she mattered. That she meant something to him. Reaching up, she took his face between her hands and leaned into him to lay her cheek against his. Robin had anticipated such a gesture and was ready to take her into his arms when she moved.

They held each other tightly for almost a full minute. Robin could feel almost the entire length of her body against his. In the back of his mind, Peter's analogy of the Barbie doll lingered, yet beneath his hands her waist felt small. Her well-formed breasts pressed into his chest. Their effect was sending pulses of bright heat into his groin. Added to her warmth, her scent, and the touch of her breath on his ear, his emotions once more began to go into a dizzying spin.

Without realizing what he was doing, Robin turned his head ever so slightly and touched her lips with his.

Sah'Reena instantly stiffened. She pulled back from him, but not completely, so that they still stood intimately close to each other. A shocked expression masked her face. Her eyes looked almost accusing. She reached up with a trembling hand to touch her lips, then glanced back at him. She was curious. Surprised. Intrigued. And most definitely frightened.

"What did you do?"

"I ... sorry. That was a stupid thing for me to do." A hundred apologies ran through his mind, yet he knew he was treading more than potentially dangerous waters. There was no precedent for what he had just done.

"No. I mean ... what did you do? Here."

"I kissed you."

"A what?"

"Kissed you. It's what some people do when they like each other and want to show it." He groaned inwardly. Now he was beginning to talk Pidgin English just like her.

"Kissed." She touched her lips again. "To show you like me."

"I take it people don't kiss on your world."

"No. They *aba*. Show with the face."

"Can you show me *aba*?" he asked.

Sah'Reena smiled, soft laughter coming from deep inside. "We did *aba* now. My face. Your face."

Robin caught on. "You mean when we hugged. You put your face against mine." No wonder the gesture had seemed so natural to her.

"On Murrall, *aba* is how we show we care. Thank you for help. Thank you for ... you." Once again she moved into him, touching him. "A kissed is *aba* here?" Her voice was barely a whisper. Her breath, sweet with the hint of apple, filled his senses. Making her more intoxicating than strong drink.

"Kiss," he corrected, finding himself on the brink of a tidal wave. "A kiss." Dammit. He was literally shaking.

"What is a kiss? Show me a kiss? Again? Please?"

She looked beseechingly at him, waiting. Robin touched the silky strands of hair curving under her jawline and pushed them back. Without hesitation he lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers. In the moment before he pulled back he opened his eyes, only to see her still looking at him. This time when she touched her lips her hand no longer trembled.

"Good?" he murmured.

"Different," she replied. "And good."

The drawbridge had been lowered. All the walls had been scaled. Robin could no longer ignore nor deny the hold she had on him, *had* placed on him from the first moment he had seen her. He pulled off his glasses and tucked them into his coat pocket. That done, he gently cupped her cheek in his hand. He ran a thumb over the fullness of her lower lip, amazed by its



perfection. "Close your eyes, Sree," he ordered her in a whisper.

She closed her eyes, allowing him to cradle her face against his shoulder. Robin took his time to tease her and deliberately build her anticipation ... and his. He indulged in his own fantasies by brushing his lips near her temples, across her cheeks, and up the bridge of her nose with little tickling kisses. He touched her eyelids with the softest contact, then found the creamy skin beneath her ear. He followed an imaginary trail to her throat until she quivered in his embrace. This time when he kissed her, he felt her begin to respond. He touched her lightly, tenderly, teasing her mouth with his lips without encroaching upon its softness. The delicate juice of the apple was still on her mouth. A shiver went through him like an invisible hand shaking him from the inside out. Her lips were as incredible as he'd dreamed they'd be. And when he claimed them fully, they clung to his, molded to his, and sent showers of delight through every part of him.

How long they stood there, wrapped in each other, he had no idea. It was the angry sound of a car door slamming that jolted them back into awareness of their surroundings. They still remained close together when Peter Gray strode up to them from the parking lot. In the dim light Robin could tell the man was infuriated.

"I think the star girl needs to be returned to her chamber," he remarked. His words were clipped and edged with anger. "It's late. God knows who may have seen you two out here necking like two hormonal teenagers."

Sah'Reena broke from Robin's embrace to take a step toward the older man. She knew who he was, having heard stories from the son, but had yet to be formally introduced. "Are we doing anything wrong?" she asked stiffly, almost challenging the man.

Her bearing had changed. She had changed. Robin could almost swear she had put up a protective shield around them both.

"You're damn right you're doing something wrong. You have no business being outside Six without security," Peter countered once he overcame his initial surprise at her response.

Robin opened his mouth to speak but his father cut him short. "I need to speak with you. Now. In my office."

"Robin will take me back first," the star girl announced. She stood her ground almost equal distance between both men. Robin saw the glint of hardness in her eyes and knew she was not above asserting herself again if she felt justified in doing so. Not after what she'd done to her chambers a few days ago. Just *how* she would assert herself, though, was still a mystery, and Robin felt a small twinge of fear at what she might be capable of doing.

"Dad, I'll be right there after I take Sree back to the chamber. Ten minutes, tops. I promise."

Pete gave the star girl another hard stare, then turned to his son. "I'll be waiting." He walked off without looking back, hoping he could trust his son as he'd always been able to in the past. But with this new development, he was beginning to have his first doubts.

Robin drew an arm around Sah'Reena's shoulder and turned her around to look at him. "He's right about one thing. It's late, and you really need to go back inside before this cold weather does something nasty to you," he said, putting his glasses back on.

She glanced over his shoulder at the retreating back. "He does not like me."

"He doesn't know you," Robin defended.

"He is afraid for me."

"Of you. He's afraid *of* you. And I believe you're right about that. We as a species tend to fear easily, because we believe that what we fear will cause us harm. Thus we want to

eliminate what frightens us. It's a flaw, to fear what we know little or nothing about, but it's also a basic survival skill," he told her.

She looked at him closely, staring deep into his eyes as if trying to read for traces of fear from him. Instead, what she saw puzzled her. "You do not fear me."

"No," he shook his head slowly. "Never have. Cautious, yes."

"You ... care for me."

"That's true, too. What are you doing? Reading my mind?"

She gave him a blank look. It was clear she had no idea what he was talking about.

"Never mind," he told her. "Too many science fiction movies. But, yes, I do care for you. A lot. Maybe more than I need to. Let's not go into it now, okay?"

"Why?"

Taking a deep breath, Robin guided her toward the front doors of Building Six. "We have neither the time nor do I have the energy to answer that tonight. Later. I promise."

"You are to be here on the morning?"

Opening the doors, he glanced over his shoulder to see if he could still spot the man, but the night had swallowed him up. "I'll do everything in my power to be here tomorrow," he answered.

But he didn't kiss her again when he finally left her.

## Chapter Twenty One

## Confession

Peter slammed the door behind them the moment they entered the room.

“What the *hell* are you thinking?” he yelled. “No, wait. Don’t tell me this is a fame and fortune, self-promotional thing, because if it is ... but, no, that’s not you.”

“It’s not,” Robin tried to assure him. “I don’t even know if I *can* explain.”

“Then why on God’s green earth are you *doing* this?”

“Hey, do you think I deliberately woke up one morning and decided, ‘What a beautiful day. I think I’ll fall in love with a girl from outer space.’?” Robin snapped back. He immediately regretted his heated response, and he walked away in irritation. He removed his jacket and angrily tossed it at the couch.

Peter withdrew to the other side of the office. His stunned expression was a mute accusation. Robin realized he’d gone too far, perhaps said too much.

“You’re ... in *love* ... with this . . .?” Several seconds passed as he tried to get his thoughts in order. Anger was coloring his rationale. Emotions were riding high in the wake of what he’d just witnessed.

“The word I think you’re looking for is ‘alien’.”

Peter turned on his heel and strode over to the wall of windows behind his desk. Common sense was conflicting with his fatherly instincts, all of which was battling against his urge to strike out at his adopted son both physically and verbally.

Robin was well aware of the turmoil going through his father. It was something he’d tried to prepare himself for, knowing there was no way he could have predicted the man’s reactions.

“Peter, look, let me explain something.”

“Explain? Rob, there’s no way you *can* explain it.” He took several more deep breaths in an attempt to further calm himself.

“You can’t believe I did this deliberately,” Robin said.

Deliberately? No, not when it came to Robin. The child had been mature at age five when Peter had first met him. Anyone could see the old soul living in the body of the starving little boy. Eons of wisdom were reflected in the saddest green eyes he’d ever seen. If ever a youngster had the intellect and drive to become somebody, that child did.

If Robin said he had fallen in love with the alien woman, then he had. He was not one to bandy about the word. Even when it came to his job, which he was passionate about, the most he would exclaim was that he ‘thrived’ on it, ‘cared’ about it, was ‘deeply fond’ of it. But ‘love’? No.

Sometimes Peter wondered if the word was in the young man’s vocabulary. On the rare occasion when he had told his son that he loved him, the most he would get in return was ‘Same here, Dad’, or ‘Me, too’.

“Do you even know what love is?” he muttered aloud, then started. He hadn’t meant to be vocal with the question.

Robin ran a hand through his hair, a familiar, nervous gesture, and sighed deeply. It was

then Peter noticed the extra lines etched on the young man's face and the circles under his eyes. Suddenly he realized just how much of a burden all of this had become for his son, the endless days working one-on-one with the star girl, the hours he spent with her.

What had been hurt and anger after seeing the two of them kissing immediately became concern for their safety and well-being.

"Rob?"

"Yeah, I know. Answer the question."

"Well?"

The young man made his way over to the sofa against the far wall and literally fell into it. The leather cushions puffed noisily upon contact.

"I can't explain it, Pete. I can't describe it. I can't examine it within myself. But, hell, I *can* tell you when I realized it for what it was." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "All I know is that I love her. It eats at me little pieces at a time. When I look at her, I feel like I'm falling down a deep, black, endless hole, and I can't wait to reach the bottom."

"What's at the bottom, Rob?"

The young man looked up at him. "I don't know. But if she's there, I don't care. She does something to me and I've racked my brain trying to figure out what."

"Maybe you're in love with the ideal," Peter tried to reason.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, your life has been the stars, the universe. Ever since I took you to Griffith when you were ten, you've dreamt of nothing else but learning about what lay beyond this planet. Maybe that's why you think you love her. She's part of what is out there. She's a product of everything mysterious and unknown. Maybe you love her for what she stands for."

"That's where you're wrong," Robin stated bluntly.

Peter leaned back against his desk and waited to hear his son's side. He gave a small wave for the young man to continue.

"I don't need to explain myself further to you," Robin remarked. "I know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't. There are a lot of people out there, a lot of people who have put their lives on the line to protect this secret while you're willing to risk the exposure."

"I haven't risked anything," he started to protest.

"Oh, no? Well, that's where *you're* wrong. What do you think's gonna happen when the press get wind of her existence? Do you think we can keep her here at the Center once the government, hell, the world!—finds out?"

"I know what I'm doing, Pete," Robin reiterated.

"I just hope to God you do," Peter said. "Something else, too, I wish you'd think about tonight. Think about your life. Think about how much it's gonna change if you stay on this course. Do you think the Center will want to keep you on if you're found to be responsible for exposing her? Do you honestly believe things will remain the same? Are you willing to risk everything you've worked so hard to achieve, your position here, and all you ever cared about in this world? Are you willing to risk them just so you can have a few unguarded moments with a space girl?" He stared for a long moment into a pair of clear green eyes and saw there was no hesitation in Robin's response.

"Yes."

Throwing up his hands, Peter stood and walked over to the coffee maker on the wet bar in the corner of his office. Without asking, he poured two cups. He handed Robin one of them

before joining him on the couch. They took a sip together.

Robin made a face. "Ohhh. That's bad. How long has this stuff been regurgitating?"

Peter also waved off on the brew. "Since last month, from the taste of it. I either have to get myself an assistant who can fix a decent pot of coffee, or learn to make it myself."

"Dad, you're sixty years old. Are you capable of learning *anything* new?"

"Shut up before I beat you senseless with my cane."

They drank a little more in silence. Outside the window they could see the space center complex going about its normal business as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened to the world, much less the discovery of an actual sentient life force from another galaxy. Robin sighed heavily and looked down into his cup. "To paraphrase a famous movie line, all my life I've been waiting for her ... and when I find her ... she's a little green man."

"She's not little. She's not green. And she's definitely not a man," Pete muttered, and took another sip of his coffee.

Finally Robin got to his feet and dumped the rest of the contents in the little sink in the wet bar. "Okay, now that we've had our little father-son talk, I need some advice."

"Shoot," Peter said.

"What am I going to do?"

"I take it you're not wanting me to lay odds?"

"No. I want your honest opinion. Do you think there's any way Sree and I can have any kind of life together?"

"Outside of a remote village in South America, no," Peter offered.

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Serious as a heart attack. You know as well as I that once she's discovered she'll be a celebrity. And nothing you do will keep those news hounds and camera jocks off your butt."

Robin stared at his father. "You need to meet her," he said in a gentler tone. "You need to speak with her, get to know her, get to see the kind of person she is inside. Dad ... she's been through something traumatic that's scarred her forever. I'm beginning to think we're the first kind and decent thing she's ever encountered in her life."

"You very well may be right."

"She has a right to live her life."

"That's right, but she's rarer than the Hope Diamond. She's an alien. She's proof there is life out there, and damn good-looking life, too!" Peter smiled humorlessly. "You're gonna have crackpots trying to reach her for one reason or another. Crackpots who'll try to start new religions because of her, and other's who'll try to kill her out of fear and ignorance. You're gonna be a very busy boy."

Robin sighed, bowing his head. "I can't walk away," he admitted softly.

"I know. And I don't expect you to."

"I can't stop loving her."

"Which brings up the question ...."

"What?"

"Does she love you?"

Robin paused. Peter could tell at once the young man was hesitant, but he didn't press for an answer.

"I think she does."

"You *think*?"

“She hasn’t told me. Not in so many words.”

“Then how can you be sure? My God, she’s another life form. Maybe she has as much interest in you as she does taking out the trash. Maybe to her you’re nothing more than a pet. Or a science experiment.”

Robin shook his head. “She doesn’t have to tell me. I just know. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Yeah, let’s leave it.” Peter walked over to the sink and washed out his cup. Turning to leave, he gave his son one last look.

“I pray to God you’re right, Rob. That’s all I can say.” Sighing heavily, the older man scratched the back of his head. “Okay, you win. I’ll talk to her. I’ll try and keep an open mind.”

“When?”

“Tonight. After I pick up what I came back here for, I was thinking about going to have a last look-see at my potential alien-in-law before heading back to the house. Lock up when you leave, okay?”

He closed the door behind him, leaving the young man alone with his thoughts.

Robin walked back over to the couch and lay down, using an arm to cover his eyes against the glare of the sidewalk lamp coming through the windows. He fell asleep, exhaustion unexpectedly overtaking him as, outside, the winds picked up and prepared to drop a film of ice over the city. No one knew it, but a brutally cruel winter wasn’t the only thing about to occur.

## Chapter Twenty Two

## Removal

Peter had not been the only one to witness them kissing outside of Building Six.

It wasn't the persistent ringing of the phone that finally woke him. It was the pounding on the office door. Ragged from needing his rest, Robin unlocked the door to find a trio of armed soldiers waiting to take him to Overmeyer's office. Once there, he found Dr. Wendicoff also in attendance.

The General waited until the soldiers had left the office before tearing into the young scientist. "Who the *fuck* do you think you are?" the man practically growled. Without giving Robin a chance to answer, or to ask what he meant by the question, he continued. "I'd been told you and the star girl were getting ... 'close'. I tried to convince myself you were doing it so you could worm your way into her good graces. Get more information from her. Keep us updated as to every tidbit she threw your way. As of this moment, you're off the project, and I'm busting your clearance level back down to blue."

Overmeyer expected an icy reaction from the man. He wasn't disappointed.

"Very well. I half expected this to happen sooner or later. But you know without me telling you, Sah'Reena is not going to take any orders from anyone else. Shut me out, and she closes down."

Placing his knuckles on the General's desk, Wendicoff leaned over, toward the man. "Who gave you clearance to take her to the cafeteria? Huh? And ... you were seen *kissing* her, for Crissakes!"

Robin remained silent, his hands firmly clasped behind his back. His stoic non-response irritated them all the more, while they remained unaware of his hands clenching and unclenching out of sight.

"You've grown too close to her," Overmeyer said. "You've become emotionally attached. In my book, that makes you almost as dangerous as she."

"How do you figure that?" Robin asked softly. His voice remained calm. Neither Wendicoff nor Overmeyer could read him, and that bothered them. They wanted to have the man ranting at them. They wanted the flaring of tempers, the empty threats. Those reactions they were trained to handle and had handled countless times in the past from others.

"There's no telling what you two may have already conspired to do."

The man's statement was not only hilarious, but it was also ludicrous. Robin gave a sharp bark of laughter. "What we *conspired* to do? Will you listen to yourself? What? You think the two of us together are going to conquer the earth? This isn't an interstellar war between two worlds, General, so get that crappy idea out of your head right now!"

"We've heard you speaking with the star girl in her own language," Wendicoff stated darkly. "The only reason you would do that is to keep us from knowing what you're discussing."

"Speaking in a language that only the two of you would know would prevent us from learning your plans before you carried them out," Overmeyer added. The look in his gray eyes was like watching molten lead harden.

To their surprise, the young astrophysicist seemed to change the subject. "Have either of you gentlemen been to France?"

"Stick to the subject," Overmeyer tried to interrupt.

"No. Humor me for a minute. Have you? Either of you?" Seeing that both men continued to stare at him without answering, Robin nodded slightly. "Thought not. I have. Oh, I only spent a week over there, during that conference NASA held in conjunction with some of the other European governments which also have their hands into space flight. You remember it, General, don't you? Well, never mind. The point I'm trying to make is this. The French have no fondness for Americans. They think we're crass and overbearing. No better than a bunch of super-power bullies. *But ...* but if you happen to take the time to learn their language and speak their language, instead of expecting them to use English, you would be amazed at how quickly they warm up to you. They're willing to accept you a whole lot quicker if you show you're willing to knock that American chip off your shoulder and let your hair down. That's what I've done with Sah'Reena. Rather than force her to take on the full responsibility of learning our language, I've reciprocated. Hell, hasn't she already had enough thrown at her? She's not from another country, gentlemen. She's not from a place that has green grass and blue skies and puppies and horses and cars and airplanes and Mom's apple pie and soccer and all that stuff that we can readily identify with once we see it."

He took a step toward them. "Her world has green skies. Blue grass that feels like no grass you've ever walked on. There are tall, willowy creatures that grow bulbous blue orbs on their bodies, and you break off the orbs and eat the worms crawling inside. Their homes look like big yellow bushes, but not like any bushes you've ever seen. And on the horizon is the huge shape of her sister planet. Always on the horizon. It glows red in the mornings and a deep purple at sunset. To see it would take your breath away. They have no puppies or horses or cars or airplanes. There is no Mom's apple pie, or ice cream, or football.

"On the other side of the coin, there's no sister planet dominating our horizon, just one pale, piddly little moon at night. We have intensely cold weather that could kill her. In fact, she's here on a world where everything and anything could destroy her—our water, our food, our trees and animals. We take so many precautions to protect ourselves from *her*, when it should be the other way around.

"She is terrified out of her mind on most days. Her people tortured her, then threw her away like so much garbage. How would you be coping if you were in her shoes? And then you have the goddamned audacity to berate me because I learned her language, just so I could give her at least some small sense of normalcy?"

His temper had slowly been rising with every word, his disgust with the two men growing even more quickly. His clenched fists no longer rested behind his back, but were down by his sides, held back by the thinnest thread of control.

"Yes, I kissed her. Do you kiss your mother? Do you kiss a baby's cheek? We kiss, General. We, as a people, use our lips to show we care. Fat lot you would know about such things, right? So, go ahead, General. Take me off the project. But I will not accept any responsibility for anything that might and will happen when you tell our star girl she's going to have to take her lessons from someone she doesn't know or trust. Just when she's beginning to let down her guard and start to feel some sort of acceptance from us."

He took a deep, shaky breath, letting it out slowly to try and calm his racing heart. His hands were cold, his fingers numb. From the expressions on their faces he could see he hadn't made a dent in their attitudes.



Turning on his heel, he headed for the door, when Overmeyer gratingly said, “You haven’t been dismissed.”

Pausing, his hand on the doorknob, Robin responded without turning around. “Oh, yeah, I was. About ten minutes ago.”

He made sure to slam the door behind him.

## Chapter Twenty Three

## Escape

It was a little after ten-thirty in the morning. Sah'Reena had been awake since before six when they'd turned on the lights and came to take her vitals. Breakfast had been served at eight on the dot. Other than that she'd had no contact or communication with another living being, and chances were she'd not have any more except for lunch and dinner.

Once Robin had been removed from the project, she had refused to be tutored by anyone else, going as far as to knock out the poor technician who'd been chosen to work with her. How she had done it, no one knew. One moment he had entered the airlock, exchanged a few words with the star girl, and then she had thrown out her hand in his direction as if to wave him away. Instead he'd slumped to the floor, out cold. Security had hurried him out and over to the infirmary where he came to, puzzled and bemoaning a mean headache, but there were no marks on him, no sign of bruising, nothing to indicate how the alien had managed to defeat him. A quick blood test showed no unusual elements, so he hadn't been drugged. As the scientists and doctors scratched their collective heads in puzzlement, a ban had been placed on Building Six. Clearance was now at Level Red. A virtual quarantine had been put into effect.

Sah'Reena spent her time reading the magazines and books they allowed her, and re-watching the videotapes, polishing her language skills on her own. However, after three days, her patience was gone. She'd asked for Robin, inquired as to where he was and how he was doing, but no one seemed willing to answer her requests. Not only was it frustrating, it was infuriating.

On the bright side, she knew it would not last much longer.

\* \* \* \*

Robin drained his coffee cup, then stared at it for a moment before setting it down on his desk. Glancing at his wristwatch, he leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair, sighing noisily.

If he got any work done today it would be a minor miracle, just as it had been the past three days. The real question was how much longer could he continue without seeing her? No one would tell him how she was faring, or if she was continuing her lessons. No one would confide in him, tell him what she was eating, and if she was having any reactions. No one would even speak to him or ask him how he was doing. To all the people he knew who were directly connected to the project, it was as if he'd become a pariah. No less a leper. Even Jack, poor girl, was a social outcast among the other administrative assistants because of him.

He got to his feet and went over to the coffee pot to refill his cup. Before he got halfway across the room Jack buzzed him. He hurried back to his desk to answer it. "Yes?"

"I know you're extremely busy, sir," his secretary began, instantly raising the hairs on the back of his neck. Jack abhorred secretaries who used condescending tones when addressing their bosses. So for her to begin a sentence with such a comment raised a major red flag.

"... General Overmeyer is here to see you," she finished.

"Send him in, Jacqueline," he informed her in their prearranged code. Some months back they'd had to fend off some pretty persistent news journalists. Jack had made it known by her

tone of voice that unwanted company was around, and he had acknowledged her warning by using her full name—something no one did if they ever expected to call the petite woman ‘friend’. By her buzzing him she had let him know the general was not there for friendly chit-chat. Just the opposite, he was on the warpath. And forewarned was forearmed.

Robin had barely parked himself back in his chair when the general and his entourage entered the office. From the expression on Overmeyer’s face he was not a happy camper.

The general wasted no time getting straight to business. Placing his hands on the desk, he leaned directly into Robin’s face. “The star girl is balking. She refuses to allow anyone into the chamber except to bring her food or other items. She won’t take lessons. She won’t follow simple directions. Therefore I want to know if you’ve said anything to her to make her act in this fashion.” The man’s face bore signs of rising blood pressure. Evidently he’d already blown his stack earlier and had waited until he had calmed down somewhat before approaching him.

“Once again you’re accusing me of collaboration, General,” Robin calmly responded. “Or do you still think I’m involved in some sort of conspiracy?”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if you’re a member of the Boy Scouts of America. I want you to give me the answer I’m looking for. Did you or did you not make prior arrangements with the alien in the event you were removed from the project?”

“No, I did not.”

Overmeyer stood erect. “You’re a lying sonofabitch.”

“All right, then, don’t believe me.”

“You and that alien ... there’s something else going on between you, isn’t there?”

“If there was, General, it would be none of your business,” Robin said quietly. He leaned back in his chair, fingers templed in front of him. If Jack could have seen him, she would have known the man was close to his boiling point. Overmeyer, of course, was oblivious.

“Why you little upstart! I’ll have you know I was commanding whole platoons while you were just a twinkle in your daddy’s eye. Who do you think you are, telling me something is none of my business?” The man’s complexion was becoming ruddy again. The adjuncts standing behind him were definitely looking uncomfortable.

Robin decided enough was enough. Getting smoothly to his feet, he remained standing behind his desk and crossed his arms over his chest. “General Overmeyer, you removed me from this project at the insistence of Dr. Wendicoff. Wendicoff wanted me off because he felt he was no longer in control. Wendicoff wants the whole thing to run his way, with all the acknowledgments and accolades going to him. That’s on the public servant side. On the military side there’s you and your branch, more commonly referred to around here behind your back as the Fourth Reich.”

“How dare you talk to me in that manner!” Overmeyer threatened. “I’ll have you fired for insubordination.”

“Go ahead and try, General. See how far you get, considering I was hired through NASA and not through the DoD,” Robin shot back. His own anger that had been steadily rising the past few days now fused into a white core of heat that flushed his face. He moved around his desk and approached the officer until they were just a few feet apart. The general could have throttled the young man if he’d reached out with both hands.

Overmeyer stared at the scientist. Deep inside he couldn’t help but admire the tenacity and loyalty shown by the man who was half his age. That didn’t excuse the fact that the scientist was preventing him from obtaining what might be the greatest accomplishment of his career.

After several tense seconds, the general pivoted on his heel and stormed out of the office

with his entourage in tow. Jack stood in the doorway, watching them leave.

"I bet they slam ...." She was interrupted by a loud, explosive sound. She winced, then finished her sentence. "... the door." Glancing at her boss, she tilted her head questioningly. "Should I start packing now? Hmm, I wonder, what are the chances of me raiding the storage closet for extra boxes of pencils and paper clips before they disengage my security code?"

Hands on hips, Robin stared at the carpet for a moment before answering her. "They're not going to get us fired, Jack. So put your confiscated supplies back on the shelves."

"You seem confident."

When he didn't answer, she tried again as she watched him go over to the coffee pot for a refill. "You've changed, Rob. For better or for worse, I haven't figured out yet. Care to clue me in? At least give me a reason why I don't need to peruse the help wanted section of the *Post*."

Robin took a sip from his cup. "I'm in love with Sah'Reena."

The statement literally stripped the color from his assistant's face. "Oh. My. God."

He went back to his desk and sat down. Any further conversation was postponed by the phone ringing. Robin held up a hand to stay Jack from running back to her desk, answering it himself. "Inside call," he let her know. "Dickenson. Yes, I understand. She's not dangerous, do you understand? I promise I'll bring her back as soon as possible. Yes ... yes. Very well. I'll keep you informed." He hung up, not realizing how his hands trembled.

"What?" Jack whispered. "The star girl?"

"She's left Six. She's trying to find me."

"How'd she get out? Didn't security try to stop her?"

"She, uhh ... it would seem she removed the rear wall of her chamber."

"She *what*?"

"Well, she did promise me she'd never do anything to the door or its controls again. Look, Jack, the brass want a Code Three placed on the center immediately. I think I've managed to convince them into leaving her alone and giving her some space. I hope she makes it over here safely."

"Why don't you go get her?" Jack questioned.

Robin shook his head. "She's asserting her freedom. She needs the chance to familiarize herself with this world. Jack, she's never been outside alone before."

"And what makes you so sure she'll make her way here?"

"I just know she will." He hoped he sounded more convincing than he felt. "I just know."

## Chapter Twenty Four

## Power

It had already been thirty minutes. For the umpteenth time Robin checked his watch. Ever since he'd received the phone call from Six he'd been nervously anticipating Sah'Reena's arrival at his office. She'd left just after ten-thirty. It was no more than a fifteen-minute walk even if you took your leisurely time crossing the parking lot to get from one building to the other.

Jack buzzed him from the outer office. He jumped to answer it. "Anything, Jack?"

"I've been getting calls asking if she's gotten here. I'm giving them the run-around but I don't know how long I can hold them off. What shall I tell them?"

"Don't lie for me, Jack. Don't risk your neck for mine."

"Oh, sure, *now* he tells me," she quipped, yet there was an underlying edge of seriousness to her light-hearted remark. "I called to see how you were holding up."

"Peachy. I think I've just given birth to a new ulcer. Look, Jack ...."

"Morse code, Boss. Hang in there," she signed off unexpectedly.

Robin dropped his head and closed his eyes. He couldn't tell what was worse—expecting the star girl to walk in the door at any moment after she'd disintegrated part of her inner chamber, or wanting her to come to him so he could be with her again. He remembered explicitly the second phone call he'd gotten not ten minutes after she'd escaped from Six.

*"Rob, we're going to Code Three, Red Alert on this," De Zavala told him. De Zavala was chief security officer for Building Six, and third in the overall chain of command.*

*"What happened?" Robin had questioned. He needed to know everything, and as soon as he was assured she was safe, he was going over to inspect the damage personally.*

*"The back wall is gone. Totally gone, as if it had never existed."*

*"There's no way she could have disassembled it? Burned it away? Something?"*

*"Your people are examining it now, but the studs are standing exposed. There are no scorch marks. She didn't burn her way out. She didn't blast her way out. One moment it was there, and just like that she walked through open air." De Zavala snapped his fingers for emphasis.*

*"What about the video cameras? What do they reveal?"*

*"That's the frightening thing," the security officer told him. "We had to slo-mo it in order to grasp what she'd done. You can literally see the wall turn transparent and disappear as if it were turning into glass."*

*"Any idea how she did it?"*

*"Well, sir, she had her hands up in front of her, like she'd placed them on the wall and was pushing against it. You can see on the video where she's doing it until she drops them and walks out of her chambers."*

The mental image he'd gotten made him shiver involuntarily. What kind of being had that kind of power? Or was the power emanating from her in another way? What if she carried

some sort of force field device they hadn't found when they'd first examined her? *No, no*, Robin argued with himself. The x-rays would have revealed anything unusual or non-organic on or inside her body.

He glanced again at his watch. 11:12. *Damn!*

He walked over to the bank of windows behind his desk and looked out. There was a line of low-lying, ugly gray clouds coming in from the northwest. The weather bureau was predicting a major Canadian cold front due to sweep over Houston within the next sixteen to eighteen hours, and temperatures would drop into the twenties. The hard freeze would also bring sleet. The ice could be devastating to the area. The space center was preparing for possible loss of power by checking and refitting its backup generators.

A sudden chill went up his spine. It had to be nearly freezing out there right now. Sah'Reena was not accustomed to the cold temperatures, even if she were wearing her heavy jacket and gloves.

He reached for the phone and hit the redial button. De Zavala answered on the first ring. "Security, Six."

"Sergeant, this is Dr. Dickenson again. Could you tell me if the star girl was wearing her coat or any other protective gear when she exited the building?"

"Just her regulation jumpsuit, sir."

*Double damn!* "Thank you, Sergeant." He hung up, nearly missing the cradle. She was out there in the bitter cold without protection. By now she could be seriously ill from its effects. *Waiting be hanged*, he thought as he grabbed his coat from the hook behind his office door, unaware of the signal coming from his intercom—three long beeps, three short beeps, three long.

He threw open door, one arm blindly searching for the sleeve of the coat, and nearly collided with the alien woman standing not three feet away from him. She was deathly pale, and her eyes were a glowing pink. Her glorious hair had turned an ugly shade of gray and lay flat against her skull. Her clasped hands she held tightly against her chest, and she was shivering uncontrollably. She tried to say his name but her lips were too swollen to form the word.

"Sree." Grabbing her hands, he pulled her into his office, throwing his coat over her shoulders. "Jack, warm tea, and hurry! Oh, sweet mother of ... Sree, haven't I told you not to go wandering outside in the cold?"

She gave him a glazed look as he frantically tried to warm her up, rubbing her to help with blood circulation. He had no idea if it would work with her as no one knew just yet how similar or how different their physiologies were to each other, but he had to do something. He helped her over to the couch where he sat her down, sitting next to her. When Jack brought over the mug of tea, he wrapped the star girl's cold, stiff fingers around it and made her slowly sip the contents.

"Do you want me to get Dr. Wendicoff?" Jack asked quietly. Despite knowing the animosity that had grown between the two men, she'd brought up the suggestion to remind him that Wendicoff was probably the closest thing they had to a physician for the woman.

"Not just yet," Robin answered. "Let's see how she is in a half hour. If I think she needs hospitalization, I promise to take her over to the infirmary myself." He glanced up at his assistant. "Call Six and let them know she found her way over here but explain the extenuating circumstances. Tell them it may be a while before I can bring her back, but I won't break my word."

At the news she would be returned to Building Six, Sah'Reena reached for Robin's arm. "No. Do not take me back. Please do not, Robin. Please," she begged softly, struggling to make

herself understood.

“Jack?”

“No problem, Rob. I’ll keep guard until you let me know who’s allowed to come in.” Jack gave the two of them another look, then gently closed the door on her way out. Once she was out of sight, Sah’Reena tugged on his shirt sleeve. Already Robin could see the warm liquid was helping the color return to her face.

“Do not send me back, Robin,” she pleaded again. “I can not have you gone from me. I can not have you away ....” Her voice hitched. Robin watched as a crystalline tear the palest blue in color fell from her bottom lashes and glided over her right cheek.

“Do you think I want to be away from you?” he whispered back. “Don’t you think I’m fighting to get my clearance reinstated so I can come see you again?”

She slowly shook her head. “I do not under ... understand. Why are you gone? Why can you not come back?” She moved closer to him, as much for comfort as for his warmth.

Robin felt himself growing light-headed. In the thin cotton jumpsuit she did not look even remotely like a being who could make reinforced walls disappear. If anything, she reminded him of a homeless puppy left to fend for herself against a calculatingly cruel world. He was forced to remind himself that she had been in space for some reason that still remained a mystery. One day the truth would be told, but would she be the one to tell it? Was there even the slightest chance she could perish before all the questions were answered?

At the thought of losing her, Robin felt his stomach tighten, as if an invisible fist had rammed into him. His mind refused to accept the scenario. As the first images of life beyond that moment flashed through him, a life without her, his mind seemed to shut down. There would be no acknowledgment of it ever becoming a possibility, not if he could help it.

Wendicoff could go to hell. Robin swore he’d get his clearance reinstated somehow.

As his minded drifted, his hands remained on the star girl, rubbing her arms and back to help circulate warmth into her extremities. Before he was aware of what was happening, he found her cuddling next to him. Her hands borrowed inside his lab coat, found his shirt, and slipped her arms around his waist so that she could hug him closer. Her face found the hollow of his throat. There she pressed her lips to the skin where his heartbeat pulsed at the surface.

Robin groaned softly, conscious of the way his body was reacting to her. The chill that had enveloped her was quickly melting away. Already the pinkish circles around her eyes were disappearing, and her hair was regaining its healthy glow.

“Please let me stay for a small while,” she murmured. Her eyes were closed. Her shivering was almost gone. “I want to stay with you. I ... need to be with you.”

His arms crept around her back and waist and drew her closer to him as he rested his cheek and chin against her temple. She matched him so perfectly. She felt so natural, an exact fit that defied all logic. They were born universes apart, yet it was as if they had been created specifically for each other. Solely for each other. Forever for each other.

Things were spinning out of control. Robin could feel the tightening behind his eyes, the familiar signal of another massive headache coming on. If she remained in his arms there was no telling what he would do or what he would attempt to do. His will was one thing. His desire was another. There was no way on earth they could ever be more than just friends. Intimacy was out of the question. Their bodies were incompatible. And Robin cursed a deity that would bring the two of them together, only to disallow any physical contact beyond a lover’s kiss.

“Sree . . .” Taking her arms, he gently pulled her away from him so he could look at her. “We need to talk.”

Her expression was open, willing, questioning. Waiting.

“Okay, where to begin.” He clasped his hands together tightly. He needed to keep his mind on something other than the fact that he wanted to pull her down upon the couch and rain kisses all over her face and body. Visions of what she looked like under the regulation jumpsuit had haunted him ever since they’d first rescued her from her spaceship prison. And after the incident in the meeting room, the urge to touch the shiny mark on her skin was an increasingly difficult desire to ignore. Her *Utuli’ia* seemed to call to him on a subconscious level, like a siren’s song.

With the acceptance of the fact that he loved her unlike any other woman he’d known, Robin had chastised himself for his recurring adolescent fantasies. Had ... at first. That was until he realized his need to have her sexually was an extension of his love. It was the normal course in human nature—the need to love, to cherish, to have, to protect, and ultimately to procreate. Making love was not simply a physical urge, but one of the most basic laws of human emotion. The physical act cemented the word after the word had cemented the feeling. Now, the need, *the need* to make love to her was a surging, deafening, piercing current in his mind, subjugating his thoughts every night, stirring his feelings and pounding against his heart.

All to no avail. *She’s like a Barbie doll. All body but no features.*

“Sree ... you need to tell me the truth,” he began.

“The ... truth . . .”

“All of it. Everything.”

He saw tears begin to well up in her eyes. Her head began to shake from side to side, slowly, reluctantly. “I ... You ....”

“What?” He kept his voice soft. “You have to be honest with me. You have to tell me why you’re here. Why you were in that ... that coffin? Why did they send you away? How were you able to leave Six? Why is everyone so damn scared to be around you?”

Her eyes got wider and she moved a few inches away from him. After staring at him for a few more seconds, she got to her feet and walked toward the middle of the room. Clearly she was fighting her own demons, torn between the urge to tell him and the need to keep hidden whatever secrets she had locked away. Afraid of what would happen if she told him. Afraid he would reject her as surely as her own world had rejected her.

Robin wondered if her needing to stay quiet had anything to do with their growing relationship when he saw her notice the wall of windows behind his desk. Slowly she went over to them and looked outside. She reached out a curious hand and touched the pane. At the touch of the icy cold glass, she withdrew her hand and placed her fingertips to her lips.

“It is cold outside but not in here,” she stated, almost making it sound like a question.

Robin stood, taking the empty mug from where she’d left it on the couch, and walked over to where she stood. He reached out and took one of her hands and placed the mug in the palm. “Sah’Reena, look at me,” he ordered gently.

She turned to face him without question. Robin tapped the mug with a finger. “Now ... make it go away.”

A look of pure fear swept over her. Her face turned gray-blue, and her eyes were like pools of arctic ice. “Robin ... no ... do not ask ....”

“Make ... it ... go ... away.”

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. Finally she looked at him once more, never taking her eyes from his face.

There was the faintest shimmer of light. Then the mug was gone. In less than a blink, in



less than a heartbeat, it was as if it had never been.

Robin swallowed hard. "Where is it?"

"Gone," she whispered.

"Gone ... where?"

"Gone ... forever."

He could feel himself shiver, and he knew it was not from the cold. It was fear, stark and life-preserving. "What is your power, Sree? What ... what is it that you can do?"

"I took it apart from its smallest part. From its smallest, smallest, smallest part. I took it apart and threw the pieces into the air."

The headache that had threatened behind his eyes was becoming a full-blown migraine. The pain was incredible, almost blinding. Robin fought to concentrate and prayed the star girl wouldn't take his reticence as a sign of rejection for her actions.

"You threw the pieces .... Molecular disintegration." He tried to take a deep breath, and found he was shaking. "Complete annihilation at the molecular level. You took apart the mug at its molecular level and ... and threw the molecules away. Scattered them to the wind.

Sah'Reena, how great is your power? How big an object can you take apart?" Now he could envision why the wall of her chamber had become so much air.

When she didn't answer, he phrased his question another way. "You took out the wall in Six. Was it hard to do?"

"No."

"How did you knock out the security guard who tried to stop you?" Involuntarily he jerked as the life-threatening aspects of her ability grew clearer. "You didn't hurt him, did you?"

Her reaction surprised him. Suddenly she was angry, almost hurt. "No!" she snapped. "I refused to harm others. I refused to kill. I refused to be a weapon!" Her voice had risen sharply until she realized what she was saying and stopped. Something had come over her, and the terrified star girl had vanished. Before him had stood a wholly different person, a powerful person, a person filled with righteous indignation and personal conviction. A person who had been chastised for what she had not done. A person who had been condemned, and from the scars, had been punished for her refusal.

Robin stared at her. She *refused* to harm others? She had *refused* to kill? No one had ordered her to do such things here on earth. No one, not even Wendicoff or Overmeyer, had the barest inkling of what she was capable of doing. But because of her recent 'escape' they probably knew by now that she possessed some sort of fantastic power even greater than they had imagined. That only left one other implication, and Robin could feel all the pieces start to fall into place.

"Sree, did someone order you to kill? Is that why you were put into space? Because you refused to kill when you were ordered to? Were you part of a military operation?"

It was as if all of her strength was suddenly sapped away. She collapsed into his chair, her hands lying limp in her lap. Bowing her head, she kept her eyes averted. Robin leaned against the window sill to wait. Somehow he knew she was gathering her courage to tell him. She already trusted him. Now she just needed the time to work things out.

## Chapter Twenty Five

## Explanation

“There are ... two kinds of people on Murrall,” she began haltingly. “There are those like normal. Normal people. They work and have families and get to live their lives. The others ... they are the Gifted. They were born with abilities. Gifts. Powers. Strengths in areas that make them special. That is why they cannot live normal lives. Most of them are not allowed to work and have families. They are ... owned ... by the Sacrant.”

“Sacrant,” Robin echoed. “The government? The military?”

“They are part of the Council. The Judiciary.” She paused to collect her thoughts and Robin took a mental step back. As much as he wanted to press her with questions, he knew that he would eventually find out all he needed to know in due time. Maybe more than he’d wanted to know.

“The Gifted are taken to the Sacrant when they are born, to be raised and taught and trained to use their gifts. All the Gifted are there. Kept together until Por’Utul, the time when their gifts are made known. Then they are separated into small groups of their own kind and given their names.”

“Por’Utul ... puberty?”

She looked up, confused. Robin tried again. “When you become ... a woman.” He made the shape of a female figure in the air with his hands. “When do you have Por’Utul?”

“We are small. Young. Very young. Not long after we learn to speak, that is when we discover the beginnings of our gifts.”

Sah’Reena had inadvertently shifted from the third person narrative to first person. Try as she might to distance herself from her past, she had slipped back into her own memories. Robin felt himself becoming lost in the drama.

“How many Gifted are there, Sree?”

She shook her head. “Not many. We are ... rare. Both of my hands full this many, a few more, a few less, when you count like this.” She held up ten fingers nine times. Ninety, plus or minus.

“Out of how many in the population? How many people do you think there are on your world?”

“In my city, there were ... I cannot begin to count in your way. The plaza was full. Many. Many many. More than would fill this center and the space outside, as far as you could see them.”

“Is there more than one city on Murrall?”

“Yes. I know there are others, but I have never been allowed to go outside of Tammall.”

“Okay. So there are about ninety. Let’s round that out to a hundred. A hundred Gifted all total. In the city? Or on all of your world?”

“On our world. If a Gifted is found outside of Tammall, he is brought before the Sacrant. He ... he must live within their boundaries.”

The implications were staggering. “So, out of hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of people, there are less than a hundred of your kind. And once you reach Por’Utul, and know what

kind of power you have, you are split up into smaller groups, where each person in that group has a similar power?"

"It is like that a little. Not one Gifted has the same Gift as another. The Gift they have belongs to the same Utul."

"I don't understand the concept of Utul," Robin admitted. He knelt before her, taking her hands in his and giving them a gentle squeeze. That small contact seemed to reassure her.

"I will try to explain better. My Utul is Sah. That is the Utul of destruction. Of protection and fighting. When I discovered my Utul, I was given the name of Sah. All of us became Sah."

"You told me before that Sah is your title," Robin clarified for himself. "Your given name is Reena. There are others like you with your kind of Gift?"

"No. There are others who are Sah who have Gifts that cause destruction or protection or fighting. Sah'Coffa makes the air solid. The land not solid. People die when they cannot breathe. People die when the land swallows them.

"Sah'Taror makes the land heavy, and all who walk on it cannot walk. Your clothes become heavy. Your body you cannot carry. Your insides become crushed. People die.

"Sah'Seefa makes buildings move."

"What?" Between the headache and trying to imagine what she was telling him, Robin was having greater difficulty concentrating. He felt a hand on his arm.

"You are not well."

"I'm fine." He tried rubbing his temples to help lessen the pain. A pair of hands removed his glasses, then tilted his head up.

"Look at me," she ordered softly, firmly.

He gazed at her, looking deeply into her eyes, as her hands remained pressed against the sides of his face.

"Close your eyes," she added. He obeyed. Suddenly he felt a pair of warm lips press to his and he responded automatically. Unconsciously he drew his arms about her and pulled her down out of the chair, holding her against him. They remained that way, locked in each other's embrace, for nearly a minute. Reluctantly, Robin broke the kiss and opened his eyes. To his surprise, the headache was almost gone, reduced to a dull, tolerable throb.

"What did you do?"

Sah'Reena smiled. "Nothing. You needed escape. You were like a tight fist. You needed to open your fingers."

Tension. Tension and stress. Robin returned the smile and pressed his forehead against the side of her neck. He could breathe her scent and feel her hair caress his cheek. An errant thought drifted through his mind, a vague wondering how it would feel to sleep upon a pillow covered with her silky hair.

"Tell me more," he whispered into her ear. "I think I'm beginning to understand. How does Sah'Seefa make buildings move?"

She sighed against him. The rise and fall of her breasts against his chest was deliciously tempting. "The sides will move, making the buildings fall. The roofs come off. The doors fall away. Windows fall down. Does not matter what the building is made of, Seefa can destroy it."

"The Sah destroy. Do you have Gifted that heal? Make things better?"

"Yes. The Utul of Bin. There are five Utul. Gifted to heal. Gifted to help. Gifted to know. Gifted to seek. And my Gifted. To destroy." She pulled away from him just far enough to look at him. "They condemned me to die, Robin. They sent me away to die when I would not

destroy any more for them. I would not be their weapon.” Her face began to crumble, her body started to tremble. Robin realized she was finally allowing herself to face whatever pain and humiliation she had suffered. The events which had led up to her being sent to earth had to have been traumatizing, if not de-humanizing.

She cried onto his shoulder. Although they were silent, her sobs were no less wracking. She clutched him as the pain and the memories tore through her. Her fingers gripped the shoulders of his lab coat, twisting the fabric.

How long they sat on the carpet, their bodies tightly pressed together while she let go of all the hurt, Robin couldn’t tell. He continued to murmur tender words of encouragement as he held her and stroked her back and hair, oblivious of time passing. Once he caught the telltale flash as one of the phone lines lit up, but Jack was as good as her word, and no one disturbed them.

After a while he helped her back to the couch where they could continue their talk. He started to pat down his pockets for a tissue to offer her, but to his surprise there was little sign she needed one. As he was trying to justify this discovery to himself, one last tear began to slip down her left cheek, but before it reached past her nose, it twinkled and disappeared. Suddenly Robin understood.

“Feel better?” he grinned, sitting next to her. He slipped an arm around her waist, keeping them hip-to-hip. It was a comfortable arrangement.

“Yes. I do. It is strange to cry. I would not cry when they condemned me. I could not cry when they podded me.” She took a deep breath. The feeling of release was immense. “I feel better.”

“Care to continue talking?”

“Yes. Please. The talking made me cry, but talking makes me feel better. Crying makes you heal.” She gave him a curious look. “You knew that,” she accused.

“I didn’t know if it would work for you. Some things do. Some things don’t. I just knew you needed to get it out of your system. Those memories were festering inside you, like a wound that wouldn’t heal until it was cleaned out.”

Sah’Reena pressed her hands to her cheeks and licked her lips. “I ... I forget what I was saying,” she admitted.

“Never mind. Let’s go back and answer a few questions that got missed. How strong is your power? What’s the largest thing you’ve ever ... removed?”

“I have removed whole buildings,” she answered without having to think, then insisted, “I will not remove a person. I will not.”

“But you’ve removed big buildings? Bigger than this one?”

“This place ... this space center ... I could make it go away. All of it. Easy.”

Robin closed his eyes and tried to envision the possibilities. But she had to have limitations, despite the enormity of her range and ability. “Then how did you knock out the security guard who tried to stop you from leaving Six?”

She smiled slightly. “I removed his air. Without air, he could not breathe. He tried, there was nothing there, and he falls to the floor.”

Robin used a corner of his shirt to polish the lenses of his glasses before putting them back on. It was a useless gesture, but it allowed him a moment to digest what he had heard. His next question would be more painful for her. “Sree, why were you in that spaceship?” He watched for her reaction. Although her expression alarmed him, it was not unexpected.

“They wanted me gone.”

"They who?"

"The Judiciary. I was found dangerous and they podded me. They sent me away."

"How were you dangerous, Sah'Reena, if you refused to hurt anyone?"

"My Gift ... it is strong. Strong and strong. Many people are ... frightened of me. The Gifted must follow the edicts of the Sacrant, the Council, and the Judiciary. The Sacrant told me to obey the Council. The Council took me to the Judiciary. They said I was to go away from the Utul to be with the Judiciary."

"They took you to the Judiciary, away from the others you'd grown up with? Away from the only people you'd ever known, who were basically your family?"

"I was to be their weapon. They said my Gift would grow more strong. They said I would be able to destroy more after I was *ambidunn*."

"Been what?"

Sah'Reena suddenly looked embarrassed. "I have not ... I have not gone through the *ambidunn*. They told me that if it happened, my Gift will grow stronger than anything they have ever seen. My Gift will be stronger than any Gifted in the known writings of our world. That is why I was given to the Judiciary. They were going to control my Gift. They were going to tell me when I could use my Gift, where I would use it, how to use it. Then they decided I was not to have *ambidunn*. It was too dangerous. I was too dangerous." She gave him a look he couldn't read. "I was going to be their weapon," she whispered, and it was immediately clear how frightened she was.

"Your power will grow stronger? How much stronger?"

"They told me I could ...." Her voice dropped considerably. "I could destroy whole worlds."

The room seemed to grow faint and fuzzy around the edges. The furniture took on a surface gleam as if bright lights had been installed around the circumference of the ceiling.

*I could destroy whole worlds.*

*I will not be a weapon.*

Robin felt himself growing light-headed. Instinctively he pulled her back into his embrace, which she willingly accepted. In the quiet minutes which passed they simply held each other and allowed whatever thoughts and fears that had threatened to blind them to fall away like dead winter leaves. The implications of her confessions were enormous, Robin realized. Yet, at the same time, she had raised a completely new set of problems. Much of what she said she could do had to remain a secret. It was enough she was proof of alien life. It was enough she was on Earth, bringing to them her technology, her biology, her language, and all the known knowledge of her planet. It was enough they knew she could make walls disappear. If they were to find out the enormity of her abilities, the situation could get much worse, and quickly. And if the military were to find out ....

Robin mentally shuddered to think.

"Robin?"

"What?"

"You are still not afraid of me." It was a statement of pure truth. How she knew, he was unable to fathom. He nuzzled her temple before responding.

"No. I'll never be afraid of you."

"Why? Every person here is afraid of me. Every person on Murrall is afraid of me. Why do you accept me without the fear?"

"Because I love you."

For some unknown reason, it didn't bother him to say it aloud. In fact, he was surprised at how easy it was to confess. Besides, she needed to hear his truth.

"I do not know ... I have seen others talk about it, about this 'love'. I have seen others kiss when they say it." She turned slightly in his arms and looked at him. "Does it mean you care?"

"Yes, I care."

"About me?"

"Yes."

"You care much?"

"I care ...." He smiled gently, "I care strong and strong. Stronger than your power could ever become, Sree. Stronger than the forces which brought you here. Stronger than anything you've ever encountered."

"That is love?"

"That is love."

She reached up to touch his cheek. In the back of his mind Robin vaguely realized that her small hand had the ability to destroy the building they were in within seconds. However, he deeply believed and trusted her when she said she refused to destroy living beings. In Earth's own history, men had also been put to death for similar reasons. *The concept must be universal*, he mused to himself.

"You will not let me go?" she asked in a voice so soft he barely heard her. At that moment she was extremely fragile. Her world had tried to kill her. No one back there had wanted her or even cared if she lived. No wonder the prospect of finding someone who loved her terrified her.

"Never," he promised.

He did not need to lean down to kiss her to seal his vow. She came to him.

## Chapter Twenty Six

## Returned

It was late afternoon before Robin decided Sah'Reena needed to return to Building Six. At first she protested, claiming she wanted to stay near him, but he managed to convince her that it would be better for all if she stayed at Six.

"For all practical purposes, it just wouldn't work if you stayed with me. Not right now, anyway," he insisted.

She gave him an unreadable stare. "Not right now?"

He shook his head. "No. It's not time. I need to think things out."

"What things?"

"Yeah. What things?" a voice echoed from the doorway.

Robin glanced up to see Jack standing in the doorway. She was wearing her coat, which meant she was heading for home.

Glancing at his watch, he was surprised to see it was nearly six. Jack saw his puzzled expression, and nodded. "Yep. Time sure flies when you're harboring a fugitive. Are you planning on staying much longer, or can I go ahead and lock up?"

"Jack, come here a moment." He motioned for her to come inside. Curious, Jack closed the door behind her.

He waved a hand in her direction. Jack hesitated, but it wasn't because of his request. Her eyes never wavered from the star girl sitting next to him. Robin immediately understood her reluctance.

"Jack, I need to borrow your coat."

"Now?"

"Just for about fifteen minutes. Just long enough to get Sah'Reena back to Six, and then I'll return it. Promise."

He looked at his assistant, then at the woman beside him. Both were eyeing each other, both showing distinct signs of distrust and fear in the expressions on their faces. Gritting his teeth, Robin determined he could not have the two women closest to him not be allies, and he got to his feet, pulling Sah'Reena up with him.

"I don't believe you two have been properly introduced. Sree, this is Jack. Jack, this is Sah'Reena. Look ..." He turned Sree around so she faced him directly. Dropping the jovial tone he'd tried to inject into the situation at first, he now grew very serious. "If there's anyone I trust explicitly, it's Jack. I trust her beyond question, and I want you to accept her as someone you can go to when you need help when I'm not around."

Sah'Reena tore her eyes away from the sight of the petite redhead who appeared about to bolt and run. Staring straight at Robin, she saw the pleading in his eyes, as well as in his voice.

"She is a friend?"

"She's more than a friend."

Looking back at the assistant, Sah'Reena asked, "You will not try to harm me?"

The simple question, asked honestly and directly, gave Jack pause. "No, I wouldn't harm you."

“You will not send others to harm me?”

Jack stiffened. Robin noticed the lightning-swift defensive wall erecting itself.

“Only if you try to harm Dr. Dickenson,” Jack answered bluntly.

The star girl’s response was surprising. Giving the woman an open smile, she said, “We will work well together.”

Jack raised an eyebrow at her boss, who gave her a lop-sided grin.

Helping Sah’Reena to her feet, Robin took Jack’s proffered jacket and wrapped it around the star girl’s shoulders.

“I’ll be back shortly,” he told his assistant.

Without further word, the two of them walked briskly back to Building Six. Once inside the front doors, Robin waved away two approaching security guards moments before they recognized the alien woman.

“You’re going to be fine, understand?” He held her by the shoulders and looked directly into her eyes, which he could swear mirrored wariness and distrust. “Sree?”

“What if I need you tonight?” she whispered.

“Then tell one of the technicians. I’ll leave word to let them allow you to call me if something happens. But you’re going to be fine. They’re not going to bother you tonight, so you’ll be able to get a good night’s sleep, okay?”

“Will you come to me the next day in the morning?” she whispered.

“Yes. I promise.” He tried to convince her with a smile. It seemed to be enough.

Sah’Reena leaned into him, pressing herself against his body as if to soak up his assurance. Robin found himself holding her tightly in response. They stood that way for another minute before Robin pulled back, turned her around, and gave her a gentle nudge toward the set of inner doors leading to Section One.

As the star girl neared the locked double doors, one of the sentries keyed it open and held the door for her as she slowly walked through. The door shut behind her, leaving Robin alone in the main foyer. He immediately hurried over to the nearest wall phone and called in.

“Six.”

“This is Dr. Dickenson. I need to speak to Paula Singleton.”

Although it was late, he knew Singleton would still be on base. The woman was committed to her study of the alien visitor, and with Sah’Reena’s recent escape, would remain at her post until the star girl was returned to her confines. Robin guessed the tech would be found deep inside Six. He wasn’t wrong.

“Singleton,” a tired voice answered after several minutes.

“Paula, Rob.”

“Well, I see you’ve managed to talk her into coming back,” the woman responded with a mixture of old anger and dry humor. “I don’t know what you said to her, but she’s as docile as a pussycat.”

“Then whatever you do, don’t antagonize her,” Robin ordered. “Don’t make any threatening gestures or remarks to her. And, above all, don’t give her any commands. If she thinks she’s being forced into anything, she’s going to dissolve whatever’s in her way.”

“Dissolve. Hmm, good term. Yours or hers?”

“Hers. Listen, is everything okay for tonight?”

“We’re fine here,” Singleton told him. “A few panels of sheet rock and we’re right as rain until the carpenters come back tomorrow to start reconstructing. Overmeyer has asked for a concrete bunker.”



Robin gave a loud sigh of exasperation. "Concrete won't hold her."

"That's what *I* said. Do they listen? Hold on ...." There were some muffled sounds coming over the receiver, then Singleton came back online. "Look, Anita says you've been taken off the project, and I could lose my job if I'm caught talking to you. Is that true?"

"Yeah, Paula. Sorry."

"So ... what else can I do for you?"

Robin smiled to himself. "You got my pager number?"

"It's in the directory."

"And my home phone number?"

"Want someone to yell if E.T. starts to melt down?"

"Please. But I'm pretty sure things'll be calm enough for tonight."

"Gotcha. But remember, this conversation never happened."

A sudden click in his ear told Robin the tech had hung up.

## Chapter Twenty Seven

## Call

It was almost eleven when the phone rang. Half-asleep, Robin reached over the nightstand to pick up the receiver. "H'lo?"

"Rob? Paula." Her whispery voice was urgent. He was fully awake almost instantly.

"What's happened?" he asked tersely. In the call's background he could hear the low purr of an engine. She was in a car, most likely on her way home, and calling him on her cell.

"This is way out of my league, Rob, but I knew I had to contact you. When I was signing out tonight I caught a glimpse of some orders clipboarded at the security station. I don't know the whole of it, Rob, but I did see an order for a shipment to go out at fourteen hundred hours tomorrow."

Cold chills went through him. "A shipment?"

"That's all I saw, but you and I both know there's only one thing that could be shipped out of Six."

"Any idea where they're planning on sending her?" he asked. He was already on his feet and reaching for a pair of jeans.

"I wish I could tell you more," the tech apologized. "I was lucky to have seen that much."

"Thanks, Paula," Robin said.

"What do you plan to do?"

"If they try to remove her from Six, she's going to rebel. God knows what kind of damage she'll do, and then all hell will break loose. I've got to get to her. I've got to ... shit, I don't know."

"Let me know if I can be of any help."

"Thanks again. Look, I'm heading back to the center now. Hopefully I'll have thought up something by the time I get there."

"You know you still don't have proper clearance," she reminded him. At his four-letter expletive, she chuckled. "That's why I left standing orders for security to let you in, in case the star girl asked for you tonight."

"Paula, I owe you. Just name it."

A soft chuckle came over the line. "I'll let you know when I think of something." Shifting into a more somber tone of voice, she asked, "You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?"

"Not any more stupid than I've already been accused of. Don't worry, Paula. None of this will come back on you."

"I wasn't afraid of that. I'm afraid of you losing your job. And if that happens, what'll happen to the star girl?"

Robin sighed noisily over the phone. "Let's not cross that bridge unless we absolutely have to," he answered. He thanked her again before hanging up, and paused a moment to try and think, his hand still on the receiver. What *was* he going to do?

His mind was confused, his thoughts fuzzy. He wasn't cut out for all this top secret espionage crap. His degree was in physics—numbers, projections, solidly cold, unquestionable facts. The ground he was trespassing on was based on none of that.

He was walking in the territory of the heart. They were going to ship Sah'Reena away, to some place even he couldn't get information about. She wouldn't let them remove her from the premises. He knew that as certainly as he knew the feel of her in his arms. She wouldn't let them get anywhere near her unless he was there to convince her otherwise.

She wouldn't leave without him. He couldn't let her go. Plain and simple. And if they tried to subdue her ....

*My Utul is Sah. That is the Utul of destruction. Of protection and fighting.*

Of protection and fighting. She'd fight them, and there was no way on God's green earth she would lose. They had not the slightest inkling of what she could do, or would do. But if they tried, and failed, then—Robin swallowed painfully—there would be no way they would hesitate to do to her what her world had tried to do.

Despite the fact that his whole body was shaking uncontrollably, he managed to finish dressing, grabbing his keys on the way out of his apartment. Johnson Space Center was twenty minutes away. He prayed he'd have some sort of idea what to do when he got there.

## Chapter Twenty Eight

## Plans

“Seth, I want you to do me a favor.”

Seth Goldman looked up from his console with a curious look on his face. “Hey, Rob, anything for you.” It was true he owed the scientist a few favors. It was also rare he got the chance to pay any of them back.

“I want you to go get a cup of coffee.”

Goldman started. “I don’t drink coffee. And you know I could get canned for deserting my station.”

“Then go get some tea. A soda. I don’t care,” Robin asked. “If anyone comes looking for you and doesn’t find you, tell them I ordered you.”

Goldman squinted in puzzlement, then turned to look at the plexiglass chamber. “You’re going in there, aren’t you? Overmeyer’s gonna have a cow.”

“I’ve got to talk to her. They’re shipping her out tomorrow and I need to see her before they do.”

The technician started again. “How’d you know that?” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “That stuff’s more classified than Area 51.”

Robin shrugged it off. “C’mon, Goldman. Ten minutes. No more, no less.”

“Alright, but if I get written up for this ....”

“You won’t,” Robin reassured him. “My butt, not yours.”

Goldman took one last look at the scientist before sighing loudly and leaving his assigned section. Robin watched him go until the man cleared the room. Momentarily alone, he leaned over the console to flip the bypass switch. Now he would be able to enter the chamber without raising the alarm.

Inside he crept quietly to where she slept, careful not to frighten her. A dim overhead light gave him just enough illumination to see her huddled under a thermal blanket on the single bed. He stood for several seconds watching her, amazed by the innocent beauty of her face. There was almost a timelessness to her features. With a little imagination he could envision the child she had been, asleep with the same pure innocence he saw now on her face.

She stirred as if subconsciously aware of his presence. Slowly she rolled onto her back and yawned softly.

“Sree?”

She opened her eyes, focusing on him, and smiled. “Robin.”

He gestured. “I need you to get up and come with me.”

Glancing around, she sat up, still confused and fuzzy with sleep. “What is wrong?”

“I’ll explain later. Please. Trust me.” He saw she wore a set of plain white cotton pajamas, typical astronaut-in-training issue. He handed her the jumpsuit he’d grabbed from one of the lockers outside. “Put this on over your pajamas. It’ll keep you warmer.”

“Warmer?”

“Shh! Hurry.”

Sah’Reena quickly obeyed as she watched him fluff up the blankets to make it look as

though she was still sleeping under the covers. She'd sensed his unspoken need for expediency and secrecy. Slipping her feet into her shoes, she took his proffered hand and followed him out of the chamber.

As Goldman had promised, he hadn't returned to his console just yet. Robin slapped down the safety lock to reactivate it. There was a service exit door a few feet away. He led her toward it.

"Where are we going?" she whispered.

"Off base," he replied.

"Why?"

"Later."

Down a short length of hallway they half-ran until they reached the outer door. The blast of cold night air stunned them both.

"My car's over in the next lot. Hurry."

Across the frozen grass they ran, still holding hands. He could feel her grip tighten, whether from fear or the cold he couldn't tell. It took them precious minutes to reach the parking lot where authorized personnel were allowed to park. After helping her into the passenger seat, Robin climbed behind the wheel and started the engine, revving it gently to get the air flowing over the motor before turning on the heater.

"This is your car," Sah'Reena stated. "We *are* going away from here."

"We have to. I had no choice." He carefully headed toward the main gate, hoping not to arouse suspicion. Goldman would have returned to his console by now. With any luck he might not have discovered Sah'Reena's absence, and wouldn't until the morning crew came in at six to take her vitals.

A new man was stationed at the kiosk. Robin breathed a sigh of surprised disbelief. It was almost as if fate was helping them along. As the security guard gave them a wave as they pulled through, Robin grinned and nonchalantly waved back.

"Have a nice night!"

"Thanks! You, too!"

The trip into the city was uneventful although Robin continuously checked his rearview mirror, expecting to see flashing lights behind them at any time. Sah'Reena watched the passing landscape of buildings and lights and cars in rapt silence. *Oh, strange new world*, Robin thought to himself.

When they reached his apartment complex, he parked the convertible behind the row of dumpsters, out of immediate sight should the police patrol the area. It wasn't until they were safely inside his apartment that Robin allowed himself the chance to breathe easier.

Blinking against the sudden bright light, Sah'Reena stared in wonder at the room. Robin gave her the chance to orient herself to the surroundings, aware that everything was new, totally strange, and potentially dangerous to her by her way of thinking. He grabbed an extra blanket from the hall closet, bringing it back to the living room where he wrapped it around her, and helped her over to the couch. The star girl obeyed mechanically.

"Well, this is my home, such as it is. Sorry it's such a mess, but if I'd known I'd be bringing you here ...." He paused, unsure how to begin to explain the reasoning behind his actions, when she reached out and placed a hand on his cheek. It was icy cold. He took it between his own hands and tried to rub some warmth into it.

"They were going to take me away," she said.

"How did you ... never mind. They were, but they can't now if you're not there."

“You are hiding me?”

Running a hand through his hair, he tried to sort out how he would phrase his next words. “Sree ... they were splitting us up. Taking you away to study you. Perhaps get you to do things with your power that you might not want to do.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why. I may not even have my information straight. All I know is that ... is that I couldn’t let them take you away. I couldn’t allow them to just ... *use* you, as if you were some sort of potential new weapon for them.”

Sah’Reena’s eyes narrowed. Her face paled. “They want to use me as a weapon?” she repeated, her voice edged with obvious anger.

“If they can, they will,” he said honestly.

“I am not a weapon.”

“I know you aren’t.”

“I am a defender. No more.”

“I know that, too.”

She suddenly pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. Confusion filled her face, replacing her growing anger with a look of helplessness he was more familiar with.

“When do we go back?”

“That’s a good question.” He got to his feet and walked over to the double-glass sliding doors which led out to his balcony. Unlike his neighbors who preferred a first floor apartment, he liked being upstairs. At least he got a better view of the stars when weather permitted.

A telescope sat just inside the vertical blinds. There were many nights when he’d set it up on the balcony and gaze up past the sky. Tonight was cold but it was also crystalline clear, and Robin wished he could do a little gazing. Maybe one day he could train the scope toward the star cluster where the star girl originated and look upon the constellations in her heavens. He was so lost in thought, he was unaware of Sah’Reena coming up behind him until he felt her hand on his shoulder.

“Do we stay here?”

He shook his head. “Not possible. Once they find you missing, this’ll probably be the first place they’ll come looking for you. We have to find you a safer place, a less obvious place.”

“Where?”

Robin shook his head again, more out of irritation with himself than from uncertainty. At the moment there was no ‘out’ for them. Her transfer might have been delayed, but it hadn’t been canceled. An hour after Overmeyer found her, she’d be shipped off on the first helicopter out of there.

No, what Robin needed was a way to insure that Sah’Reena couldn’t be handled like a deadly virus just because the military choose to. She needed protection. Legal protection. Legitimate protection. Protection that even NASA couldn’t argue against.

His first impulse was to pick up the phone and call his father. Peter had always managed to help him sort out the details in the past—he was definitely an ally in this situation. But would it be fair to ask his father to risk possible jail time because of his decision? Or would Pete contact the authorities ‘for his own good’, and turn in his son?

The longer they remained at the apartment, the greater the chance of being caught. Phone calls could be traced. His car was as obvious as a neon sign. But somehow they had to get to someplace safe. At least he could call his father and ask for his opinion. If Pete ordered them to

come over to the house, then Robin wouldn't have any guilty qualms about the risks involved. From there, the two men could come up with a possible solution, or at least a viable option or two. But he needed his father's level-headedness.

Flipping open his cell, he made the call. It nearly went to voice mail before a sleepy voice answered, "What's up?"

"I'm here at my place. I have Sah'Reena."

The physician did not hesitate. "Get here as soon as you can," he said and hung up.

Robin hurried into the empty second bedroom and pulled a down jacket from the closet. "Here." He gave it Sah'Reena and helped her with the zipper and snaps.

"We are going again?"

"We have to. This place isn't safe."

"Not safe? Where is safe?"

"Good question," he muttered as he hurried her out the door.

## Chapter Twenty Nine

## Solution

When they pulled into the driveway, Robin chose to follow it around to the back of the house where the garage was located, rather than follow the initial drive that looped around by the front door before exiting back onto the street. As they got out of the car the light came on over the back door, and a figure stood silhouetted in the doorway.

Silently, Robin took Sah'Reena's hand and led her into the house. Pete took a good look behind them before closing the door.

"You're gonna need to do something about that muffler, son. I could hear you coming a mile away." He gave the young couple a serious look. "Considering it's the middle of the night, I'm hoping this a friendly visit."

"We need help," Robin began.

Cutting him off with a curt wave of his hand, Pete led them further into the house, into his study where he'd apparently been before their arrival. A half-eaten microwave dinner and an empty glass of iced tea sat on a TV tray by the leather recliner. An old movie was playing on the television in the corner. Pete waved a hand toward the leather sofa beneath the window that ran the length of the room. Robin guided Sah'Reena to sit beside him.

"Okay. What's going on? You haven't asked me for help since you tried to flunk your physical because you didn't want to play football in high school."

To their surprise, Sah'Reena spoke first. "I love your son. They want to take me away from him, and I will not let them."

Pete stared at the star girl for a full minute. A breath he'd unknowingly been holding slowly leaked out of him like a collapsing balloon. "Very well. I accept what you're saying, but that doesn't explain why you're here." He turned to his son who sat with hands clasped in front of him. "Am I seeing a bit of broken protocol here? I didn't know they were allowing her to go off-base."

"They're shipping her out tomorrow," Robin replied bluntly. His weariness and worry was clearly evident in his voice and in every part of his body language. "I ... I can't think straight. All I know is that I had to get her out of there. Maybe just for the night. Maybe for a couple of days. Pete, they want to use her as some sort of military application. They want to turn her into this alien weapon."

"Rob. She can't stay here. *You* can't stay here. You know that once they check your place they'll come here next." The doctor gave his son a piercing look. "How much time do you think you might have?"

"I don't know. An hour or two? I seriously doubt if that much if Goldman blew the whistle when he got back to his station."

Sah'Reena glanced from the father to the son and back. She eased one hand between Robin's clasped ones. He squeezed it, bringing it to his lips to kiss it. It was meager reassurance.

"Can we go somewhere else?" she asked.

Pete glanced out the window behind them. "Weather's getting nasty. The news



predicted ice in the morning. It might help. Then again, it might not. Either way, Rob, you know you don't have a leg to stand on if they find her. It'll be your butt, ground first and then canned."

"But what if ...." He stopped, searching for words. "Isn't there something that we can do to keep them from taking her? I mean, isn't there some legal jurisdiction to prevent them from using her like that? I mean, dear God, she's a living, breathing being! She's not a-a piece of rock that just fell out of the sky one day, to be poked and chipped at and studied under the microscope!"

Pete leaned over to lay a soothing hand on Robin's arm. It was all too clear the young man had a tremendous emotional stake in the star girl's future. It was also clear that this emotional rollercoaster he was on was just as alien to him as the woman who had brought it about.

"Rob, aren't you making this too much of a personal issue?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Jumping to his feet, Robin angrily brushed away the man's hand. "Oh, I bet that was easy for you to say," he accused the older man. "I can understand where you're coming from. 'My son is in love with a space alien. He's making an ass of himself over her, and that's not kosher. She's being moved to an unknown facility pretty soon, so I'd better try and keep him occupied until she's gone, and then everything will be neat and tidy, just like it was before she got here.' Well, it's not gonna work, Pete, you got that? Sah'Reena has touched me in ways I can't begin to explain. And I'll be damned if some over-blown, self-important military brat is going to destroy what we have, just because he wants some top-secret weapon in his arsenal!"

He started to stride out of the study but paused as he reached the door. He was breathing heavily, and the throbbing behind his eyes was beginning to turn into glass-like strips of pain piercing the back of his eyeballs. Without being aware of it, Robin began to slump to the floor, sliding down against the door frame as he clutched his forehead and temples.

Sah'Reena cried out, scrabbling across the floor to reach him and pull him into her lap as Pete hurried over to a roll-top desk. Inside one compartment he pulled out a box. From the box he produced a small syringe and a vial. He quickly pulled a cc of liquid from the vial before taking the needle over to where his son lay in the star girl's embrace. At her warning glance, he explained.

"He's had these migraines ever since he was eighteen. This will help him with the pain."

Once he'd administered the shot, he helped her drag Robin back to the couch and prop him up against it. All the while Sah'Reena kept him within the safety of her embrace, unwilling to let him go. For a long minute Pete and the star girl stared into each other's eyes.

"Help us," she finally whispered.

"How much do you love my son?" He needed to know. He needed to watch her face and see what her reaction would be when she answered him, because Pete prided himself on his ability to read people, to see their own truth even if they denied it.

"With all that I am," she whispered.

Despite the fact that she wasn't human, he knew it was the truth.

Resting back on his heels, Pete took a deep breath and released it in a loud sigh. "Okay," he nodded. Reaching out, he patted Robin's cheek. "Hey, son. You still in there?"

Robin started, opening his eyes slowly as if awakening from a deep sleep. The first thing he saw was his father leaning over him, but the first thing he was aware of was Sah'Reena's protective hold on him. Laying his own arms over hers, he craned his neck to look up at her.

“You didn’t remove anything while I was out, did you?” he smiled, half-teasing.

Sah’Reena smiled gently back. “No. You told me to behave, remember?” She looked up in a gesture meant to draw his attention back to his father. “He is going to help us.”

“Dad?” Robin turned back to Pete.

Holding up a hand, the older man tried to clarify himself. “It’s only an idea. Depends on what you think.”

“Think about *what*?”

“About ... well ... I don’t know if it’ll even work out.”

“Dad!” Robin let out an exasperated laugh.

“Listen, Rob, what I’m about to suggest isn’t a laughing matter. It’s serious, and I want you to consider the fact that if you two do agree to what I’m about to recommend, this is not meant to be a temporary solution. If you two are serious, if you are willing to place your hearts and lives on the line for each other, to me this seems to be the most logical answer.”

“What is the answer?” Sah’Reena asked.

Pete stared down at his son. “Marry her.”

Robin took a moment to digest what his father had said.

“What is ... marry?”

Squeezing her hands where they were clasped across his chest, Robin answered. “Marry is when two people who love each other publicly dedicate their lives to each other.” Slowly, he eased himself up into a sitting position on the floor, keeping her hands encased between his own. Now he was able to look directly at her and judge her reaction to the suggestion.

“Marry is when two people say ‘yes, I care more for you than for my own self, and I want to spend every day of my life with you, for the rest of my life, until death takes one of us’. Marry is forever, for as long as forever can be.”

The star girl’s eyes shifted from his face to Pete’s. “How do we marry?”

“Now, mind you, I don’t even know if it’s a viable answer,” Pete interjected. “But there’s the slight chance that, if you’re married, that might be enough of a loophole to keep Wendicoff and the rest of his guerillas from shunting you off to parts unknown without Robin’s knowledge.”

“How do we marry?” she repeated.

Robin tugged gently on her hands, making her look back at him. “This is forever, Sree. If you marry me, I will never let you go. I will never release you from this obligation, do you understand?”

“I understand very clearly. You have brought something into my life that I never allowed myself to believe could be mine. You have shown me a part of myself I never knew I could be. You have given me hope and dreams and wishes and happiness ... and if this is just the beginning, and if you and I can have *more* of this for the rest of our lives, then *yes*. I never want you to release me. I never want you to let me go. I will never want anything but you. You ... Robin ... how can I make you understand how much I love you?”

Robin grinned. “Keep working at it. I like what I’m hearing.”

She started to retort to his response, but he managed to muffle her protest with a tender kiss.

Pete waited patiently until Robin finally sat back. Clearing his throat, he continued. “The little lady asked how. That’s going to be a bit trickier, but I *think* I might have a solution.”

He slowly got to his feet, grunting from the exertion of old knees and joints not being as flexible as they had been in past years. Hobbling over to the desk, he picked up the receiver and

punched a number. The call was answered almost immediately.

"Hello, Kurtis? Hey! This is Pete Gray. Look, I'm sorry to be calling so late. Yeah, I know it's after midnight. I didn't wake you from a sound sleep, did I? That's good. No, no, we're still on for next weekend. I haven't heard back from Larry yet, but he usually doesn't confirm until the day before. Yeah," the physician laughed, "I heard about that. That'll teach him not to take that old hound out again. Say, look, I called for a reason. Actually, a very big favor. A very *big* favor. This is ... this is something so big, I need you to realize that you have every right to bow out if at any time you feel uncomfortable, understand? Yeah. Yeah, I do. Yes, it's official business. You still perform marriage ceremonies, don't you? I need you to come over to my place and bring some specific paperwork. Yeah. A marriage license. Yeah. Right now. No, not for me. I'll explain when you get here. Two witnesses? Umm, there's me. We'll need another warm body. Okay, thanks. We'll be waiting. Right. Thanks, old buddy. See you when you get here. 'Bye.'

He hung up, letting out the breath he'd been holding. "He should be here momentarily. He just lives a few blocks over."

"Kurtis?" Robin reiterated. "Kurtis Walker? *Judge* Walker?"

Pete nodded. "Before he gets here, though, we're going to need to get our stories straight."

"There will be nothing told to him except the truth," Robin insisted. "I want everything open and above-board. That way, if he foresees any problems, or thinks it's too risky to deal from this end, I want to have a clear conscience."

Nodding, Robin's father agreed. He got to his feet, gathered up the remains of his supper, and headed off for the kitchen, leaving the two of them alone.

Turning back to Sah'Reena, Robin explained. "The man coming over is a very powerful man on my world. His job is the law, like your Judiciary, and he has the ability to marry us. What he says and what he does cannot be challenged except in a court of law. So when he marries us, that part cannot be severed unless we so will it."

"Again you are using words I am not yet familiar with," she whispered with a smile. "But I understand what you are telling me. When this man says we have been married, it will be so."

"Yes."

"And no one can say it is not so."

"Exactly."

"And you?"

Robin gave her a quizzical look. "And me, what?"

Sah'Reena slowly shook her head. "You have no ... what am I trying to say? You will not regret having to do this?"

"What would make you think otherwise?" he asked her.

"But you are doing this only to protect me," she said. "You and Peter, you said are trying to keep me safe from Overmeyer and those other men ...."

Robin angrily grabbed her by her upper arms and lightly shook her, as if he could somehow remove those thoughts from her mind. "Is that what you're thinking?" he asked her, half-pleading, half-saddened. "Do you think the only reason I want to marry you is to keep you out of their clutches?"

A turquoise tear threatened to spill from one corner of her eye. Her voice dropped to where he almost couldn't hear her. "You asked me if I would marry you. You told me what

marry was. Then you asked me if I would marry you for those reasons. But you never said . . .” She paused. Stopped. And bowed her head.

*Oh, Jesus.*

Robin gathered her into his arms. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Forgive me, Sree. Forgive me for not being more open to you, and for leaving you with any doubts in your mind.” He kissed the top of her head, then cupped her face in his hands and raised it so he could look into her dark sapphire-colored eyes.

“I have been waiting my whole life for you,” he whispered to her. “When I found you, I knew you were the reason why I was put on this earth, and that once I found you, I knew I was meant to love you every single moment of every single day for the rest of my life. Yes, my beautiful Reena. I do love you enough to marry you. I love you so badly that I ache when I can’t be with you. I want to spend forever with you, no matter where we must go, no matter what life throws at us. I want to be your husband, and, if at all possible, your lover. I want to marry you. Please ... never doubt again how I feel about you. I thought you already knew the truth.”

A smile gently touched her lips even when the single tear fell into his palm. “Tell me again. And again. And again. Never stop telling me,” she murmured. “Tell me over and over ... forever. Forever.”

He quieted her with his lips, caressing her mouth with his as he repeated his vow.

*I do love you. And I will love you. Forever.*

Gone was the room. Gone was the threat of discovery, of the possibility of being separated. Because now they knew that would never come about, not as long as what they knew, what they felt, and what they believed in was stronger than any other power in the universe.

Sah’Reena slid her hands around his neck as Robin drew her tightly against him. Their kiss deepened as they surrendered to their emotions, to their need and desire. He leaned backwards until he was stretched across the cushions with her lying on top of him, and she melted across his stomach and thighs. Her hair became a milky-gold waterfall around their faces, shielding their passion from the harsh glare of the desk lamp. They lost themselves in the single truth of their love, and their hearts rejoiced.

Her face was warm, her body even warmer. She moved slightly along his stomach, and he could feel a tightness in his lower belly as he physically reacted to the pressure of her weight. Daring what he’d told himself he would never do, Robin slid one palm around and up along her ribs until he felt the fullness of one breast above his hand. Even through the two layers of clothing she wore, he could feel how firm and round it was as he cupped it, stroked it, and the tremor that went through her at his touch told him how much she was affected.

Deftly he found the jumpsuit’s zipper between them, and slowly he drew it down until he could reach inside. The buttons on her pajamas melted away, and suddenly his fingers were caressing her throat, moving downward and over, closer and closer to their goal. Sah’Reena gasped lightly into his mouth, pulling away a little in order to look into his eyes.

“You are ... touching me,” she barely whispered. Her face glowed, her irises nearly black. This is how she would look if he could make love to her, he realized, and his body responded to the mental image he suddenly had of her. Unclothed. Beneath him.

“I want to touch you.” He moved his hand, letting his fingertips lightly trace little whorls of excitement across her satiny skin. When he finally reached her softness, he held it gently in his palm, allowing it to react to his fingers as it vibrated delicately with her trembling body.

The strident sound of the doorbell intruded upon their sanctuary. Robin started, breaking

away from the sweetness he was just beginning to discover in her responses as his thumb had begun to rub across her breast. He closed his eyes and willed himself to a less excited state of mind as they disengaged themselves from each other and got to their feet, prepared to meet Judge Walker. Less than a minute later, Pete and his old friend entered the study. The physician curtly introduced everyone around.

“Rob, you remember Kurtis Walker. Kurtis, my son, Robin.”

Robin stared up at the imposing figure as they shook hands. Kurtis Walker had been an all-pro defensive tackle for the Houston football team until a back injury had permanently sidelined his career in that field. The six-foot-three college honor student had not gone down for the count, but instead had returned to his studies to finish his degree in criminal law and pass the bar. Sixteen years later, Walker had gone on to become a member of the Texas state supreme court. To the world, the man was currently being touted as possibly going on to Washington. To Robin, he was the man who drank his Heinekens warm when he went duck hunting every year with his father.

Tonight, he was all business.

“Been a couple of years, Rob. How’s the space agency?”

Robin nodded. “Getting more political every day, Kurtis. It’s good to see you again. How’s Katie?”

“She’s freshening up at the moment,” Pete told him. “She shouldn’t be but another moment.” Turning back to his friend, he motioned toward the woman standing behind his son. “Kurtis, may I introduce you to Sah’Reena. She is the reason I’ve asked you here. Sah’Reena, this is His Honor, Judge Kurtis Walker.”

Sah’Reena stepped forward, holding out a hand. The judge stared at her, hesitating. For several seconds he studied her, taking in every detail, until finally, without taking his eyes from her, he spoke to his friend. “What’s going on here, Pete?”

It was Robin who answered. “Let’s wait for Katie.”

At that precise moment the Judge’s better half hurried into the study. “I’m so sorry I made you wait,” she smiled brightly. “How ‘ya doing, Peter? Hello, Robin! Oh, my, you’re getting better looking every day!”

The petite woman gave Rob a heartfelt hug before pulling back to look at the woman who stood next to him. Like her husband, she gave Sah’Reena a close examination. And apparently what she saw was enough to make her stand back for a moment. Then she, too, turned to look at the older physician for an answer.

Robin sighed softly. “Kurtis ... Katie. I would like to introduce you to the woman I have asked to marry me.”

The frown wrinkle in the judge’s forehead became distinctively darker and deeper. “There is something very different going on here, but I just can’t put my finger on it. Pete, is this why you’ve asked me and Katie over?”

Peter nodded, stone-faced. “God’s truth, Kurtis. I’m asking if you’ll marry my son and this woman. Tonight.”

“Tonight?” Katie gasped. “Isn’t this a bit ... out of the ordinary?” She gave Sah’Reena another distrustful glance. “This doesn’t sound at all like the Robin we know. Same for you, Pete. What’s really going on here?”

“Dad’s telling you the truth. Sah’Reena and I want to get married right now. Tonight.” Looking straight at Kurtis, he added, “She’s an illegal alien, and I’m trying to keep her from ... I guess you could say they want to ‘deport’ her.”

“Whoa, Rob.” Walker held up his hands, palms out. “You really expect me to be a part of something illegal and potentially career-damaging? I never thought you would ask me such a thing.”

Pete also held up a hand to stay the man’s ire. “Listen to us first, Kurtis. Please. Katie. Hear us out. What we’re about to tell you has been labeled Top Secret in the uppermost hierarchies. Countries could fall because of her being here. Science and technology will be forever changed. Drastically. The future of our government *and of this world* will be determined by this woman. You’ve got to suspend all your disbeliefs and trust us like you’ve never trusted anyone before in your life when we tell you the whole story.” He took a deep breath. “When Rob told you Sah’Reena was an illegal alien, he spoke the truth. She *is* an alien, and she’s here ... I guess you could say ‘illegally’. Kurtis, Sah’Reena is from the planet Murrall. She’s a real alien, from outer space.”

As his meaning sunk in, the couple seemed to take a mental step back. Robin could see a hundred emotions reflected in their faces—fear being the most prominent. Beside him he could sense Sah’Reena’s growing wariness.

After another minute, both the judge and his wife broke into shallow smiles. “That’s a good one, Pete. For a moment there I was actually going to swallow your tall tale,” Kurtis chuckled.

Robin shook his head. “It’s no tale, Judge. Sree’s spaceship crashed into *Liberty* while it was on its last mission behind the moon. They brought the ship back here to earth, where it’s been kept under the tightest restrictions. Sah’Reena was the ship’s only passenger. She was dying. We managed to save her. But now our military wants to take her off to some remote facility and start prodding and piercing her to find out how she ticks. They want to take her ship and see how many weapons they can create from its technology. They’ll kill her if they feel it’s in the best interest of our world.”

“So why are you asking my husband to marry you?” Katie whispered.

“Because I have fallen in love with Robin,” Sah’Reena spoke for the first time.

“We sincerely love each other,” Robin added softly. “It was not something we anticipated, or even believed possible.”

“The marriage was my idea,” Pete concurred. “I thought, if there was any way possible we could keep the military from taking Sah’Reena away, we might have a greater chance of preventing them from treating her like so much refuse if she had some rights. If Robin had rights. As a husband. Am I making any kind of sense?”

Kurtis nodded slowly. “You’re thinking that as a husband he would have to be kept abreast of where they took her and what they were doing to her if he couldn’t accompany her. Is that what you mean?”

“Exactly like that, yeah,” Robin said. “What do you think? Think it might be worth the chance?”

Katie glanced at the couple, then up at her husband. “They said they loved each other,” she reminded him.

“I was hoping I wasn’t asking anything of you that wasn’t too far from the ordinary,” said Pete.

Kurtis let out an explosive laugh. “*Too far* from the ordinary? Good heavens, Pete! *Listen* to yourselves! You’re giving me and my wife this cockamamie story about Robin wanting to marry a girl, oh, excuse me, an *alien* from outer space, just so our government won’t hide her away in some remote little Area 51 location for the rest of her days? Do you realize

how totally ridiculous this sounds?”

Quietly, Sah'Reena stepped out from behind Robin and stood before the couple. Closing her eyes, she bowed her head and lifted her hands, palms inward, until her arms were parallel to her shoulders. Suddenly her head snapped upward. Her eyes flew open, eyes pink-rimmed and glowing in a face turned incandescent, and she threw her arms outward, hands palms-up. A stream of twinkling lights arched over their heads, bouncing from one fingertip to the other before flowing over the room and covering everything in sight with their sparkling glitter. In less time than it took to draw another breath, the room became totally barren. Every piece of furniture, every item on the shelves, the shelves themselves, every framed picture on the wall, the curtains on the window, and even the carpet beneath their feet—gone. While they themselves remained untouched.

Robin felt his knees go weak. It was obvious the others were feeling the same way. Katie tugged on her husband's arm. Peter stared at the star girl, as if truly seeing her for what she really was—a strange and dangerous entity.

Wordlessly, Sah'Reena clenched her hands, tucking them under arms crossed against her chest. “Forgive me,” she murmured softly. “You had to see, or you would have never believed.”

Putting an arm around her, Robin drew her close to him. “It's all right, Sree. This time I think your instincts were correct.” He looked over at the Judge, who appeared to have regained control of himself. “Now do you understand? Can you marry us?” he asked the man.

“Will you?” Sah'Reena softly added.

Kurtis glanced down at his wife, who gazed back up at him silently. “How much trouble am I going to get into for this?” he wondered aloud.

“The buck stops with me,” Peter told him. “I put you up to this.”

“Kurtis?” Katie again tugged on her husband's sleeve. “They're in love. Really, *really* in love. Can't you tell? This is something that's taken them completely by surprise. They never planned on it. And now they're trying to cope with a possibility that none of us can begin to understand.”

Robin could see the big man's jaws clench and unclench as he warred against himself and his better judgment. “Is there any legal reason why we can't be married?” he asked, hoping to put a different slant on what they'd proposed.

“Legally? Yes and no. Sham marriages, as you know, are taken up by Immigration. But, personally, I don't see a sham. And this definitely isn't a green card issue. However, I still feel like I'm being used, and that's a feeling I don't like having.”

Pete stepped forward to place a hand on the man's shoulder. “We never wanted you to feel you were being forced into something against your principles. If you want to bow out, you know your way to the door, and you can go without any prejudice or anger from us.”

Unexpectedly, Katie reared back and slapped her husband's arm. Hard. A piqued look brightened her eyes. “Kurtis Walker! If these two were just regular human beings, and they wanted to get married in the middle of the night, what would you do? You'd marry them, right? As long as they had all their paperwork together and in order, right?”

“Katie, girl ....”

“Don't you ‘Katie, girl’ me! Why don't you get your head out of the sand and marry them? What did you do with your briefcase? I know you brought it!”

“I left it by the front door,” Kurtis told her.

Lifting her chin, the diminutive woman left the room, returning moments later with the

black leather case, which she thrust into her husband's hand. "Here. Do what you said you always wanted to do. Make life better for people. This girl, Sah'Reena? Okay, she's an alien, but now she's stranded here. For the rest of her life. And she's found someone she wants to love for the rest of that life. And Robin, you've known him ever since Peter adopted him. That's what? Twenty-four, twenty-five years? And Pete, you've known him since you both went to high school together! What's he ever done to make you all of a sudden the biggest Scrooge in Texas? Of all the people they thought they could trust with what's probably going to be the biggest secret in all of creation, they chose *us*! And *you're* just gonna *walk* away from it because ... WHY?"

She stood defiantly staring up at him. Kurtis sighed loudly. Opening his briefcase, he extracted several portfolios. "Is there a table nearby where I can get you to sign these?"

Peter led them into the kitchen where everyone took a seat around the glass-topped breakfast table. Kurtis opened one portfolio and pulled out a ballpoint pen from the briefcase.

"Normally, in the state of Texas, you cannot get married without a blood test or a three-day wait. However, I have the right to waive both the test and the wait under certain circumstances. I need you both to sign here and here, agreeing to the waiver." He showed them where to sign, flipping over the legal-sized sheets accordingly.

Robin quickly signed, then watched in fascination as Sah'Reena drew an intricate design he recognized. It was the symbol above her breast, her name in her language.

Producing two more portfolios, the Judge explained them both before requesting their signatures once again. "It normally takes seven to ten working days for a marriage license to go through all the red tape, and the marriage is declared officially legal. I'll see what I can do to speed up that process. Until then, this is the document itself, which I'll have to notarize myself. Pete, you and Katie will have to serve as witnesses, since the law requires two."

Once all the documents had been signed and properly sealed, stamped, and readied for processing, Kurtis tucked everything back into his briefcase, finally pulling out a small black Bible from a side pocket.

"That it?" Pete asked him.

"All except for the actual ceremony," Kurtis told them. "Where do you want to do this?"

"Well, definitely not in the kitchen!" Katie piped up. Without hesitation, she grabbed Sah'Reena's hand and proceeded to lead the way into the living room on the other side of the house.

Other than featuring the seasonal Christmas tree and the odd birthday party or celebration, the living room usually remained empty and unused. Pete drew the curtains as Kurtis took a stance in front of the empty fireplace.

"Robin, if you'll stand here in front of me. Sah'Reena, next to him. Honey, can you and Pete stand right over here next to them? Yeah, like that. Are we ready? Rob, is there a ring?"

Robin paused. "No. No ring. Sorry."

Nodding, the Judge proceeded with the ceremony. A brief five minutes later, it was all over. Robin leaned over to give Sah'Reena a quick but tender brush of lips.

Katie gave them all earnest hugs as the men traded handshakes. "What now?" the Judge asked as he and his wife donned their coats for their drive back home.

"Sah'Reena has to be returned to the space center tomorrow morning," Robin admitted.

"Won't they be looking for her tonight?" Katie asked.

Pete nodded. "Which is why it's not a good idea you two stay here any longer than you have to."



“Why not get a good hotel room for the night?” Katie mentioned. Her eyes immediately widened. “Oh, have you been to the Plaza de Bazdicado downtown? Kurtis and I got to stay there one weekend for some judges’ conference last summer. It’s absolutely *wonderful*!”

“I have a better idea,” Pete said. “Just a minute. Hold on. I’ll be right back.” He left the room.

Robin felt a cold hand slid into his, and he grasped it tightly. Glancing over at her, he was saddened to see the paleness of her face. She was so tired, tired of the running, tired of trying to cope in a foreign and frightening world.

“This is not what I envisioned when I told you I wanted to marry you,” he whispered to her. She glanced up to give him a weary smile. “I know it’s nothing like the ceremony you’d have on your world. I promise you, though, soon, we’ll have the kind of ceremony that will reflect both of our worlds. But for now, with what we have, no one and nothing will be able to keep us apart.”

“I am with you, and I will always stay now with you,” she told him. “I do not want more.”

“You two going to be okay?” Kurtis asked as he and his wife prepared to leave. “First thing in the morning I’m going to file the paperwork, but the important part is over.”

“Shouldn’t we wait until Pete gets back?” Katie asked her husband. She needn’t have worried, as Pete hurried back into the foyer, a big smile on his face. He clapped his son on the shoulder.

“It’s been arranged. I’ve booked you a room at the Plaza de Bazdicado for tonight. On me. Consider it a wedding gift.”

“Dad ....”

“How sweet!” Katie exclaimed. “Oh, you’ll just love it! They even have Jacuzzis in the rooms!”

Robin shook his head. “But is it a wise idea to take my car out on the streets now? It’s been at least a couple of hours since we escaped from the center. Won’t the police have my plates, make, and model?”

“Take my car,” Pete suggested.

“No, take ours,” Kurtis interrupted. He held out the set of keys to their sedan. “If the police come here looking for you and find your jalopy, they’ll immediately put out a search for *your* car, Pete.” As Robin accepted the keys, he said, “Just drop us off at our house on your way. Tomorrow morning I can call a cab.”

“We’ll get your car back to you in the morning,” Robin promised. Katie waved off his insistence.

“Just don’t put a dent in it,” she whispered conspiratorially. “That town car is his baby.”

Turning to Peter, Robin gave his father one last look. With a start he realized how much older the old man had gotten in the past few years, how much grayer around the temples, how many more wrinkles lined his face. Silently father and son hugged.

“I just want you to be happy,” Pete whispered in his ear. Robin nodded.

As Pete hugged the woman to whom he’d given his son, he also gave her a softly spoken command. “Love him enough for both of us.”

“I already do,” she promised, and added a soft kiss to his cheek.

Quietly Peter watched as Robin made sure his new wife was warmly bundled against the cold before he handed them an overnight bag he’d thrown together at the last minute. “If anything happens, you know where you can reach me,” he told them.

Robin hefted the bag over his shoulder. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Pete nodded. Tomorrow. It would come too soon.

"Thanks again, Kurtis. I owe you a big one," he told his old friend. The Judge just smiled and threw him a salute.

As the big sedan pulled out of the driveway and onto the street, Peter wondered if life would ever be so simple again.

## Chapter Thirty

## Love

Robin unlocked the door to the hotel room with the keycard. He pushed open the door and stepped back to allow Sah'Reena to enter first. However she remained in the hallway, looking inside, and required a small push from him to go in.

"This is our room for the night. You have to go in," he smiled.

"This is ours?" She stared at the room arrangement, noting the king-sized bed, the draperies and carpeting, the wardrobe and table, and the presence of a full bath. Giving him an odd look, she asked, "Why are we here? Is this where we will be safe?"

Robin paused briefly, dropping their overnight bag next to the closet, then remembered to shut and bar the door behind them. He walked over to the windows and opened the drapes, only to be met with a cold, dreary night. The ice storm had arrived. Already a thin sheet of frozen sleet rimmed the windowsill and coated the other side of the glass panes.

"We should be in Hawaii or the Bahamas, somewhere other than here where it's too cold to enjoy a walk outside. You belong in the sunlight. You glow in the sunlight. You deserve so much better than this."

In the reflection in the glass he could see her walk up behind him and lay her cheek on his shoulder. "Why are we here?" she repeated. "Is this where we will stay to be safe?"

"It's our honeymoon," he told her, knowing full well she would not understand. He chuckled to see her confused look. Turning around, he placed an arm about her waist and led her over to the bed where they sat down simultaneously.

"After a couple marries, like we just did, they go on a honeymoon. It's a time for them to be alone, to talk, and get the chance to discover one another in private." He hesitated. He had never deceived her or tried to be less than truthful, and he would not start now. "It's also the time when the man and woman discover each other sexually."

Sah'Reena's eyes widened. "I ... think I understand a little more."

"Sree ...." He looked down at where her hands were resting on her thighs. He lifted one hand to his lips and kissed the back of her fingers. "This is going to be difficult to explain."

"We are together. We can talk, we can learn from each other, we can learn more about each other. You are my friend. Now you are my ... husband. Why can you not talk to me now? Why are you holding back?"

Robin looked up at her. He was surprised by her astuteness, but maybe it was just another part of their growing together. "Look, Sree, there's a small problem we have ...."

"Do you want to have me?" she interrupted softly, leaning closer to him. Her unique scent was intoxicating. And it was more than evident she was completely open to him.

"Do I ... God, Sah'Reena, how can I explain this so you'll understand? Do I want you sexually? In the worst way." He tried to breathe normally, but he suddenly felt unsure about this whole thing. She was an alien. She was an unknown entity. Now she was his wife. She loved him without any hesitation or reservation, and there was no denying his heart and his soul, as well as his body, were totally captivated by her. "I have dreamt about this moment, dreamt about how you would feel, how I could make you happy, how I could .... Only, it won't work.

Don't you see? We're not compatible. Your body, my body, it just won't work."

Rather than listen to him, Sah'Reena suddenly leaned forward, taking her free hand and placing it behind his head, drawing him closer and pressing her lips to his. Robin groaned softly as her body heat filled his nostrils, and her breasts and thighs rubbed against his chest and legs. For the moment he allowed himself to pull her closer, allowed his hands to wander slowly down her back, around her buttocks, and up over her hips. With fingers spread he lifted both hands over her ribs, found the soft swelling of her breasts again, and gave himself the freedom to cup their firmness in his palms. He squeezed gently. She responded by moving closer to him.

He broke away, unable to continue. He was shaking and literally sweating from the contact. His jeans felt uncomfortably tight, his own body betraying him. "No, no. Oh, crap, stop." Getting quickly to his feet, he took two steps away from her, as if she'd become a danger to him. Sah'Reena blinked at the unexpected reaction.

"This is a mistake," he told her. "I'm sorry, but ... there's no way. I shouldn't have brought you here. What was I thinking?" Now he was muttering to himself, his confusion overshadowing his desire, which had risen like a wall of suffocating blackness and threatened to devour him in an overwhelming need for her. He was unaware of her getting to her feet and planting herself directly in front of him.

"Robin."

He lifted his head, unsure of what to do or what to say next. The feeling was foreign to him. Never before in his life had he not known what to do. Never before in his life had he not been able to trust his own judgment or his instincts. Somehow he had managed to gain something he'd only imagined. The star girl was his wife. As a result the world was quickly falling apart around him. Their discovery was imminent. And when they were found he would lose her, perhaps forever. All he wanted now was to hold her in his arms, to sleep on a cushion of her translucent hair, and to wake up in the morning to find her still within his reach.

"Robin?"

"What?"

She reached up to brush away the tear that had found its way down the side of his cheek. "Why are you sad?"

"Because I want to make love to you and I can't."

"Explain make love."

"Well ...." He laughed humorlessly. "Making love is sex. It is an act between a man and a woman for pleasure, or to create a new life. To procreate, make a baby. It's also a way that two people who are in love share that love. At least, they do here on Earth."

Sah'Reena had given him a look of surprise at the mention of creating new life. When he paused, she whispered, "It is *ambidunn*."

The term was familiar but elusive. She had commented about it before, but without elaborating. "What is *ambidunn*?"

Sah'Reena bit her lower lip, hesitating for a moment. "A man and a woman care. They want to stay together forever. They are given permission to bond. *Ambidunn*. Making love. Making new life. Making children. It is giving myself to you."

She stepped back and began to remove her coat. Robin watched, transfixed and unable to move as she unzipped her jumpsuit, letting it drop to the floor before stepping out of it and kicking it out of the way. Next she unbuttoned her pajama blouse, pulling it off to toss it along with the jumpsuit. The pajama bottoms she slid out of as she hurried. Sah'Reena removed everything, dropping her clothing to the floor in an untidy heap, until she finally stood before

him, totally nude.

In awe Robin gazed her flawless beauty, at the curve of her hips, her flat stomach, and the full, alabaster globes that were her breasts. Her long legs were perfectly shaped. Her whole body glistened like white marble. But, like Pete had told him long ago, she was a Barbie doll. Her skin was totally unblemished and unadorned by surface hair or any details, except for the symbol above her left breast. Her marking that seemed to glow a pale pink.

He knew she was waiting for his reaction. He couldn't deny one thing. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life."

She smiled, but she was still unsure. "I do not know what to do next," she admitted shyly.

Suddenly, it all came back to him, and some of the puzzle pieces began to fit. *Her powers would grow after ambidunn. She had not undergone ambidunn when she was sent away.* "Sah'Reena? Have you ever made love to a man before? Back on Murrall?"

She began to rub her arms for warmth. Realizing the room was a bit cold, Robin hastened to remove his jacket and cape it over her shoulders. The simple act brought them back together, into each other's embrace. "Have you ever had sex before?" he murmured close to her lips. He lightly kissed her and felt her tremble.

"No," she admitted.

"There was no one on Murrall you loved? Cared about? Wanted to stay with for the rest of your life?"

"No. Not until ... you."

Robin released the jacket and removed his glasses, pocketing them before reaching behind his neck for the back of his sweater. He pulled it over his head, then started on the buttons of his long-sleeved shirt. Like her, he tossed his clothing one piece at a time over her shoulder, onto the pile she'd left behind. Once he had removed everything, he waited for her to look at him. It was the only way she could understand their dilemma. She would have to be the one to make the final decision.

Sah'Reena reached out and tentatively touched his lower belly. The feel of her hand sent an electric shockwave throughout his body, and his manhood reacted instantly, leaping to stiff attention. Robin kept his eyes locked on her face, waiting for a sign of either rejection or acceptance. When she looked back up at him, he had to ask. "Have you ever seen a man on your world? Without his clothing? Am I much different from them? Or am I so completely alien to you?"

Instead of answering, she looked back at his body. Her fingers trailed through the soft hairs on his arms and chest. She grew fascinated by his nipples and the way they hardened when she lightly brushed them. Robin clenched his fists, not knowing how much longer he could stand there.

The wait, the anticipation was becoming unbearable. Worse, the inspection was doing little to curb the growing ache in the pit of his abdomen. Unable to control himself, Robin kept his gaze on her, knowing his manhood was swollen to its maximum. He remembered how soft her skin had been when he'd held her and had felt the briefest touch of her neck and shoulders. How perfectly her breasts fit in his hands, and he could feel his fingers burning to touch them again. In the dank light coming through the windows she almost seemed to give off an incandescence, like the reflection off a pearl.

"You are ... you are not very different from men of my world," she told him. The announcement was totally unexpected.

“What?”

“This ....” She touched the tip of his manhood. “It is warm. Your skin is soft.” She seemed surprised, touching it again, almost stroking it. Robin groaned and grasped her wrist to stop her.

“Sree.” The room seemed unreasonably hot. The situation was fast becoming much more flammable. “On my world, the women have an area of their body where men like me place themselves when they make love. You don’t have that place.”

“Where is it on your women?”

“Here.” He reached down, gently brushing his fingers between her legs. The skin was smooth, cleft-less, as he’d expected, but the verification still managed to stun him. “How can I not be different from men of Murrall?”

Sah’Reena grabbed his hand and slid the palm up over her lower belly. For the first time Robin noticed she lacked a belly button. “Here. Here is where you would place yourself,” she whispered. His fingers had stopped around her pubic area. There seemed to be a faint, ridge-like quality to her skin there.

Slowly, Robin dropped to his knees and peered closer, hoping to understand. His fingers touched a nearly invisible line running vertically upward, stopping a couple of inches from where a belly button would be if she’d had one. He tenderly touched the line and saw it was a slender, delicate flap of skin. However, when he tried to open the flap, there was no give. Sah’Reena dropped a hand over his. He glanced up at her.

“I have not had *ambidunn*,” she began to say. And suddenly it all made sense to him.

“You’re a virgin.”

She shook her head to show she didn’t understand him.

Getting to his feet, Robin picked her up and carried her over to the king-sized bed. He laid her down carefully, pulling back the sheets and coverlet, making sure she was comfortable before sitting beside her. He turned on the bedside lamp for more light.

“Sree, how do I open the flap?”

“You must ... you cut it ... or tear it open,” she told him, her voice shaking from either fear or anticipation, he couldn’t tell. The *Utuli’ia* above her breast was a pale blue.

“Tear it? God, no.” Yet, it was not so far-fetched a concept. Women of his world lost their virginity when their own hymens were torn. As different as she was physically, she was not so different after all.

An idea came to him. Retrieving his pants from the floor, he dug through his pocket until he found the small pocket knife he’d owned since he was in high school. Pete had given it to him one Christmas, a typical man-to-man gift. It was a handy tool, used primarily to tighten screws, slice apples, and trim the odd coolant hose on the car. Carrying it to the bathroom, Robin tried to clean and disinfect it as much as possible.

Sah’Reena watched as he returned to the bed with the small blade. Her expression was not one of fear, but of expectancy.

“I will try everything in my power not to hurt you,” he told her.

“I know.”

“You’re going to have to guide me on this.”

“I know.”

Robin looked at her, noticing how her hands clutched the mattress and sheet. He leaned over to kiss her, hoping to reassure her that his feelings for her would never change, regardless of their ability or inability to make love. He had never expected the power of her desire as she

clung to him, clung to his mouth, and pulled him on top of her.

At some point he dropped the knife onto the carpet as his senses were engulfed and his bare skin melted on contact with hers. All of his barriers were down. His need for her was undeniable, and he no longer had to restrain it. He made free with discovering her, planting small kisses down her throat and in the valley between her breasts, then trailing his tongue over her belly, and down toward the fragrant recesses between her thighs. His hands teased her, stroked her, and made tiny, tickling patterns all over her skin until she pleaded for him to stop.

He found the taste of her to be intoxicating. She was unlike anything he had ever experienced—every taste, every smell, every inch of her golden-white skin with its warmth and incredible softness. Tonguing the swells of her breasts, he was surprised to feel them tighten beneath his lips, until a small bud grew taut inside his mouth. The discovery made him smile in deep satisfaction. “So that’s where you’ve been hiding,” he murmured to the rigid, pearl-colored nipples.

He explored every inch of her and reveled in both her beauty and her uniqueness. She arched beneath his ministrations, keeping her body against his and rubbing skin along skin until their combined heat moistened the sheets. All the while she continued to watch him and touch him wherever she could reach. One hand found his length of manhood and began to play with it, enjoying its thick softness. The contact made him shudder.

“Robin.”

He moved his body back above hers and pressed himself against the swollen mound he now knew to be her womanhood. He rocked himself along its length until he couldn’t take it any longer. For her sake, he had to sustain himself as long as possible. The curve of her neck invited soft kisses, which he planted from shoulder to earlobe. She writhed slightly, and the movement gave him pause.

“Sree?”

“Now ... please . . .”

Quickly he found the pocket knife. The membrane, flushed for sex, was translucent, semi-opaque. All it took was a single swipe of the sharpened blade. Tiny drops of dark pink blood formed along the slit—her sign of lost virginity. Sah’Reena half-choked, half-sobbed at the violation, and her hands clenched into fists at her side.

Dropping the knife again, Robin spread himself above her. Then, with the gentlest motion, eased himself into her, gradually pressing himself inch by slow inch, until he found himself completely encased by her, sheathed within an incredible warmth that pulsed with expectancy. And as he began to move his hips, her inner muscles responded, grasping and releasing him with his rhythm.

He shuddered. It was as if a thousand little hands inside her were combining to stroke him, caressing his turgid manhood, and urging him to move more assuredly. Faster. Harder. He groaned loudly from the pure sexual gratification it gave him.

Looking down upon her face, he saw himself briefly reflected in her eyes until she closed them and lifted her hips to increase the sensation. As wave after increasing wave of throbbing pleasure surged through them, he allowed his body to take over, and his mind no longer cared about the time, the place, or the circumstances. Every nerve sang her name. His senses were filled with her. She was his now and forever, and he loved her with every cell in his body.

Her whole body wrapped around him, suspending him in space where a blue dwarf sun drifted so close it was searing the flesh from their bones. He could feel her lips on his face, down his neck, and along his shoulders as she alternated between kissing and nibbling, tasting

and touching his sweaty skin. He increased his speed, pushing deeper into her wet heat, and the breathy sounds of ecstasy she made in response filled his heart with even greater joy.

Dropping his forehead so it rested against her neck, he caught a glimmer in the corner of his eye. It was her *Utuli'ia*, glowing a fiery red, like a sizzling, setting sun. For the barest moment his lust-fogged mind recalled the power and surge of diamond-hard desire that had raced through them when he'd innocently touched it with his fingers. Without another second of hesitation, Robin shifted his upper body just enough to where he could bend his face over the mark, to where he could kiss it.

Exquisite, indefinable fire exploded inside them, turning their bodies inside out and scorching their bones in the flames. His release came a second later, volcanic, almost painful as his body went rigid in response. Involuntarily he cried out, a guttural scream of passion, and almost fell on top of her.

Deep within her, he could feel Sah'Reena's muscles constricting and vibrating like a finely tuned violin, her own rigidity growing more acute with every second as she was flooded with the heat of his release. He pushed himself to heighten her orgasm, and when it came, she crushed him to her as her body convulsed under and around him, arching her back as if trying to escape the searing pain of pleasure. She gasped to breathe, and he rolled a little to one side with her still in his embrace.

Before he was aware of anything else, he was unconscious.

\* \* \* \*

Silence.

And the feel of a feathery breath against his face.

Several long minutes passed before Robin opened his eyes. He was surprised to see it had grown darker outside. The lights outside the hotel had been covered in a thick layer of fog, turning the world almost totally black, but he had no urge to get up from the comfort of her body or their bed and shut the curtains. Besides, they were on the third floor.

Sah'Reena appeared asleep until she stirred and opened her eyes. She gazed at him silently, her face inches away from his, either waiting for him to speak, or content to simply look at him.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly, hoarsely. He brushed a lock of hair from where it had fallen over her swollen lips. The *Utuli'ia* had faded to the palest shade of pink, like a ghostly blush against her glistening skin.

"This is *ambidunn*?" she inquired with the barest hint of a smile.

"If you're asking if we just made love, the answer is yes. Are you in any pain?"

She moved her head slightly. "No pain. I tingle. My hands tingle."

"How about your ...." He reached down to touch her and noticed the swelling was almost gone, her belly nearly flat once more. Other than faint smears across her skin, there was no sign of blood. Sighing, he craned his neck and kissed her on the forehead.

"Robin?"

"Yes?"

"How long can we stay here?"

"Not long. We'll have to leave in the morning."

"We will stay here tonight?"

"All night, yes. Look, it's gotten dark. Are you hungry? Shall I order up some room service?"

"Room service?"



He pointed in the direction of the phone on the bedside table. "We can call them. Ask them to bring us some fruit. Maybe a couple of baked potatoes with everything ...."

"And crackers?" she asked, brightening.

Robin laughed. "And crackers. Sure. Whatever you want." He continued to stroke her face, noticing the soft shadows around her cheek and jaw.

"Whatever I want?" she echoed. Taking his hand, she kissed the palm, then laid it over her breast. The contact was a spear of pure pleasure lancing through them both. She leaned back to press her breast deeper into his palm.

"What do you want?" Robin finally managed to ask. He watched as his thumb drew her nipple from its hiding place. Without waiting for a response, he lowered his head to suckle it. Sah'Reena shuddered, pressing him closer.

"*Ambidunn, ka rinn*. Make love, more love, to me again," she begged throatily.

Robin drew her arms above her head, pushing her wrists down into the pillows. Spreading her legs, he positioned himself directly over her, then began to tease her by lightly rubbing himself over her, sliding skin against skin. When she wriggled to try and loosen his hold, he adjusted his grip so as not to bruise her. The effect began to drive the both of them mad. Against the confined friction produced by his growing manhood, her mound responded, warming and rising as it waited for his entry.

"Robin!"

"Say 'please'."

"Please."

"Say 'please make love to me'."

"I said that."

"Sree, say 'please make love to me'."

"Please? Make love to me?"

"Say ...."

"*Robin!*"

He plunged into her. The sensation of being swallowed up in her undulating heat scorched every fiber of his being, making him go instantly rigid with passion. He found her mouth, and she opened up to him, allowing him the final pleasure of exploring every one of her moist recesses.

At some point he released her wrists in order to support his weight on his arms. Their bodies found their rhythm, as if they had been lovers for years, and they went slowly, extending the sensations and climax for as long as possible.

Robin rolled onto his back. Sah'Reena moved with him until she rested on top. There she wriggled over him, pressing her abdomen harder against his, letting his manhood gain even deeper entry. Robin moaned with pleasure as his hands explored her every curve and contour, and teased her with his fingernails as they made light loops along her hips and sides and over her ripe breasts. He cupped her buttocks and squeezed them gently before pressing her harder and harder over him, working them both rhythmically as she laced her legs with his. Making soft little panting noises in her throat, Sah'Reena rested her face along his neck and shoulder, and her hair slid over his chest like a satin curtain.

Their mutual climax was more like a long, flaming glide across the stars, blazing for several seconds instead of exploding like the one they had felt earlier. Sah'Reena wrapped her arms around her husband as he gently lowered her onto the bed beside him. Warm, sweaty, totally exhausted, they cuddled close and rested, unaware of when they drifted into light, sated,

and contented sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Sah'Reena woke, slightly disoriented and confused. There was a distinct moment when she wondered where she was and why. A tiny seed of fear made itself known in the back of her mind until a deep breath and a slight movement beneath her hand reassured her.

He lay beside her and against her, hip to hip, on his back. His face was turned toward her. One hand rested on his stomach but the other was pressed along her ribs, his fingers spread beneath her. His breathing was slow. He was sound asleep.

She rose up onto her elbows and tried to see him through the negligible light, although her heart saw him clearly. At some point he must have gotten up and turned out the lights, but the darkness no longer frightened her.

In her lower abdomen she felt a deep, pulsating throb, and the realization of her loss of her virginity did not make her sad. In fact, a sense of expectancy had taken its place. A wall had been breached. A path had been taken she could never retrace. Yet she had no regrets. Now she would discover what had been kept secret from her, and she wondered how much further her Gift would expand.

More than anything, she knew without any reservation that this man, this creature from an alien and frightening world, had managed to reach into her soul and find a part of her she never knew was there. Feelings she had never dreamed she could experience now flowed through her veins. This man had become everything to her. It was an exciting and terrifying thought.

He knew nothing of her old life, yet he knew more of what she was capable of doing than anyone else ever had. He had seen what her Gift entailed, and he reveled in her abilities. He had accepted the challenge of how different they were physically so that together they could find a way to share their love in the most intimate sense. He had never condemned her, had never found fault with her, and he had never denied her.

It was almost easier to believe a dream.

With a tentative hand she ran her fingers lightly through his dark, sable brown hair, brushing it away from his temples. Even in the blackness of the night she knew his features better than her own. Despite his strong and handsome looks, she was enamored of the one thing that had stirred her heart the very first time she'd seen him—his eyes. His incredible green eyes. No Murrallisian had green eyes, and his were the color of life, like the leaves of the trees and the soft grass she'd seen in the picture books, the color he had promised the world would become in a few months, once the coldness went away and the sun made everything warm and start to grow again.

His hand moved beneath her as though reassuring itself of her presence. Rolling over onto his side, his other arm found her back, found her waist, and gently pulled her into the harbor of his arms before settling back into unconsciousness. The warmth of her husband kept away the chill even though the sheets and coverlet were a tangled pile at the foot of the bed.

Sah'Reena knew that if she tried to make sense of the twists of fate which had brought her from certain death in the cold vacuum of space, and into the arms of this incredible man, she could drive herself mad from reasoning. It was much easier to close her eyes and be at peace with herself, and at peace with the knowledge and proof of their love, and to drink from the cup of each day that was to follow.

A hand found and cradled her breast, enveloping it in the warmth of its palm. Against her shoulder she could feel Robin's breath tickle her skin. His heart was a steady beat, strong,

sure, and lulling her back to sleep and into the safety of her dreams. His dreams.  
Their future.

## Chapter Thirty One

Past

“Peter is not your real father?”

“Huh?”

“Peter. Dr. Gray. Is not your real father.”

Robin looked up from the biscuit he had just buttered. “No, he’s not,” he answered and bit into the bread.

Sah’Reena smiled over her slice of cantaloupe. She wore his white t-shirt which barely reached to her mid-thighs, and nothing else. Robin had opted for his jeans. It was the middle of the night. Room service had delivered two trays as per their promise to be open twenty-four hours a day—one of the better perks for staying at one of the ritzier hotels in the city.

Taking a bite, she thought momentarily while she ate. “How can he be your father, but not be your father?”

Robin crossed his legs and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Well, he adopted me.”

When she gave him a quizzical look, he tried to explain further. “I was a street urchin. No joking. I was five and living in the alleys. How I got there, I have no idea. I have no memory of it except for bits and pieces. I do remember Pete, though. He was taking a pair of shoes to a repairman and I saw him go in. He was dressed nice, and he smelled nice. So when he came out of the shop I tried to get a handout from him. At least, that’s what Pete tells me.”

“You do not remember?”

Robin slowly shook his head. “I guess I’ve managed to block most of it out, which is astounding considering my cognitive skills.”

“Your what?”

“Photographic memory? Forget it.”

“No, no, I want to know about you. Tell me more. Please.” She moved around the floor from where she had sat across from him, until she was almost next to him, the trays spread out in front of them.

Picking up a small bunch of seedless purple grapes, Robin leaned back against the side of the bed and began popping them into his mouth one at a time. “I was five, maybe four. Starving. Lost perhaps. Definitely homeless. Pete says he took one look at me and saw the wisdom of the world in my face. That’s when he took me by the hand and walked me to the nearest police station.”

“Why?”

“To see if I was listed as a missing person. There weren’t any reports fitting my description, of course, which is why he took me home. That day he made a few phone calls and started the process of seeing if he could adopt me. Pretty Hollywood, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I ... do not understand. He was not your father, but he wanted to be?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Where was your real father?”

“I have no idea. Neither does Pete. Same goes for my real mother.”

Sah’Reena looked surprised. “You have no mother?”

"Well, obviously I had one or I wouldn't be here. Pete's been both parents to me."

"Does he not have a wife?"

"He did," Robin told her. "She died a year before Pete adopted me. Cervical cancer. She was pregnant at the time. Neither she nor the baby survived."

Sah'Reena lowered her head as she imagined the pain the man must have gone through. "Pete has no other children?"

"No."

She reached for the cup of warm tea, cradling it in her hands. "You are taking the place of the child he did not have," she commented, and took a sip.

Robin stared at her. "You're very astute."

"It is the only truth I could find," she said.

Leaning over, he lifted her chin with a hand and kissed her lightly on the lips. "You're also very wise."

"It makes me understand better why he protects you. Why he loves you," she smiled.

"He saved my life. Children cannot survive in the kind of environment I was in, much less grow up in it. Pete's been more than a father and mother to me. He's my friend. He's my mentor. He helped me to discover my love for space. My passion for the stars." He looked at her from over the rim of his cup. "You could say he brought us together."

Sah'Reena thought for a moment. "Then I will learn to love him," she announced.

"You're not obligated to. You don't have to," he added for clarity.

"Without him I would not have you. Without you I would not survive." Sah'Reena got to her feet in one fluid movement and strolled over to the darkened window. Touching the pane, her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "I could be like this world ... cold. Dead. Without life. Without hope."

"Sree." He patted the carpet beside him. "Come sit next to me."

"When I think how close I was, how I could have lost everything, how I ...."

"Sree, why are you dwelling on something that never happened? Why not look at what we have now?"

She turned to confront him. "What do we have now, Robin? We ran away from the space center. Your police are looking for me. For us. You have put yourself in great danger because of me."

"What can they do to me?" he challenged her in a gentle tone of voice. "Not a whole lot. Oh, I might lose my job, but trust me, I can find another very quickly. This world has a definite deficit when it comes to experts in physics. Besides, I didn't steal you. You are not a piece of property. You didn't break the law, so you can't be called a fugitive. I didn't kidnap you. You came voluntarily."

"Your laws are confusing," she confessed.

"Very true. So ... are you coming back over here? Or do I have to come over there to get you?"

She turned back to the window and saw her reflection. She touched her hair, then looked at it directly. The only light on in the room was the bedside lamp. Its weak glow gave her skin a sickly yellow tint.

"Sah'Reena, tell me something," Robin asked to break the silence. "Do you look like your mother or your father?"

"My mother," she answered quietly, now combing her hair with her fingers. Robin could swear he saw minute sparkles of light twinkle about her face.

“When was the last time you saw them?”

She paused, frozen in the memory of the last time she saw her parents. Her mother had such regret on her face, her eyes filled with tears.

*“Promise me, pitkins,” she begged. “Stay alive as long as you can. Do not let them destroy you. Do not let them win. More importantly, do not believe they will ever win. We will not forget you. I will never stop thinking of you.”*

A warm tear coursed down her cheek, leaving a turquoise trail. “My mother believed in me. She never knew I would live, but she never stopped trusting that what I did, what I had done, was right.”

“Did your mother have a job? Did she work?”

“A job?” Sah’Reena turned to walk back to where the tea tray lay on the floor. “Those who are without gifts, they have ... assignments. If you are not Gifted, when you become old enough, the Sacrant give you your place to work. My mother ... her name was ... is ... Jinim. My mother worked at the Vor’Indurah. She did what she was told to do for the Darunn.” She turned to look at her husband. “It is hard to explain.”

Robin nodded his head slowly. “I think I understand, somewhat. Everyone on your world is told what to do with their life. Told where to work. I’m guessing this Sacrant ruled every aspect. Your father, where was he assigned to work?”

She poured herself another cup of tea. “Dun’Cori was a Gifted. He lived at the Tower, like I did before they took me away.”

“Really? Your father was a Gifted? What was his Gift?”

“He was Gifted to Know. He was Utul to Dun. My father can tell you when the suns will not shine. He knows when the moons will stay below the horizon, and when the food in the fields will wither. He knows many, many days before it happens, and that gives the Mittal time to take in the foods before they are destroyed. Or to make everyone go to safe shelter.” She shuddered slightly and took a deep swallow of the tea, unable to make eye contact with Robin. “He knew I was going to be taken to the Fahn. He knew ... I would not listen to him.”

*The look of terror on his face had frightened her, but it had also steeled her resolve.*

*“They will try to destroy you. Not just your body, but your mind, as well. You must be strong!”*

*“I am stronger than they could ever dream,” she assured him.*

*“No, Reena. No. That is exactly what I have been warning you against. Your Gift is immense. All powerful. You do not believe you can be hurt. They will hurt you. A great deal. I have seen what they will do to you and it tears me apart inside. You will not survive their games.” Dun’Cori walked toward her and held out his hands to clasp her shoulders. He gazed with loving eyes at his daughter, the woman so many people hated, feared, or exalted. The daughter who was still a child, not yet a woman, and not yet in full bloom of a Gift that already exceeded everything their world had seen.*

*“Knowing what I have seen ... I will lose you, ka rinn. I will lose you because I know you will not heed my warning. Just as I know this is our last time together on this world.”*

*Sah’Reena embraced her father. She was sure her powers would prove him wrong, although, deep inside, she knew her father’s Gift had never been wrong. No Gifted to Know was ever wrong.*

Robin remained quiet. He could feel she needed to tell him everything. She needed to open up the wound that remained festering inside her. Talk was cleansing. Confession, along with the anger and tears, would heal. Their love had earned her trust. Now, she only needed the

time to let it out.

“So ... Gifted give birth to other Gifted?” he asked.

“No. Not ... it is not ....” She drew a shaky breath. “So few of us are allowed *indil aba*. A mate. My father was favored among many of the Sacrant. He was given permission. He had seen ... he had seen my mother one day. He had seen her walking in the city, and knew his heart sang her name. She had seen him and was afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“He wore the ribbons of a Gifted. He had the right to take her, without permission, if he chose to. But instead he went to the Sacrant and asked permission to meet her. And then ....” She laughed softly at the retelling. “Then he went to my mother’s father and asked permission to meet her. It was all so formal. So ... different.”

“Then Jinim fell in love with him?”

“Yes.” Sah’Reena nodded. Turning around to face him, she leaned against the desk next to the window. “The Sacrant have tried for many, many rotations to create Gifted through special breedings. Our history is full of tries and attempts, but we cannot be predicted. We just ... are. Gifted may give birth to others of our kind, but not always. There is not the greater chance of a Gifted being born from the blood of another Gifted. And those of us born from Gifted are not always of the same Utul as our parent.”

“It’s totally random,” Robin said. She nodded. “Unpredictable.” Again she nodded as she wiped the tears from her face. Again Robin saw the shower of sparkles, and his realization sent a small shiver of surprise through him. She had used her power again to eliminate the signs of her crying. More efficient than tissues, and without any residue. So, unquestionably, the combing through her hair with her fingers had also been a cleaning. Another puzzle piece fell into place.

*“She has an aversion to water,” Lopez told him.*

*Robin paused. “I don’t follow,” he commented. “She drinks water.”*

*“I mean she won’t get into the shower and take a bath.”*

*“Why not? Is she beginning to get offensive?” He continued to glance over the charts with the lab reports on her skin and hair samples.*

*Lopez made a face. “Cut me some slack, Doc. I was told to install the sink and shower so she could have a place to clean up. Only, she doesn’t use them, other than to pour stuff she doesn’t like down the sink. By the way, you’d better say something to her about that ‘cause one of these days she’s going to stop up that sink big time.”*

*“Has anyone taken the time to show her what the shower is for?” Robin wanted to know.*

*“Sure! Fahlings, Alice Fahlings, she tried to explain. Went so far as to step inside and turn the shower on. Didn’t make a bit of difference. The star girl won’t get in.”*

And she wouldn’t, Robin mentally told himself. Why go to the time and trouble to take a shower or bath when you have the power to eliminate all excess dirt and dead skin cells in the time it takes to wipe your hands over your body?

During this time, Sah’Reena had reseated herself on the floor next to one of the trays and was picking banana chunks out of the bowl of fruit salad. She was pensive.

“When were you born?” he asked. It was a senseless question, he knew. It would take some time before the NASA scientists could come up with an equivalent number of years to place Sah’Reena’s age. Still, he was curious.

“I was born four rotations into their joining. My blood showed I was a Gifted, but my father was granted a delay because he was also a Gifted. So I got to spend several cycles living

with them before the Sacrant took me into their hold to raise and train me.”

Robin frowned. “How does your blood show you’re Gifted?”

She made a gesture as if it were a commonly known answer. “My blood is different.”

Robin let it go at that. He knew he would eventually figure it out on his own.

They ate in silence. Robin carefully watched what she put in her mouth. One thing he was very cautious about was what she ate, as anything could become poisonous to her system, which was why he mentally kept a note of anything new, just in case she began to have a reaction.

“Hey, try one of these.” He leaned over a tray and held out a grape. Sah’Reena bent toward him and took the fruit into her mouth. Her mouth lingered around his fingers for a split second. Robin found the moment incredibly sexy. In fact, the past twenty-four hours seemed to have all the makings of an unforgettable dream. Least of all, he couldn’t begin to fathom the change that had come over him. The depth of emotion he felt for this woman was beyond anything he could have ever imagined and thinking about it almost terrified him. He had never looked for any permanent relationship. Yes, he had found a few women who had caught his attention, who had appeared interesting. One even had challenged his obsession with the stars. Although it had ended after fourteen months, that had been his longest tryst with any woman.

Throughout it all he had gone back to studying the heavens and all the secrets it contained. He’d finished high school when he was sixteen. By the age of twenty-four he’d earned his doctorate in astrophysics. With his degree from Harvard and Pete’s connection to NASA, it was understood he had a place waiting for him at the space center if he wished it. He did.

Now, four years later, everything seemed to be coming to a head—the job, Sah’Reena’s discovery, and the blossoming of their new-found love were reaching a pinnacle from where he was afraid he would fall. If there was such a thing as happily ever after, he was certain it was not to be their fate. But in the meantime, whatever joy they could derive from their union, be it long or short-term, he promised himself that he would make it as memorable as possible for them both.

“What time is it?”

“Hold on.” He reached overhead for his glasses on the bedside table, slipping them on long enough to read the clock. “Almost three in the morning. Tired?” She gave him another puzzled look as he placed the frames back on the nightstand. “What?”

“Why do you wear those?”

“You mean the glasses? Laziness, mostly. Both Jack and Pete have been needling me to get contacts or laser surgery. With the hours I work, contacts won’t work, even if I get some of those twenty-four hour ones. The surgery ... I guess I just have an aversion to surgery of any kind.”

“If you were on my world, I would have Bin’Rallen fix your eyes.”

“A Gifted to Heal?”

Sah’Reena nodded, smiling. She’d pulled her legs up closer to her chest and drawn the t-shirt over them for warmth. The thin white cotton garment did little to hide the curves of her body. Robin realized that, although his mind and body was eager to explore her physical depths again, his stamina had reached its limits. Between the tension and strain of the past few days and the intimacy they’d shared earlier, they were both exhausted to the point of collapse.

Once they finished their snack, they retired back to bed where they snuggled together under the covers to keep warm. Robin turned off the lamp, throwing the room into near pitch



blackness. Sah'Reena tried to find a comfortable position, partly by moving her hips further into his lap. The closeness began to reawaken Robin's libido slightly.

"Careful, you might lead me back into temptation," he growled softly into her ear.

"Your what?" She rolled over to face him but he was a dark shadow against the barely darker shadows in the room.

Robin felt her hand on his chest. Taking it in his, he raised it to kiss her palm. By touch he could tell it was her left hand. Without thinking he ran a thumb over the bare knuckles. "One day soon I'll buy you a wedding band," he whispered. "On second thought, that wouldn't be too smart, would it?" He didn't wait for an answer. He knew she was listening, trying to decipher what he meant. "I mean, with your Gift, one good blast from your hands would disintegrate it. Guess I'm going to have to come up with an alternative."

"One day I hope to understand everything you are telling me," she remarked with a note of humor in her tone.

Robin chuckled. "I promise. You'll learn from me, and I'll learn from you all about your world. More than anything, do you know what I want?"

"What?"

"I want something I've dreamt about since the first time I met you. I want to wake up in the morning with you in my arms, knowing you love me, knowing you'll always love me, and knowing that no matter what happens, we'll always have this night." That being said, he brushed her hair out over his pillow and lay his cheek against it, and gave her a tender kiss.

He fell asleep almost instantly.

## Chapter Thirty Two

## Morning

Robin turned on the shower and stepped inside. The nearly scalding hot water sprayed over the back of his shoulders, and he groaned from the sensation. For a full minute he allowed the water to play down his body as he braced his arms against the stall's wall, head bowed. His body ached, his muscles sore from overuse. His head was fuzzy from lack of adequate sleep over the past week. No wonder he needed something to clear his mind. The heat helped, penetrating through his hair to his scalp and coursing down his back and legs.

It was nearly seven a.m. Time to return to the space center to face the music. It was something he wished he didn't have to do.

He heard the sound of the shower curtain moving. Wiping the water from his face, he turned around to see Sah'Reena peeking in. He flashed her a weary smile.

Sometime around four a.m. he had been awakened by the persistent feel of her hands stroking him, easing him into another pulsing erection. "Love me," she had whispered, begging in the darkness.

And he had loved her, gently, sensuously, amazed at the strength of their mutual hunger, amazed by the lack of weariness as his body craved hers. The floodgates had been opened. All the denial they had placed on themselves in the past had been vanquished as soundly as if it had been no more than a whisper in the wind. They had found the perfect partner in each other, like two halves fitting exactly and creating a union that could only grow greater as time passed.

Her appetite for him equaled his for her. Their need for bodily contact and raw sex to assuage their overwhelming hunger sometimes overcame the simple joy of a kiss, yet afterwards they often found themselves no less sated. Robin had to admit to himself that he would never tire of her unearthly body. More so, he would never stop loving her tender, inquisitive nature and her unabashed honesty. If she wanted something, she was never averse to asking for it. Perhaps it was because of her status as a Gifted on her world where she had been raised to ask—or demand—everything she wanted. And she had expected to get it. Only, what made her different from the spoiled military daughters he had dated in the past was that when she wanted something, it had always been to both their benefit.

*"Some day I'm going to have to teach you some dirty love words," he had grinned as they lay panting on the sweaty sheets.*

*"Why dirty?" she wondered aloud.*

*"Because men of my world like to hear the woman they love say them. It makes them feel stronger, more virile, more excited. More in ... control."*

*"Why not teach me now?" she countered.*

*He laughed aloud and pulled her tighter against him. "If I taught you everything now, what would you have to look forward to in the future?"*

*"I still have everything from my world to teach you," she teased him.*

A brief two hours of sleep had come to them afterwards before the alarm clock on the nightstand had rudely informed them that morning had arrived. Outside the clouds still remained gathered like a pile of dirty gray lint, allowing for very little sunlight to filter through. Wearily

Robin had forced himself out of bed and away from his wife's warmth, to trudge into the bathroom.

"Come on in." He held out his hand, inviting her to join him under the water. Sah'Reena glanced down at the water swirling around his feet, then looked back at him. Robin waved his hand, gesturing again, but she remained on the other side of the curtain. "Don't be afraid. It's only water."

"Why must I come in?"

"Hasn't anyone explained to you about showering?" He turned around briefly to lower the heat and make the flow more temperate.

"Yes." She continued to stare at his drowned puppy appearance. "You *like* being in there?"

"Don't knock it until you try it." He gestured again. "Please?"

Reluctantly she stepped inside the tub, taking his hand and allowing him to draw her under the waterfall. She didn't flinch as he had initially expected her to. Surprisingly she cupped her hands under the warm stream and poured the water over her face. It was an amazing sensation she had to repeat several times before she stepped fully under the downpour and let the water sluice over her entire body and soak her hair. Watching her delight in the simple pleasure, Robin couldn't help but lean over and taste her warm, wet lips.

"You *like* being in here?" he quoted her with a smile.

"I wish I had been taken here sooner," she admitted.

He kissed her again under the water. This time, however, she drew back quickly, one hand to her chin. "What is it?" he inquired.

"Your face." She touched his cheek with her fingertips. He realized what she meant.

"It's a beard," he told her, rubbing his hand over the stubble. "I haven't shaved yet. I do it in the mornings after my shower."

"You ... you remove it?" Water glistened on her face like tiny diamonds. He fought the urge to kiss them away.

"Yes, I remove it. It's hair. Men on your world don't grow hair on their faces?"

She didn't answer. Instead she continued to feel the harsh growth on his cheeks. A stray lock of hair lay plastered over her forehead. He remembered waking up with a wave the color of golden milk covering his pillow. He brushed the lock away.

"What are you thinking?" he whispered.

"You remove it?" she repeated, and then he understood where she was going.

"Don't destroy the root, in case I decide to grow a beard or mustache in the future."

Peering closely in the dim bathroom light, Sah'Reena stroked his face with both hands, touching the corners of his mouth with her index fingers. Robin saw a faint twinkling but felt nothing but the pressure and warmth of her palms. When she lowered her hands, he reached up to feel a smooth, baby-soft surface. He bent toward her to kiss her, and this time she smiled when the stubble didn't irritate her.

"Thank you," he told her. "Now it's my turn to show you what *I* can do for *you*." He reached for the small bar of soap and grew a lather in his hands. Blocking the water from her with his body, he began to spread the suds over her body, starting with her creamy breasts.

Sah'Reena closed her eyes, her face reflecting her pleasure at his touch. At times her breath would come in short gasps as his hands lathered every inch, pausing occasionally over a curve or roundness to tenderly massage or tease it.

He hesitated when his fingers swept near her mark. It was a pale, greenish color,

whatever that meant. He hoped it reflected her contented mood. Nevertheless, he avoided touching it.

This was the first time he had gotten the chance to study all of her in the light. He turned her around as he moved over her shoulders, revealing her back to him. The sight of it immediately turned his stomach, and he had to pause. When they had been making love, he had felt her scars beneath his hands, but his mind had been too filled with lust to actually register them at the time. Seeing them now, bared in the light, he realized how much uglier and more telling they were than what he had been led to believe. They ran from the base of her neck to her buttocks—thick, short, ropey scars, many of them barely healed. A couple of them looked borderline infected; he made a mental note to have them examined again. When he ran his fingers over them, she flinched slightly and looked over her shoulder at him.

“Some day you’ll tell me everything,” he managed.

“I can ... tell you now.”

“No. No. Let’s not ruin this moment.”

He moved over her buttocks, down her full hips, and along her long, beautiful legs. He soaped the bottoms of her feet and found she wasn’t prone to be ticklish in any of the areas humans were. All the while she luxuriated over his treatment.

He turned her back around to work on her arms and hands, then under her arms and down her sides. He counted six sets of ribs but still no tickle spot.

As his hands moved lower toward her abdomen, he got on his knees and stared at the nearly invisible slit. He knew it intimately now, yet he realized there still were many mysteries about her left to discover. He gently kissed the translucent camouflaging membrane, and her reaction was instantaneous. She shivered and reached to cover herself, but he stopped her. Keeping his eyes glued to her face, he lightly ran his tongue over the skin. Immediately he felt a throb of heat coming from her. Sah’Reena convulsed once and she grabbed his head to pull him away.

“Robin, do not.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. I ....”

“Shhh, shhh. Does it excite you?”

She looked down at him. Without a doubt Robin could tell she was becoming sexually aroused, and he wondered how far he could bring her with his mouth.

“Let me do this to you,” he begged, watching her as he kept his voice low and soothing. “Close your eyes. Let yourself go. Experience it. Don’t be afraid.”

She clenched and unclenched her hands, keeping them near her shoulders as she pressed her head against the shower wall, her eyes tightly closed. Her body tensed with anticipation, but she didn’t try to stop him again.

With utmost care Robin pressed soft little kisses along the flap. He made sure the area stayed wet, letting tiny rivulets of warm water run over it. With the tip of his tongue he slowly glided up the slit, deliberately titillating it. Sah’Reena reacted with a violent trembling, but she kept her hands up and away from him.

By now the area was sending out a noticeable wave of heat. He could feel her mound swelling beneath his lips, a sign she was growing increasingly hungry. And as her body signaled her readiness, he could feel his own erection rising, readying for her.

Using his thumb and forefinger, he lifted the flap and again lowered his tongue, running it along the edges of the membrane. Sah’Reena nearly fell on top of him. He caught her before

she could.

“Are you all right? Did I hurt you?”

“No more. Please. No more. I ....” She opened her eyes, her need for him clearly reflected on her face. “Take me. Take me, Robin. Now. Please!”

He didn’t need her to ask again. The act of heightening her arousal had done the same to him, and he wanted to feel her muscles around his thickened shaft. He had to have her body grab him, swallow him, stroke him, and bring him to his own climax. He stood to face her and she reached out to kiss him as she wrapped her arms around his neck. His probing manhood found her velvet slit, was encased within it, and Robin held her against the wall of the shower as he pounded deeper into her. They were toe-to-toe and chest-to-chest as they worked toward their pinnacle. Sah’Reena dropped her hands to his buttocks and guided him with each thrust. Robin buried his face in the curve of her neck as the excess soap lubricated their skin.

It was a sudden, powerful, unexpected flash of release that erupted between them simultaneously. Robin growled throatily as Sah’Reena gasped a small cry and quivered. They breathed heavily as they tightly held each other in the aftermath, savoring the spiraling downslide, not wanting to let go, not wanting to separate. The feel of himself resting within her was a delight he could not put into words, but finally Robin kissed her neck and the lobe of her ear, and whispered, “We must be going.”

She nodded as he pulled away from her. She touched the still sensitive area between her legs then looked up at him. “I did not know I could feel this way,” she confessed. “I did not know my body would .... What have you done to me, Robin Dickenson? I am not the person I was on my world. I never thought I would need another person to make me happy. I never thought I would need another person to help me live my life. I never thought I could feel this kind of joy or this kind of happiness.” She looked at her hands, and clenched and unclenched them over and over. “I am changed. You have changed me.”

“For the better, I hope,” he smiled as he finished washing the soap off their bodies.

She smiled in return. “No. For the best.”

He turned off the shower as she stepped out and began drying off. Robin paused as he watched her wipe away the wetness with her hands. “Hey, stop a second.”

She stopped to look at him. Robin climbed out of the tub and reached for a towel. Another great perk of a great hotel was that they stocked large, fluffy towels. “You’re missing out on another joy in life,” he smiled. Opening the towel, he draped it around her and began to rub her dry. “All right, I know you can remove the water on your own, probably with a lot more efficiency. But you have to admit, toweling dry is a nice alternative. Probably warmer, too.”

She smiled at him as he caught an errant drop of water on the tip of her nose. When he was sure she was sufficiently dry, he grabbed another towel for her hair. Sah’Reena stopped him. “What are you doing?”

“Drying off your hair. Why? Is there a problem?”

“The towel may hurt me. Let me do it.” She took the towel from him and dropped it across the toilet tank. Bending forward, she shook her head slightly and began running her fingers through it. Within moments it was dry and shiny. “Now you?” she invited.

“No, thanks. I’ll do it the old-fashioned way.” He dried off as she dressed, then dressed as she stood gazing out the window.

“The weather is cold,” she said. “There is ice everywhere.” She turned her head to look at him. “We are going back?”

He paused in cleaning his glasses. “We have to. We have no other choice. We could

keep on running, but there's no telling how long before they caught up to us."

"Why do we run?"

"Exactly." He put on his glasses and shrugged into his coat.

"What will they do to you?" she asked him as he helped her with her coat.

"The worst they can do to me is fire me. Maybe a short stint in a minimum security prison. It's you I worry about."

"You need not worry. They will never take me from you."

Robin ran a thumb over her lower lip. Over her shoulder he could see the tousled bed but he refused to allow the memories of the night before to sidetrack him. He needed a clear head in order to think things through, to plan a way for them to remain together. And if at all possible, to create a future that included her.

He shouldered their overnight bag and they left the hotel.

## Chapter Thirty Three

## Rebellion

“This could pose a problem.”

“How?” Sah’Reena glanced around the neighborhood, uncomprehending. Robin directed her attention to the car.

“Ice, my love. This storm has created havoc with the current driving conditions.”

“You mean you can not drive the car?”

“Oh, I can drive it all right, as long as I take things nice and slow. It’s the other idiots on the road I’m going to worry about. That is, if I can get this vehicle moving.” He glanced about, noticing the coating of ice on the trees and power lines overhead.

Sah’Reena shook her head. “It is cold, but how is that bad for the car?”

Robin opened the door for her and helped her into the front seat. “It’s not the car, it’s the streets. They’re slick. Slippery. If the tires lose traction, the car could slide uncontrollably, perhaps crash.” He slid in under the wheel and started the car.

Sah’Reena sighed and gave him a mischievous look. “You are not thinking, husband. Watch.” Without explaining further, she got out of the vehicle, then turned and got back in, all in one smooth motion.

“What was that all about?” he asked.

Laughing softly, she pointed out the front windshield. He had been so intent on watching her that he had failed to see what she was doing. His surprise made her smile.

“It’s going to take me some time to get used to you doing that,” he commented. He put the car in drive and proceeded out of the ice-free parking lot. They continued on their way slowly as Sah’Reena cleared their way as they went.

As expected, Pete had left his car parked in front of the judge’s three-car garage. Leaving the luxury sedan next to it, they exchanged vehicles, and Robin threaded their way back onto 45.

Traffic was sparse. More than once they saw another vehicle slide along the slippery terrain, or the results of a vehicle unable to regain control on the road. What would have taken Robin twenty-five to thirty minutes to drive on a normal day took them almost an hour and a half to negotiate.

The weather appeared to be on hold. The storm had done its damage and left the area, leaving behind a damp, cold, gray morning. There was no wind and no sun, but there was the bitter chill.

During the trip they talked very little. Sah’Reena repeatedly glanced down at her hands lying palms-up in her lap, giving Robin reason for concern.

“What’s the matter?”

She shook her head. “They feel ... they tingle. I have not felt them do this before.” She looked at him with confusion. “Did we do this to me?”

“I don’t know. What happens after you go through *ambidunn*? You said your powers could grow stronger. Is this part of the process?”

“I do not know,” she confessed.

“You don’t know? What did the other Gifted go through? Didn’t you speak with them?”

“No. When a Gifted is given to be bonded, she is not returned to the Tower.”

“Not re .... Sah’Reena, you mean you’re not allowed any contact with any Gifted after *ambidunn*? That’s absurd. What about your father?”

“I never thought to talk to him about ... this.”

They drove along for several more long minutes before Robin broached the subject again. “Sree, are you going to be all right?”

There was a long pause before she answered, “I do not know.”

As they pulled up to the security booth, Robin waited for Parkhurst to give them clearance. Instead, the burly guard leaned through the window. “Mighty expensive wheels for someone not earning six figures, Doc. I never took you for the richer-than-thou crowd.”

“It’s a loaner.”

“With physician plates and a Johnson decal?”

“Look, Frank, what’s the word on the street?”

Parkhurst squinted at the woman sitting on the seat next to him. “You know you’re a wanted man, right, Doc?”

“It depends on who you believe,” Robin answered. “We didn’t steal anything. We didn’t do anything except go for a ride.”

“We’re sitting on Code Three right now. You know I have to report you coming in to the boss.”

Robin nodded. “You have a family to take care of, Frank. I understand. Don’t feel bad about doing your job. I would be disappointed if you didn’t.”

“Are you going to be okay in there?” the security guard asked, honestly concerned.

“Yeah. The worst they could do is fire me and give me one to five at Huntsville. But I’m willing to lay money on the line that they won’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have the ultimate ace in the hole. And she’s now my wife.”

Parkhurst stood and waved him on through. He noted the time on his log, then called Security to let them know the absentee scientist had just entered the base, bringing with him the reportedly ‘missing classified documents’.

“It might get nasty,” Robin warned her as they slowly drove through the parkway toward Building Six.

“How?”

“Be prepared for anything. And trust me.”

“What will they do to us?”

He reached over and patted her arm. He ventured a quick glance in her direction. “To you, nothing. You’re too valuable an asset to risk. However, I’m a totally different equation.”

“I will not let them harm you,” she said.

Her tone of voice rang alarms in his head. This was a side of her he’d only glimpsed briefly in the past. It was the voice of a Gifted. A very powerful and determined Gifted, whose powers were growing stronger. Looking over at her, he could see the faint shadow of the woman she had been on her world. A woman who had terrified enough people to condemn her to death.

Then, just as quickly, the memory of the trembling, dying, blood-soaked figure trying to claw her way out of her interstellar tomb loomed in the foreground.

Finally, he could see her passion-flushed face as she lay beneath him, lost in their mutual lovemaking, her eyes languid, her trembling lips wet and warm and inviting.



"I love you, Sree. Nothing will ever change that," he whispered.

They turned the corner and into the parking lot across from Six. Robin had expected a cadre of Overmeyer's flunkies to be waiting to take him into custody when they arrived. He wasn't too far wrong. A full platoon of guards were standing at arms, rifles held shoulder-high. Wendicoff was there, too, surrounded by his staff. All were standing in a huddle a few feet away from the main entrance.

Robin pulled up to the curb and killed the engine. Security immediately surrounded the vehicle and two guards tried to open the doors. Taking a deep breath, Robin unlocked the doors. Instantly the driver's side was thrown open and he was roughly jerked from behind the steering wheel. Sah'Reena turned toward him, but her door was also thrown open and a pair of hands reached inside to pull her out. Not caring what happened to her, she stared unbelieving at the rough treatment being dealt out to her husband.

The handcuffs slapped on his wrists were tightened almost to the point of cutting off circulation. Robin winced and started to protest, but he was shoved onto the sidewalk.

"You know that what you did was a federal offense," Overmeyer told him.

"I haven't done anything wrong," Robin stated. Somebody jerked the handcuffs, pushing his arms up almost to his shoulder blades, and he cried out from the pain.

"STOP THIS!" Sah'Reena called out.

Overmeyer gave her an almost disinterested once-over. "Take her inside."

"No!" She struggled against the hands holding her arms. She had not been handcuffed, but she was completely surrounded. She stared as several guards gathered behind Robin, one shoving the muzzle of his rifle into the small of his back. "I will come with you!" she called out, and started in his direction. But the guards assigned to her were prepared. Several arms wrapped themselves about her as three more men stepped in front of her to bar her way. She struggled to break their hold as Overmeyer warned them not to harm her.

"Why can I not go with him?" she asked. Instead of being answered, Overmeyer ignored her question, turning to follow the guards taking away her husband. She caught a flash of a familiar face, and she called out to him. "Peter! Peter, make them stop!"

Dr. Gray gave her a look of sadness. He had no control over the situation. He was there only as a spectator—the fact that he was the father of the accused gave him no power over the situation, or over Robin's ultimate future.

"We have done nothing wrong!" she called out as a final defense. By way of an answer she felt herself being lifted off her feet and carried toward Building Six. She tried to wriggle her way out of their clutches but failed to loosen their hold. They were too close for her to try and take them all down without knocking herself out. And it was only because of her own personal beliefs that she prevented herself from removing the men permanently.

They entered the inner chamber and took her directly to the plexiglass room. The small circle of guards paused before the airlock as the technician keyed it open. Once the door swung out, they shoved her into the room, throwing her onto the floor, and the airlock hissed to a close between them.

Painfully, Sah'Reena rose to her feet. She shrugged out of her coat, dropping it on the floor. They might not have harmed her in any permanent way, but she was bruised. Just as she straightened up, the outer lights grew brighter and the wall lost its opaqueness. She stared out over the dozen or so scientists, technicians, and guards gathered outside the room near the console. Wendicoff detached himself from the group to walk up to the window.

"Don't think you can make your wall disappear this time, Sah'Reena. We've reinforced

them. Solid steel with a few feet of concrete embedded for good luck. Oh, and if we even think you're about to try to get out of there, well ... remember, you are in an airlock. That means we control what you breathe, and when you breathe it."

"What will you do with me?"

"You have an ability. We want to see if we can use that ability to our own advantage."

"Like a weapon?"

Wendicoff shrugged. "That's not an impossibility," he admitted.

"What will you do with Robin?"

"That's not my department. Sorry."

"I want to see him."

"Again, sorry. Not on the docket."

Lowering her voice, Sah'Reena tilted her head downward as she stared at them. Her image changed, and her body appeared to take on a strange, almost intimidating stance. "Let me out. Now." Her voice was no longer pleading. It was direct. An order. A very soft, very threatening order.

"Go ahead, little star girl. I've seen what you can do. I've seen your magic tricks, the disappearing wall and all. Small beans. Wood and glass are probably like crumpling paper to you. But you're playing in the big leagues now. We've done some redecorating while you were gone. Things aren't going to be as simple as they once were."

Sah'Reena closed her eyes. They had given her no choice. They were giving her no other alternative. Her fear of what they would do to Robin was greater than her fear for herself. Yet, in the back of her mind, she knew she had a power they could not even begin to imagine. And she could already feel it growing stronger.

Lifting her chin, she called out, "I am Sah'Reena of the Utul to destroy! I will not be used as a weapon! I will not *be* a weapon!"

Wendicoff smiled. "That's not a decision for you to make," he informed her, and started to turn away.

Several scientists and technicians screamed as they watched the star girl suddenly begin to glow like the core of a miniature sun, a halo of intensified heat pulsating around her entire body. As she lifted her arms straight out to her sides, her hands flashed open, fingers spread, and her entire body seemed to *push* forward. It was as if the entire plexiglass chamber, inner room, airlock, and console were covered in twinkling lights—lights which swirled, coalesced, solidified, and with her second breath vanished instantaneously in a blinding flash and a hiss of sound. They stampeded for the exit in mindless terror from the room which no longer contained anything other than themselves and the creature advancing toward them.

The woman walking out of the disintegrated lab was truly a being from another world. She had changed. Her skin had turned a bright pink. Her eyes were wide, transfixed, almost hypnotic. She held her hands out to her sides, palms out, and she walked with a defiance born of her station and power. She was chaos and destruction personified.

Two guards lifted their weapons. The rifles vanished in their hands.

Wendicoff started to pull his revolver. He dropped unconscious to the floor.

A technician ran to pull the alarm lever on the far wall. The entire panel evaporated as if it had never existed, and the tech melted into a mindless puddle.

Claxons began to howl. A split second later the sound system had become so much air.

Banks of overhead security lights went ablaze to shine down upon the room when the alarms were triggered. They disappeared as if they'd never existed.

Another guard threw down his rifle and tried to rush her. The rifle vanished, and he slumped into a heap in less than three steps.

The remaining security personnel ran for the exits, along with the rest of the employees. Sah'Reena walked calmly for the main doors. She would not be stopped.

Halfway across the room she came across Anita Fahlings cowering behind the last remaining bank of monitors. The woman had been injured in the mad crush for the doors, tripping over a power cord, and seriously wrenching a knee and ankle. Now she stared at the figure advancing toward her, and she held up a hand in an effort to stay the creature from coming any nearer. "Don't hurt me," she begged softly.

Sah'Reena looked down at her. "I am not going to hurt anyone. I am going to find Robin."

The woman tried to move but failed, sobbing from the pain. Sah'Reena reached out to help her, but was waved away. "You are my friend," she told the technician. "My power is not to harm."

"Y-you said you were to destroy," Anita reminded her, her tear-stained face accusing. "I heard you."

Sah'Reena nodded. "I destroy things, not people. I destroy weapons, not become one. Let me help you. Please."

Anita held out an arm, and together they got her into a chair. The technician stared at the star girl. "They're going to try to hurt you if you don't do what they say," she confided.

"No. They will try to hurt Robin," Sah'Reena corrected her. "If they try, I will be their judge and jury."

"What will happen if they do hurt Dr. Dickenson?"

Sah'Reena gave her a solemn look. "Then my life is worth nothing," she said bluntly.

She left the building and turned toward the offices, but was met with another cadre of security officers barricading the front entrance. Slowly, steadily, she advanced toward them, her palms resting on the front of her thighs in a non-threatening manner. The bitter winds tugged at her hair and clothes, yet she felt none of it. Her power generated immense internal body heat until she was impervious to the freezing weather. The guards allowed her to advance within fifty feet before she was ordered to stop.

Pausing, she gave them a moment to reconsider. "I am not here to harm you. I want to be with my husband," she told them.

There was an immediate buzz among the small crowd gathered. Sah'Reena saw a petite figure detach herself from the group and start to make her way toward the star girl, only to be brought up short by an officer. They had a brief, heated argument, then the woman turned to call out, "They're holding him in his office. They've cleared out the building."

Sah'Reena nodded to show she understood. "Please put down your weapons. I will not harm you but I will take them away if you try to use them."

The guards refused to obey.

The star girl began to walk toward the main front doors when she was ordered again to stop. This time she refused to pause. The cadre raised their rifles in the hopes of challenging her. When it didn't work, they placed their guns to their shoulders and took aim. They had been ordered not to kill. However, they had been told they could wound.

Sah'Reena gave them a casual glance as if they were no more than a hedge of pretty flowers. She raised her left hand and made a sweeping motion, as if she were waving to a group of friends. A shower of sparkles danced in the frigid air, and the guards were stunned into

immobility with the instantaneous loss of their weaponry. A wave in the opposite direction, and the men fell where they stood as if they'd turned into jelly. It had all been done within the span of a heartbeat, and no one had been injured.

She proceeded into the building, taking the elevator up to the second floor. She was not surprised to see a guard outside the office door, but no more than he was to see her striding toward him.

"Halt!" he called out, bringing his rifle up to bear.

"I am here for Robin," she informed him gently. "Let me in. Please."

"Sorry, ma'am, but my orders are to let no one enter without General Overmeyer's permission," the young man responded. His hands shook as well as his voice, betraying his fear and nervousness.

Sah'Reena raised a hand. The rifle dissolved into nothingness. Without his gun, the young guard lost his nerve, yet something deep inside him, a sense of duty and pride, kept him posted next to the door. Unarmed, he held out his hands to bar her from entering.

"Like I said, ma'am ...."

He slumped against the door, out cold. Sah'Reena carefully pulled him away, laying him across the hall carpet. That done, she opened the door the traditional way and walked in.

The outer office where Jack worked was empty. The inner door leading to Robin's office was closed but she could hear voices inside. They sounded agitated. She knew that by now they had been informed of her escape from Six. She reached for the doorknob, prepared for anything.

## Chapter Thirty Four

## Detente

They threw Robin into his chair. Overmeyer ordered the guards to take a position around the room while he propped himself on the edge of the desk in order to use the phone. Outside the office the entire building was being evacuated of all personnel as per his orders.

Jack had vehemently protested her removal, even when she was picked up and carried out in the arms of a stone-faced Lieutenant.

Once his calls were made, Overmeyer stretched and walked over to the coffee counter to pour himself a cup. He never offered to pour a cup for anyone else.

Robin watched the goings on in silence. His arms were numb and his hands had no feeling. He knew the next hour would be crucial to his and Sah'Reena's future. What he needed was to absorb as much as he could—information and knowledge had always been his strong point. Whenever there had been a heated confrontation during an emergency or crisis at the space center, he had managed to sail calmer seas by noting every argument, mentally categorizing friends and foes, and taking the safest route out of harm's way. Unfortunately in this case he was the cause of the current emergency, not merely a spectator. There was no route out of harm's way, at least nothing short of waking up and realizing that the past two months had been one strange nightmare.

He wondered what they had done to his wife. Common sense would dictate she would be escorted back to Six and kept under guard. A soft chuckle died in his throat. If he knew her mind as intimately as he knew her body, he guessed it was just a matter of time before she evaporated those restrictions. She would target his office first in her quest to find him, to reunite with him.

He held no worry for her. She could more than take care of herself. What really troubled him was the possible reactions of the other personnel on base when her identity was revealed. Would they accept her, allowing for her differences, before they tried to pass judgment? Sah'Reena had been born on a planet that had determined she was too dangerous to live there anymore. Would her new world adopt her? Or would Earth deem her the ultimate threat to mankind, willing to negotiate whatever means there were to likewise be rid of her?

"...could we deport her?" one of the guards asked. Robin stared at the older Lieutenant Colonel taking orders from Overmeyer. The brass nametag over his heart said FLECKI.

"Now there's a bump in the road," Robin commented almost under his breath. "What do you do with an illegal alien when you've decided she's *persona non grata*? And I mean alien. I think the space shuttle *Valor* is scheduled for liftoff in March sometime. Pull a few strings and I bet you could get her a seat on that mission."

Flecki gave him a non-consequential glance and resumed his place by the door.

Overmeyer snorted his disgust. "This is the part I hate the most," he commented off-handedly as he sipped his coffee. He made an appreciative face, glancing at his cup. "Not bad. Who made the coffee? Who's in charge of the pot?"

"Want me to answer the second question first or the first question first?" Robin countered sarcastically.

“Oh, come now, Rob. You and I used to be friends. This attitude of yours doesn’t suit you.”

“That was before parts of my anatomy had their circulation shut off,” he replied caustically.

“Well, you should have thought over what you had planned to do with a little more lean toward caution,” Overmeyer said. “Once you absconded with a top secret classif ....”

“I did not abscond with her. She walked out of her own free will. If you don’t believe me, ask her. And where the hell do you get off labeling her as a ‘classified document’?”

“I can call her a nuclear prototype if I want to, star boy. She has powers I bet we’ve never dreamed of. I bet you’ve seen a few of them yourself, haven’t you?” Overmeyer walked around the desk and stood facing the young scientist. “Just what is she capable of, Dr. Dickenson?”

“What do you plan to do with her?”

“Ship her to a secured location to study her. Don’t worry. I promise nothing bad will come to her. As for you, I’m turning you over to the law to face full prosecution. When you drove off base with her, you officially became a traitor to your country. Hope you realize that.”

“A traitor? How?”

“You stole military secrets.”

“She’s from another planet!” Robin practically yelled. “She has *nothing* to do with the military. I’ll tell you now, Francis, when she gets wind of the fact that you’re wanting to develop her gift as a weapon, she’ll shut you down so fast you’ll never recover.”

“Oh, she’ll follow our directions ... if she thinks she’s keeping you safe by doing so.”

Robin stared at the man he had once had a casual friendship with and realized just how far the General was willing to go in order to advance his career.

“So ... what’s your plan for me? Other than throw me into jail for the next five to fifteen years? How is my being incarcerated going to keep Sah’Reena jumping to your every beck and call?”

“That’s really information on a ‘need to know’ basis, and your clearance level has suddenly hit rock bottom.”

“On the contrary, General. I have access to information you will never gain, no matter what you do to me or to her.”

Robin noticed the white inside phone line flashing the same time Overmeyer did. Muttering something under his breath, the General picked up the receiver. “Overmeyer.” The color suddenly drained from the man’s face. “When?”

Robin had no doubt Sah’Reena had done something. The world tilted itself back on its axis, giving him a sense of relief. A ray of weak, watery sunlight crawled through a crack in the clouds and cast a faint shadow on the carpet at his feet. Closing his eyes, he hoped for a positive ending to the whole unbelievable fiasco. It was becoming difficult to believe that only a few hours ago he had been in the throes of the most absolute rapture he could ever imagine.

“Put up a flank outside this building now. Try to keep her detained until we’ve established another holding cell for her.”

Robin snorted softly as the General hung up.

“You care to make a comment?” Overmeyer growled.

“You can’t hold her. You know that. Why even try?”

“She just took out the entire quarantine chamber and airlock over at Six. In the blink of an eye, she blew it away.”

“‘Blew it away’ signifies an explosion. Sah’Reena doesn’t create explosions. *Implosion*, maybe. But her powers are more discreet than that. Things dissolve. They go poof in a cloud of nothing. The air sparkles or tingles or brightens for the briefest nanosecond, and then it’s as if the object had never existed. No residue. No aftereffects. No odor or shadow. I’ve watched her take out every stick of furniture in a room, right down to the carpet and pictures on the wall, yet leave the telephone lying on bare concrete with its wire still plugged in. Do you know what else I think she can do?” Robin tried to adjust the burning sensation that was beginning to creep up his arms. The slight movement sent bullets of intense pain shooting to his brain.

Overmeyer seemed intrigued, either ignoring or oblivious to the man’s discomfort. “No. Tell me.”

“You want to develop her gift to benefit mankind? Begin by stop thinking that war is the best and only option. Try surgery. Imagine what she could do if she could remove inoperable tumors. What if she could destroy a bomb that couldn’t be defused before it exploded? What if she could stop a terrorist from carrying out his plans?”

“What if she could destroy a nuclear warhead before it could land and totally annihilate us?” Overmeyer interjected.

“What if she would do it, not because you ordered her to, or threatened to do harm to others if she didn’t, but because she *wanted* to?” Robin replied.

“Nice arguments, but I have neither the time nor the reason to factor in those situations, now, do I? I have you as my ace up my sleeve. It’s all the ‘what if’ I need.”

“And you think it will do you any good?” Robin asked. “She’s coming over here, isn’t she?”

Overmeyer ordered one of his men to take position outside the office. “Let us know if you spot her,” he added.

“General, she’s another species. Another culture. A whole other freaking galaxy! Alone, the technology we could glean from the ship she was in could advance both of our interests for decades. That’s not accounting for her knowledge of her world. Everything that makes a civilization deal in the humanities she has inside her. She is a wealth of information we could tap for the next fifty years, and benefit from exponentially.”

“Exactly,” the General nodded. “That’s why such a Pandora’s box has to be kept safe from the crackpots and third world nations out there who would like nothing more than to see her killed.” He rubbed his hands together, smiling delightfully. “It’s going to be a bumpy ride, studying her. But the benefits ... personally and not so personally ....”

“General, there’s one small problem you may not be aware of,” Robin told him.

“What?”

Robin looked directly into the man’s eyes, waiting for his reaction. “Sah’Reena and I were married yesterday. She’s my wife, General. Your charge of theft will never hold up in a court of law. On top of that, if you try what you say you’re planning to do, I will personally file charges against you for kidnapping.”

Overmeyer’s face went red, then back to white. Veins in his temple and neck stood out as the man tried to control his initial outburst of anger. There was thinnest moment when it looked as if he might strike out in anger. “You lying sonofabitch!” he almost screamed at the scientist.

“Judge Kurtis Walker, *the* Judge Walker on the state supreme court, he’s an old duck hunting buddy of Pete’s. You know Peter, Dr. Gray, my father? The judge was over at Dad’s house last night when Sah’Reena and I were there. Short service. Very little flash and finery. I

promised Sree we would have another ceremony more fitting later on, one that would do justice to how much we truly feel about each other.” Robin kept his gaze on the bewildered and enraged man. “All legal. All binding. You can’t touch her, General. You ... can’t ... *touch* ... her.”

The door leading to the outer office clicked open. Everyone froze where they were as attention was shifted in that direction.

Sah’Reena slowly opened the door, stepping inside. The guard that had been placed in the hallway was not with her, making Robin wonder where the man was. Out cold was his guess.

She stepped into the room and stopped just past the threshold, taking a stance. There was an aura about her that had not been there before. A sense of self. She radiated an immense power, an ability, and a formidability that was undeniable. Her posture was erect but tense, her chin up, her eyes wide—she was the thinnest filament on the brink of snapping.

It was as if he had been punched in the gut. The sight of her, wild and in her element, sent his pulse racing. A small voice in his head gave thanks for her arrival. Another gave thanks for her safety. Still another voice, the voice of the small child who had loved superheroes and comic books, thrilled at her presence. Overriding them all was the voice of a man who simply wished it would all go away so he could be alone with the woman he loved. She was here for only one reason, one simple reason. Him.

Her movements were precise and sudden. Slender hands flicked outward, and every man in the room either gasped or cried out in surprise as their weapons vanished as if they had never existed. After another quick check about the room, to make sure there were no other guns which could be used against them, she visibly drew back. She had entered in an attack, defensive mode. Now she had downgraded to watchful but at-ready. Her hands were pressed tightly against her thighs, her legs slightly spread as her weight shifted gradually forward. Her skin glistened with a pinkish translucency. Her eyes were like black stars, stark, and unblinking.

Her gaze rested on her husband sitting in his chair behind his desk. However, from the man’s posture, it was clear he wasn’t sitting naturally. “Are you all right?” she asked in a voice that was hollow and controlled.

Robin stared at her, at what she now was, at the creature he thought he knew. Waves of something were emanating from her, waves that seemed to feed off of fear, waves that pooled out like radar and bounced back to her in distinct patterns and messages. He opened his mouth to answer, but before he could voice it, Sah’Reena headed toward him. The guards in the room visibly jumped and involuntarily stepped back to let her by. Even Overmeyer retreated to the other side of the desk. Robin could swear the man was unaware of his actions.

His arms were released as the handcuffs vanished. Free flowing blood and its accompanying singeing pain caused him to grimace and moan softly. A hand rested on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. Sah’Reena took her place behind her husband, ready to protect him.

Raising his head to look at the General, and fighting the slicing pain in his arms and hands, Robin started to make a comment when a small huddle of people suddenly converged on the office, filling the narrow space from the doorway to the hall. At the head of the crowd was a familiar, if not often seen, figure—Dr. A. John Mason, Director of the Johnson Space Center.

Overmeyer came to attention yet refused to retreat.

Mason glanced around the room, slowly walking into what clearly was a tense situation. He spotted Robin sitting at his desk and noticed the pain written on the young man’s face.



"You okay?" he asked.

Robin managed to nod. "Yes, sir. Given a little time."

"Might want to drop by sick bay and have those burns looked at," Mason added.

Glancing down, Robin noticed for the first time the raw, almost bloody marks around his wrists. He looked back up to say something else and saw how the man was staring intently at the woman behind him. The hand on his shoulder was trembling. He quickly peeked up at her to make sure she was doing well, but it was difficult to tell when she was in 'ready' mode.

At fifty-three, Abraham John Mason had been in charge of all major aspects of the center for the past six years. Before that, he had climbed the ranks while practicing his doctorate in physiology, concentrating on the effects of space flight and extended time in space on the astronauts. He had a dislike for the military applications his men had to endure, and a deeper distrust of the people assigned to oversee them. To say that he and Overmeyer often clashed was an understatement.

Casually sauntering into the room as if he were entering a party, Mason turned to Overmeyer. "What's going on, Francis?" he asked in an almost off-handed way.

"We've regained possession of the alien and we're about to redirect her toward a more secure facility," Overmeyer clipped. His position as overseer was quickly being stripped away. It was clear he was not happy with Mason's appearance.

"If I understood correctly, the quarantine chamber in Six has been ... uhh ... evaporated." He looked to Sah'Reena and Robin for confirmation. "Evaporated, right? Would you say she evaporates things?"

"She prefers the term 'removes'," Robin corrected.

"Thank you. She removed the chamber, Francis. Now, you tell me, what kind of a 'more secure facility' could hold someone like her?"

"We have methods that would ensure her not ... removing ... any further structures," Overmeyer told him.

"What kind of methods? Methods like holding Dr. Dickenson hostage until she complied?"

"The two are close," Overmeyer said. "Dr. Dickenson would not be harmed."

Mason made a gesture toward the scientist's wrists. "I take it torture, imprisonment, and illegal seizure are suggested methods approved by the military in these situations?" His voice was sharp, icy. His anger toward the man was increasingly apparent.

"Appropriate methods were taken, as prescribed and approved by the Department."

"And why, pray tell, are these overblown actions occurring on my base, General?"

"Dr. Dickenson absconded with the alien, removing her without permission from the base, and jeopardizing the secrecy of the mission by revealing her to the general public."

"I took her away from here where she's been kept a prisoner since the day she arrived," Robin interjected. "She wanted to see the city. She wanted to see other places. If you were a stranger in a strange land, wouldn't you want to see this new world you'd landed on?"

"She is a top secret ...."

"She's a person with feelings just like you and me." Again Robin countered Overmeyer's reasoning. "She didn't come here to conquer."

"Then I suppose her removing the quarantine chamber was a simple exercise to strengthen her muscles?" Overmeyer sneered.

"To protect herself. And to be reunited with me," said Robin.

"There's an additional impediment that's not been factored into the equation," a voice

spoke up from the back. Peter moved further into the room after checking to make sure his son and daughter-in-law were safe.

Mason nodded in Dr. Gray's direction. "It's clear you have a stake in this, Pete. Care to elaborate?"

Peter took a deep breath. "Yesterday my son and the star girl were married. It was done legally and with the blessings of a state supreme court judge."

The atmosphere in the room seemed to rise a notch. Robin remained seated. A virtual glove had been thrown at Overmeyer's feet. Add in the fact that the General was outgunned by Mason, it was only a matter of time before this standoff would dissipate. He didn't anticipate the General's next strategy.

"He married her, hoping to save her from extradition. The marriage is a sham. It won't take but a simple court order to annul it."

A headache was beginning to make itself known between Robin's temples. He knew sooner or later he would be forced to justify his actions. He didn't feel like going into details right then. "Point one, I married her because I love her. Point two, there's no way you can truly extradite her, unless you shoot her back into space. Point three, the marriage is not a sham because Sah'Reena loves me in return. What we feel for each other is real and true. We want it to work, God willing. And point four, a third party cannot annul a marriage if the couple is not seeking it. We're both adults. We knew what we were doing." There was still the small matter of the official paperwork that had to be signed and filed, as Judge Walker had told them, but he didn't feel it was necessary to bring it up.

He rubbed the burning areas as the hand on his shoulder squeezed in sympathy. Sah'Reena had not said a word since she took her position behind his chair. He wondered if her stoic persona was part of her training or if there was another reason. He started to glance up at her to see how she was taking it all in, when Overmeyer commented.

"Since the marriage can't be consummated it can't be justified. The marriage is a sham, if there ever really was a marriage."

Mason, who had been rubbing his chin during the verbal back-and-forth, waved a hand for attention. "Dr. Dickenson? I've been kept current of all reports and tests regarding our star girl. For this rare occasion I find myself in agreement with the General's last statement. How can you call it a legitimized marriage when it can't be consummated?"

Peter voiced his question. "Why must a marriage be consummated to be legitimate?"

"It can't be consummated. He might as well have married his dog," Overmeyer quipped.

"The marriage ... *was* consummated."

Silence as thick as smoke filled the room. Breathing became difficult to bear, as were the nearly twenty pairs of eyes fastened on him. A single one-word question seemed to hang above the room like a neon sign.

The hand on his shoulder began to bear down, pressing him one-sidedly into his chair. Robin reached up to pat the hand and felt its unnatural coldness.

It was Mason who broke the moment. "Repeat what you just said."

"I said ... the marriage was consummated. Last night. Sah'Reena and I are husband and wife in all aspects, legally, emotionally, and physically." Staring at Mason, Robin asked, "Let's end this interrogation now. Please. All of the General's arguments are moot. Everything Sah'Reena has done has been with the sole intent of being with me and to protect herself and me. Yes, she's destroyed some material, but she's hurt no one. I don't believe there's a court in this country that will find fault with that."

He started to say more when he felt the hand on his shoulder start to slide off. An alarm went off in his head, making him swivel around in his chair to see why. He froze as he pivoted. His eyes were level with Sah'Reena's waist, and to his growing horror he saw the blossoming of a dark pink stain on the fabric of the sweatpants she wore. The flower of blood slowly grew in size and color. "Oh, God, Sree!"

He got to his feet as she started to slump. Her eyes had closed, her mouth slacking open. Her skin had grown rigid and cold. Robin picked her up in his arms as his body filled with fear.

The room erupted into action. Mason grabbed the phone and called for Wendicoff.

Peter was immediately at his son's side. "Take her to Six!" he yelled over the din, pushing to keep up with Robin's rush to seek help.

"I thought she destroyed Six."

"She destroyed the inner chamber. The medical labs are intact. It's the closest and fastest way to get her emergency medical attention," Pete told him.

Robin ran as fast as he could with his unconscious wife in his arms. She felt unusually lightweight, adding to his worries. The growth of blood still oozed through the thick cotton fabric, and there was no mistaking where the bleeding was coming from.

*Sree ... what have I done to you?*

Time no longer existed. All that mattered was getting her to where the physicians could stop the bleeding.

Wendicoff was waiting for them outside of Six with two assistants and a Gurney. Robin helped to lay out his wife on the portable bed as they quickly pushed the Gurney through the main entrance and began running it down the hallway toward the nearest examination room. At the door to the examination room Pete laid a hand on Robin's arm to hold him back as Sah'Reena was wheeled inside.

"Rob, you can't do anything more for her. I'll go in and lend a hand. You should stay here and wait for me."

Dazed, Robin nodded his acquiescence. Pete was right. He didn't want to risk being in the way if something critical should happen. Even then, he knew his father would inform him the moment there was any news.

"Pete ... we do love each other." He had to make the man realize the truth.

"I know, Son."

Pete hurried inside. Robin watched the door hiss to a close on its hydraulic hinges and the hallway grew quiet. The crowd that had followed remained outside. Few had clearance, and those that did had opted to stay out of the way.

Alone, Robin took two steps back until his back met the wall behind him. To him the world had ceased to exist. The pain in his head could not match the pain he felt in his heart or the indescribable pressure in his chest. As his legs refused to hold him up any longer, and he slid down the wall to sit on the floor, he closed his eyes, bowed his head, and silently and earnestly began to pray.

## Chapter Thirty Five

## Interlude

It was a little more than two hours later when Pete walked out into the hallway, looking for his son. He found him exactly where he had left him. He was sitting on the floor, knees bent, elbows resting on his legs and hands cupping his head. At first it was difficult to tell if the man was sleeping or deep in thought until the hiss of the hydraulic door closing got his attention, making him look up. His face was a mask of emotional pain, his eyes full of anguish. There was no trace of tears, only self-blame.

"You look like hell," Pete commented. "Let's go get you some coffee." He held out a hand to help the man to his feet. Robin reached up to take it, then froze.

"How is she?"

"She's fine. Better than you're doing at the moment, if the way you look is any indication." He led him further down the hall and into a small break room where a pot of coffee was always available twenty-four-seven. The odor of the brew sparked vague memories. A glance at his watch told him it was nearly noon.

"When was the last time you ate?"

Robin smiled slightly as he sat hunched over the small break room table. "Three a.m." *It was hot biscuits, fresh fruit, and Sree ... in that order.* With two simple words, 'she's fine', daylight had appeared where there had been night. Pete would not so casually drop that phrase on him unless Sah'Reena was truly doing well and expected to fully recover.

Pete nodded. "We'll sit for a while and then head over to the mess hall to see what they're serving today. But I promise you, if they don't have a chicken-fried steak on the menu, I'm treating for lunch at Slick Sam's." He handed a paper cup of coffee to his son, patting his arm after he accepted it. "Got one of those stress headaches?"

"Yeah, and for the life of me I can't figure out why." Rubbing his eyes seemed to help. It was a good pain if he pressed hard enough to counteract the one in his temples.

"Taken anything for it?"

Robin took a sip from his cup and shook his head.

Getting to his feet, Pete disappeared out the door. Moments later he reappeared dragging a crash cart behind him, more than likely obtained from the next examination room. The first thing he did was tear into a package of pain killers and hand them to the young man. Wordlessly Robin popped the pills into his mouth and chased them down with coffee. Next the physician had him remove his coat and hold out his wrists, which he dressed with an antibiotic cream before wrapping them in gauze.

"Don't remove those bandages until tonight. Here. Stick this tube of cream and roll of gauze in your coat pocket. After you take a bath, redress those wounds. Don't want them getting infected after everything that's already happened."

"What's happened, Pete?"

Pete gave a shrug as he cleared away his mess. "She had some abdominal bleeding. Fortunately x-rays didn't show any pockets of blood. The bleeding appears to have stopped on its own. Also on the plus side, we were able to get several swabs of blood for analysis. If we're

lucky, there's enough for a full work-up. If not, at least we can get some DNA mapped." He chose his next words carefully. "We found an aperture in her lower abdomen, the purpose of which we're not sure."

Robin pulled off his glasses to rub his sleeve over his eyes. "What did I do?" he whispered. "What did I do to her?"

"You fell in love with her. And she loves you in return. There is nothing unnatural or wrong with that."

"What happens now? Where do we stand?"

"Well ... she's sleeping. At least we think she's sleeping. Her vitals look calm and well within her previous parameters. However there are some anomalies we're unable to decipher. I thought maybe you might be able to shed some light."

Again Robin shook his head. "You know more than me." He thought for a moment, then asked, "When can I see her?"

"Anytime. But I can't tell you when she might wake up, pesky Murrallisian physiology." Pete tried to coax him into a grin.

"And what about Wendicoff? For that matter, where did Overmeyer go? I would have thought he'd be hot on my tail over here. Or at least assign enough security to make the Pentagon proud."

"My guess is Overmeyer is in Mason's office. Nice place, Director's inner sanctum. Ever been there?"

"Not in recent history."

"Really nice carpet. Kind of an oriental design. There's a golden dragon design right in front of Mason's desk. Note that dragon, Rob. Don't ever be asked to stand on it, or been seen standing on it."

"I copy. Wendicoff?"

"Off to type up his notes. He's really a good man, Rob. Just a bit overzealous about his work, especially with such an anomaly as Sah'Reena. Give him a bit more credit. You might find a staunch ally in him."

"Copy, again, Dr. Gray. And your medical degree is in what? Psychology?"

"General Practitioner, smart ass. Better be kind to me now or I'm changing my will."

Robin snorted softly. This small sign of humanity lifted Pete's spirits.

"Ready to go harass the kitchen staff with me?"

"Yeah. But let me stop to look in on Sree before we leave."

They walked back to the examination room where the lights had been dimmed in their absence. Sah'Reena lay peaceful under a warmed blanket, an air hose taped into her nose and monitors beeping away. Across the room, through a looking glass, a nurse was keeping tabs on the readouts.

"She's asleep," Robin stated simply.

"Think so?"

"Don't think. Know." How he knew, he couldn't begin to explain. Maybe it had something to do with the link he was developing with her. Maybe it was an educated guess.

One limp hand lay along the mattress. Taking her wrist, he lifted her hand, feeling how cool it was to the touch. Gently, he raised it to his lips and kissed the palm. A fleeting thought raced through his mind, the knowledge that he was possibly the only person left in her life who understood both the strength and the tenderness contained in the skin and blood and bone. He remembered how gently she had removed his stubble, and with the same gesture had eradicated

an arsenal of hard weaponry.

"Sleep well, my love," he whispered, and placed her hand back on the bed.

They left Six and strolled to the cafeteria for a bite. Outside the complex looked normal, business as usual. Not a sign of extra security forces anywhere.

"Where're the hired guns?" Robin asked, his breath erupting in clouds of steam. The temperature was not as cold as it had been that morning. It was hovering around the freezing mark, keeping it cold enough to make it uncomfortable to remain outside for any considerable length of time. Thank goodness the wind had died down.

"The dogs have been dismissed, more than likely, but you're not in the clear. Check out four o'clock."

Robin glanced over his right shoulder. Standing beneath the entryway of building Six was a solitary figure wrapped in tan overcoat. As he was being observed, the figure spoke into a walkie-talkie, but he remained where he was.

"Betcha they'll even follow you into the lavatory," Pete remarked.

They walked several more yards before Robin voiced what they both knew. "It's not over yet."

"Nope. Not by a long shot. Overmeyer may have lost the battle, but he's damned and determined to win the war."

Robin stopped on the sidewalk and turned to face his father. "What happens now, Pete?"

"I guess someone is contacting a lawyer to see what the options are. I'm also guessing some people are waiting to see what you and Sah'Reena have planned."

"Why can't they leave us alone and let us live our lives the way we want?"

"Like a normal married couple?" Pete gave him an incredulous look. "Please tell me you're not serious."

A soft laugh came from deep within his chest. "A fellow can dream, can't he?" Robin remarked.

They entered the cafeteria. Several people passed them, coming and going, all of them giving the two men a wide berth. Both men were well aware of the reason behind their actions but chose to ignore it. Decades of faithful work had gone down the drain in a matter of hours. No telling how long it would be before they were no longer pariahs in their own workplace.

As expected, Mr. Tan Overcoat took a seat at a table near the exit.

They found a table in the back of the room, away from the rest of the growing lunch crowd. As soon as Pete had gotten comfortable his pager went off. He muttered a four-letter word as he looked at it. Handing it over the table, he commented, "It's for you."

Robin raised an eyebrow as he accepted the beeper. The message was terse. "Tell Rob to turn his damn beeper on and call me."

Obediently, he got up to walk over to the yellow phone on the wall where he punched in his office's extension. It was picked up before he heard the first ring.

"About damn time."

"Good afternoon to you, too. Are you back at your desk?"

"Where I belong. From the background noise I'd say you were over at the mess hall," Jack observed.

"I take it you need me for something?"

"Nice trick you pulled this morning during the standoff. I'll talk to you later about it. In the meantime, there's this small, incidental piece of drudge I need to do called 'work'. You might want to try it some time."

If he hadn't caught his assistant's playful undertone after years of working with her, he would have sworn the woman was peeved at him.

"What's up, Jack?"

"Mason's looking for you. Wants you in his office pronto. Are you going to be much longer? I need to let his assistant know when to expect you."

"We're almost finished," Robin lied. "I'll be there in ten."

"Super duper. I'll let Phyllis know. Oh, and Rob? Turn your damn beeper on."

She hung up, leaving her boss with a lopsided grin on his face.

"Why do you put up with her?" Pete teased, fully knowing the reason already. Then the smile disappeared. "You need more than ten minutes to eat, no matter what the problem is."

"Mason wants to see me," Robin repeated, reseating himself after he'd returned and told his father what Jack had said.

"Oh. Well, in that case, dig in. And, Rob?"

"Yeah, I know. Stay off the dragon."

## Chapter Thirty Six

Deal

It was a little more than twenty minutes later when Robin arrived at Mason's outer office. His secretary, a look of caution on her face, immediately ushered him through the wide, double-glass doors.

Pete was right. The huge ornate carpet in the director's office was a glaring red and deep blue, with gold Chinese symbols outlining the edges. Directly in the middle of the rug, right in front of the carved oak desk, was an immense greenish dragon. It was coiled and winged, bloody mouth open and forked tongue spitting forward. The whole thing seemed totally out of place to him. Not the kind of thing you would expect to see at the Space Center.

A wing-backed chair sat to the left of the dragon design. A more practical chair sat to the right. Mason was standing at the huge windows which overlooked a majority of the complex, but turned around upon hearing Robin enter.

"Thanks for coming. How are you doing, Dr. Dickenson?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?" Robin asked. Involuntarily, he touched the bandage wrapped around his right wrist.

Mason smiled humorlessly. "It's an honest question," he responded. "I was made to understand our favorite General was less than gentle in his treatment of you."

"Then the answer is I'm fine. Antibiotics, bandages, the miracles of modern medicine." He glanced down at his hand, then quickly corrected himself. "No. Wait. Strike that. I'm not fine. I'm not fine physically or mentally. The woman I love, my wife, is lying unconscious over in Six. I'm a wanted criminal for doing something I never did. And I have an over-zealous Army general calling in favors to try and destroy what I believe is the most incredible thing to ever happen to this planet. So ... whatever you've got planned for me, go ahead and do it."

Casually, Mason strolled to the far corner of his office and poured himself a cup of coffee. Holding up a cup, he gave a nod of his head. "How do you like yours?"

Robin paused. "Just two sugars."

Calmly, the director poured a second cup, then walked it over to where Robin still stood just inside the doorway.

"Thanks," Robin said, accepting the mug. He vaguely noticed the white ceramic mug had the NASA logo in gold and, in the back of his mind, wondered where he could get one like it.

Mason waved an arm in the direction of the wing-backed chair. "Why don't you take a seat?"

"Why don't you just get it over with?" Robin responded calmly.

The two men stared eye-to-eye for several moments. Finally, Mason gave in.

"You jeopardized the star girl's presence."

"Not intentionally."

"You deliberately broke lockdown. You took her off-site."

"Sir ...."

"You got Overmeyer riled up. Because of you, I'm now having to instigate a Directive



One to clean up this mess.

Once Sah'Reena had left Six to rescue Robin, once she had demolished Overmeyer's troops and evaporated their weapons within clear sight of the other personnel and who knows how many civilians, the Space Center knew they couldn't keep her secret any longer. Directive One instituted maximum damage control.

"I ought to throw the book at you," Mason threatened.

Robin started. The man was serious. His tone of voice brooked no argument. But there was also an undeniable twinkle in the director's eyes, a twinkle that shouldn't be there.

"You ought," Robin said, and waited for the man to continue.

Drinking his coffee, Mason walked back toward his desk. "Tell me something, Doc. This marriage. You said it wasn't a sham." He glanced back to see Robin stoically watching him. "It's all legal."

"To a point."

"What point is missing?"

"There's some paperwork that needs to be filed and finalized. Judge Walker told us it was a minor wrinkle, but it doesn't negate the fact that we *were* legally married."

Nodding, Mason took a seat in the wingback. Again he motioned toward the chair across from him. This time, Robin did as he was requested.

Mason's job was as multi-tentacled as an octopus. He had to watch the budget, while also keeping the lines open to Washington. He had to keep the PR positive in all matters of space exploration to Joe Taypayer, and at the same time kiss a lot of congressmen's butts to keep the programs flying. Everything he did, everything he was involved in, was either Top Secret, or capable of being labeled as such. Robin didn't envy the man's position one iota.

"What do you want me to do?" Robin asked.

"This can be turned around to our advantage," Mason told him. "However, it can't be done unless I have your full cooperation."

"Mine?"

"Without you, there is no star girl."

Robin nodded. "But you have to understand something. She won't be a weapon. She won't allow anyone to use her to create mass destruction. Her planet tried to do it, and she refused, and because of her refusal they condemned her to death." He shook his head. "She won't allow Overmeyer or even the President of the United States to use her. And I'm not going to ask her or try to coerce her or in any way try to talk her out of it. So don't even try to convince me otherwise."

"And you thought that by taking her away from here and marrying her, you would keep the General at bay long enough to do ... what? Why on earth did you leave the center in the first place?"

"I. Don't. Know." Robin ran a hand through his hair. "I wasn't thinking straight. To be honest, marrying her wasn't even part of the original plan until we got to Pete's," he admitted.

A thin smile crossed Mason's face. "*You* weren't thinking straight? Our boy genius? You *are* in love, aren't you?" Staring down into his coffee mug, he thought for a moment before speaking again. "What is wrong with her? Why was she bleeding? Will she be all right?"

"You mean the doctors haven't told you?"

"I've heard their explanations. I want to hear yours."

The phone took the opportunity to ring at that moment. Mason answered it, irritated. "Mason. Yes. I see." He glanced up at Robin. "If Overmeyer has a problem with it, tell him to

come see me, but I won't have any more militia on my base. Not even the National Guard, is that clear? Okay. Keep me posted, then. Okay." Hanging up, he took a deep breath.

"Word leaked out to the press. Channel Eleven's already been calling. We're having to initiate a communications blackout. Rob? I'm going to have to trust you on this one, but if you go your own way again, I promise I won't be there to watch your back. This center comes first. But I want to know is, what are your plans?"

"I'm pretty much playing it by ear right now. These past few hours haven't exactly been normal or routine by any sense."

"If you could leave with the star girl, where would you go? Where would you stay?"

Robin shrugged. "If the press has wind of her, my apartment would be out of the question, wouldn't it?" He gave the man a final look. "Get to the bottom line, please. Sir."

Mason didn't mince any further words. "The star girl is a coup. We found her ... or, rather, she ran into us. But we have her. And we have her spaceship. And you ... you've scored the ultimate goal. We have to keep her safe and happy, and you'll be instrumental in that."

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial near-whisper. "We're getting first crack at her technology. At her knowledge of her home world. At *her*. She's proof life exists outside our planet. She'll blow away every theologian, every scientist, every astronomy expert and physicist on this planet. With her powers, she could be the beginning of a world-wide nuclear treaty. Every country's military will step down their armament. She could change the future, and we're at ground zero."

"I meant what I said earlier," Robin reminded him. "She will not be made into a weapon."

"But if worse came to worse, wouldn't you prefer her to be on *our* side?"

Carefully, Robin sat the half-empty coffee mug on the edge of the director's desk. Rising to his feet, he subconsciously reached for his bandaged wrist. "Finders Keepers. Is that what you're getting at, Sir?"

"Succinct but precisely right. Are you willing to help?"

"I'll help," Robin told him, "but not because I work for the Space Center. We're talking about the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with ... and I'll do whatever it takes so I can."

Once again, the phone went off, now to both men's irritation.

"Mason. Yes. Never mind. Don't worry. I'll notify him myself. Just inform your men to remain at a fifty yard radius and try to stay out of direct sight as much as possible, all right? Okay. Keep me posted."

Sighing, Mason hung up the receiver. "That was Dr. Spielman. Sah'Reena's awake and asking for you. Her vitals are normal, and they're afraid she might go on another rampage if you don't get over there immediately."

Robin immediately bolted from the office. In his wake, Mason raised his nearly-empty mug of coffee and saluted the man who had just left.

"Congratulations, Dr. Dickenson. Here's to a happy marriage ... God willing."

## Chapter Thirty Seven

Rest

Rushing into Six, Robin was surprised—but, then again, not surprised—to see everyone standing outside in the hallway where he himself had kept vigil not more than a couple of hours ago. They turned *en masse* when he entered the hallway, and one stepped forward as he started toward the doors leading into the examination room.

“Uhh ....”

“It’s okay,” Robin abruptly told the intern. “I’m her husband.” The door closed behind him, blocking the stunned, slack-jawed responses which followed his remark.

At the sound of the door, Sah’Reena whirled around, her hands at-ready and already covered in the glittery sparkle Robin knew was her power. She was faintly glowing, giving him reason to believe she’d been removing items before his arrival.

Seeing it was he, she hurried from around the back side of the Gurney. Robin met her halfway across the room where she melted against him, extraordinarily warm in his arms. Robin found her lips and consumed them, fighting the urge not to pull her down to the floor with him. Already his body was betraying him, reminding him of the glory of her ripe fullness, and the brief hours of passion they’d shared as her hands clutched him in return. She was breathing heavily, overjoyed to see him.

“Robin! Robin .... Where am I here? Where did you go?”

“Are you all right?” Somehow he managed to pull her away from him enough to look down the front of her hospital gown. There was no trace of blood on the front, not that he could see anyway. Glancing back up at her face, he was greeted by her warm smile, and he wrapped his arms around her once more. “Oh, God. You were bleeding. It frightened me .... Sree, did I hurt you? Did I do something to you that made you bleed like that?” He closed his eyes and kissed her cheek before holding her tightly against him.

“I am fine, my husband,” she whispered. “The bleeding ... yes, we caused it. Not just you. Not just me. Us, when we made love, but it is nothing to be afraid of. I was not prepared for it. I ... I did not know how I would feel. My body ... you have changed me in many, many ways.” She placed little kisses along his neck and under his ear, trailing them around his jaw until she found his lips once more.

He allowed himself to become lost in her, in her warmth and her scent. She was trembling slightly, whether from her ordeal or their nearness, or from some other reason, he couldn’t tell.

This time it was Sah’Reena who pulled back to examine his wrists. “How are you?” she asked him, her face full of concern.

“My wrists? They’re fine. Pete took care of them. Look, Sree, if I’ve hurt you ....”

“No,” she interrupted gently but firmly. She gazed into his eyes, seeking their depths. “I want to make love to you again. Many, many times. There may be some bleeding, but you cannot feel guilt when I do. It is something that happens. It is ... it is part of *ambidunn*. Part of my power becoming. Growing.”

She glanced around at the nearly bare room, then gave him a slightly chagrined look. “I

am afraid I was a little angry.”

“You made things go away?” he asked, already finding it hard not to laugh. When she nodded, looking a bit like a child who had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, he chuckled, drawing her back into his embrace.

He kissed her again, allowing his hands to slide over the fullness of her breasts before they reached around to her firm buttocks to press her against the front of his jeans. She moaned softly into his mouth. It was with greater difficulty he pulled away from her a third time.

“We can’t stay here. Are you ready to leave this place?”

She nodded, needing the moment to steady herself. “Where will we go?”

Go? Now that the question had been asked, Robin wondered where, as well. “You took out the C block, pretty much. And I seriously doubt we can go off-site again.”

His ruminating was interrupted by the sound of the doors leading into the trauma room opening. Despite the fact that their arms were still around each other, neither Robin nor Sah’Reena broke away. They were ready to face their future together.

It was with a great sense of relief to see Pete walk into the room and pause, looking around until he spotted them. The older man let out a slow whistle. “Offhand I’d say there’s about sixty or seventy thousand dollars’ worth of equipment missing,” the physician commented. He peered at Sah’Reena over the top of his glasses. “Fit of temper? Or just a precautionary action?”

“She was frightened, Pete. All this stuff is unknown to her. How was she supposed to know it wasn’t a weapon of some sort?” Robin defended her.

“I am sorry I made it go away,” Sah’Reena spoke up. “I was ... unsure. Everything is still strange to me.”

“I bet it is,” Pete sighed. Taking another glance around he asked, “Any idea what you two are going to do now?”

Robin laughed softly and kissed his wife’s hair. “We were just discussing that.”

“What did Mason have to say?”

“Can we continue this conversation over at your office? I want to get Sree out of this place, and I don’t think my office is back to rights at the moment.”

Pete nodded and turned to lead the way out of the room. His arm remaining around her waist, Robin led the star girl out of C. People still gathered in the hallway and lobby silently stepped back to allow them passage. Before exiting the building, Robin removed his lab coat and helped Sah’Reena into it, hoping it would be enough protection against the cold until they reached the offices.

Once inside Pete’s inner sanctum, the older physician locked the door as Robin grabbed the phone on the desk and dialed his extension.

“Jack, it’s me. How are ... yeah, I bet the place was a mess. That’s why I’m calling. Are you okay? Good. I’m glad to hear that. Listen, give me my messages, would you, please?

Yeah. Okay, I got it. What else? Um-hmm. Yes. Okay, I will. Listen, if Channel 13 or any of the others call again, give them your best run-around. Better yet, transfer them over to Mason’s office. Yeah. Yeah, that would be a good option,” he chuckled at her off-color suggestion, “but I don’t think NASA would think too highly of us if we did that. Um-hmm. All right. Well, as you can see, we’re over here at Pete’s. Yeah. Yes, it’s true, Jack. I married her. Yeah, I’ll tell her. Go ahead and call it a day, Jack, okay? Okay. Talk to you tomorrow. All right. Thanks again, Jack. ‘Bye.”

“Have I told you you don’t pay that woman enough?” Pete commented. He had helped

Sah'Reena over to the sofa where she now sat, shivering. He fetched a thermal blanket from the side table beneath the lamp and draped it over her. "Better?"

She gave him a shaky smile.

"So, the reporters are descending like a swarm of locusts, are they?" the older man continued to observe. "I'm surprise one of the major news networks hasn't puffed out its chest yet and demanded exclusive footage."

"Did I ... do more wrong?" Sah'Reena asked softly.

Sitting down beside her, Robin pulled her tightly against him. "It was inevitable. Someone like you cannot be held a secret for long."

"If you had been just that pod spaceship, they could've kept you out of the public's eye for decades," Peter said. "How they expected to keep a living, breathing being under wraps ... I don't know what Overmeyer was thinking. Speaking of, you were going to tell me about your little tea party with Mason."

Robin nodded, but turned first to the woman in his arms. "Would you like some hot tea to warm you up?"

"Please."

"I'll get it," Pete offered. "You spill the beans."

"Well." He paused a moment while Sah'Reena folded her legs beside her and leaned closer against her husband. Her quaking had ceased, finally. She was warm and comforted, safe. Knowing she might slip back into sleep, he kissed her temple. "You need to hear this."

"I am listening."

"Mason, you realize, is looking out for the space center. He's also looking out for us. He wants you out of the military's hands, at all costs, and to remain the sole property of NASA."

"I am not property," she said softly.

"Point taken," Robin told her, "but in this case, I'm willing to agree with him. The knowledge you have of your world, your technology and science and history, and all that makes you so unique among us as a new race of beings, he wants NASA to become sole proprietor of that knowledge."

"For what purpose?" Pete asked. He extended the mug of hot water with the tea bag already in it toward the star girl. She wrapped her fingers around it gratefully.

"Uhh, grab her a couple of those raw sugars, would you, Pete?"

He nodded and brought back two brown packets, which he emptied into the mug.

Robin continued, "For the purpose of using her skills and knowledge to advance the space program. What else? He thinks of her as a coup."

Pete pulled a chair over and sat in front of them. "She is definitely a coup. And she would most definitely boost the space program a million-fold if we could apply everything she knows and could teach us. Well, good for old Abraham. Didn't think the boy had the *cojones* to stand up for himself, but he's willing to try. Gotta give him a gold star next time I see him. So that leaves you where? Stuck here until Mason and Overmeyer duke it out for the championship title? That could take months. Hell, years!"

Leaning over, he placed a gentle hand on Sah'Reena's knee. Robin was quick to observe the man no longer had any fear of touching her when she was conscious, or of receiving retribution. Peter already trusted and accepted her and that knowledge gave him an enormous sense of relief.

"Hey, are you okay? What was that blood all about?"

Sah'Reena nodded, lowering her half-empty mug. "I am fine. In time I will be better."

And stronger. My powers are growing.”

Pete’s eyebrows rose. “Growing?”

Again the star girl nodded. Robin allowed her to tell her story without him interrupting. “When a Gifted goes through *ambidunn* for the first time, there is some bleeding. From what I overheard others saying, I think it is natural. I ... I had forgotten about it. I had not paid much attention. After all, I was never supposed to . . .” Her voice trailed away as her memories caught up with her, drawing her away from her narrative and back into the gloomy darkness that had been her past. Robin squeezed her gently.

“*Ambidunn*?” Pete glanced up at his son for clarification.

“The loss of her virginity,” Robin told him softly.

Pete leaned back in his chair, his hand rubbing his chin in a gesture Robin was all-too-familiar with. “You know, we have our own legends here on Earth about beings with great powers growing stronger and more omnipotent once they had broken that barrier. Go on, Sree. You were never supposed to do what?”

The look she gave him was masked. However, the fact that the memories were still raw, open wounds made Pete realize he had to tread carefully or else risk losing what small trust he had earned from her.

She let out a shuddering breath. “I was never to undergo *ambidunn*. I had been marked ... for sole selection.”

“Why?” asked her husband.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Pete murmured. “Her powers were already too dangerous. Can you imagine what potential there is now? If the people who condemned her were terrified of her abilities then, it’s no wonder they wanted to take every precaution to make sure she’d never have the chance to have them grow.” He glanced up at his son. “Remember that Barbie doll reference we kept alluding to? I rechecked the x-rays. She has a uterus. It’s just tilted a bit more forward, which means any child she conceives, if she’s able to conceive, will be carried a little bit differently. I’m willing to bet that difference, in the future, if our people ever evolve into a similar species, I bet that difference will eventually eliminate a lot of the problems we have now with miscarriages and infertility.”

“Soooo, what now?” Robin reiterated.

Pete slapped his hands on his knees and rose to his feet. “Let’s see. As your doctor I prescribe bed rest for a clear head tomorrow. Then we’ll go face Mason and see what he suggests, or see if he has any plans.” He made a small sound and scratched the back of his head. “I hope the old boy isn’t flying by the seat of his pants.” Pointing to the side cabinet table next to the sofa, the doctor added, “There’s some sheets and another blanket in there. The sofa makes into a double bed. Call it a perk from the Apollo days when we had to be on call twenty-four-seven during the entire mission. Want me to go by your place and bring back some clean clothes?”

“I would appreciate it, Pete.”

“What about her?”

Robin glanced down to see that Sah’Reena had succumbed to sleep. After their lack of rest the night before, and the events that had happened today, he was also finding it difficult to concentrate. The idea of curling up next to her body, of being able to touch her and caress her between dreams, was an irresistible hope.

“You’re right. She needs some decent clothes. She can’t be expected to wear astronaut jumpsuits the rest of her life.”

“What size do you think she wears?”

“I have no idea,” Robin laughed gently. “How am I supposed to know these things?”

“Well, I’ll run over to the mall before they close and see what kind of damage I can do with the credit card. Don’t jump down my throat, though, if not everything fits. She’s what? Six feet tall?”

Robin nodded. “I think so. I’m six-one. We’re almost nose-to-nose.” Grabbing his father’s shirt sleeve as the man prepared to leave, he added, “Thanks.”

Peter responded by giving his son’s shoulders a quick hug and dropping a kiss on the top of his head. Reaching inside his pants pocket, he extracted a small ring of keys which he tossed onto his desk.

“Lock the door behind me. I’ll knock when I come back tomorrow morning.” That being said, the older man left them alone for only their second night together.

## Chapter Thirty Eight

## Nightmares

Once he was certain the door to the office was locked from the inside, Robin went back over to where Sah'Reena lay stretched out on the sofa, sound asleep. For a long while he stood, simply to watch her. To observe the gentle expression on her face as she floated in that netherworld where the real world had receded but the dreams had yet to appear.

He worried about her having eaten. Had she had any kind of nourishment since .... Robin shook his head, trying to rid himself of the drowsiness which was slowly descending over him, fogging his thoughts in gentle gray mists. When a yawn caught him by surprise, he knew he had better try and get the both of them prepared for bed.

She felt unusually light in his arms as he lifted her from the sofa to lay her on the carpet near the desk. She never stirred while he opened the sofa bed and quickly dressed it with sheets and the extra blanket. When he was finished, Robin placed her on the bed and covered her, joining her once he'd shed his own clothing.

She still wore the hospital gown. He left it on her, thinking it would give her an extra amount of warmth, and cuddled up next to her, wrapping his free arm around her waist.

He had no memory of when he fell asleep holding her—her scream brought him instantly awake. From nowhere a hand lashed out and struck him in the chest. She was flailing her arms, reaching out, grabbing, searching, desperately seeking.

"SAH'REENA!" He tried to snatch her arms before she exerted any powers and possibly hurt herself, or him, or maybe took out the whole space center. "SREE!"

*"Ite'el abrinim!"*

She was sobbing uncontrollably, babbling in her language in a way that was heartbreaking. Somehow Robin managed to find her shoulders, grasping her upper arms until he was certain he had more control of the situation.

"Sree! Wake up! You're dreaming!"

*"Ite'el abrinim!"*

*Don't do this to me!*

She was facing him, yet her eyes were closed. She was lost in the terror which had gripped her in her dreams. Gently, Robin shook her, hoping to rouse her from what he knew were memories of her past come back to destroy her sanity.

"Sree! Sree! Listen to me! Listen to my voice! You're not in space. You're here. With me. Look! *Feel!*" Releasing her arms, he cradled her face in his hands. "LOOK at me!"

*"Ite'el abrinim!"* She was gasping for breath. Running out of oxygen. Running out of hope. Running out of life.

He gathered her tightly against him, praying their contact would send a signal to her brain that reality was no longer an icy pod in the middle of a heartless universe, but in a warm bed with the heart of the man who loved her. "*A'a batalis onorinim,*" he murmured next to her lips. "*Sora. Sora. Ka rinn.*"

Her body shook, either as an aftereffect from her dream, or from the cold. Robin had no way of knowing. He only knew he had responded to her from the deepest part of his soul, in a



language he barely knew, but somehow knew almost as intimately as he did her body.

*You are here with me. We are safe. Do not fear. Do not fear, my love.*

Her hands came up to touch his shoulders. Slowly her eyes opened, tears falling as they were released upon her cheeks. Robin saw realization reflected in their depths.

*"Sora, ka rinn,"* he repeated, adding a smile.

The moon shining through the open windows gave her an ethereal glow. Her hair seemed to give off a light of its own. Sah'Reena managed a weak smile. "I ... I was very scared," she admitted in a breathy whisper.

"I know. You were having a nightmare." Carefully he pulled her against his chest and drew her back down on the bed with him. She pressed herself tightly against him.

"We are ...," she began, when her voice trailed off.

"We're in Pete's office," he concluded for her.

"I fell asleep."

"Yes. So did I."

He felt her move, and the silkiness of her skin was like electricity. She moved again, and this time there was no way he could control the effect she had on him.

"Sree, what are you doing?"

"I am taking off this ... this thing they put on me."

She shifted again, and Robin saw her toss a length of material over onto the floor. It was the gown they had put on her when she had been in Six. The thin gown he had thought would help keep her warm.

He rolled onto his side, and Sah'Reena slid along his length, pressing her whole body against his. It was only natural their lips would join as their hands mutually reached out to stroke bared skin.

He found the beckoning hollow of her throat when she arched her back, her fingers weaving themselves in his hair. He could sense desperation in her movements, and he wondered if she was trying to lose herself in their lovemaking as a way to vanquish the horrors that had awakened her.

"Reena," he whispered.

*"Aba, ka rinn. Love me."*

"What did you dream?" he asked her. Her full breasts were warm in his hands, the nipples hard and erect. "Tell me what frightened you." He let his tongue lave slowly over the peaks.

She shivered in his embrace, and he could hear her soft cries. "I was so ... so alone. So scared. So alone. So ... *alone*. Space ... black and empty and going on forever and ever without ending. A mouth ready to eat you and swallow you until there is nothing left of you except cold and loneliness and fear and ... and death." Her breath hitched in her chest, making her shake from the memory. With gritted teeth, she started to moan from her fears she'd kept bottled up inside.

Robin lifted her legs and wrapped them around his thighs. Gently, carefully, he pressed himself into her vibrant warmth before lifting her back against him, until they were once more face to face. With each slow thrust, he kissed her, then lifted his lips from hers as his own hips pulled his hardness out and slightly away.

"You are not alone anymore," he breathed into her mouth. He moved back into her as his tongue found the moistness of hers. When he retreated, she trembled in response.

"You are here. With me. Forever." Again he slid into her tightening muscles. With one

hand at the back of her head, he burned her mouth with another kiss. As he receded, she gasped.

“Let me make love to you.” His other hand now pressed against her buttocks, and he went as deeply into her as he could before her whole body stiffened. Too deep. A small pain. But one which let her know their coupling was now very, very real. He gently pulled on her lower lip with his teeth when he withdrew. This time, however, he remained at a distance, with just the tip of his manhood at the entrance of her swollen, pulsing heat.

“There is no more space to swallow you,” he told her in a husky whisper. “There is just me, wanting to be swallowed by you, inside of you, where you are hot and wet and needing me. My love. My Reena. Let me have you.”

“Robin.”

“Your nightmares will go away every time we blend our bodies. My beautiful Reena. Give me your body.”

“Love me,” she begged.

“No one will ever hurt you again. I promise. You belong to me, and I am yours. Forever. My glorious fallen angel. My Reena. I want to bring you to your peak until you shine brighter than a blazing comet. Let me inside of you. Now. *Now.*”

Her hips moved forward as he rolled over on top of her, and together they melted into the hottest core of the furthest star in the universe. And this time when she cried, it was because of the overwhelming ecstasy that swept them both away.

## Chapter Thirty Nine

Different

At first Robin thought he was imagining the phone ringing. It wasn't until the third (or fourth?) ring that he realized it was the real thing and coming from Peter's desk. Only partially awake, he rolled out of bed and padded over to the desk. The caller ID read Dickenson, R.

Jack?

"Yes?"

"Good morning, Son. It'll take me about ten minutes to walk over to the office from here. Will you have a pot of coffee ready when I get there?"

Robin grinned in spite of himself. "Sure, Dad. Hustle your old bones over here. What's the weather like outside?"

"If you're asking if the sun's in the sky, you can see that for yourself. Otherwise it's colder than a welldigger's butt. See you shortly," Pete announced before hanging up.

Stretching, Robin could hear his cartilage crack. He sighed deeply and turned to look back at the figure still lost in sleep on the bed. Ten minutes? He would be lucky to be halfway awake by then.

Pete was right about the sun outside. It was another overcast day, but there were patches of sunshine streaming like ribbons of light through the clouds. The weak light of morning didn't help to dissipate the fog clouding his mind.

A quick glance at the clock at the base of the phone read 8:12. A pot of coffee would do wonders. After a quick trip to the small restroom, Robin found his jeans where he'd tossed them beside the bed and pulled them on. Feeling slightly more human, he went over to the small wet-bar on the other side of the room and began to clean out the leftover dregs from the carafe.

He had just flipped the switch on the coffeemaker to begin the brewing process when a strong knock came from the door. Robin grabbed the keys from the desk and walked over to unlock the door. Pete stood on the other side with an over-laden department store bag in both hands.

"Pretty sad to get locked out of my own office," he groused good-naturedly. "Turn on the light, would you?"

Robin snorted softly, smiling. He stepped back to allow the older man entry, snagging a bag on his way past. "What did you do? Buy out the entire department store?"

Pete started to retort when he noticed the partially-covered figure asleep amid the tumbled sheets and blanket. He glanced back at his adopted son who now stood by the desk, removing items from the sack. Robin caught the look on his father's face.

"She had a really bad nightmare last night."

"Is she okay?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Yeah. For a second there, though, I thought she might dissolve this whole building. Dad, I don't see any underwear for Sree in this bag."

"I didn't get her any. There's some in this bag for you." He placed the second bag on the desk before glancing back at the bed. "She needs to get up and get dressed. Mason wants us over at his place at ten-thirty." He paused, then asked, "Rob?"

“What?” Robin began to chuckle. “Pete, have you *ever* bought a bra or a pair of panties in your whole life?”

“Hush. Besides, she doesn’t need a bra, if my feeble memory serves me correctly. No, what I was wanting to ask you was ....” He turned to stare at his son. “Doesn’t she frighten you? As great as her power is, and there’s no telling how much greater it’s going to become ... haven’t you ever felt even the slightest twinge of fear that she might ....”

“At first I did, Pete. At the beginning. But not now. Not anymore,” Robin admitted truthfully. “I know, deep down, without a doubt, she loves me too much to hurt me, even unintentionally. I think she’s sort of placed me on her mental ‘do not injure’ list, so if something ever happens and she begins to melt down, I won’t be touched.” He pulled out a pair of jeans and a shirt, tossing them on the desk.

Pete sighed loudly. It was small comfort to hear his son’s reassurance. Silently he wondered if he was also on the star girl’s ‘do not injure’ list. “Oh, you’re welcome to use my electric shaver. It’s in the bottom right-hand drawer.”

“Don’t need one anymore,” Robin commented off-handedly, stretching his arms overhead. “Guess it’s time to wake up the missus.”

Peter watched as his son walked over to the bed and knelt on the bedclothes over Sah’Reena’s sleeping form. Placing a hand on one alabaster shoulder, he saw him lower his face to kiss the woman on her cheek before whispering in her ear. At first the star girl didn’t seem to react. Then, slowly, she rolled over to face him, snuggling into his ready arms. The sheets pulled away, leaving her completely uncovered as she reached up for his lips.

For some unexplainable reason Peter felt his face beginning to flush. Here he was, a doctor with over thirty years of practice, accustomed to dealing with the human figure—clothed and unclothed—on a daily basis. In the short time she had been among them, he had seen the woman’s body more than a handful of times, mostly when she was unconscious. He had examined it closely, along with his peers, but he had done so in the detached, clinical way all professionals treated their patients.

This was a wholly different situation.

He tried not to show his uneasiness when Sah’Reena sat up, swinging her long, shapely legs over the side of the bed as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“Hello, Pete.”

“Good morning, Sree. How are you feeling this morning? Rob said you had a nightmare last night.”

She nodded slowly. “I am better. Sometimes the nights are too much like death. I am afraid one day I will wake up and find all of this was part of my fevered mind playing a cruel trick on me, and that I am back in the pod.” She shivered at the acknowledgment. Robin gave her another kiss against her hair.

“Pete brought you some real clothes to wear. We need to hurry if you want to get something to eat before we have to be over at the Director’s office at ten-thirty.”

She looked up at her husband and smiled. Touching the stubble on his cheek, she asked him silently with her eyes, to which he responded with a smile. Now that she intimately knew the contours of his face, it only took a single swipe with her fingers and palms to remove the new growth. He gave her a kiss in thanks and got up from the bed.

Sah’Reena got to her feet and stretched, sighing loudly. For the first time, Pete was able to watch her beautiful body in action, his eyes drawn to the erect nipples now evident on her full breasts. He started. The woman had nipples? His gaze shifted automatically to her lower

abdomen, but in the florescent light her skin was as seamless and unblemished as it had appeared the first time he'd examined her. If he hadn't known any differently ....

"Pete, you're staring," Robin commented *sotto voce*, a wide smile on his face.

"She has," he started to say, when he caught himself. To his chagrin, Robin chuckled at his uneasiness.

"When she's cold. Or aroused," Robin noted. "I dare you to put *that* in your next report," he added, teasing. His gaze slid back over to her. The mark in her skin was a light gray color. It got him to thinking. "Sree, come over here and pick something out to wear," he gently ordered her before turning back to his father. "Dad? You've examined Sree, right?"

"It is cold," she commented, wrapping her arms around her chest for warmth as she approached the desk.

"I got you a couple of sweaters," Pete told her. Answering Robin, he replied, "Yeah. Just part of the job, Rob." He walked over to the coffeemaker and prepared two cups. "Sree, do you drink coffee?"

She shook her head as she held up a soft pink pullover with long sleeves. "I like this."

"I know that," Robin continued. "What I'm asking is ... did you or any of the other scientists touch the mark on her skin?"

"You mean that tattoo-looking thing? Yes."

"With your bare hands?"

Pete paused. "Now, you know that's not SOP. We wore latex gloves. Why are you asking?"

Robin felt Sah'Reena's stare as he weighed his next words. "Come over here. There's something I want you to do."

He turned to see her questioning, half-frightened look on her face. Giving her what he hoped she'd interpret as a 'don't worry' smile, he waited for the man to join them.

"What do you want me to do?" Pete asked.

"Touch her mark."

Pete looked surprised. "Any reason why, may I ask?" He glanced over the rim of his glasses at the *Utuli'ia*. "Odd."

"What?"

"I don't recall it being that color before."

Robin glanced back at its smoky tint. "What color do you remember it being?"

"Mmm, more of a greenish color. Kind of lettuce green. Not real dark." Without warning, he reached up and touched it with the tip of his middle finger. Sah'Reena immediately flinched, waiting for the feelings that would sweep through her. When they didn't appear, she turned wide eyes at her husband.

Rubbing the tip of his finger against his thumb, Pete observed, "Hmm. Oily but not oily. Rather mercurial in nature. Is that what you wanted me to notice?"

Robin let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Yeah. And I've noticed it tends to change color, too."

"Like a mood ring?" Pete joked, going back to the coffee pot.

Laughing with relief, Robin gave his wife a quick but tender kiss. "Yeah. Like one of those. Honey, I think one of those pairs of jeans in the bag is yours. I hope they fit."

"I told the saleslady it was for my daughter-in-law, but that I had no idea what size you wore. She asked me how tall you were, how big around you were in the hips ... that sort of thing." He paused to pour him and Robin a cup of coffee, then looked up to see Sah'Reena

stepping away from the desk. “What ...?”

“I cannot put these on until I am cleansed,” she explained with a small smile.

Slack-jawed, Peter watched as she stood absolutely still in the middle of the room, her face lifted as if she were bathing it under a shower. Her hands lifted from her sides, arms like slender wings, fingers spread as a thousand tiny motes of light danced between the digits.

She started under her chin, slowly trailing the tips of her fingers down her neck and over her shoulders, cupping her breasts before gliding over her ribs, stomach, and abdomen. A waterfall of lights flowed down her back and over her buttocks. She caressed the length of each arm with light strokes before bending over to encircle one graceful thigh and run her hands down the leg to her foot. Then she performed the same thing with her other leg. As her fingers came in contact with her skin, the minuscule barrage of sparkles seemed to have a life of their own, leaving behind softly glowing skin in their wake.

Robin stood beside the desk, watching her in rapt wonder. He had read the reports about her performing her own toilette. Seeing her actually doing it was a completely different experience.

When she was done with her body, her hands gracefully caressed her face before she plunged her hands into her hair. Bending over, she shook her head as she simultaneously ran her fingers between the strands. In a matter of two or three minutes, she was totally fresh.

“Now ... you?” she asked her husband with a shy smile, holding out her hands to him.

Robin turned his head to look at his father who still stood by the wet-bar. “Uhh, Pete?”

The physician swallowed hard. “I think I’ll take my coffee and wait for you in the foyer. You won’t be much longer, will you?”

Glancing back at his wife, Robin smiled. “Nope. Don’t think we will.”

Pete nodded and beat a hasty retreat, his son’s amused chuckle following him out the door.

## Chapter Forty

## News

They were heading out the door when the call came in. A quick glance at the Caller ID told Robin it was from the Director's office before he answered it.

"Dr. Gray's office. Dickenson speaking."

"Oh, good. Caught you just in time." Mason's voice sounded agitated but relieved.

"Were you on your way over?"

"No. We were going to eat breakfast first over at the cafeteria. Why?"

"Have you looked outside the window this morning? Out onto the Mall?"

As Pete's office didn't have that view, Robin replied in the negative.

"Then I strongly suggest you go out the back door and take the long way around to the cafeteria," the Director advised. "When you're finished there, call my office and my assistant will come over to pick you up."

"How about giving me a heads-up?" Robin glanced up to see Pete coming back into the office. The expression on his face was priceless. A long silence came over the receiver before Mason let out a sigh.

"I've decided the best defense is a damn good offense. I've invited every news outlet to gather at the hangar for a breaking news announcement. We're going national with the star girl."

Robin remained rooted where he stood. "You can't do that," he told the Director, feeling the blood drain from his face. "If you do, how are you going to keep her protected?"

The man's answer was the last thing he wanted to hear. "As long as she remains on site, we can keep her protected."

"Mason, that's no life for her. She belongs with me now. And I have no intention of keeping her penned up at the center."

"And you think you're going to provide for her in that little apartment of yours?" the Director tossed out. "Get your head on straight, Dickenson. Let her stay at the center until you come up with a more viable solution that I'll agree with. In the meantime, get yourselves over to the cafeteria and feed her. And while you're over there, have a talk with her. Make her understand this is going to be the biggest story our world has ever seen. We'll have some items over at the hangar for her to 'remove'. Show them what she's capable of."

Mason paused again. Robin could only imagine the headache the man was having at the moment, and he didn't pity him one bit. Yet, the Director had struck the proverbial nail on the head. Where *were* they going to live? Robin's little 2/1 apartment wasn't going to cut it. In fact, once the news broke, there would be few, if any, places where they could live in relative peace.

"We'll call when we're ready to come over," Robin told the man. "I'll talk to Sree and help her through this. Under no circumstances can you separate us, is that understood?"

"Very. I've already given Overmeyer the fourth command. If he makes any move you feel is unjustified, just signal me. I'll have him forcibly removed if I have to. Oh, and one more thing, Rob ... think you can convince her to talk to them?"

Pete was frantically gesturing for him to get off the phone. Robin held up a hand to let

him know he wouldn't be much longer.

"I can promise nothing, but I'll see what I can do."

"This is big, Rob. This date will go down in the history books as the number one event of all time. And, to be honest with you, I'm scared shitless." A moment's hesitation, and then the man added, "Dammit, I was supposed to meet with General Delvecchio ten minutes ago. I'll let you go, Rob. See you over at the hangar."

Mason hung up without waiting for Robin's reply. Lowering the phone, he realized he was beginning to sweat. His hands already felt clammy.

"Who was that?" Pete demanded. "You have got to come look outside, Rob. The whole damn world is converging on the center!"

"That's because Mason is going national to reveal Sah'Reena's existence. This is ground zero, Dad. Where's Sree?"

"I left her in the hallway, looking out the window. You've got to see this."

Quickly he followed the man out into the hall where a huge picture window looked out over the main concourse. Over to their right was the block and Building 29 where the astronauts trained underwater. Beyond it and to the left, way in the distance, were Areas 200 and 300, which included the two huge hangars where over a hundred vans were already in attendance, many of them setting up their aerial transmitters to broadcast by satellite. The ground was swarming with news crews, cameramen, photographers, and reporters. It looked like a madhouse out there.

Sah'Reena stood watching the goings on with a transfixed expression on her face. It brought up a memory that she had flashed into his mind back in that tiny meeting room, and Robin felt his throat constricting.

*Hundreds of thousands of screaming, sweating faces twisted in rage, crowding, crushing closer and closer to where she stood.*

Carefully, he approached her and drew an arm around her shoulders. He kissed her hair, and was somewhat relieved to feel her move closer to him.

"Are they here for me?" she asked softly.

"Yes. But they're not here to condemn you," he hastened to tell her. "They want to see you. Talk to you. Ask you a few questions." He took her hands in his and held her tighter. "They're going to want to see your Gift."

The face she turned to him looked haunted. "You?" One word, but it spoke volumes.

"I will be with you through it all. I'm not leaving your side, and no one will be able to make me." He gave her a warm smile. "We're going to get through this, but this is what we've been needing, Sree. Letting them know about you. Because once they do, Overmeyer won't have any reason to stop us. Once my world knows about you, that will put us in a very different position."

He gazed out at the milling masses, aware of her drawing closer to him.

"We need to get over to the cafeteria. Any suggestions?" Pete commented.

"Where are you parked?"

"In the back."

"Great. Let's take your car over to the cafeteria."

He gave his wife another quick hug and turned her face, cradling her cheek in his palm until he could look into her eyes. "I knew this day would come, sooner or later. I need you to be strong for me, as much as I'll try to be for you."

"Strong for you?" She blinked. "Why?"



“Because you are going to be the biggest news on my world since man was created. But I’m going to have to spend the rest of my life defending my right to be your husband.”

“As I will defend my right to be your wife,” she murmured with a small smile. She placed a kiss on his shoulder and squeezed the hand that clasped hers. “Let us go eat. It will give us the chance to think better.”

“I hear you,” Pete concurred. “Let’s go, kids. We’re burning daylight.”

\* \* \* \*

They easily managed to get to Pete’s SUV without any interference. Of course, the media was not yet aware of the star girl, although some news had already leaked out about the possibility of ‘extraterrestrial life’ being discovered by the crew of the Liberty. That tidbit of information alone was enough to send everyone flying into Houston to cover what Mason had promised them would be ‘groundbreaking news, the likes of which mankind had never before witnessed’.

They enjoyed a leisurely breakfast in the cafeteria, although talk was minimal. Robin carefully explained what might and might not happen during the news conference, but he emphasized the fact that she would have to use her Gift in order to convince the most cynical.

“They will not believe I am who I say I am?” Sah’Reena asked over her bowl of oatmeal. Like her baked potatoes, she liked to add the most unusual assortment of food items to enhance its flavor, some of which would make most people wince. This morning, however, was one of her more conventional toppings—peaches and maple syrup from the pancake buffet.

“There will be doubts, yes. But you’ll convince them, Sree. Without a doubt.” Robin continued to watch her eat in silence. By his elbow, Pete finished off his third cup of coffee and checked his watch. “Getting close to ten. We need to start thinking about making our way over there.”

Robin nodded, never taking his eyes off of her. “She looks nothing like an alien from outer space,” he said almost nonchalantly. “What do you think the news media is going to expect? How do you think they’re going to react?”

“I can’t even begin to guess. What else was it Mason told you? That it would be ridiculous of you to take her off-site at this point in time?”

“Basically, yeah.” He looked down to see his fingers toying with his spoon. “He’s right. I’ve been an absolute idiot. I haven’t had a legitimately intelligent thought since Sree’s come into my life.”

“Well, love’ll do that to you.” Pete smiled with a small shrug of his shoulders. “But I might have a temporary solution.” At his son’s inquisitive stare, he said, “You two could stay with me at the house until we figure out where you can set up a permanent camp. I agree with the man when he said you couldn’t take her over to your apartment.”

“Dad ...”

“Now ... wait.” Pete held up his hand to stay what he knew the man would say. “Hear me out first before you trounce my idea. There’s three more bedrooms upstairs. I hated when you moved out to go east to college, and then again when you didn’t move back in once you graduated and came back to Houston to come work at JSC. If it wasn’t for the fact that Livvie loved that house, and it was where you grew up, I would have sold it and gotten a smaller place years ago. Yeah, I know it’s going to be hard adjusting at first, but like I said, it’s only meant to be a temporary arrangement, until we can come up with a better solution.”

He watched as his son mentally digested the idea. “It does offer a bit more protection,” Robin commented.

Pete nodded. He'd had the security system put in four years ago. Not to mention the fact that that section of the city was well-patrolled because of the neighborhood's affluence.

To his surprise, Robin suddenly grinned and lightly laughed. Shaking his head, he said, "I can't believe this is all coming together. It's ... it's too unreal."

Throughout the conversation, Sah'Reena had quietly been taking in what they'd been discussing. Now that she was finished with her breakfast, she pushed her bowl into the middle of the table and gave both men a calm look.

"Are we going to live with Peter?" she asked her husband.

"Just until we can get a place of our own," he promised.

"Then I must find a way to help us live," she added.

Both men looked startled. "What are you talking about?" Pete spoke up first.

She tilted her head at them. "Are you not given payment for your work? Do they not tell you when you have done well, and give you a reward?"

"Yes, but ... Sree, what are you telling us? That you were *paid* on your world for using your Gift?" Robin asked, incredulous.

A tiny grin pursed her rose-colored lips. "How else would I have been able to get the things I wanted? If I saw a *kolial* I wanted, I could not walk over and take it. I would have to give the *Mittal* equal for it. I have seen that it is the same way here. When we get our food, you give them equal in payment." Nodding, she said in a determined tone, "I will need to find a way to earn payment for us. I cannot let you bear the burden alone."

Her statement lay across the table like a golden opportunity. It was several very long moments before Peter could manage a reply.

"Oh, dear God, Robin. I think the little lady has just trumped our ace." Slowly his eyes swiveled around and caught his son's sea-green glance, and a smile began to grow on the young scientist's face.

"She's done more than that," Robin told him. The possibility was becoming brighter and shinier with each passing second as his mind took the rationale and ran with it. "She's guaranteed us a future together."

## Chapter Forty One

## Announcement

Before leaving the cafeteria, Robin used one of the yellow wall phones to call Mason's office and left word with the assistant they were going over to the hangar in Pete's car. When the aide began to splutter, he assured her, "Look, they don't know what Sah'Reena looks like. They have no idea what to expect. We'll just be more Johnson employees blending in with the crowd, until Mason needs us. And if he has any problems with my decision, tell him I need to acclimate her to these people. Try and eliminate some of her anxiety."

Once he hung up, he joined the other two where they waited for him by the door. "Well?" Pete asked as he watched his son put on his jacket.

"Well ... let's get this over with."

"And then what? What happens once this is over?"

Robin paused. That was a good question. What was their next move? "Let's plan on coming back to your office. Most likely if anyone tails us, they'll go first to my office, but they won't be able to gain entry without a keycard."

"Sounds like a plan," Pete agreed as they got into the vehicle.

\* \* \* \*

They drove slowly, careful of the growing number of people infiltrating the center. Several times Pete had to hit the brake to avoid hitting an individual dashing out in front of the vehicle. More than once a specialized swear word left his mouth as he maneuvered around to the rear of the immense buildings which the center used as warehouses.

From the back seat where they sat close together, arms around each other's waists, Robin smiled to hear the older man cursing. Pete might be a nervous wreck, but, oddly, he didn't feel any kind of foreboding. Sah'Reena sat with her head angled against his shoulder and even through her thick jacket he could sense her heat. The scent of her body was comforting reminder of her love. She was calm. He wondered if her ease was due to his presence, or if it was because she knew there was no maliciousness in what was about to occur. Or maybe it was due to both.

"Are you going to be all right?" he murmured against her forehead.

She turned eyes the color of the night sky up at him. She trusted him. Robin found the irony inescapable. Here was a woman with one of the greatest powers ever known, and she had every faith in him to protect her. Unable to resist her Mona Lisa smile, he kissed her. It was soft. Comforting. Loving.

The sound of a clearing throat gained their attention. Robin saw a pair of brown eyes staring at him in the rear-view mirror. "Did you want to say something?" He grinned.

"I don't think we'll be able to get much closer. Best if we park here, close to the road, and walk the rest of the way," Pete suggested.

"What if we need to make a quick getaway?"

Robin watched to see his father's gaze shift to the woman sitting beside him. "I don't think we'll have any problem getting back to the car."

"I don't want her forced into using her power if it can be helped," Robin insisted.

"Mason told me there would be enough security to back us up. Which reminds me ... Sree, there

are going to be some guards here with guns. They're going to be here for our benefit, so don't take out their weapons unless I tell you to, okay?"

She nodded, taking it all in. There was so much she couldn't yet comprehend, but she knew that if she followed her husband's lead, all would be well.

Pete parked the car, and they got out together. Robin made sure Sah'Reena was bundled up. The sky was sunny, but it was still cold. Every so often a brisk wind blew over them, stiff enough to give them a chill. Taking her hand, he led her over to the hangar where Mason and Pillman, head of Special Relations would be waiting.

Despite Peter being ahead of them to help clear the way, every so often they were bumped or nudged by fast-moving news people squeezing through, who gave them an obligatory "scuse me" in apology as they hustled away with their cameras or microphones, or other pieces of equipment. A smug smile creased one corner of Robin's mouth, one which Sah'Reena caught.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked, returning with one of her own.

Leaning close to her ear, he replied, "It's a term called 'right under their noses'. I'll explain more later."

By the time they reached the hangar, they could see the place was jam-packed. Every news media and outlet was represented, and floating among the sea of faces, he could identify by sight, if not by name, many of the people he'd seen countless times on television and in the papers. Many were standing outside the building, already spotlighted and reporting live on the many possibilities they might be hearing from the space agency.

Apparently, when NASA promised 'something groundbreaking', they were taken seriously.

There were no available spaces left to sit. The risers and folding chairs that had been erected were already filled. Cameras and other equipment were crowded side-by-side all around the huge enclosure. Whatever available floor space was left that wasn't taken up by the media was filled with Johnson personnel who had come over to observe. Both sides of the hangar had been opened up, and Robin could see where an airplane was gradually being towed into the building. It was an old T-2C Buckeye jet training aircraft. He nudged his wife for her attention and pointed to it. "I'll bet that's what they're going to want you to remove," he nearly had to shout into her ear. She nodded to let him know she understood. The noise inside was deafening.

At the other end of the hangar, where the other set of huge doors were opened, a screen had been set up. There was also a long dais with more than a dozen chairs and a podium. Robin spotted Mason standing near the podium, checking his watch and looking fit to be tied. Also on the platform, Dr. Wendicoff sat in the first row with a clipboard in his lap. Next to him was Overmeyer, looking every bit out of sorts.

"I think those two chairs up there are for you," Pete commented with a nod. Actually there were three empty seats left on the front row, but one would be for the Director.

He felt his hand being squeezed tightly. Shifting her grip to his other hand, he put his freed one around her waist. "Doing okay?"

"They ... will not hurt me?" She spoke into his ear. More than a question, it was a need for confirmation.

"No." It was all he needed to say to placate her. That, and a tender kiss to her temple.

Turning to Pete, he asked the man, "Would you go tell Mason where we are? We're going to hold off a bit before going up there. Down here feels a bit more secure, if that makes any sense."

Pete nodded quickly and went to tell the man where they would be found. Hopefully Mason would understand that by staying at ground level, Sah'Reena would be less afraid than if she was forced to stand up there, exposed like a target.

Robin watched as the Director's face turned dark and grim, but he gave a curt nod to let the doctor know he understood. Or, at the least, that he would abide by Robin's decision, regardless of whether he agreed with the man or not.

It was nearly twenty minutes until eleven. Mason approached the podium with a sheaf of papers and adjusted the microphone.

"May I have your attention."

Around the couple, cameras began rolling. The crowd went silent as they waited to hear the reason why they had been gathered on such short notice. Beside the dais, Robin noticed a group of uniformed men, not soldiers, not military, but definitely a unit of some sort. His concentration was broken when Mason spoke again, his voice booming through the open building. With the doors pulled away, the reverberating echo had been eliminated.

The man began to read from a prepared statement.

"On January sixth, at approximately sixteen-fourteen hundred hours, Houston time, space shuttle *Liberty*, while in orbit around the moon, was struck by an unknown object."

The screen behind him lit up with a picture of the shuttle craft. The rent through its side was clearly evident.

"This object was determined to be a pod of unknown origin and definitely not from Earth."

Mason paused as a photo of the closed pod as it floated out in space flashed on the screen, and the crowd reacted. Robin felt Sah'Reena shiver, but a quick glance at her profile showed it had been a gut reaction at seeing the hated container that had been meant to be her coffin. She sighed and pressed closer against him. Behind and around him, Robin could hear cameras clicking. Several people were speaking softly into hand-held tape recorders.

"The pod was loaded into the cargo bay of *Liberty* and returned to the Kennedy Space Center, where it was then shipped here to the Johnson Space Center for analysis."

The screen showed the pod being loaded on the flatbed. Robin realized his wife was watching closely. She had been unconscious during this part, and the narrative was filling in some of the gaps in her memory.

"Once the pod reached JSC, it was discovered to contain an alien life form." Mason took a deep breath. "A *living* life form."

The next picture was of the opened pod, but Sah'Reena was not visible. Robin wondered if the man was deliberately keeping her identity secret until the very last moment. He smiled. If he was, it would make for great theatrics.

The media went into a frenzy. It took the Director over a minute to silence them enough to continue.

"However, it was quickly evident the life form was on the verge of dying. But because of the quick thinking and ingenuity of our staff of doctors, scientists, and technicians, the life form was resuscitated."

Nearly a dozen hands shot into the air. Mason gave them a hard stare. "You will be allowed a chance to ask your questions in just a few minutes," he told them. The hands went down.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the media. Not only is the alien life form alive, but she is thriving."

The crowd exploded into exclamation to hear the creature had been labeled as female. Robin felt Sah'Reena staring around her at the pandemonium, yet she remained steadfast. Her fingers, laced through his, were warm. He marveled at her bravery.

The screen behind the podium had gone black. The tension in the building was as heavy as the precursor to the eye of a hurricane, before the wall of wind came down to slam everyone and everything into the ground.

"I have asked you here today so that you can meet our guest from another galaxy. Ladies and gentlemen of the media. I present to you Sah'Reena. Of the planet Murrall."

Robin stepped forward, leading her toward the platform. Several of the news men felt the jostle and turned around with angry stares. One man looked at her dead-on, and his face went totally white as he saw the six-pointed stars in her eyes.

They continued through the crowd that didn't seem to want to let them pass amid the tightly packed mass. Finally reaching the podium, Robin helped her up the steps. Once they reached the dais, he helped her off with her jacket, and gave her warm smile. At the microphone, Mason gestured for her to join him.

"Speak into the mic," he instructed. She gave him a cursory glance, then turned back to find that Robin was no more than a couple of steps away. If she held out her arm, he could reach her.

"Talk to them," Mason ordered carefully, hoping his voice wouldn't sound too authoritative.

"What do I say?" Her heavily-accented voice carried throughout the hangar, and the sound of it startled her.

"Tell them who you are. Tell them about you, where you're from. Whatever you feel comfortable with," the Director advised.

She stared out at the sea of people, at the quieted, confused, and expectant mass. Many faces looked awed. Some were distrustful. Most were reserving judgment until the whole thing was over.

"I ... I am Sah'Reena. I am from Murrall."

"Real cute, sweetheart. What country is Murrall in?" came a voice from below.

Sah'Reena gave her a puzzled stare. Immediately Robin stepped up beside her.

"This is not a joke," he began.

"Not a joke?" another voice spoke out. "You tell us you brought back an alien from outer space, and then you give us a model straight off the catwalk and expect us to swallow it?"

Mason nudged her gently aside and assumed the microphone. "We knew you would have a little difficulty believing. May I introduce our head of Astro-Biology, Dr. Wendicoff. Dr. Wendicoff?"

Wendicoff got to his feet and took Mason's place behind the podium. "I was asked to give you a few specifics as to the differences between us and the star girl's physio ...."

"Star girl? Is that what you're calling her?" the question rang out.

Wendicoff glared at the interruption. "Yes. Until we were able to communicate with her and find out her name, she was referred to as 'star girl'."

"Sweetcheeks doesn't look anything like a *girl* to me!" someone responded, and the crowd chuckled.

Sah'Reena backed up, turning around to find her husband directly behind her. She quickly found solace in his arms as Wendicoff continued, despite the taunts and jibes. From the corner of his eye, Robin could see Overmeyer squirming in his seat, but he kept silent, as per his

orders.

“If I may point out some of the specifics, using layman’s terms. Externally, the star girl has no fingernails. She has no toes. She has no navel. She has star-shaped instead of round pupils. She has no vagina or rectum. She has no nipples or areolas. She has an aperture in her abdomen, of which we have no immediate information as to its function. And other than her head and face, she has no body hair. “Internally, she has an extra organ, which, again, we have no information as to its function. She has no gall bladder and no lower intestine. Both of her lungs are dual-chambered. She has an extra vertebrae in her spinal column. She has no tail bone. As far as we can ascertain, she never had an appendix or tonsils. She has the same number of teeth, but no canines. She has one more pair of chromosomes. Her blood has less iron in the hemoglobin, giving it a slightly pinkish color. Her average blood pressure runs around one-eighty over one-ten, but we have reason to believe that is normal for her. Her body temperature remains constant around ninety-two degrees Fahrenheit.”

He looked up from his clipboard. “Are there any questions so far?”

A middle-aged woman stepped forward with her own mic in hand. “Dr. Wendicoff, do you realize how ridiculous this sounds to us? You call us out here with some important news. You tell us you have an alien from outer space, and then you want us to believe this malarkey? I mean, *look* at her!”

Mason laid a hand on the doctor’s arm and gave him a nod, dismissing him. Resuming the podium, the Director fielded her question.

“We knew, because of Sah’Reena’s appearance, you might have difficulty believing us. Please remember, all our preconceived notions have been driven by the movie industry. Trust me when I say, we’ve all been working in a state of shock ever since we opened her pod. That is why we are going to provide you with a little demonstration of her power.”

The room hushed, the single question on everyone’s mind. Finally, a man, wearing a blazer with a Channel 2 logo on the front pocket, stepped forward. “What power? You mean ... like some super hero?”

His comment caused titters to reverberate throughout the hangar. Mason patiently waited until they were quieted down.

“On her world, Sah’Reena is a Gifted. There are less than a hundred of her kind, among the millions of other non-endowed inhabitants. Each Gifted has a power, a ‘gift’, they are naturally born with, and no Gifted has the same power or ability as another Gifted.”

Robin realized the man was almost quoting from one of the reports he’d written back when he was giving Sah’Reena her lessons.

“What’s this Gift of hers?” the Channel 2 newsman asked.

Mason paused before quoting, “Total annihilation of any object at the molecular level.”

The resulting quiet was disconcerting. “You mean she can blow things up?” asked someone in the back.

Shaking his head, Mason explained, “No. She doesn’t blow things up. She ... dissolves them. And we’ve prepared a demonstration for you.”

“Ready?” Robin asked her quietly. So far she had remained unmoving in his arms. Now, as she began to follow Mason off the platform, he made sure to keep her within his reach.

Someone noticed him following, and yelled, “Who are you? Her bodyguard?”

Robin refused to respond, but he caught the flash of anger in Sah’Reena’s eyes as she glanced back to where the question originated.

The crowd made way for the tall, slender woman in the pink, long-sleeved sweater and

blue jeans. The so-called alien's statuesque beauty and physique were undeniable. She had the body men had written about in a million books, sung about in hundreds of songs. Her walk was smooth and graceful with those long legs. But more than that, her face alone could launch the thousand ships of Troy. Robin noticed the stares, but they didn't bother him. His only worry at that moment was making sure the woman he loved didn't suffer any further emotional trauma or breakdown from this ordeal. She had already been through too much, more than any human woman could have withstood.

As suspected, Mason led her over to the jet until they were standing beneath it. He motioned upward at the cone-shaped nose and asked, "Sah'Reena. If you please. Can you remove this airplane without harming anyone or anything else in this hangar?" Instead of waiting for her to answer, he retreated backwards until he nearly bumped into a cameraman running a direct feed to his truck.

Sah'Reena glanced back at her husband. Giving her a little smile, he nodded, and she visibly relaxed.

"You want me to remove this?" she asked the Director, turning around to face him. At Mason's nod, a look of disdain came over her face. "Why do you insult me like this?"

Mason's jaw dropped. Around them, several more people began to laugh out loud.

"Go ahead, honey. Remove the airplane," someone sniggered.

"Could you use a little help?" another voice offered, chuckling.

Again, Sah'Reena turned toward Robin. "Why are they laughing?"

"Because you need to show them the truth," he replied. "Go ahead, Sree. Show them who they're dealing with."

She spent another couple of seconds accepting his permission, then glanced up at the large object parked over her.

No one expected her to suddenly turn and begin walking directly toward them. Crew and reporters began jostling each other in their haste to retreat out of the woman's way. Just as suddenly as she had started toward them, she stopped and pivoted back around to face the jet.

Her legs were slightly parted, her arms spread outward from her sides, shoulders parallel to the floor. Her fists were clenched.

"I am Sah'Reena of the Utul to destroy, protect, and defend!" she called out in that hollow, controlled voice Robin immediately recognized. Completely fascinated, he watched as she lifted her chin to stare at the jet, and an aura of raw power began to surge from her, like the core of a miniature sun. Her skin flushed to a deep pink as her eyes widened. Every muscle tensed as she began to generate her Gift.

Then, without warning, she broke her pose and turned on Mason. "You would insult me, telling me to remove the airplane. You! You do not believe me, either! You want me to remove the airplane?"

She threw open one hand. Tiny motes of light, like angry fireflies, danced in the palm.

"I will remove the airplane. And I will remove the ground below it!"

The other hand opened, and a million points of light swirled around her fingers.

*"And I will take this building with them!"*

Her arms swept upward, stiffened, and she clapped the palms of her hands together. The sound was explosive thunder, and several people screamed in fear. She stood erect, her eyes reflecting the light that was burning hotter and hotter inside her clasped hands. The flecks of light began to dance around her arms, tiny faeries of destruction weaving back and forth, dipping and diving and whirling between her fingers.



She was a candle aflame, her hands a wick of immeasurable power. Without warning, Sah'Reena stepped back to balance herself, and threw the handful of lights upward.

Like strings of silvery Christmas lights, the pulsing points covered the interior of the roof of the hangar and slowly started spreading outward, sliding over the steel girders and beams, eating away at the structure from the top down.

And the sky began to appear above them.

She stepped backwards again. This time she tossed a hand at the jet while her other steadied the roof. The plane glimmered, wavered, caught in the web of her Gift which was tearing it apart molecule by molecule, and, before the eyes of the crowd, it began to disappear from sight as if it was no more than a cloud of smoke.

There was no sound once the thunderous clap had stunned them into silence. The T-2C continued to fade underneath its skin of a trillion tiny lights. Now the walls of the hangar were melting into the concrete floor, fading like soft wax beneath her melting power.

Outside, the people who had gathered because the building had been too full were watching in white-faced horror as the structure continued to disintegrate before them, wavering like a ghostly mirage before fading from existence.

One man backed up to get the entire scene inside the viewfinder of his camera. His back touched the wall of the hangar, and at that same instant he screamed as the advancing slide of lights began to descend upon him.

Sah'Reena turned in time to see the lights as they began to work their way onto the man's clothing. Twisting her whole body, she threw both hands toward the entrapped man, and the lights winked out of existence, as if they had never been. The cameraman blinked, unable to believe how close he'd come to death as he surveyed the remnants of his coat and shirt.

As the lights reached the concrete flooring, she turned again to face the last wavering blink of the plane before it was forever gone. As she had promised, the floor beneath it sunk into the ground, and as the lights reached the dead grass and earth, Sah'Reena swept her arms forward as if gathering them up into her embrace, her hands open, fingers out. Swept upward, turned, closed her hands tightly ....

The lights disappeared. Blinked out, snuffed out, wiped away. As if they'd never been.

The cold wind blew over everyone, reminding them that they were now exposed to the open air and the elements. It was as if someone threw a switch as the entire mass of people reacted as one body, and they began advancing toward the alien woman.

He had been held in rapt wonder as he watched her sweep her arms and prove to the world the wondrous ability she had been given. This was only the third time Robin had watched her using her power. First the mug, then Pete's den. Now this.

*This place ... this space center ... I could make it go away. All of it. Easy.*

*I could destroy whole worlds.*

"Oh, my God," he breathed aloud as she tucked her arms close to her chest and shivered.

In two long strides he was beside her. Throwing the coat around her, Robin pulled her tightly against his chest, wrapping his arms protectively about her. At the sight of the man clasping her in his embrace, the surging tide of reporters stumbled to a halt. He continued to stare them down in silence, daring them to encroach closer. Against his neck Sah'Reena continued to shake. Softly, he asked her, "Are you all right?"

She felt hot against him. Almost burning. Her skin was still flushed from her exertions.

"I am c-cold."

Like a fever. Hot, cold, her body was wracked with chills in the aftermath.

“Who are you?” A female reporter stuck her mic in his face.

Ignoring her, Robin turned and slowly began to help Sah’Reena back toward the podium. At least, he figured once he got her back up on the dais, putting that small distance between her and the crowd would calm his shattered nerves, if not hers.

“Sir! Answer the question, please! Who are you? Aren’t you afraid of getting destroyed by the star girl’s powers?”

The absurdity of the question grated. “She does not destroy people, or didn’t you notice how she saved that man over by the wall?” Robin pointed out in low, terse voice.

“Is she able to take out more? Could she remove a bigger building?” another man shouted out.

“Is she ill? Is that why she looks like that?”

At the inquiry, Robin glanced down to see that her face was paler than usual. Her eyes were closed. Except for the fact that she was keeping pace with him as they dashed toward the small stage, she looked asleep.

*“Ka rinn. Kili a’atrika losa piriminda?”*

*My love, are you drained and weak after using your Gift?*

She answered with a simple shake of her head, but remained mute.

They got to the steps of the dais and ascended them together. Immediately after they reached the stage, a pair of armed guards closed ranks behind them, preventing anyone from following them.

“How is she? What’s wrong with her?” Mason hissed, coming up from the side. Once the plane had begun to glitter, he had retreated to the dais to watch the whole thing from there.

“She’ll be fine. Just a bit cold. Give her a minute.” Robin continued to rub her arms and back as she remained pressed along his length. Laying his lips against her hair, he murmured, “You were magnificent, Sree. I was just as spellbound as everyone else.”

A tiny tremor went through her. Taking a small step away from him, she raised her face until she could gaze into his eyes. For a minute she studied him, searching his eyes for that sign of fear and rejection she knew had to be there. That had always been there whenever someone she cared about viewed her ability at its worst. In the past, whenever she had opened up her Gift and spread destruction where she had been ordered to use it, even those closest to her had withdrawn in fear, trepidation, or stark terror. Every man who had promised to remain with her, each friend who had claimed that nothing would ruin their friendship—not one person had been able to approach her after seeing the enormity of her Gift. Even her own parents had backed away at first.

She wasn’t as cold as she was desolate. This was the moment she had never wanted to happen. If Robin feared her, if he were to leave or turn her away, she didn’t know what she would do. But she knew that if there was the smallest bit of dread in his heart because of what he knew she was capable of, it would crush her.

“Robin?”

His deep green eyes watched her, calm and tranquil and concerned as they studied her. Eyes still shining from what he’d witnessed.

“You do not fear me?” she whispered, her voice hitching.

His smile was tender. “Fear? Why would I fear you?”

“Because of my Gift. Does it not scare you?” She shivered again, and a feeling of faintness passed through her when he enfolded and covered her with his love.

“You can control it. You proved it when you saved that man. You can direct it, to its

most finite degree. And when you are in the grip of its strength, you are the most perfect, the most incredible creature I have ever seen. Why would that scare me, my love?" His mouth was next to her ear, blowing warmth into her hair.

Mason tugged on his sleeve again. "Will she answer their questions now?"

Robin leaned back slightly. "Well?"

The lightness of her happiness was just beginning to fill her. He accepted her. He actually reveled in her Gift. Hot tears stung her eyes, and Sah'Reena found herself on the verge of a hard, joyous bout of weeping. Somehow she managed a small smile and a nod to let him know she would now speak to the crowd.

Robin led her over to the microphone, but he kept one arm about her waist. As she waited for the people to settle down, she glanced over at him once more in relief and hope.

And she saw only pride in his beautiful eyes.

## Chapter Forty Two

## Interrogation

*I will love you. Forever.*

They were the words he had burned into her heart. They were the words she could read in the softness of his gaze as he held her waist and gently squeezed it.

Turning back to the bank of microphones shoved toward her, Sah'Reena steeled herself and began to take their questions. On the other side of her, Mason began picking out individual reporters, queuing them up for questioning.

"Where is Murrall?"

The Director fielded that one, referring to his handful of notes in the process. "We believe it's located in the Ganymede system, in the star cluster known as Cassiopeia. Unfortunately, that's a very vague direction, but it's the best we can ascertain at this time. We do know, however, that it is a twin planet system, with a blue dwarf star for a sun. Because of it ...." He checked a memo. "We believe the planet may have had a heavier gravity than ours. And because our sun is brighter, she is more sensitive to the daylight. Other than that, we know little else."

In the back of Robin's mind, he remembered the times he had picked her up in his arms. Her musculature was like steel rope, dense, hard, and strong, but she weighed practically nothing it seemed.

"Does she have any other power besides the one we witnessed?"

This time, the star girl resumed the mic. "No," she breathed, careful to pronounce her words as clearly as possible. "My Gift is to remove what I am told. But how great I can remove things can change."

"How great? What do you mean by 'how great'?" a shout went up in the back.

"I mean ... I mean big things I can remove with no problem. Little things, smaller things, I have to think harder, but I can do them."

From the sea of faces, Robin could see their confusion as they tried to comprehend what she was telling them. Stepping forward, he interjected, "What she's trying to tell you is that she can remove very small items, as well. For instance, she can remove the writing on a piece of paper, but leave the paper intact. She can take the paint and shellac off of a table, leaving the bare wood. If need be, there's the possibility she could take out cataracts and tumors without damaging the surrounding tissue. She can pinpoint her Gift to a very fine degree, as well as take out large structures like this hangar."

"And you are ... ?"

"Dr. Robin Dickenson. I've been her teacher, and I act as intermediary and bodyguard, as well." That much was the truth, although he knew that sooner or later the truth would come out. Until then, however, all attention needed to remain focused on the star girl. From the corner of his eye he could see Mason staring at him, but the man made no move to add any additional information.

They would have to relay to the public all the information they had found out, or as much as they felt the news outlets should know, and it would be the media who would shape the

public's opinion as to whether Sah'Reena would be welcome or rejected on this world. If they found her to be the possible answer and salvation to many problems, the same way Robin thought of her, life would become much easier for them. But, if they believed she was a possible danger or posed any threat to humanity ....

A shiver, like a knife filleting the skin from his spine, went up his back, leaving his stomach feeling as if it was filled with heavy lumps of lead. He couldn't let his mind go down that track. Her rejection was not something he could dwell on for long, much less consider.

"What has been the most difficult thing for you to accept here on Earth?" a woman inquired. Her credentials bore the AP press logo.

Sah'Reena paused a moment to think. "I must be careful what I eat," she replied. "Food that you have no problems with could be dangerous to me."

"Glen Hodges, Channel 13 Eyewitness News. Why were you in the pod in the first place?"

A spark of righteous indignation glittered in her eyes for the briefest moment. Lifting her chin, her timid voice grew stronger with her convictions. "I would not be a weapon for the Sacrant. They wanted me to destroy life, and I refused. But my Gift is great, and becoming greater. They were afraid they could no longer control me or my Gift, and they told the people I was a ... a ...." She turned to Robin as she sought the word she wanted. "*Otilo'o bilo?*"

"Renegade," he offered, was as close as he could think of to the word she'd provided.

She turned back to the microphones. "They told the people I was a renegade. I was a danger to the people, and therefore I had to be eliminated."

Glancing down on the podium lid, where her hands were tightly clasped together, she continued in a softer tone. Her voice soon turned dark as the memories she had kept bottled up inside came foaming to the surface.

"There were other Gifted who sided with me. Who felt my cause was the right one. We have no right to take away the lives of others, even if they are our enemies. There are other ways to vanquish our enemies, to defeat them. The Sacrant saw I was convincing other Gifted not to destroy life, and they ... they grew very angry.

"One evening we were in hiding, planning on how to overthrow the Sacrant so we could live our lives as others. So we could be allowed to be free, and ...." Her head snapped up. "I will use my Gift to protect and defend, but I will not be a weapon for others to decide who lives and who dies!"

A hand in the crowd waved overhead. "The Sacrant ... is this your government?"

Sah'Reena nodded. "It is part of it, yes. It is the body who rules the Gifted."

Another hand went up. "Vera Gomez, News This Week. You said one evening you were in hiding, but you didn't finish telling us what happened."

A shiver went through the star girl's body. Robin spread his fingers over her hip, reminding her she had his strength to draw upon.

"We had to make our plans in secrecy. But somehow the Sacrant found out. They sent Gifted who had not joined us, Gifted who remained loyal to the Judiciary, along with many, many guards. While we fought the other Gifted, the guards shot us with *fu'ul avi'i*. It ... it prevents us from using our Gift. It keeps us ... weak and unable to think. Unable to concentrate.

"They dragged us to the Sacrant, who pronounced judgment on us. It is decreed no Gifted can be put to death, so my sentence was to be podded. The rest ... my friends, they were to be kept in *fu'ul todavi'i* until they could be ... *sokka viet*, Robin?"

"Rehabilitated? Brainwashed?"

She nodded. The point had been made. "They were returned to training until they no longer opposed the Sacrant. But I had to be made a lesson of. They had to show the others, the Gifted and the people, what would happen if any others chose to go against the direct orders of the Judiciary."

A turquoise tear started to roll down one cheek, but it twinkled out of existence almost immediately. The cameras whirled in close-up.

"So they podded you?" the News This Week woman repeated. "And then what?"

"No." Sah'Reena backed up slightly and lowered her head between her arms as she tried to gather the courage to reveal it all. This was the part she had kept from them all, and yet she had tried to share with him back at the hotel. The last of the cancer waiting to be exorcized from her soul. Moving back in front of the bank of microphones, she continued, keeping her eyes directed downward.

"They took me to ... to punishment. I was b-beamed."

Her entire body tensed, as if it was reliving the memory.

"What is beamed, *ka rinn*?" Robin asked gently.

Two more tears fell, like blue topaz crystals. "It is a ... stick. There is a p- ... point at the end. They p-put . . ." This time a shudder went through her, and it became clear to all she was fighting the terror that was eating her from the inside out. Reaching over, Robin took one of her hands in his and gave it a hard, almost painful squeeze to help center her. The extra contact seemed to help.

"They put the stuck inside you, under the skin ... and it cuts ... turns and cuts ... and the pain is . . ."

She wobbled on legs beginning to weaken from her distress. As her words sank in, Robin visualized the ropey scars on her back, and he could see the point beneath the skin turning and chewing its way through muscle and tendon like a blood-hungry drill bit, until the shredded and torn flesh was left in a twisted, knotted mass. There were more than a dozen of those permanent knots in her back. Without realizing it, he lowered his head as his body reacted from the horror of what she'd had to endure. The excruciating pain she had suffered.

Somewhere Sah'Reena found a reservoir of strength to continue. "They gave me little to drink and nothing to eat during those four days I was prepared. Each day I was beamed. Each day I grew weaker and less able to save myself."

"Four *days*?" a voice in the crowd yelled out.

She continued without answering. "To disgrace me among the other Gifted, they removed my ribbons of authority. They cut my hair. My mother and father were sent away to live in another city. All known records about me and what I was were destroyed. In the end, on the day I was podded, they took me out into the crowd to show them how far I had been defeated. I was taken into the Deathship, and from above my world I was shot into space."

"Mike Oldencamp, from News Post! You said your world couldn't kill a Gifted, but they sent you into space to die? Isn't that the same as killing you?"

She graced him with a small, humorless smile. "Not to our way of thinking. If a traitor dies while in space, the Judiciary does not consider itself the killer. I was alive when I left my world. My death would not be their fault."

"That's utter nonsense," another voice commented.

"Even so ...." Holding up her arms, Sah'Reena presented herself. "I have defied all that has been thrown at me. I have defied all the laws of space. I am here, but I cannot tell you how, or why. Can you?"

A movement from the corner of his eye caught Robin's attention. General Overmeyer got to his feet and approached the end of the dais, turning so that he was facing the podium.

"I have a question for the star girl," he announced loudly. His face was white, but there was an undeniable gleam in his eyes that raised Robin's hackles. In his arms, Sah'Reena turned her head to give the man a patient but wary look. Obediently, the news media waited for the authority figure in uniform to have his say.

"I want to know how many people you've 'removed', star girl. How many people have you killed?"

The noise from the crowd began to swell. Individual mics were raised as they waited for her answer.

"Less than they wanted me to," she finally replied.

"So you *have* killed?" Overmeyer reiterated, his eyes narrowing.

"In the beginning, yes," Sah'Reena admitted. "Before I came to see how wrong it was. I will not lie."

Robin saw her eyes slide up to his. He gave her waist another squeeze. It suddenly became clear to him that she was terrified of losing him, now that the truth about her was coming to light. Softly, so only she could hear, he repeated his vow.

*"Aba roatili'i, ka rinn."*

*I will love you. Forever.*

Overmeyer, however, seemed very pleased by her admission. Assuming a military parade-rest stance, with his arms clasped behind the small of his back, the General tilted his head slightly in the star girl's direction.

"You have killed before, but you stopped only because your government managed to stop you before you killed others."

She reacted instantly in anger. "No! That is not how it happened!"

"That's why they drugged you," Overmeyer continued. "They had to drug you to prevent you from harming others. They tortured you to show you some discipline."

"No!"

"General, your assumptions are unfounded," Robin stepped in. He turned to Mason and gave the Director a nod to let him know the General had to be removed. Immediately.

"You're feeding the media a crock of shit," Overmeyer smiled. "You're going for the sympathy vote, when the real reason you were shot out into space was to protect your people. Admit it, star girl! Admit you were deemed too dangerous to live!"

A squad of four armed guards came up onto the platform to escort the General to safer quarters.

"You lie!" Sah'Reena cried out, her face pale and covered in more tears. "You lie! I would not follow their orders! I would not kill any more, so they had me removed!"

"But we know better, don't we?" Overmeyer taunted as he was being led away. "You and I, we know the real truth now, don't we? They couldn't stop you from killing every living being who got into your way, so they did the only thing they could to ensure their own safety! To ensure their own survival as a species and a planet! And now you're here with us, and there isn't a damn thing we can do to protect ourselves *from you!*"

Her hand came up automatically, fingers flared, the iridescent glitter of her Gift outlining the palm. Robin knew, without a doubt, she only meant to hush the General up. To toss away his air as she'd done before to others. But it was the wrong response. The crowd would not know her intent. And without thinking, he threw up his hand to grab her wrist and stop her as a

scream erupted from the group. The slap of skin against skin was clearly heard by all.

The media stepped back in stunned silence. For the span of several heartbeats, green eyes met dark blue, and a current of communication passed wordlessly between them. Finally, Sah'Reena curled her fingers back together, snuffing out the infinitesimal flecks of light. In that moment, Robin knew that no one else in her lifetime had ever stopped her so abruptly from using her Gift. He now had become a solid, stabilizing force for her. Not just for her emotionally, but for her physically, as well.

She was the Gifted. He was her source of strength.

She held the power. He controlled it.

And every time they made love, her ability became greater.

Unable to stop himself, Robin drew her hand down and pressed it to his chest. It was an incredible feeling to know how strong her love was for him.

Below them, the media went into a frenzy.



## Chapter Forty Three

## Invitation

“The cat’s officially out of the bag.”

Robin glanced up from his cup of coffee in time to see his father launch the newspaper at him. He tried to catch it, but missed, and the huge tome slammed onto the table, barely missing his bowl of cereal.

It wasn’t hard to read the enormous headline—“ALIEN LIFE EXISTS!” And under it, in a somewhat smaller font, was the sub-header “Sah’Reena of Murrall, Angel of Life or Death?” Beneath that were two photos. One was of her using her Gift. In the picture the little lights looked ominous as they melted the steel girders and jet aircraft like so much ice cream under the hot sun. The other photo was a facial close-up of her speaking into the microphones. Either the photographer was a professional, or Sah’Reena’s features were more enhanced through the lens. She appeared both other-worldly and breathtakingly beautiful.

“You know what the headline’s going to be tomorrow, don’t you?” Peter added. Seeing the inquisitive look on the young man’s face, he pointed directly at him. “You. I’ll bet you a dollar to a donut they’ll find out today you two are married, and then watch the fireworks fly. Have you listened any to the news network today?”

“I was rather hoping to avoid it,” Robin remarked dryly.

Giving a snort, Pete turned his back on the man and walked back into his newly refurbished den. The new liquid crystal screen mounted on the wall was filled with images of what had taken place the day before at the space center. Following behind his father, Robin paused in the doorway to watch and listen.

“... the enormity of her power has yet to be seen, but sources within the space center assure us that the demonstration witnessed yesterday is but the tip of the iceberg. Coming up next ...”

The sudden ringing of the telephone masked the narrative coming from the television. Pete answered it. “Gray residence. Yeah.” Eyebrows went up, and Robin turned his full attention toward his father. “Is this for real? All right. Please hold a minute.” He placed a hand over the receiver and gave the young man a disbelieving stare. “It’s for you. It’s the President.”

Robin started. “President of what?”

“Of the United States.”

Knowing that his father wasn’t prone to practical jokes, Robin took the receiver. “Hello?”

“Is this Dr. Robin Dickenson?” asked a cool female voice.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Please hold. I will connect you to the President.”

A moment later a familiar voice came over the line. “Dr. Dickenson?”

“Yes, Mr. President.” Robin looked over at his father and nodded.

“Son, answer one quick question before we get to the serious stuff. Are you really married to the alien star girl?”

Of course the man would know, Robin told himself. He had all of the FBI and CIA, and God knew what other intelligence groups ready to move at his command. "Yes, sir, we're married."

"Good gravy, man! Well, never mind. What's done is done. Listen, I've been watching the news, and my head of the military has called a special meeting for oh-eleven hundred today. Our main concern is this. Is the star girl a potentially dangerous entity?"

"Dangerous in what way?" Robin immediately snapped back. He was answered by a low laugh. "No, really," he persisted. "Do you think I would deliberately place myself in danger if there was even the slightest chance of getting evaporated?"

"Evaporated. I like that term. I watched the film sent over by my men. I especially like the part where General Overmeyer makes the comment that there's absolutely no way we can protect ourselves ... how did he put it?"

"There isn't a damn thing we can do to protect ourselves from you." Robin supplied from memory.

"Yeah, that was it," the President chuckled. "And then, she raises her hand to obviously deal him a dose of what she can do, and you, *you* just grab her arm and stop her. Cold. My God, what a set you have on you, son."

"What is your point, Mr. President?"

"Can you do that every time? Just stop her cold? No matter what she's doing, or how far she's into doing it?"

"I won't know until I have to. But to be very honest with you, in the few weeks we've been together, the only time Sah'Reena has used her Gift was never with the intention of hurting anyone. I know she's telling the truth when she says she was punished for refusing to bow to the orders of the Sacrant."

"How do you know it's the truth?" the President questioned earnestly. "In a few short minutes I'm going to have to convince my entire military cabinet this woman is our ally. How do you propose I do that?"

"You have to get to know her, Mr. President. Talk with her. Learn what she's like. She's had to suffer greatly for her beliefs. It's a miracle she's managed to survive and get this far. Sir, there is much we can learn from her. Just as there's much she can do for us. But the one thing she adamantly refuses to do is to become a weapon for others. She made mistakes. She knows that. Now she's trying to find some sort of retribution for her sins."

Taking a deep breath, Robin added, "Sir, the feelings between Sree and I are real. The marriage is not a sham. Nor is it an attempt to legalize her status as an American citizen. If this country deems her *persona non grata*, then I will go with her wherever we can find some sort of sanctuary. But you don't want that to happen, Sir. Her Gift is extremely powerful and growing. There are things she could do for us that would benefit mankind for centuries to come. Just ... just try to convince your men to give her the chance. Please. Just give her the chance."

A long pause came over the phone. In the background Robin could hear a thin, high whine coming over the wires. Presently the man came back on the line. "Dr. Dickenson, would it be possible for me to speak with her?"

"I'll have to go upstairs to wake her."

"Not a problem. I'll wait."

Putting the man on hold, Robin started upstairs to his old bedroom where they'd spent the night.

"Well?" Peter called from downstairs as he saw his son stop at the landing.

“He wants to speak to Sree,” Robin explained, and headed for the back bedroom.

As he half-expected, she was still sound asleep under the covers. In fact, it didn’t look as though she’d moved from the time he’d slid the sheet and blanket over her, shielding her naked body from the cold. She was so prone to chills, especially since her constant body temperature was lower than his. It didn’t matter what position he slept in, she always managed to huddle close to his warmth.

Closing the door behind him, Robin walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge. She was exhausted. So was he, for that matter, and he wasn’t the one who’d expended all that energy the day before.

After the news conference, which had lasted a good two hours, they had retreated back to the main mall at the space center to field more questions. By one o’clock, Robin had called a halt for them to get some lunch. Sah’Reena had eaten little, and begged for a short nap. Locking themselves safely in Pete’s office had not been a good idea, and they’d made love on the carpet like two starving savages. It was nearly two hours later when Pete had unlocked the door to find them naked, cuddled on the couch, and sound asleep.

By that time the media had been taken on a tour to see the pod that had brought the star girl to their galaxy. Pictures were snapped and scientists were interviewed, and then the whole entourage was led back to Building Five where Robin’s office was located. He and Sah’Reena went back outside where she performed other, smaller demonstrations of her Gift, to show how finely tuned her ability was.

A smile graced his lips. One of the cameramen had a strawberry birthmark on his face. He’d approached Robin on the side and asked, practically begged, to know if the star girl could remove it. Not only was she able to remove it, but she’d gotten great pleasure out of helping. Her joy was clearly evident, and the media realized how much easier she felt around them, now that the initial awkwardness was gone.

They were steadily warming up to her, and for the first time Robin allowed himself the smallest fragment of hope.

By five p.m. the center went on lock-down. The news media packed its gear, but by then the world was already very much aware of its new visitor from the stars. As they sat in Mason’s office to watch the broadcast news, they were given their first indication as to whether or not Sah’Reena would be treated as a guest or as an invader.

As they sat on the carpet, watching, Robin relished the feel of her in his arms, now that he was able to hold her as he’d been wanting to do all day. It wouldn’t be long before everyone else knew their secret, but for now he could touch her and place small kisses in her hair and on her skin without having to care about prying eyes. Likewise, Sah’Reena leaned back into his embrace and whispered little words of love, short Murrallisian phrases meant to thrill and entice and get his blood boiling, which they did.

While on the screen she melted a one ton aircraft as if it was butter.

Both the national news, then the local news reported the day’s events, then afterwards a commentary was set up to discuss the pros and cons of her being there. All things taken into consideration, it appeared as if the general consensus was to give her the chance to prove herself. The trust of the American people was there, but she had to earn it.

On the way back to Pete’s, they had sat in the back seat and talked quietly, resisting the urge to fondle each other in the darkness, or to share secret kisses, knowing that once they started, they wouldn’t be able to stop. And the last thing Robin wanted was to make love to his wife with his father within hearing and seeing distance.

Once they were home, Pete had ordered pizzas while they had gone upstairs. When they hadn't come down, even after Peter had let them know the pizzas had arrived, the older man didn't go back up to see what was keeping them. His father was smarter than that.

In fact, his father seemed quite surprised to come downstairs the next morning to find his son already in the kitchen fixing coffee. That was when the old man had gone outside to fetch the morning paper just as a Channel 11 news van came careening around the corner of the block.

\* \* \* \*

Leaning over his wife's form, Robin nuzzled the tender skin underneath her ear. One hand snaked under the sheet to find the warm firmness of one breast, and he tweaked and milked the hardening nipple until she responded.

Unfortunately, he realized too late his own body was doing the same, and his sweatpants were quickly tenting away from his body.

"*Ka rinn, velo ka rinn.* Wake up. There's a very important man on the telephone who wants to talk to you."

His hand moved downward, over one tasty hip, and it was starting there that he let his fingertips brush and tease the silken skin across her lower stomach. Muscles bunched beneath his caresses, and Sah'Reena moaned softly at his touch. Already her body was growing hotter with her rising desire as his hand continued to excite her with slow, feathery strokes.

"*Sree. Velo ka rinn. Piamilianda ka rinn.* Wake up."

"*Tesirian aba,*" she begged throatily. Plaintively.

A chuckle rose in his throat. "Later. I promise. But you need to take this phone call. It's very important for us that you do."

Slowly her eyes opened to find his face inches above hers. As his lips came down to brush across her forehead, he handed her the receiver.

"This is a very important man on my world. Treat him with the greatest respect." That being said, Robin pressed the hold button and placed the phone against her ear.

"Hello?" she asked breathily, still somewhat asleep. Robin grinned and wondered what the President would think if he realized the woman was still simmering in the glowing aftermath of her last orgasm.

This close to her, he could hear the man's voice on the other end.

"Is this Sah'Reena of Murrall?"

"Yes. I am Sah'Reena," she reiterated. There was no way anyone could copy her accent, although Robin wondered how soon someone would try.

"May I ask you some questions?"

"Yes."

"Are you happy here?"

Robin saw her glance his way. "Yes. I am very happy."

"That's good to hear," the President responded. "I understand you've just gotten married. May I offer you my congratulations?"

"*Co'ova colu a'a,*" Robin told her.

"Thank you," she complied into the phone.

"Sah'Reena, I have to admit to you, after seeing what you did yesterday, there are many of us who are afraid of what you're capable of doing."

"I understand, but you have nothing to fear."

"You were going to dissolve the General yesterday, weren't you?"

"No," she immediately corrected him, pulling herself from Robin's embrace and sitting

up. “No. What I do is remove the air. When they cannot breathe, they become unconscious. They are not hurt, but neither can they hurt me.”

“Ah,” the President responded. “That’s what you do. Well, it gives me some relief to know that. I would like to meet you. I would like for my Chiefs of Staff to meet you. Would it be possible for you to come up here to Washington so we can meet?”

“Can Robin come, too?”

“Sure. Bring him with you. I’d like to hear from him how you were rescued from your pod and brought back to life. He is the one who did that for you, isn’t he?”

Her voice was warm when she answered him. “Yes. Yes, he did that for me.”

“Well, we’ll be looking forward to seeing you both. I’ll have arrangements made for Air Force One to land down there to pick you up tomorrow. Until then, I want to personally welcome you to Earth. I hope we can mutually benefit from each other.”

“Thank you,” Sah’Reena said again, then handed the phone back to her husband. “We will get to see him tomorrow,” she told him.

“I know. I think, Sree, it’s going to happen,” he smiled at her across the tumbled bedclothes.

“Happen?”

“Our lives together. I think we might actually be able to have one.”

She flowed across the still-warm sheets, into his arms as he drank in her quivering kiss. He could feel her fingers fumbling at the waistband of his sweatpants, and he quickly jerked out the knot, sliding off and kicking the velour pants onto the floor.

*Tesirian aba*, she had begged him earlier. Roughly translated, she has asked him to make love to her hard and heavy. Or, in crude but toe-curling English, fuck me.

Before she had the chance to ask him again, he shoved himself into her slick, moist body, and she arched herself against his bare skin until neither one of them was aware of anything else surrounding them.

Slowly, gradually, they drew strength from their timeless love. It was the greatest gift they could give each other.

## Chapter Forty Four

## Caution

By lunch time the street was filled with as many news crews as it could hold, and still allow passage for a single vehicle. Since Texas law forbade trespassing on lawns, that left the single sidewalk running parallel to the property, and the street, as the only public thoroughfare.

Early on, Pete had turned the volume off the telephone. He screened all calls coming in before he would answer, and even then he wondered when someone would get smart and try to call in using an extension they trusted.

"You're going to need to get the police to clear you a way out," Pete suggested. He watched as his daughter-in-law glanced surreptitiously out the window at the crowd gathered. There was no mistaking the reason for their presence. The news about the marriage was already on the tube.

"Or, I could remove a few trucks," Sah'Reena grinned mischievously. "That would piss a few of them off, right?"

Both men turned in unison to stare at her in shock. Seeing their expressions, she laughed delightedly. "I did not take the time to learn just the usable words, my husband. Sometimes the badder words can work just as effectively, right?"

Remembering some of the 'badder' words he had taught her for the intimate moments between the two of them, Robin flushed slightly and grinned. "You're getting too smart for your own britches, sweetheart. But this time we'll need to do it Dad's way. I'll phone the police and ask for an escort to the center. Sree, better grab a jacket. It's going to be chilly tonight."

Once she had left the den, Peter turned back to his son. "Did Mason give you any reason why he had to see you?"

"No. Just that it was imperative we both come back to the center so he could see us for a few minutes. A jet copter is supposed to be landing on the main concourse at the end of the center tomorrow around ten a.m." He sighed heavily. "They don't want to take any chances of something happening at one of the airports, which is why they chose to come get us in this manner. It's going to cause major disruptions, but at least it's out in the open."

He glanced back out the window again. Several times a brave soul had rung the front doorbell, but finally had to admit defeat when no one answered the door. It wasn't until Pete has spotted a lone figure sneaking around the driveway in the rear of the house, trying to gain entrance through the garage, that he finally called the police and explained the situation.

Pulling out his cell, he checked to see he had thirty-two missed calls and eighteen new messages. Fortunately, three were from Jack. Robin called her back on the unpublished inside line.

"Rob?"

"Hey, Jack! Anything new?"

"Oh, funny, funny, wise guy!" she practically growled irritably. "I don't know whether to kiss you or put a contract out on you! Where are you?" She sounded breathless and definitely out of sorts.

"I'm still at Dad's. We're waiting for the police to show up to help clear us a way out of

here. Mason called, asking to see us.”

“Well, all I can say is thank God Johnson is in lockdown. Everybody and their mother has been calling today, wanting verification that you and the star girl are married.”

“What have you been telling them?”

“That it was information I was unable to verify, and that they would need to speak to you personally instead. And, no, you weren’t in today, could I take a message. Gee jiminy, Rob!” Her voice suddenly dropped to a soft, conspiratorial tone. “I got to speak to that cute guy, that new weekend anchorman over at NBC Evening News! They’re all wanting personal interviews with you.”

For some reason, hearing how his assistant had been running interference for him made him chuckle. “Jack, what would I do without you? Okay, slight change of tactics. From now on, if someone calls to ask if Sree and I are married, confirm it.”

“Confirm it? Okay. Gotcha. What else?”

“If they want to speak to me or her, do an interview, anything like that, take a name and number. If they keep calling back, or start to harass you, turn on that Campbell charm and let them know that I might not get the message at all if they persist. I’ll make the decision who to call back.”

“Take a message. Got it. Next?”

“Just don’t fall of any of their shenanigans. They’re going to use every trick in the book to try and get past you.”

He heard a snort of determination, and he could imagine the expression on the petite redhead’s face at that moment. “Hey, I haven’t worked for you for the past four years and not learned a thing or two about being tenacious. By the way, how’s the star girl doing? I’ve had the television on here all day, and it seems like they’re reserving judgment on her.”

“She’s doing fine,” he told her. “Still a bit leery as to all the attention, but who wouldn’t be? Look, we’re getting a police escort over there. Can you stay until we arrive?”

“Sure thing, boss. Just give me some ideas what you want for a wedding present, and I’ll do some shopping online while I’m waiting.”

Robin grinned. She wasn’t joking. “See you soon, Jack,” he told her, and closed his cell.

“Police are here.”

Nodding, Robin stepped back out of sight while his father answered the door and ushered the two officers inside. Once the door was closed, Robin addressed the men. “Thanks for coming out,” he began.

“Is there a problem?” The officer with a nametag that read LEMMONS, S. was giving him a leery eye. “Aren’t you the guy who married ...”

Robin cut him off with a wave of his hand. “Yes, which is why we would appreciate getting an escort over to the space center,” he began, when both men’s faces went slack. Robin turned around to see his wife coming down the stairs. She paused on the landing to shrug on her sweater jacket, giving the men a shy smile in return. Despite the fact that she was dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved blouse, there remained an ethereal quality about her that was unavoidable. Even without using her Gift, she was like an inner light trying to break out of the darkness. Seeing her husband motioning her over, she joined him in the foyer. “Sree, these gentlemen are going to help us get back to the center. Officers, my wife, Sah’Reena.”

Lemmons stuck out his hand, then hesitated. His eyes nearly bugged out of his head when the star girl reached out and shook his hand. The second officer whose tag read MISSIONS, P. numbly offered his, as well, and got the same greeting. Both men paused to stare

at the palms of their hands, unable to believe what had just happened, until Lemmons reached inside his shirt pocket and pulled out a small spiral notebook.

"Uhh, excuse me, ma'am, but is there any way you could give me an autograph?" He held out the notebook and a pen toward her.

Robin caught her questioning glance his way. "*Evavali'i*," he interpreted, making a writing motion with one hand.

She took the notebook from the man, opened it to a clean page, and made a gesture over the paper with the tip of her finger. Robin recognized the sign of her *Utuli'ia*, her name and symbol, etched on the sheet as permanently as if she'd done it in ink. Both men watched with rapt attention as if she were performing sleight-of-hand magic. Handing the notebook back to the officer, she cocked her head at the other policeman, as if expecting him to ask her the same. The man quickly complied, pulling out a similar notepad from his breast pocket.

"Would you like to follow us? Or would you rather we take you in our squad car?" Lemmons inquired as his partner pocketed his autograph.

"Would it be possible to provide us an escort? Give us the chance to get to the space center without someone blocking our way."

"Captain said something about going to Bush."

Robin nodded. "The President is sending Air Force One to the airport to take us to Washington. But we're supposed to meet a 'copter at Johnson to take us to the airport."

Missions nodded. "Makes sense. The space center is closer. Less traffic to maneuver around. All right." He backed away and radioed in their plan of action.

"We'll take point," Lemmons instructed. "You two take the middle, and we'll support your rear. Stay directly behind us and we'll keep you covered. Now, where's your vehicle?"

Robin took Sah'Reena by the elbow and they exited the house through the back door where the vehicle sat in the driveway. With the exception of some crowding by the media as they pulled into the street, there was very little interference on their way to the space center. However, once they neared the exit ramp leading off 45, things no longer ran smoothly.

The media lined two-lane blacktop all the way from the Space Center to Johnson. Trucks and vans were pulled off onto the grass, and people were crowding the area as close to NASA as possible. More than once Robin heard the rapid whirr of helicopter rotors pass by overhead as the three squad cars helped them make their way to the front entrance of Johnson.

The police pulled their cars into a semi-circle in front of the main gate as a guard waved Robin into the compound. A heavy sigh of relief passed his lips once they turned into the parking lot and he parked in his assigned slot. Sah'Reena gave him a curious glance.

"You've been silent the whole way down here," he commented. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"I am worried for you," she murmured softly.

His head jerked up. "For me?"

"Yes. You are trying hard to protect me, when I am very able to protect myself. Robin, stop fighting."

She reached across the gear box and took his hand where it rested on his knee. He watched in a detached mode as her fingers caressed the back of his hand before lacing between his fingers. His hand was larger than hers. It was almost ludicrous to think what kind of power could be generated from those slender fingers and porcelain skin.

"I'll never stop fighting for you," he admitted. "It's part of who I am. It's part of what being human means. The male instinct to protect what is his. To defend and protect his mate."



Somehow he managed a weak smile. “I know you can protect me far better than I ever could you, but that won’t stop me from trying.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “Come on. Mason’s wanting to talk to us before the ‘copter gets here to take us to D.C.”

## Chapter Forty Five

## Warning

Mason had all the earmarks of a man faced with a daunting decision. He didn't wait for Robin and Sah'Reena to take their seats in front of his carved desk before blurting out the news.

"Overmeyer is bringing in the big guns. He's convinced someone up in Washington that Sah'Reena could be a threat to national security, and therefore she needs to be contained as quickly as possible."

"Overmeyer is reaching," Robin snapped heatedly. "The man wants to be in charge. He wants to use Sree as his own personal artillery, and he thinks that by throwing a chain around her neck and convincing the public that she's nothing more than a rabid dog, that he'll get the opportunity to have her turned over to the military."

"Overmeyer has connections, Rob. Strong connections. Many of them with far-reaching arms and constituents you don't want to meet in a dark alley." Mason glanced down at the woman sitting quietly. She was listening intently, and he wished he knew what kind of signals she was throwing out.

It wasn't difficult for Robin to guess what the man was thinking. "Sree is ready for whatever the man has planned," he assured the director. Seeing the man open his mouth to object, he hurried to add, "And I know just how far she can go. If I see her starting to cross that line, I'll stop her."

He threw a glance at his wife, who was staring at him in dark-eyed compliance.

"Yeah. But you're already making a critical mistake. What if he manages to separate you two? Who's going to put the brakes on you, Sah'Reena, when Rob isn't around to grab your arm?"

"I will not hurt anyone," she promised in a soft voice. "Not even Overmeyer." An amused grin suddenly lit her face. "But I might skin his knees by accident."

"Not good enough, sweetheart. But you're right, Sir. I need to be with her at all times, regardless of what the general instructs."

"I've said it before, and I'll remind you again. The military has no jurisdiction in this center other than to maintain security. After 9-11 those operations went into overdrive, and a large part of what goes on here went further undercover. Which, for the most part, was a blessing when we discovered and brought you here," Mason told the woman sitting not six feet away from him. This was the closest he had been to the star girl. Close enough to see how unearthly beautiful she was. Close enough to see the minute details that made her different from them. Yet the details were insignificant. She was a priceless, one-of-a-kind jewel never before discovered. For the first time in his life Mason was at a loss for words when he found himself being studied by those depthless eyes. He didn't know whether to envy Dickenson, or pray for the man's well-being.

"From what I can gather, Overmeyer's plan is two-fold. He wants to get Sah'Reena to answer only to him, and he wants her powers at his disposal."

Robin's answer was clipped and exactly as he expected. "He's getting neither."

Mason nodded. "Hear me out. He figures he can accomplish both by turning the public

against her ... you.” He tried to return the unwavering gaze coming at him, but her scrutiny was unsettling. It took a few seconds for him to figure out why. Her responses were not human. Her brain worked on a totally different level than theirs did, and that unnerved him. Mason prided himself on being able to read people. On second-guessing what they were about to say by the body signals they gave out. Or from the expression in their eyes and on their faces. Sah’Reena was an enigma, and dammit, her silence was piquing his interest. Swallowing loudly, he continued.

“If he manages to sway public opinion, your life is all but worthless. If that happens, then he can pretty much write his own ticket. That’s why these next few hours are the most critical, Sah’Reena. With the President inviting you to meet him, the rest of the world is going to be glued to their television sets to see what happens. He has to feel comfortable around you. Same for his cabinet members. And Congress. More than that, the top heads of every military branch has to believe you won’t turn rabid on us. If you can do that, if you can convince him you plan to dedicate your life to protecting us and serving us ....” He graced her with what he hoped would look like a warm smile, and held out a hand as if inviting her to finish his phrase.

The star girl continued to stare at him for several more seconds before answering. “I will make it clear to all I want no more than the rest of you. I want to be loved. I want to be happy. I want to live. If Overmeyer tries to make me a weapon, I will refuse. I refuse to be a weapon.”

“What if he tries to coerce you by threatening Robin?”

A flash of confusion crossed her face. Mason started to comment when Robin interceded.

“*Kelo voul ri fista?*”

The confusion instantly hardened into determination. There was no mistaking the glitter of cold anger. A shiver ran up Mason’s spine, and he realized his reaction was pure fear at the thought of what the woman was capable of doing. At the revenge she could enact if the general actually attempted to use her husband as a bargaining chip. Although her next words were softly spoken, the center’s administrator felt a chill claw its way up his spine.

“Let him try.”

Dragging his gaze away from the star girl, Mason lifted an eyebrow in Robin’s direction. The young man shrugged in response.

“Overmeyer still hasn’t learned how far out of his league he’s treading. The man is more tenacious than a half-starved pit bull.” Letting out a sigh, Robin slowly got to his feet. “We appreciate the warning, Sir. Forewarned is forearmed. Is that all you needed to see us about?”

Mason nodded. “I know you’re anxious to be ready when the jet copter lands. Hold on a minute.” He leaned over his desk for the telephone and punched the speaker button. “What’s the ETA for that ‘copter, Sherry?”

“It’s coming in straight from Ellington Field,” the executive assistant answered. “It’s due here by ten thirty-seven, give or take five minutes. I have a direct line to Bush Intercontinental, and they gave me word ten minutes ago that Air Force One left Reagan National on time and should be touching down at approximately ten forty-five.”

Mason nodded out of habit. “Thanks, Sherry.” Punching the button, he straightened up to see that Robin had taken a stance behind his wife. It was both a defensive and a protective posture, and one that impressed the director. A glance at the clock on the phone’s console told him there was a good hour more to wait before the ‘copter invaded their air space.

“Any idea how long you’ll be up in D.C.?”

Robin smirked. “Do I need to apply for an extended leave, you think?”

“Oh, I think I can swing you a couple of extra days vacation leave.” His expression went suddenly serious. “Rob, have you had a chance to talk about my offer?”

“To work here with Robin? With your scientists? As they study me and my world?” Sah’Reena gave him a tiny smile. “I can do more than that. Much more.”

“I know you can,” Mason nodded. “But rather than plunge in with both feet, let’s just take it one day at a time. One step at a time. One experiment at a time. A little discovery here, a little hocus-pocus there ....”

“Hoc ....” The look of confusion passed over her perfect features again, and this time she looked up to get another explanation. Mason chuckled.

“Of course, we would pay you. I’d have you put on the payroll as an employee. But damn if I can figure out what your title would be.”

“How about Director of Interstellar Affairs? Screw that, just call her the Murrallisian Ambassador.” Robin smiled at the joke.

“I have a better idea. I have an old friend over at Rice. Let’s see if we can’t get her an honorary doctorate in physics. Maybe throw in something about astronomy. Sah’Reena, how much schooling have you had?”

“I took all the subjects my masters required of me.”

“Such as ... ? What kind of subjects do Gifted study?”

She glanced up at her husband, shifting quietly in her chair as they exchanged gentle glances. It then became clear to Mason that Robin’s proximity was more than a gesture of concern. The man was reminding her of his presence as a solid force of love and comfort. Close, and within her reach should she ever need to touch him, to reassure herself.

Mason had read the reports over and over, sometimes to the point where he almost had them memorized. A lot of her past brought her more emotional pain than happy memories. The ugly scars on her back were mute testimony to what she’d been forced to endure at the hands of her world’s leaders. And Mason was sure there were many more unhealed wounds they couldn’t see. Her own people hadn’t wanted her, but there was no way on Earth she could avoid not going back to her past and reliving parts of it for the benefit of her new home.

Sah’Reena shifted again. “We ... I learned to read. I learned to do, uhh, counting. My numbers.”

“Math. Mathematics.”

“Yes. We were given many, many sequences about the Sacrant.”

Now it was Mason’s turn to frown. “The what?”

“Propaganda,” Robin interjected. “They were fed all kinds of doctrine regarding their government and the ruling bodies who claimed control over them and their abilities.”

“Oh, really?”

“It was those doctrines Sah’Reena eventually rebelled against,” Robin continued, much to Mason’s fascination. “The Sacrant has total control over their lives, down to the smallest detail. The Sacrant gives the Gifted their names, and they’re allowed complete autonomy over this small group of individuals. There’s nothing the Gifted can do without their permission. They’re told when and where to use their powers. They’re even told when they could find a life partner, *if* they were allowed one.”

“If?” The sudden shift in Robin’s tone of voice was not lost on him. “You weren’t allowed a husband, is that it?”

A dark blush spread over the star girl’s cheeks. She dropped her eyes for a second before answering. “When a Gifted is allowed the right to have a life partner, if that partner is a true

match, then the Gifted's power can grow stronger. More powerful. Much, much more powerful. They, the Sacrant, they did not want this to happen to me. They did not want my powers to grow. They could not control me, and they feared what would happen if I became too strong." She lifted eyes filled with anguish at her husband. Robin reached down and gently squeezed her shoulder. The contact gave her the ability to focus.

However, for Mason, the full impact of the past few days rammed into him like a car slamming into a concrete wall at seventy miles per hour. His legs buckled under him, and he fell heavily into his expensive leather chair in stunned silence.

"Ohmygod." Staring at Robin, he saw a brief smile of understanding cross the man's face. "The other day. In your office. When you said your marriage had been consummated. Sah'Reena collapsed because her powers were growing. I'm right, aren't I? You ...." He glanced back at the star girl. "You found your life partner with Robin. And it's a true match?"

"It's a true match," Robin murmured.

Grabbing the edge of his desk to steady his shaking hands, Mason pulled himself up to ask the ultimate question. "Tell me this, then, and give it to me straight. How powerful are you? Now?"

She calmly laced her fingers together and left them in her lap. "I could remove this whole planet in less time than it would take for you to walk from there to the door."

Mason's eyes automatically flew to the big double doors on the other side of the room. A dozen feet away, maybe a few inches more. Four strides. With his long legs it took him four strides to reach them. Five, if you counted the little side-step he had to take to back away from behind the desk. Five steps, and Earth would be no more than a whisper of thinning air in the cosmos.

"Fuck!"

Robin nodded. "And every time we make love, her powers increase."

"Increase?" He took a deep breath to steady himself. "All right. I'll bite. How powerful *can* you become?"

He was answered by a shrug of the young man's shoulders. "It's hard to extrapolate. The increase isn't exponential. Think of it more like a bucket of water. Sometimes you pour in a cup of water. Sometimes you add no more than an eyedropper full. You're a married man, Mason. Sometimes the orgasm feels like your head's about to blow apart, and sometimes you just love the feeling of togetherness, sharing the sensation, without the explosive climax." It was evident Robin didn't like talking about something as personal as their sex life, but he knew Mason had to be aware of Sah'Reena's source of strength.

Mason reached for the cup of coffee he'd left on his desk and took a swig. It was cold. "We have to keep this information inside this room. You understand me? If word got out that the star girl's powers were increasing every time you two exercised your marital rights, things would definitely get out of hand with regards to how the public accepts you."

The expressions on the couple's faces reflected what he was feeling. Mason knew there had to be a whole lot more they weren't telling him. But, if truth be told, he didn't want to know. There were too many miracles staring him in the face—the miracle of Sah'Reena's arrival, the miracle of her survival, plus the miracle she and Robin would meet and fall in love.

Another restless glance at the clock made him rise out of his chair. "I've kept you too long. Your 'copter will be here before you know it."

His eyes widened as Sah'Reena got to her feet and extended a hand in his direction. For a second Mason was at a loss as he stared at the fine-boned hand hovering palm-up. Memory of

what she had done to the jet fighter and hangar reminded him of the incredible power lying underneath the smooth, pale epidermis. Gingerly he enclosed her hand with his, feeling the warmth and strength, the surprising softness of her skin. They shook, and it left him shaken.

“Thank you, Sir,” she told him softly. “Thank you for accepting me. For trying to help me and Robin. I will do all I can to make you proud.” She gave him a smile that was warmer than the heat of her hand.

Mason melted as he looked into the midnight-colored eyes. He swallowed again, then gruffly ordered, “You two be ready when the transport arrives. If anyone gives you any static, send ‘em to me.”

Robin gave a nod before sliding an arm about his wife’s waist. The contact, and Sah’Reena’s response to her husband’s touch, spoke volumes to Mason. Watching the couple leave his office, he fell back into his chair and ran a hand across the back of his neck.

The next twenty-four hours were critical. He could only pray they wouldn’t prove disastrous.

## Chapter Forty Six

## Goodbye

She was relaxed in his arms. Sated. He kept one hand pressed to her stomach, tantalizingly close to her lower abdominal area. The other was across her shoulders where she could rest her cheek against the sleeve.

He could smell her hair and that unique scent that did not come from any other source but her. Not from perfume, not from soap. He remembered the smell of her sweat, the smell of her after they had made love, the smell of her after she had lightly brushed her hands over her body to cleanse it. She smelled free, like a warm summer breeze just off the gulf.

She was pressed against him, her buttocks along his thighs. If he allowed himself he could easily become aroused again, and he knew that if he pursued it she would not deny him or herself the pleasure of their re-joining. He was teetering on the edge of that possibility even now, silently cursing the fact that they'd had so little time as it was. But just at that moment, just for the while, the joy of savoring their recent ecstasy and the simple pleasure of holding her was beyond description.

They stood next to the wall of windows and looked out at the morning. The sun was behind the building, leaving the room in grayish gloom. It didn't matter. They would be leaving soon. There was no reason to turn on the inside lamps.

They hadn't planned on making love when they got back to Robin's office. It just ... happened. He remembered Sree entering the room ahead of him after they both had bid Jack a good morning. He had closed the door behind him, and Sah'Reena had turned around for a comforting hug, a reassuring hug.

A reassuring kiss. A kiss that had instantly burned as hot as lava, sweeping them both to the carpet in unexpected passion. The burning in their blood was inescapable. Robin felt as if his skin was on fire from the inside out, and she was the only cool relief.

Touching her was like finding a soothing balm for the blistering pain of need crawling through him. As they writhed on the floor, mouths locked together, his hands fumbled with the zipper on her jeans. Seconds later—eons later—he managed to release the buttons on his own jeans and he freed himself a heartbeat before plunging into her pulsing wetness.

God, there was something so wonderfully exquisite about the physical makeup of a Murrallisian woman. No need to jerk the pants down over the legs. No need to lift the knees to gain access. No awkward shuffling of body parts in order to melt into each other's bodies. Just drop the waistband of a pair of jeans to the upper curve of the buttocks, and slam home where her inner muscles would stroke him into roaring madness like a hundred tiny wet tongues. He had more difficulty reaching her wonderfully round, firm breasts beneath her shirt.

There were times when he resorted to touching the mark in her skin below her collarbone. When the throes of sexual pleasure were so great, he could swear he was puddling into a simmering morass that turned his internal organs into a thick, bubbling soup. When Sree was crying and jerking beneath him, unable even to call out his name as wave after wave of smaller orgasmic shocks raced through her. When it all was building, building, rising into one last final peak. That was when he would place his mouth over the *Utuli'ia*, now glowing a

blistering red, and the eruption of their mutual release would send them sometimes into unconsciousness.

And then there were the times when all they needed was the lesser climactic release. To rock inside each other, their hearts matched in rhythm. Giving, taking, sharing—all the time murmuring words confirming their love as they caressed each other. A time such as this one.

By their reflection in the glass he could see the full swell of her breasts peeking out from where her blouse lay unbuttoned and open. Distantly he toyed with the idea of brushing her nipples with his fingertips or tongue until they pressed taut again against the fabric. How would others react to know she had that human female trait? Eventually he knew they would discover the fact. For now, though, seeing them beaded up like opalescent pearls made him smile.

Robin pressed a kiss to her hair. They had not exchanged words for some time. They often never felt the need to in moments like this. This was not the time for conversation. It was a time for their love to speak silently to their hearts.

Sah'Reena moved her head slightly, letting her forehead brush his temple. Her eyes were half-closed, her lids heavy, her face relaxed and serene. She touched his hand that lay below her stomach, covering it with her own. Her mound was gradually subsiding as it continued to radiate warmth in the aftermath. With her other hand she ran a finger down the side of his cheek, stopping as it reached his lips. She smiled as he kissed that finger. It was a strange sensation that clouded her mind and turned her body weak. It was an experience she was unfamiliar with, but it didn't alarm her. He was determined to show her his love in every way possible, with every gesture and touch and position they could imagine. There were no words that could express the depth of feeling he generated in her, or in her body.

"We have a saying on this world. 'Grow old with me. The best is yet to be'," he whispered in her ear.

Sah'Reena smiled and laughed softly. "I like that. I like what it means. Having years to love each other."

"We will," he promised her, although he knew the truth was possibly just the opposite. She knew, as well, he had no doubt. But for the moment it was a sweet daydream. There was no way they could predict what would happen in Washington. But they could still hope.

"We need to get ready," he murmured into her cool, golden hair. With great effort he pulled away from her and began to straighten and re-fasten his clothes. The phone buzzed while he was stuffing his shirt back into the waistband of his jeans. "Dickenson," he answered into the receiver. His eyes slid up to see his wife buttoning her blouse. "Yeah. We're on our way over there now."

"It is here?"

He buckled his belt. "It's here."

Grabbing their coats where they'd dropped them by the door, he helped her with hers as they headed out the door. Jack followed them, no question as to why. It didn't seem necessary.

There was an electric cart waiting for them outside the office building. Quietly the threesome climbed inside and remained silent as they were taken to the open field at the northern sector. As they neared the area, Robin ordered the driver to halt, and stepped outside the heavy plastic sheeting that insulated them from the cold.

He hadn't expected to see the vans and mobile units from the local news networks, but he could understand why they were there. More than likely it was Mason's idea. If the media was kept abreast of Sah'Reena's actions and intentions, even if the information was a minute amount, they would be less likely to create erroneous information. Keep the media happy, and they



would put out a good word. Good word would keep the public swayed in their favor. Obviously the announcement that the star girl was about to be received by the President of the United States was going to be a major headline.

What he didn't expect to see were the half-dozen pieces of military artillery just outside the perimeter of the landing field, sitting in a semi-circle around the red and white Bell JetRanger. Robin let loose with an expletive regarding Overmeyer's anatomy.

The driver seemed unperturbed. "You need to sit down, Sir," he told Robin.

Grimacing, Robin did as he was told, and the cart lurched forward, heading straight for the landing field.

Strong fingers gripped his inside his jacket pocket. "There is something wrong?"

"Very wrong. Mason brought in the bare minimum of the media so that it would give us good coverage. Overmeyer's determined to make it look like something more."

"How much more?" Jack spoke up from the front seat where she was sitting across from the driver.

Robin's eyes swept over the equipment. Dammit. Now he wished he knew more about the vehicles and armament the general had assembled. The best he could gather was that there was a Bradley tank, a couple of Vulcan Mobile Anti-Aircraft guns, and several Humvees, two of which had mounted missile launchers. Not to mention at least fifty troops fully armed and standing at-ready. When Mason arrived and saw the extent of what the general had procured, Robin knew the director would burst a blood vessel.

The driver pulled between two Humvees, coming to a stop directly across from the 'copter. The aircraft had kept its rotors warming. They could hear its high-pitched whirring through the thick plastic.

Robin felt her fingers squeeze his again, but this time he could sense the fear that was coming from her. "What's the matter?"

The expression on her face was a mixture of trepidation and disgust. "They will seal us up in that?"

With a start, Robin realized what she meant. The jetcopter was small, definitely smaller than a Blackhawk, but only slightly larger than a conventional helicopter. Still, there was an uncanny resemblance to the capsule she'd been entombed in, despite the large plexiglass windows. Sah'Reena knew the concept of flight. He hadn't taken into consideration that the 'copter would bring back memories of the tiny capsule meant to have been her coffin.

He turned to her and directed her gaze to him. Her eyes were wide as she fought the nightmares, and she looked to him for comfort. "It will take us into the sky?"

"Us, Sree," he assured her. Lifting her chin with his fingertips, he repeated, "Us. It will take *us* into the sky." He brushed his lips across hers, hoping their contact would help, if only a little. She shivered in response, but she scooted closer to him until he could wrap his arms around her as she continued to stare at the BellRanger.

The media soon realized the celebrated couple were inside the little electric cart but they kept their distance, held back by strategically-placed armed guards. Another minute quietly passed. Jack finally cleared her throat.

"I take it we're waiting for something?"

"Mason," Robin curtly answered. He gave his assistant a narrowed glare. "Explain to me again why you came along for the ride?"

The look she shot back at him was one he was very familiar with. The woman was pissed. "Because I'm tired of sitting in that damn office, manning the telephones, while you get

to run around and have all the fun.” A tiny smile quirked the corner of her mouth. “If anyone deserves a front row seat, I do!”

“Robin?”

“What?” He lowered his face slightly to bury his nose in her silken hair. Sah’Reena pointed to a tent-like enclosure behind where the military apparatuses were parked. It was difficult to get a good look at what was going on, especially through the plastic sheeting.

“What are they doing there?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. What I’d like to find out is what the hell Overmeyer is ....”

“Mason’s here,” Jack interrupted a second before another electric cart pulled up beside them, neatly blocking the media’s view of them when they decided to exit their own vehicle. Everyone watched as the director exited from the front seat and strode over to them.

“Time to get going. Air Force One is at Bush.”

As they climbed out of the cart, Robin immediately got a sense of something that made the hairs on his head rise. Something that wasn’t right. Something that felt both dangerous and unavoidable. *Like watching a train wreck.* The phrase stuck in his head and refused to go away. Beside him Sah’Reena gave him a beseeching look, but remained silent.

As Mason led the way to the jetcopter, the media lit up the area as they began filming the event. Having seen them on their way over, the pilot jumped out from his side of the craft and came around to the other side. Vaguely Robin noted the maroon A&M cap on the man’s head, and a years-old joke flashed back to mind.

*How many Aggies does it take to fly a helicopter?*

*A hundred. One to steer, and the other ninety-nine to blow on the rotors to keep them spinning.*

“Let me help you get settled in,” the pilot offered, opening the door to the ‘copter. He reached for Sah’Reena’s hand to guide her up. She turned back around to give Robin another look that silently asked for reassurance. He could tell she was fighting her fears, and he gave her a calm, loving smile.

“I’m right behind you,” he promised.

A shout behind him distracted them for a second, but it was a soldier calling for Mason who hurried off. Silently Sah’Reena took the front seat, adjusting herself so the pilot could buckle her in.

“Rob!”

It was Mason waving at him just beyond the perimeter.

“It’s the President!”

Gritting his teeth, Robin hoped the man hadn’t been swayed from his initial decision. He turned to give his wife’s cold hands a loving pat. “I need to take this call. Hold on. I’ll be right back.”

“Robin!”

“Don’t worry. It’ll only take a minute.” He gave her another pat and a smile, then turned and trotted over to where Mason was standing near the operations tent they had spotted earlier. The director handed over the black field receiver. Taking the phone, Robin placed it to his ear as he turned to glance back at the jetcopter.

“Hello?”

He noticed the pilot had shut the door to the ‘copter and was stepping back away from the aircraft.

“Hello? This is Dr. Dickenson, Mr. President.”

The rotors were starting to rotate faster. Almost immediately that sense of wrongness began to turn into cold, stark fear.

“You are so fucked,” a deep voice chuckled over the earpiece.

And the fear froze into absolute terror.

“Overmeyer?”

The pilot had stepped back until he was clear of the ‘copter. The rotors were at full speed now.

The rotors were at full speed ...

... and the ‘copter began to lift slowly from the tiny landing field. Sah’Reena’s face was gray with horror as she watched the distance between grow further apart.

*Without the pilot?*

“No! No!”

He turned to look behind him at the military apparatus spread across several tables.

“What’s wrong?” Mason yelled, trying to be heard over the din of the jetcopter’s engines as they came online.

At the far side of the tent Robin spotted a man holding a large remote control device in his hands. Directing the signal outside. Guiding the jetcopter so it wouldn’t need a pilot. Unmanned, except for the solitary figure of a woman lifting further and further away, her hands and face pressed against the plexiglass. Desperation etched across her beautiful features.

“NO! NO! OVERMEYER!”

Throwing down the receiver, Robin tried to run for the ‘copter although he already knew the machine was too high for him to reach. Mason was right behind him, yelling for the ‘copter to be returned to the landing field immediately. The troops remained at-ready beside their vehicles.

Robin reached the pilot and jerked him around. “Why’d you leave the ‘copter?” he growled at the man. “*Why*, goddamn you!”

“I w-was told to buckle the alien into her seat, then leave,” the pale man stammered and stumbled backwards.

Overhead the jetcopter continued to rise slowly but inexorably. Suddenly a high-pitched whine took the place of the ‘copter’s engines and rotors. Someone screamed, and Robin whirled around to see the guns mounted on the backs of the Humvees begin to lift their muzzles. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind what would happen next.

“NOOOO!” Robin shrieked. “OVERMEYER, YOU FUCKING BASTARD! I’LL KILL YOU!”

There was no way to stop them. He held no power over the anti-aircraft guns being aimed at the ‘copter that now hovered in the distance. Dimly he was aware of Mason screaming for the troops to step down, but he had no jurisdiction over their actions either. They were following their orders given to them by Overmeyer.

The media kept filming, knowing what was about to occur. People were crying, caught up in the emotionally mind-numbing event. A dozen yards away Robin saw Jack fall to her knees as she kept her eyes glued to the ‘copter in the distance, hovering over the open fields that were rice paddies most of the year, now lying fallow during the winter months.

He watched, unable to stop it. Unable to help her although he had promised her she would never be hurt again.

Unable to do anything but watch. And feel his heart shred to pieces as he screamed

brokenly at the massive guns.

*I do love you. And I will love you. Forever.*

Two guns belched fire. Less than a second later, two more guns behind him roared. The jetcopter exploded in a fireball as cameras continued to roll. As the people watching called out, sobbing and screaming at what they were witnessing. As a dozen security officers from the space center finally reached the landing field and took General Overmeyer into custody. The man had a smile of satisfaction on his face.

Hands grabbed at him as Robin tried to push through the press of bodies to get to the man being handcuffed. There was no longer anything in his mind or in his body that gave him that connection to the woman he'd given his heart to. No sense of her, no thread of life. He was an empty void of darkness—a void that was quickly filling up with diamond-hard anger and sharp hate. He continued to push and bully his way through the growing crowd. He was going to punish the man responsible for such a brazen, inhumane act. He would kill today. Somehow, someway, Overmeyer was a walking corpse.

Strong hands stopped him just short of reaching the General. Robin struggled against them but they were too strong. And rough.

“Robin! *Robin!*”

Through the red haze of hatred Robin realized it was Mason trying to break through the cloud enveloping him.

“Robin! The man just committed murder in front of millions of people! Let the justice system deal with him now.”

“The sonofabitch just killed my wife!” He continued to struggle, fueled by the blackness of his anger and pain. “He killed *my wife!* You killed ... you goddamn bastard, *why?*”

Overmeyer slid his eyes over to the man being held by nearly four grown men. There was no remorse in either his expression or his attitude, and Robin hoped he would get the death penalty for what he'd done.

“One day the world will be grateful for what I did,” the general quietly replied. “No one that powerful deserves to live.”

Robin coughed. His stomach heaved, but there was nothing to throw up. Gritting his teeth, he gave the man one final look. “I’m going to enjoy watching them shove a needle in your arm,” he softly growled.

Overmeyer shrugged but remained silent. Mason motioned for the man to be taken away, and Robin watched as half of the media trundled after the armed squad.

The hands released him, leaving him to fall heavily to his knees. His chest ached. His back cried out in pain. His head felt like it would implode. His entire body was one mass of burning agony.

She was gone. Blown out of the sky and taken away in rolling balloons of fiery flames. Sah'Reena. His Sree.

He gasped for breath, hands clenched in front of him as he saw her before him. Lying so still, so close to death beneath the oxygen mask. The sparkle in her eyes as he tried to speak her language, but butchered it instead. The toss of her golden hair as she tried to concentrate on her studies. The droplets of turquoise tears as she confessed what had happened to her.

Sobs bubbled up from deep inside his chest. She had trusted him. She had gotten into that ‘copter only because he had promised to go with her. To his dying day he would never be able to forget the sight of her face in that window as she watched him grow further and further away.

Someone crouched down next to him and placed their arms around his shoulders.

“Son.”

Unable to stand any more, Robin buried his face in his father’s shoulder and wept.

## Chapter Forty Seven

Forever

Natasha McReynolds watched in numbed shock as smoking pieces of the jetcopter continued to rain down on the empty field beyond the space center. Behind her she could hear her cameraman Nick Briseno keeping the feed live. Unedited. Raw footage of the brutality they had just witnessed. Something that was too far beyond description.

Back at the station she knew the crew would be in the same state of numb denial as they were. As the rest of the world had to be feeling.

The whole scenario was unbelievable. Dickenson had put his wife on the 'copter, then stepped away from a moment. The 'copter had risen into the sky as the guns lifted to take aim.

And then the woman alien had been blown into a million bits of debris, as if she had been the enemy.

Being a reporter, her first thought had been that Dickenson had set his wife up. That thought had gone right into the garbage when the man had started screaming for the 'copter to stop, to come back, when he had tried to reach one of the guns, only to have armed guards take direct aim at him.

Her body was shivering. Quaking with cold and denial. She'd somehow managed to get her microphone close enough to General Overmeyer when Dickenson had screamed at him for an explanation. She'd picked up the general's calm reply, and the horror of his acts felt even greater.

Dear God, the man actually thought he deserved a pat on the back for what he'd done.

She glanced over at the knot of reporters following the security team taking the general to lockup until the police could arrive to formally arraign him. To her right Dickenson was on the ground, another man embracing him as the man wept uncontrollably. Vaguely her mind riffled through her infallible memory until it found the name she sought. Gray. Dr. Peter Gray, Dickenson's father.

"Tash?" a voice thinly whispered near her shoulder. She turned to see Nick waggle his eyebrows at her before glancing at the camera he carried. Their feed was still rolling. She knew what he wanted her to do. Giving a quick nod, Natasha walked out in front of the camera and let the bright light overhead highlight the tragedy still etched on her face. Not to mention the tears she refused to wipe away.

"We'll never know the outcome of the meeting between Sah'Reena and the President. Lives have been shattered here today. Lives have been forever changed. But stay tuned to Channel 13 Eyewitness News as we continue to cover today's catastrophe and follow the arraignment of General Overmeyer as it unfolds." She turned to glance over her shoulder where the small group of people were hovering over Dickenson. From where she stood the camera would be picking it up. Looking back into the lens, she finished with, "Personally speaking, there was no reason for what happened here. No reason and no excuse to pardon such a senseless murder. This is Natasha McReynolds at the Johnson Space Center." The camera went black before she could give the 'cut' signal to Nick.

Her eyes went back to the figures on the ground. The pain in her heart couldn't begin to

compare to what that man was feeling, but now she could cry with him. Jesus, it had been like a fairy tale. She had been among those who had witnessed Sah'Reena take out the old fighter jet and the hangar. It had been Nick who had convinced the woman to remove the strawberry birthmark he had carried all his life.

There was nothing but gentleness and compassion in the star girl's demeanor. Although they were completely different species, Natasha had felt a kinship with the alien woman. She had seen the way Dickenson and Sah'Reena had looked at each other. How they had touched and held each other, and how protective the man was around her, even though the alien could probably wipe out all of Houston with a flick of her wrist. She had believed their story because her heart had told her it was the truth. Her gut instinct, her reporter's intuition—every cell in her body affirmed two things.

The Murrallisian could become the greatest boon to humanity.

And the love between the alien and Dickenson was absolute.

The earplug dangled behind her back. Slowly Natasha reached for it and placed it back into her ear. The plug was her direct connection to the station. She hated wearing it while she was doing a live feed, but it was a necessary evil. Only when things began to get hairy did she pop it out so that their chattering wouldn't distract her from doing her job.

Like when the guns had begun to train on the jetcopter. Nick had been glued to her as she jerked the earplug out and raced closer to the nearest Humvee. The same vehicle Dickenson had rushed, only to be ordered back.

They had been close enough to feel the heat of the missile when it was launched toward the 'copter. The screaming belch of the anti-aircraft gun still rang in her ears.

"Tasha? You okay out there?" It was Brian Nallie, her producer back at the station. He had learned long ago not to rag her out whenever she pulled her plug. Natasha was too damn good at her job to argue over something so minor.

"Yeah." Another shudder went through her. "Yeah, Brian. Oh, God, it was horrible." Her voice still sounded ragged. She would give anything to be able to crawl back into the news van and let herself have a good cry. This abomination was too much, too sudden to comprehend. Even now.

"You still on base?" His voice was gentle. Damn, she could swear he had been just as affected as she was.

"Yeah. Nick's going over the footage. I'm ... I'm still here with Dickenson."

"Poor bastard. Don't suppose you could get near him."

Then again, Brian could be an asshole when the decision was between being a decent human being and going for the story. As relentless as she was known to be, even Natasha knew when enough was enough.

"For crying out loud, Brian ...."

"Never mind. I've sent Douglass out to cover Overmeyer downtown. Get back here as soon as you can."

Natasha promised to get back to the station as soon as things had died down enough not to warrant any more broadcasts. She jerked out the earplug with her free hand as she walked back to the news van. She was almost at the open side door when Nick stuck his head out, nearly bumping foreheads. She opened her mouth to say something, but the pale tightness around his mouth and eyes raised her reporter's hackles.

"Tash, you gotta see this," he whispered urgently, ducking back inside. She followed him inside. He was seated back at the small bank of screen displays. Punching a few buttons,

the cameraman pointed to the screen labeled UNIT A. "Watch and tell me what you see."

It was the jetcopter. To the lower right the edge of the missile launcher could be seen. They had been standing nearly a dozen yards away, but the zoom lens on the camera made it appear as if they had been standing directly behind it.

The frame advanced slowly. The launcher belched. The missile emerged, aiming straight for the hovering 'copter.

The small cylinder was turning, rotating as it flew upward. Natasha flinched, knowing what was going to happen and seriously doubting if she could watch it all over again so soon after. She started to turn away from the screen when Nick briskly snapped, "*Watch, Tash!*"

Biting her lips, she forced her eyes to remain glued to the screen. The missile was joined by a second missile. A twin from the other launcher. Two thin streams of white smoke followed behind them like vapor trails. The 'copter never moved. Never took evasive action. It wouldn't, not when it was being flown by remote control from the ground by one of Overmeyer's men.

With a blink, Natasha realized at that moment that Sah'Reena had to have seen her death coming straight toward her. The missiles were too big not to be spotted. Their eruptions from the launchers had been bright flashes and loud booms.

"Watch, Tash," Nick repeated, his mouth practically at her ear.

Goosebumps stretched suddenly across her skin. Her mouth went instantly dry.

The jetcopter began to sparkle.

*To sparkle.*

"Oh, dear God."

The missiles began to sparkle as the frame-by-frame showing slowed even further.

Her power. The woman had begun to use her power to protect herself. But before the 'copter could completely evaporate into nothingness, the missiles struck. The resulting balls of fire were also edged in a glorious string of twinkling lights. Natasha slapped the pause button as she fought to breathe.

"I ... can't watch ... anymore. No, Nick. Give me a sec."

The man's brown gaze came into her field of vision. "You haven't seen what I need you to see," he told her curtly. "Watch, Natasha." Turning back to the console, he hit the play button.

The rolling, curling flames expanded outward. Pieces of the 'copter were flying everywhere. Huge chunks were already raining down on the barren rice fields. Nick hit the pause button, rewound a dozen frames, then jabbed a finger at the screen.

"Look, Tash. The missiles didn't hit the cockpit. They struck dead center where the fuel tanks were located."

Her eyes squinted at the picture. How Nick had managed to keep the camera steady at that point amazed her, and her evaluation of the man's talent rose a few more notches.

He was right. The target had been the 'copter, but more specifically the fuel tanks located between the cockpit and the tail. It had been a direct hit.

Once more she watched as the missiles struck. The 'copter exploded. Pieces began to fall.

"Shit!" This time it was Nick who hit the pause button as she exclaimed. "What is that?" Her finger pointed to a piece of debris clearing the flaming cloud of smoke and fire.

"Yeah. That's what I wanted you to see." He gave her lopsided grin. "Didn't you make a comment a while back that we probably didn't know the full extent of the alien's powers?"



She stared at him in disbelief as the probability went off like giant claxons blaring in her brain. Before she was aware of what she was doing, Natasha scrambled out of the van and began running toward the group of people now slowly making their way off the landing field.

“Wait! WAIT! You gotta see this! SOMETHING HAPPENED IN THE CHOPPER!”

The group of people paused and turned to stare at the woman running toward them. “Hold up!” Natasha yelled again. “Wait!”

Her eyes immediately took in the grim finality written on Dickenson’s face, the ultimate grief.

“Come back to the van. Hurry! Look at the footage we caught!” When Gray opened his mouth to protest, Natasha cut him off before he had a chance. “Sah’Reena started to use her powers before the missiles hit.” Her words were tumbling out of her faster than she could think. She prayed she was making sense. “Something fell out of the ‘copter before it exploded. Come look!”

Dickenson bolted past her, running directly toward the Channel 13 news van. The rest of them followed close behind. They reached the van as Robin watched the slow play on the screen as Nick directed his eyes to what they had seen.

When they reached the one frame that showed the dark blot ejected from the jetcopter as the fuel tanks went up in flames, Nick gave the man the same dark stare he had given her.

“There’s a lot more to her powers than you guys ever let on. Right?”

“What is it, Rob?” Dr. Gray whispered brokenly. “What?”

Robin swung out of the van and stared at the clear sky and open field beyond.

*Physics! Physics, man!* Robin tried to breathe. Tried to get his brain moving out of the numb iciness that wouldn’t let go.

He couldn’t hope. He couldn’t allow himself the most minute sliver of the possibility to cross his mind, or to embed itself in his shattered heart.

*Physics!*

He glanced over at the Humvee sitting silent. The muzzle of the launcher was still pointed upward and out.

“Seventy-two degrees. Altitude two hundred sixty feet.  $E$  over  $y$ , where  $y$  is the force caused by the explosion ....”

“Rob, what in hell are you talking about?” Pete tried to grab his arm as the man began walking toward the field. Robin jerked out of his grasp without slowing down.

*Given the proximity of the jetcopter, taking into the equation the rate of descent. No wind to consider. And weather wouldn’t be a variant this time.*

“Dearest God in heaven! Robin, what are you doing?”

He stopped to stare over the field beyond the simple barbed wire fence that separated the fields from the space station. A barbed wire fence. He jerked his head around and spotted the electric cart. The vehicle wouldn’t be able to take them over the uneven terrain, much less make it through the fence, no matter how fragile it was.

Without a word Robin bolted for the Humvee. The others raced behind him. He reached the vehicle, but this time a guard didn’t try to stop him. Their instructions had been to keep anyone from preventing the missiles from launching. Now that the deed had been done, and they had seen and understood what they had been a part of, no one challenged the man determined to take possession of one of the vehicles. In fact ....

Robin tried to turn the engine over, to no avail. He wasn’t familiar with the specially-built military vehicle. Slamming a hand to the steering wheel, he cursed in frustration.

“Sir, move over. Allow me.”

It was the same guard who had held a rifle pointed to his chest, preventing him from approaching the launcher. This time, however, the man had a haunted look in his eyes as Robin took the passenger seat. The engine growled to life as the others piled into the back.

“Where to, Sir?”

Robin pointed toward the rice fields. “That way.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The Humvee jerked forward and rammed its way through the fence. The squeal of metal running over metal was like nails on a blackboard. The guard kept the vehicle pointed in a straight line. Robin stood up, gripping the roll bar with both hands as he scanned the dark, grayish-brown earth.

*Physics! Trajectory. Angle of descent. Height over mass. Inertia versus mass using Newton’s law. THINK, dammit!*

He pointed a finger ahead and to the right of them. “That way!” he called down to the guard. The man jerked the wheel, forcing the Humvee to make a sharp adjustment. Behind him Robin could hear soft cursing as the cameraman tried to keep his equipment from banging against the side of the vehicle.

They plowed through the uneven, rolling field. It was like being on a miniature rollercoaster, flying upward and downward on waves of weed-covered ground. Robin’s eyes raked the area. They were near. Very near. So close, they were almost right on top of it.

Standing behind him, Pete poked him in the shoulder and pointed ahead of them. “There!”

There was a flash of blue in the distance. Blue. Sree had been wearing that pale blue, long-sleeved blouse. His mind flashed over the vision of his fingers fumbling with the blue buttons, fighting the heavy urge to rip the fabric apart in order to touch those delicious breasts.

The Humvee bounced erratically over the washboard field, forcing Robin to cling tightly to the roll bar. Another flash of blue loomed in the distance.

“STOP!”

The driver hit the brakes as Robin leaped from the vehicle and ran down the irrigation channel toward the smudged patch of light blue color. Stumbling over a small rise he spotted the figure in the distance. Small. Unmoving.

He had no memory of struggling to reach her. But he was excruciatingly aware that the closer he got, the deeper his feet began to sink into the ground. The soil was loose, not packed as it should have been because of the weather. Loose, soft.

*Resilient. Ohmygod.*

She had used her powers to break down the soil, softening it before impact. Giving her a chance at survival.

She was curled in a small ball and lying in a depression dug when she landed after her fall. Robin crawled on hands and knees to reach her, scrabbling in frantic haste to reach her as the tears bubbled up in his eyes and threatened to blind him. She was unconscious, and his eyes sought for any sign of breathing to let him know she was still alive. He was unaware of the prayers coming from his lips.

“Please, God. Please, God. Please. Please. Please. Please, God. Please.”

He reached out to her, but his hand struck something firm. Behind him he could hear the others struggling to reach them. They were calling out to him, but he closed his ears to their questions.

Beneath her body was the jetcopter seat she had been strapped to. Was still strapped to. The full knowledge of what she had done stunned him. Sah'Reena had used her power to detach the seat from the interior of the 'copter, then removed enough of the cockpit to let the seat freefall to the earth. She had seen the guns rising to point directly at her. She had seen, had understood what was going to happen, and had taken action.

"As long as they do not take my powers away, I can fight," she had told him once. The drugs her people had injected her with before encapsulating her had muddled her thinking process and effectively prevented her from being able to use her Gift. She had been helpless and at their mercy.

That had not been the case today. He had made love to her moments before. She had been at the peak of her power, strong and growing stronger. She had been awake and cognizant, and in full control of her mind and her Gift, able to think and react with the skill borne of years of training.

That's what the news camera had caught on tape. It had been in a unique position to film the telltale sparkle of her Gift as she escaped the jetcopter a microsecond before the first round of missiles struck. And the initial flash and fire of the explosion had been enough to hide her fall as every eye remained glued to the catastrophe occurring above them.

He stumbled again as his hands sunk into the loosened, almost dust-like particles of dirt. She was lying unconscious in the hole the seat and her body had created when it fell. Sliding along the powdery substance, he finally reached her. Collapsing next to her, he tentatively laid a hand on the still shoulder.

She was warm.

The straps were digging into her skin but the catch was jammed. Quickly Robin grabbed the pocketknife from his pants pocket, pausing a second as he remembered the last time he had used it. Shaking himself, he sawed at the thick, cloth straps until he could cut them away.

By this time the others had reached them and were watching from yards away, afraid to approach any closer or else sink irreparably into the loose dirt. Dimly Robin was aware of the news woman broadcasting the rescue as the camera panned in on the couple at the bottom of the shallow pit.

Once the straps were gone, he rolled Sah'Reena onto her back where a gentle sigh coming from between her lips was the answer to all his prayers. Unable to hold in the tears any longer, Robin leaned over and buried his face in the softness of her neck and throat. His arms came around her, and he used his body to shield hers from the rising wind that had suddenly come up like a cold shower from the northwest.

The feel of a hand on his ear froze him into stillness. Slowly he pulled back to look down at the woman who now looked back with dazed eyes.

"Oh, God. Sree. *Ka rinn roatili'i aba midisi.*" The tears were falling again, forcing him to blink rapidly so he could remain locked on the beauty of her face as she stared back at him. Her hand reached down to touch his neck, to his throat, then fingertips traced his lips.

"Ro-bin?" Her voice croaked.

"Yes. You survived Overmeyer's attack. The man is done for, *ka rinn.* He'll never be able to hurt you again. I promise."

"Robin?"

"Yes, *ka rinn.*"

"I love you, too. Forever. *Roatili'i.*"

"*Roatili'i*, my beautiful love. Forever."



## Epilogue

Five Months Later

“Tasha, call on line two!”

“Can you take a message?” she called back over her shoulder. She was hurrying to get to the news van. A local bank had sent in a silent alarm, and word was there were hostages inside.

Myrna stood up with a look of surprise on her face. “You better take this one, sweetheart, or you’ll never be able to live with yourself.”

Natasha winced. Myrna never threatened, much less made those kind of comments to others.

“Myrna, please ....”

“Take the fucking *call*, Natasha!”

She did a complete about-face and stomped back to take the call at the phone at the end of the big horseshoe-shaped reception desk. Punching the flashing button, she practically growled into the receiver, “Natasha McReynolds.”

“Miss McReynolds, this is Dr. Robin Dickenson. I’m glad I was able to catch you on your way out. The receptionist said you were just leaving on a story, so I’ll make this short.”

Her throat closed up and her eyes flew over to where Myrna was giving her a shit-eating grin along with a thumbs-up sign. “D-Dr. Dickenson?” There was no mistaking that voice.

“A little birdie has told me you’re up for the duPont award for your work at Johnson that day the general attacked my wife. Congratulations.”

“Th-thank you. What can I do for you?”

A throaty chuckle rumbled in her ear. “That same little birdie says you want to become a serious novelist. I’ll make this sweet and simple. Would you be willing to write my and Sah’Reena’s story?”

She nearly fell to the floor in shock. At least her knees buckled dangerously. “Sir? You want to what?” For some crazy reason the room had suddenly lost all of its oxygen because breathing had become damn near impossible. Not only that, but her imagination had just gone into overdrive, making her believe she was hearing things.

“We can talk over the details later after you’ve gone after your story. But I can’t begin to repay the debt I owe you for showing me that footage. Without your help, Sree could have lain in that field and frozen to death. My offer is our way of saying thank you.”

The man had also sent her flowers, not to mention a personally autographed photo of him and the star girl that she proudly displayed on her desk in the newsroom.

“I-I-I’m honored, Dr. Dickenson.”

“That’s super. Look, give me a call when you’re free, and we’ll go from there. Oh, and don’t forget to bring Mr. Briseno with you when you come.”

“A cameraman? For a biography?”

She could swear she heard the man shrug over the phone.

“Publicity, Miss McReynolds. Now that the grand jury has indicted General Overmeyer on several counts including attempted murder, Sree and I are being besieged with requests for details about how we got together. After discussing it, we agreed we needed someone we could

trust to put out the facts for us. To tell it with the kind of journalistic slant a professional like yourself could bring to it. If you had your cameraman film excerpts of the interviews while you took notes, you could use those excerpts to build up the public's interest. Get them salivating to buy the book when it finally came out."

A sly grin slid over her lips. "And what would be your take, sir?"

Another chuckle echoed in her ear. "A purely selfish goal. Keep those bloodhounds off our backs. They want the full story, so you'll give it to them. If they want more, I want to be able to send them in your direction." His voice dropped to a softer volume. "Sree and I want to live our lives without the constant harassment of the paparazzi. I know it's damn near impossible when we're outside the space center. But at least it's worth the try."

Natasha nodded unconsciously. The alien woman was on NASA's payroll now, working with both the space center and the military in the use and application of her powers, not to mention what she knew and could do for them. Like last month when an explosion had rocked the petroleum plant outside Texas City. Only because of Sah'Reena's quick intervention were the firefighters able to put out the flames and reduce the noxious smoke in mere minutes, thanks to her powers. Saving untold lives in the process.

Was she willing to become their unofficial spokesperson, she wondered? She loved her job as a news reporter, but what the man was offering was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As if reading her mind, Robin continued.

"This would be on top of your regular job, you understand. We're not asking you to give up what you love doing."

"But eventually it may come to that," she argued.

"Perhaps. We won't know until that time comes, right?"

She laughed lightly, suddenly overcome with a brightness she hadn't felt in a very long time. "You're right. What's the number where I can reach you?" He reeled off the number twice. Natasha wrote it on the inside of her wrist with a ballpoint pen. "Okay. Got it. I'll call you tonight after I get off work, if that's all right. That's assuming this hostage situation at the bank doesn't take too long."

"Not a problem. Sree and I are scheduled to go back to Washington at the end of the week. That's my cell, so you'll still be able to reach me. Thanks again, Miss McReynolds."

"Natasha. Better yet, call me Tasha. My friends call me Tasha."

"All right, Tasha. We'll be looking forward to getting started." There was a click in her ear as the connection was broken, leaving her staring out the front where Nick was pulling up in the news van.

"Well?" Myrna gave her another one of those grins.

"Well, I have a hostage situation to report," Natasha threw back at her as she practically skipped for the front doors.

"Hey! Aren't you at least gonna tell me what he said?"

"You can find out when the book comes out!" Natasha told her and laughed. Oh, boy, was Nick going to crap in his pants when she got around to telling him. Suddenly she was no longer thinking about the DuPont that everyone said was a shoe-in. Natasha smiled again.

*I wonder how a Pulitzer would look on the mantel above the fireplace?*

The End