

# RARE BLOOD

an Elizabeth Thorne Novel

BY  
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I had just put my hand over the sensor to open the lift door when there came a stabbing pain in my head, my heart. I had never felt anything like that before. It was so intense that I fell to my knees in pain. A voice reached me as though from a great distance. "Elizabeth! What is it? What's happened? Elizabeth!" I sat down hard, on the ground, and held my head. It was a pounding, intense pain, not my own. My Captain was not hurt. I didn't know who was, but it had to be more than one person, this was much too intense for one person. I had a notion. It just came into my mind, I don't know how or why.

"Captain, get my viewer out of my bag, please."

"Elizabeth?"

"Please, Paolo! And help me up."

He got the distance viewer, then took one of my hands in his own, put one arm around my waist, and helped me up. I turned the viewer to night mode and put it to my eye.

I looked toward the island in the Bay. At first I couldn't see anything, but then, there, there it was.

Smoke, rising into the sky above the island. I handed the viewer to the Captain.

"Here, Paolo, look at the island. Something's happened, something very bad."

We could both see it then, even without the viewer. The moons had risen and there was enough light to make out the shape of the island in the distance. Smoke rising from the island, probably from that building hidden in the trees. I looked at the Captain.

"Do you think they'll tell us anything?"

"I do not, Elizabeth. We are not Hegrioan, we are not here in an official capacity. We are not even investigators."

Another stab of pain, in my heart. I gasped.

"Please, we have to do something!" I gripped his shirt. Tears came to my eyes.

"I do not know what we can do, my dear. You are hurt as well, my first responsibility is to you. If something has happened, we will find out soon enough."

I took a deep cleansing breath, and another.

"You are correct, my Captain. But I would still like to see if we can get any information. Maybe the front desk lady?"

"All right, I can feel that you will not be able to rest until we at least ask, so let's go and ask right away."

He took my arm, and led me back through the courtyard, and back to the lobby. As we walked, I thought about what a long, strange day it had been.

We had arrived on Hegrioia that morning. As I stepped out of the Shuttle onto the concrete of the Spaceport I felt the cool breeze, wafting in from the ocean. The scent of the salt water, the feeling of the gentle wind, the very sounds of the leaves rustling in the trees around the edges of the concrete landing area brought back so many fond memories of our last visit to this planet. I turned to watch the open air vehicles headed our way from the road, gliding soundlessly, seeming to float a few centimeters off the ground. They were coming to collect us, to take us to our hotel on the beach.

My husband came up and put his arms around me.

The vehicles had approached, and parked near our Shuttle. The drivers got out, and came up to us to gather our bags. They each bowed.

"Greetings, Captain Bianchi. Greetings, Doctor Thorne. It is good to have you return to Hegrioia."

I bowed my head, and answered, "The honor is ours, dear Hegrioans. We are happy to be back."

The Captain and I assisted the drivers in getting the luggage into the vehicles, then climbed into the lead vehicle. The drivers started up and we were on our way.

I looked around me as we drove. Hegrioia is such a beautiful planet. I so enjoyed the lush, green foliage, the bright blue sky, the aroma of the flowers. We passed a group of Hegrioans in a field. It looked to me as though they were harvesting something, but I couldn't see well enough. I saw a large machine, and they were holding what could have been shovels. They stopped what they were doing as we passed by, and bowed. They watched us go. I thought I felt something, curiosity? Fear? I could never be completely certain of what I was feeling from aliens, even if they were Human like. As the Hegrioans are, sort of.

They have quite Human looking faces, and they walk upright on two legs, and they wear clothing similar to ours. But they average two and a half meters in height, and their skins range from light lavender to a deep purple, depending on the quality of the light, and their mood. They are intelligent, they are friendly. However, it always had seemed to me that they might have been hiding something. Their technology does

not match their outward appearance. They are casual, easygoing, spontaneous. They live simply, they are farmers mostly, and they have a booming business in the tourist trade. They also have a way of knowing who you are and what you want without asking. And they are able to provide it, instantly and unobtrusively. On our previous visit, I had found that my hotel room sensor pad knew my palm-print, without my ever having registered it. I wondered what else they had up their flowing cotton-like sleeves. We finally turned in to the drive of our resort. I remembered it, but it was still a surprise, a pleasant surprise. There was nothing like this back on Earth. Huge, with terraces, courtyards, lawns. The building itself looked as though it was made of sugar crystals, the way it glittered in the sun. We pulled up to the entrance, and the drivers got out. One began taking our bags out of his vehicle, the other assisted us out of ours.

My husband took my hand, he was looking at the huge glass doors that led into the lobby.

"What's wrong, Paolo?"

"Nothing, my dear. I was simply remembering the last time we were here. We had no idea that these doors would open onto a whole new life for both of us."

"A beautiful life, my Captain."

"Yes, indeed."

The steward came out of the lobby, and held the doors open for us. We followed him in. The reception desk looked the same. Huge, glass and metal. The receptionist looked down at us from her height behind that huge desk.

"Welcome back to Hegrioa. It is such a pleasure to have you staying with us again. You have been given the same room as previously. Here are your cards."

I wasn't sure if it was the same receptionist, but she did have the same manner. Calm, knowing, efficient. I knew that if we were to pick up the communicator in the room she would answer and know exactly what we needed. She pointed to the lift, and said, "I hope you enjoy your stay, Captain, and Doctor."

I said, "We shall, thank you."

As we rode the glass-fronted lift to the top floor, I watched the landscape. Stone courtyard gave way to a view of the beach, dotted with tourists, and the beautiful blue of the ocean. I again wondered if that was an island out there, and if anyone lived there. We hadn't taken the time to explore much more of the continent than the resort grounds. I resolved to change that, this time.

Our room was just beautiful. Spacious, bright and airy. The living area with the fluffy rugs, the bedroom with the huge bed... I noted that the steward had already been there and had put our bags in the bedroom. They always seemed to be one step ahead of us.

While the Captain checked in with Commander Walker on board the Draco, I went straight into the bedroom, and into the Refresh to change out of my travel clothes. This was a tropical paradise, a retreat. No need for a uniform. I put on a long tee shirt and tied my hair into a ponytail. That was all I needed. I examined my reflection in the mirror, not too bad. The stress and events of the past few months had not had a negative affect on my appearance, at least. I was still working out every day, my friend Jenny made sure of that. Martial arts and yoga, in addition to hard work, keeps one in good physical condition. I don't put myself forward, as a rule, but I had to admit that I looked pretty good. Slim, well-muscled, just curvaceous enough. My Captain had no complaints, and I would know if he had.

I went over to the sliding doors that opened onto the balcony. It was a large terrace, surrounded by a glass enclosure, with a table and chairs, and two comfortable, oversized chaise lounges. We even had our own private glass fronted lift that went down to the beach below. The view from that terrace was outstanding. I felt that I could see across the horizon. And no-one could see in, the glass was reflective on the outside.

I went back into the room and into the bedroom area to retrieve my distance viewer. When I went back to the terrace, I put the viewer to my eye and looked far out over the ocean. I wanted to see that island. I found it in the viewer, and it took me a few seconds to focus. There was a sand beach, a stand of trees that looked a lot like my trees back in my Lab, small buildings that looked like wooden huts. I also saw something, something else behind the trees. It was hidden well, I could only get a sense of a large stone building. And there were more large trees behind the building, tall, dark green foliage, thick. I didn't see any people at all. I looked for a few minutes, then decided that I wasn't going to be able to see any more by staring at it. I would have to wait until we had time for exploring. Which, since we were officially on R & R, could be any time we wanted.

The Admiral had released us to R & R a few days ago. We had completed the mission on Morgos, at least our part of it. We had verified that the disease had been eradicated, then I and my team had begun the process of reintroducing life to the planet's soil. I was so happy that day, the day we were finally able to

go down to that planet and tell the Morgosians that we would be starting to amend their soil. They were so grateful. I still get chills thinking about their response. I don't get clear readings from aliens, but the more Human like they are, the better it is for me. That day, I felt their gratitude. I felt their happiness. I felt their impatience to get started. It was wonderful. I do so love my job.

We had all worked very hard to get the ecosystem of Morgos up and running. It had taken us the better part of six months to get to a point where I felt comfortable leaving. So hard to leave my work in someone else's hands, even hands as capable as the Centaurus' Crew. And even when I was able to tear myself away, I made certain that the Centaurus' researchers and scientists would be keeping me informed. I felt obligated to follow it through. Even though they had been the ones to develop the delivery system that had allowed the cure to be distributed through the atmosphere, they were not of my team.

As the Head of the Agro department on the Draco, and the one who had discovered the cure for the devastating disease that had ravaged the planet, I was the lead on the project. Even though my home was on the Ship, and my husband was the Captain, I could not take time off when she was called away on other Federation business. And she was called away a few times. It was not possible to have the Flagship of the Federation static in orbit around a distant planet, especially one that was inconsequential in the grand scheme of the Galaxy. Much as I loved and admired the Morgosians and absolutely abhorred what they had been put through, I did understand that their backwater planet didn't play much part in the Federation's plans.

When Admiral Wilson had ordered the Draco to a mission that first time, it was so difficult for us, the Captain and me. We had not been apart, not really, since we had met, except when we were each abducted on separate occasions in the war against the Agrints. However, we knew that our work was more important than either of us. So I stayed on the planet, and my Captain went off to take care of the Federation. Only for a couple of weeks, but it felt much longer. The Draco was assigned to assist on the relocation of the Vindans from their planet to a new one. The Federation had finally been able to find them a beautiful new planet, much like their old one had been before their solar system became a danger to them. Captain Bianchi and his Crew, along with several other of our Ships, moved the entire population to their new location and helped them set up camps from which they could build their new lives. I wished I could have been there to help. I had really liked the Vindans, reptilian as they are, they were good to us. But my place at that time was on Morgos, they actually needed me more than the Draco did. And I knew that I had to get that project to a point where I could tell the Admiral that my part was done before I would be allowed to accompany my husband on the distant missions.

There had also been a couple of events, I was not told details, that had required the show of Federation force that only the Draco and her sisters could provide. I assumed that meant that either the Agrints or their allies or someone very like them had resurfaced. The Galaxy is chock full of races that would like nothing better than to conquer or otherwise take over Federation Alliance worlds and space. When the Admiral had sent word that our Ship was needed to defend an installation on Placu, the Captain had come to see me in my Lab.

All he had said was, "Elizabeth, we will be leaving orbit in one hour. You will need to get down to the planet immediately."

That was it, no explanation necessary. I packed my Lab bag, made a circuit of the Lab itself to make sure everything was secured, and contacted Engineering to Transport me down to the encampment. My team of Ensigns Parker and Miller would take good care of the Lab while they were gone, and most of the plantings were self sufficient for a period of probably three weeks. The Captain escorted me to the Transport Pad on Level Twelve and put my pack on the deck. He took my face in his hands, his fingers stroked my cheek as he looked into my eyes.

"You will take care of yourself, Elizabeth." Serious, solemn, he brought his lips to mine, kissing me deeply, thoroughly. I sensed some apprehension from him, which surprised me. I couldn't tell if it was apprehension for me, or for his Ship. Probably both. These missions can be very unpredictable. I let my pride in him, my love for him flow out and wash over him as my hands drew him closer to me. He ran his hand over my hair as I stepped onto the Transport Pad, and he called Engineering.

"All right, Lieutenant Dalton, Doctor Thorne is ready for Transport."

I blew him a kiss as the sight of his handsome face was replaced with the cold dark of Transport, and then the newly greening vista of our encampment on Morgos.

My abilities as a Sympath allow me to sense and feel others' emotions. My Captain and I, having our extra special connection, are each able to know how the other is doing, even when separated by many light-years. We hadn't realized that it would stretch that far until it was put to the test, but it was something that allowed us both to sleep better each night. So even though I absolutely hated the fact that we had to be separated for periods of time, I knew that I could reach out and feel my husband's warmth, whenever I wanted to, as he could reach out to me.

As I lowered the viewer, thinking that I would really like to go out and visit that island, I felt my Captain come onto the terrace. I felt his warmth, his special warmth that had led me to him in the beginning.

"Captain Paolo, it's a beautiful day. What would you like to do?"

"I thought we might go down to the beach, my dear. Later, we might get horses and take a ride around the grounds. How does that sound?"

"Anything you want, Captain."

We went back to the bedroom and changed into beachwear. I folded a blanket and put it in my bag, and we went out to the terrace, to our private lift. I collapsed the distance viewer and put that in my bag as well.

We went down to the beach, and as we stepped out of the lift I could feel it, more than before. The calm, happy, content emotions and feelings of the Hegrioans, and the tourists as well. But there was something else, an undercurrent, unfocused. I couldn't tell where it was coming from, and it felt like anger, frustration. I looked around us. We were walking on the sand, toward the water, so unbelievably blue. The sand felt so good, soft under my bare feet, not hot at all even though it was the middle of the day. My Captain had taken his shoes off as well. He looked so relaxed, so happy. I felt his lovely warmth flowing toward me, into me. He couldn't sense what I could, that undercurrent of something, something that shouldn't be there. But I couldn't see anyone who looked unhappy. All of the people I saw were smiling, enjoying the warm sun.

We found a nice spot, near the water, but far enough away that we wouldn't get splashed by the surf coming in. I spread out the blanket, and we put our bags down. I slipped my dress over my head, leaving me in just my swimsuit. I felt my Captain's eyes on me, appreciative. I grinned, and motioned him to remove his shirt.

Then I felt something else, something familiar coming toward us.

"Hey, Liz!"

I looked around, and saw my friend Jenny.

"Hey, Jen. Hello, Lieutenant."

Jenny was coming over the sand with Lieutenant Quinn. They had been dating for a few months now. I had thought she would have ended up with Commander Walker, they had seemed to be hitting it off at first. But it seemed that as soon as Jenny laid eyes on Lieutenant Mark Quinn, he was all she could talk about, or think about. I happened to know that he felt the same about her.

Jenny said, "We're going to take a boat out, do you two want to come with us?"

The Lieutenant looked uncomfortable. He knew that it would be inappropriate for the Captain and the Captain's wife to spend time recreating with a Lieutenant and his girlfriend. I wanted to tell him it was all right. Jenny and I had been best friends for many years, and I wasn't about to give that up now. Not even because of Rank. I had spoken to the Captain about that already and he agreed. We would have to work it out so that we could spend time together without jeopardizing the Captain/Lieutenant chain of command.

I looked at the two of them, admiring. They did look good together. She is fair, red-headed, slender. My best friend is beautiful in a porcelain doll sort of way, and she looks great in any clothing, or none.

Lieutenant Quinn is tall, dark skinned, brawny in a very handsome way. I wondered, as I had before, what his ancestry was, but I had never found the right moment to ask him. His rugged good looks are emphasized and increased by the fact that he is a good man, a good friend, a good Officer. They complement each other perfectly. I felt their joy, they were content and happy just to be together. That made me very happy as well.

I like to think that my Captain and I are the same, complementary. I am small, well-toned but not conspicuously muscled, and my skin is light brown. People have said to me that I must be descended from what used to be called South Americans but my parents are not even sure of our heritage. My husband is tall, extraordinarily handsome, muscular. His skin is fair, though his hair is black. Besides being one of my own main reasons for being, he is a brilliant and talented Officer, fair and just. His Crew adores him and respects him, obeying his orders without reservation. We are a perfect fit for each other, physically as well as mentally. His very presence gives me warm chills, and I do not know how I survived for all the years before I met him.

At that moment, I knew that Jenny was only asking us to join them to be polite, she didn't really want extra company. I wouldn't have either. And I didn't, I wanted to be alone with my husband, on the beach.

I said, "I don't think so, Jen, you two should spend time alone. We'll catch up with you later."

"All right. See you later, then." Her relief was obvious.

They went off toward the boat dock around the curve of the beach. I hadn't been down there before, but I knew that they had boats available for sailing, and they had plenty of boatmen to take tourists on cruises

around the bay.

I brought out the distance viewer.

"Paolo, I'm curious about that island. We don't know anything about it, and we've never seen any boats heading out there. Yet it looks occupied."

"We have plenty of time for that, my dear. Let's just relax today, I need to rejuvenate, and so do you."

"Of course, my Captain."

We spent the rest of the afternoon on the beach, watching the water, the boats, the tourists. The natives were walking around the sand, bringing drinks and food to the tourists, making sure everyone was happy. Every so often I would feel a familiar something, and when I looked around there would be a member of our Crew, wandering over the sand, or swimming in the ocean. They deserved their vacation, they all worked very hard. I noticed that for the most part they avoided eye contact with me, and certainly with their Captain. An Ensign does not fraternize with a Captain, or a Captain's wife. I knew that all of our people were staying on the same resort, but we wouldn't see them very much, they were in a different wing. Only the Captain and me, Lieutenant Quinn and Jenny, and Commander Walker, when he was able to join us, were staying in the Suites. I hoped that the repairs would be finished soon so that the Commander would be able to come down to the planet and start his leave. I knew that the Admiral was waiting for that as well, he had something planned, and wouldn't say anything about it until all of the Senior Staff were together.

The sunset was absolutely beautiful. We sat on our blanket and watched. Then we heard something of a disturbance behind us, further up the beach. I looked at my husband.

"They must be about to start a bonfire."

He smiled, a big happy smile.

"We should attend, my dear. After all, we do have a connection with that particular custom."

I put my left hand in his.

"Yes, we certainly do. Let's go."

We put our clothes back on and headed toward the noise, where the crowd was gathering. He put his arm around me and gave me a squeeze as we walked up the beach toward the crowd and the fire.

The musicians were just beginning to play as we arrived. We went over to the cleared area and joined the people who were dancing. It was lovely. The music was so sensuous, so seductive. My left hand began to tingle. I reached out and took my husband's left hand in mine. My hand was burning by now, and from the look on my Captain's face, his was as well. Our last trip to Hegrioa had led to us being married, on that very beach, in a native ceremony. The wedding rings we had been given had embedded themselves in our hands, and had spread vines, or what looked like vines, into the flesh. We were connected, to the rings, and to each other. And it had started there, on that beach.

I wanted so badly to find the leader of the Hegriogan tribe who had married us. I wanted to find him and ask him what he had done? What was that technology? How was it done, and was it really telepathy? I am a Botanist, after all, and the vines were like nothing I had ever seen or experienced before. I wanted to see where they came from, where they were grown. But he was not there that evening. We only saw a few of our Crew, and they did not do anything other than wave hello.

After a couple of hours of dancing, drinking, enjoying, we decided to go back to our suite. We walked back up the trail to our private lift. When we arrived at the lift I felt the beginnings of a feeling, a sensation, the undercurrent was becoming more prevalent. Then it abruptly burst into my awareness with a power I had never felt before.



The front of the resort was deserted. The lobby was empty of tourists. However, the receptionist still sat behind that huge edifice of a desk, looking intently at us as we entered the lobby.

"How may I assist you this evening?"

I looked at the Captain.

He said, "We saw what looked to be smoke, coming from the island in the outer bay. Can you tell us anything about that? We are concerned that perhaps someone was injured."

She looked at us searchingly. Her purple eyes shifted from me to the Captain. She felt to me as though she was trying to figure out how best to get rid of us.

"I am so very sorry, Sir, and Ma'am. I do not know anything about an event out in the bay. There is no-one on the island, no-one at all."

She was lying. I felt the deception. She knew that I knew, as well, but she couldn't say anything. If she had, she would have had to admit the lie. I looked over at the Captain, then reached out and took his hand.

I said, slowly, "We would like to take a boat out there, is that possible? I know there are boats for rent, can you help us with that?"

She looked back at me. "I will not be able to assist you with that. I am sorry. No-one goes there, it is not permitted."

Not permitted? Why not? It made me want to go there more than ever. She kept looking at me, calmly, and yet I could tell that she was agitated.

I turned back to the Captain and said, "All right, it seems that we will have to pursue other channels. Perhaps we can get in to see the Administrator tomorrow."

He answered, "I will see what I can arrange. I think the Administrator would make time for us." He turned back to the receptionist, "Thank you for your time."

She lowered her eyes briefly and then, "You are welcome, honored visitors. Please let me know if there will be anything else we can assist you with."

I gave her one last look before turning away, toward the path to our lift. I wanted to run up to her, and shake her, and beg her to tell me what had happened. But I couldn't do that, of course. And it wouldn't do any good anyway.

The Captain led me back to our lift. As we went, he was emanating vexation, frustration, and some unease as well. I held his hand tightly, trying to comfort his mind. He smiled, feeling my efforts.

"You continue to amaze me, my Elizabeth. You share your strength with me, even as you are wounded yourself."

"Always, my Captain."

Then it hit me again, another burst of pain. I fell to the ground, it had struck me like a blow to the head.

"Paolo, we have to do something. We have to find out who is hurt, what happened. Please. I can't get a focus on who, or even precisely where, it is." The tears came back.

"All right, I have an idea of where we can begin. Let me help you..."

He picked me up in his arms, and carried me the rest of the way back to our lift, and the entire ride up. He carried me to the sofa, and sat me down.

He touched his communicator.

"Commander Walker, are our sensors operational?"

"Captain? Are you all right, Sir?"

"Indeed, Commander, I know it is late, but see if you are able to read anything, anything odd, in the bay by the resort."

"Give us a moment, Sir."

"Let me know what you find, Commander. Captain out."

I smiled at him. He would find out what was going on, I knew it. I didn't know where it would lead, or what we would do with any information we got. But I did know that we had to try to help. Whoever it was that had been hurt, they needed help. The fact that the receptionist had been so secretive was very telling. She had been quite uncomfortable with our questions. It was so hard to know that there was something going on, something that affected me pretty directly, and we couldn't do anything. We would of course contact the Administrator, and attempt to go through official channels, but that would have to wait until the morning.

We sat together on the sofa, waiting for Commander Walker's contact. Not speaking, just holding hands.

I still felt a throbbing pain, not so intense as the burst I had felt earlier. But there was someone, or rather a lot of someones who were feeling pain, and fear. Sometimes it is not pleasant to be a Sympath, but if it meant that I could help these people, it would be worth it.

"Captain Bianchi, Sir."

"Yes, Commander. Have you found something?"

"I think so, Sir. About thirty minutes ago there was a disturbance, it looks like it was in the middle of the bay. An explosion, of a large magnitude."

"Thank you, Commander, can you tell anything about the explosion? What type of composition, anything about the configuration?"

"Not yet, Sir. We were not monitoring at the time, we will need to reconstruct the event. It will take time, Sir."

"All right, Mr. Walker, keep me posted. Captain out."

The Captain turned to me.

"It seems that we will not find anything out tonight. Come with me, you must try to rest."

I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep, but I went. We snuggled in the bed, my Captain's warmth flowing over me, comforting. He finally fell asleep, but I did not. I stayed wide awake, staring at the ceiling, feeling that current of pain and anger.

When the daylight came, I got out of bed and went out to the living area to do my workout. I had to. Since I was unable to sleep, it was the only thing I could do to remove myself from feeling outside emotions. I worked myself hard, blocking out everything. I didn't want to feel any feelings, not even my own. I had experienced what would happen if I allowed myself to become overwhelmed, and I had to do my best to stop that from happening.

When I was done, I sat on the floor and began my deep breathing exercises. When finally able to refocus on my surroundings, I saw the Captain sitting on the low wall between the rooms. He was watching me, concerned.

I smiled at him. "Paolo, I am all right. But we have a lot to do today."

He looked at me, searchingly. "Yes, my dear, we do. I have already contacted the Administrator's office and made us an appointment for this morning. And I have ordered breakfast. You were quite absorbed in your workout. After we eat, we will head over to the town. If nothing else, the receptionist has agreed to get us a vehicle to take us over there."

I got up and went over to hug him.

"Thank you, my Captain."

The steward brought our breakfast, a sort of egg dish, and something resembling coffee. It was actually quite good. We ate on the terrace, looking out over the ocean, wondering what was happening out there. While we were out there, I got a call from Jenny. She wanted to talk about her adventures of the day before. She was quite excited about the fact that she and Lieutenant Quinn had sailed, actually sailed, a boat around the bay.

"I've never done that before, Liz. Sailing! The feeling of the ocean breeze, the sun on your body, it's wonderful! You should try it." They had sailed past the curve of the inlet, and landed their boat on a small beach. Jenny had gotten the resort kitchen to prepare a picnic, or if I understood her correctly, a banquet. She didn't have as much experience as I had with horses, but she'd arranged for a handler to bring horses for them to ride.

"Liz. What a feeling of freedom that is. Now I understand why you love it so much."

They'd ridden over the hills on the far side of the bay, the ones we hadn't yet seen. I was almost jealous, but more happy for what she was experiencing. And she told me that they had seen something else we hadn't.

"Hey, Liz, that island out there is huge! Bigger than it looks from here. But so quiet. And it's guarded with warning buoys. We were told in no uncertain terms that we were not to go near there under any circumstances. Luckily there's plenty more to see. Like the old compound on the shore. It's so un-Earthlike, Liz. Just a collection of small huts, but they seem to be made of a strange wood that I've never seen before. Mark said he'd never seen its like either."

Obviously she didn't know about the events of the night before. And I wasn't going to tell her, especially since we didn't know for sure what had happened, nor its implications. I was surprised that they had been allowed to get close to the compound, close enough to see what the huts were made of. But perhaps it was uninhabited, though why then would it be kept? The Hegrioans didn't seem to be sentimental. Oh well, it was probably nothing I needed to concern myself with.

"Maybe we'll get out there at some point, Jen. But we have other things to do today."

She had a grin in her voice, "It's very romantic, my friend."

"Is there something you're trying to tell me, Jen?"

"I just mean it's so peaceful, and it's nice to get these men away from their duties, you know. The more I get to know Mark, the more I know it's real. And he's a lot of fun when he's not working." I wished I could see her face, but this was not a video terminal. "I'm happy for you, Jen."

When the Captain and I were done with our breakfast, we went down to the lobby and over to the desk. The receptionist turned slowly in our direction, and nodded to the steward on duty.

"Please have a vehicle brought around for Captain Bianchi and our Doctor Thorne. They wish to go into the town. They will be going to the Administration Center."

There was something that struck me about that statement, but it evaded me, and then I forgot about it. The steward bowed, and went out the front door. He came back within a few minutes, and motioned to us to follow him out. We followed, he held the heavy glass door for us, then directed us to the waiting vehicle.

"Have a pleasant day, honored guests."

I nodded and said, "Thank you very much."

The driver started up the vehicle and we were on our way. I looked around as we drove. We hadn't been to the town on our previous visit. The green, lush fields gave way to dark paved roads, and then we began to pass rows of buildings. Large and small, yet all looking very much the same. The same type of construction as the hotel, stone and glass, looking like they were made of sugar. It was difficult to tell what they were, but I got the impression that they were residences. There were no Hegrioans about, no-one on the streets at all besides us. We continued on, and then we came to the very center of the town. The buildings were the same, but even larger. We came to a stop in front of the largest, tallest building on the street. Huge windows, sparkling crystalline stone, flagstone walking path leading up to the colossal embossed glass doors. The embossing was flawless, images of huge trees, wound around with flowering vines. They gave the impression that the artist had cared a great deal about his work.

The driver helped us out of the vehicle, then bowed his head.

"The Administrator's assistant will contact us when you are ready to return, Sir. Have a pleasant day."

Then he got back into his driver's seat and drove away. Again I admired the way the land vehicles floated above the surface, riding smoothly over the roads.

The Captain and I looked at each other. We were both feeling apprehensive. We couldn't know what was going to happen, if anything would happen at all. We could only hope that the Administrator would be willing to tell us something, anything, let us help.

We had each, without discussing it, put on our Federation uniforms. My Captain looked so powerful in his pristine Captain's Uniform, with the silver Federation Globe of his Rank on his collar. I had my own uniform jacket, with the Federation emblem, stripes, and the vines and flowers embroidered into the seams. We both felt that it would make it more likely that the Hegrioan officials would speak to us if we looked like we were there officially.

We walked up to the door, the Captain pushed it open and held it for me. The front desk was manned by a young Hegrioan male, in what must have been the uniform of his position. His stocky torso, which was all we could see, was clad in a lavishly embroidered woven shirt, with symbols and emblems in silver-colored threads running up the sleeves and around the collar. The deep green of the cloth was a perfect complement to the medium lavender of his skin and hair.

He looked us up and down, then picked up his communicator. He waited a moment, then said, "Yes, Sir, they are here.... All right."

He turned back to us. "You may go in. It is the first door on your left, down that hallway." He pointed.

We both nodded, and headed in the direction of the pointed finger. My hand stole into my husband's. He squeezed it, and I felt his warmth, flowing into me.

We found the door we were looking for, and we both stopped, hesitated. We looked at each other. I took a deep breath and let it out, slowly.

The Captain turned the handle and opened the door. He motioned me to go in first. I walked into the office, and stopped in my tracks. The office was beautiful, huge, bright. Large windows overlooked the street. The walls were decorated with murals, seascapes, forested mountains. The Administrator sat behind a desk made of the most beautifully carved wood I had ever seen. Ornately carved scenes, trees and flowers adorned the legs and the trim. I stared, admiring.

"It is beautiful, yes?"

I started, I had been focusing on the carvings. Something about them looked familiar. Then it hit me that they were the same designs as the ones embossed on the entry door.

I said, "Yes, indeed, Sir. Just beautiful."

He smiled, and said, "I am very happy to see you both here. Madame Doctor, you are the Alpha One Sympath, yes?"

My jaw dropped at the suddenness of that observation. I gathered my wits, and answered, "Yes I am, Sir."  
"We have been waiting for you, and for Captain Bianchi, ever since you were here last. We are in great need of your help. We could not contact you, that would have drawn unwanted attention. However, we knew you would return."

The Captain spoke up then, "I'm sorry? You have been waiting for us? You knew we would return? I am afraid we do not understand."

The Administrator motioned to a couple of plush chairs.

"Sit. We shall talk. The steward will be bringing us some refreshment. I will give you what answers I can."

The steward, who turned out to be the young receptionist, brought in a tray of refreshments. His deep purple eyes regarded each of us, and he looked uncomfortable. I couldn't get a good reading from him, but I did feel something, anxiety perhaps. He seemed to be intimidated by us, even though he worked in the Administrator's office. He held out the large tray, full of drinks, and some small cake-like things. We each helped ourselves, and sat back in the comfortable chairs. The steward bowed, and left, closing the door behind him. I watched him go, wondering why he was so nervous.

The Administrator began, "We have had some difficulties here on Hegrioa. We try very hard to hide this fact from our guests, but this grave situation requires outside assistance. In recent years, we have had several incidents, of theft, and of injury to our residents. We have a policy of not sharing our technology with outsiders, as you probably are aware. However, some of our technology has been stolen."

I asked, "What sort of technology, Sir? And when?"

My first thought was of the wedding rings, with their interwoven vines that had entwined themselves in the flesh of our hands. Then I thought of the aliens who had abducted me, how they had redirected a Transport signal. And the toxins that had been developed by the researchers on Morgos, and the stealth technology that the Agrints had acquired... and the microscopic transponder that had been attached to my bracelet by our former Doctor.

The Administrator answered, slowly, "Please understand. This is very difficult for us. I need to be certain that you understand the gravity of our situation, and that you will be willing to assist us."

I was beginning to feel frustration. "What is it that you need me for?"

"We know that you felt something, last night, an event. I would like to be able to say that it was an accident, but it was not. It was sabotage, and we are not equipped to deal with this. We need you to find who was responsible. No Ships or Shuttles have left Hegrioa since yesterday, we believe that the saboteur is still here."

"But, Sir, I am not an investigator. I am a Botanist. I deal with plants, water, soil. Not sabotage. What can someone like me do?"

The Captain interrupted, "I think he means that they want you to try to sense the saboteur. I am not certain that I want you to be involved in this. You have been through too much, you were overwhelmed last night..."

"Yes, I know, Captain, but that makes me want to help, more rather than less. I felt pain, I felt anger. Someone was hurt! It still hurts, I still feel the pain. If the Administrator thinks I can help, I want to try. I just don't know what I can really do."

My Captain looked over at me, and gave me that slight smile that had stopped my heart when we first met. I smiled back. All right then, that was settled, we were off on another mission.

I said, "Administrator, where do we start? Can we go to the island?"

He answered, "I believe that can be arranged. However, first we must discuss the events of the past few years, and you will need to know what has gone missing. If you know the story, you may better sense the person or persons that were involved in this latest act of sabotage. And perhaps prevent it from happening in the future."

It had begun many years ago, actually, this was not a recent event. The Hegrioans are quite advanced, technologically. They have a number of research facilities, universities, scientific institutes that have been in operation for thousands of years. Hegrioa is mostly a rural world, farms and ranches are the largest industry. However, the hard sciences had developed to a point where their technology was almost like magic. We had seen this, and experienced it in various ways. Their lives were full of minor miracles that they probably didn't even think about. They had achieved methods of farming, of irrigation, even weather control, that were far more advanced than anything the Federation had.

Such a society is bound to attract attention. Hegrioa is famous throughout the Galaxy for its relaxed atmosphere, its beaches, its friendly inhabitants. People of many races flock there for vacations, as well as various conventions and business meetings. I was fairly certain that most of the visitors did not stop to think about the underlying technology behind such things as the door sensors, or how the open air transport vehicles floated over the ground without making a sound. I had noticed, as had the Captain, but on our previous visit we were thinking more of ourselves than the technology around us. Which brought up something that had been on my mind quite often. I would definitely be asking about the wedding rings, and the ceremony, after we solved the immediate problem.

The Hegrioans had, over the years, been successful in keeping their technology to themselves. They did not create weapons, they were not in conflict with any other worlds. They were simply their own world,

catering to the tourists who came to visit. And running their farms, and living their normal lives.

Until someone decided that they shouldn't keep their discoveries to themselves. Until someone decided to take what they wanted, for their own purposes. I had a feeling I knew where this was going. We had only recently defeated the Agrints, who had seemed to possess more advanced technology than they should have. If it wasn't them, it was someone like them. They had either stolen the information themselves, which didn't seem likely, or they had purchased it from the actual thieves.

I broke in, "Administrator? How long ago was the first theft?"

He turned his eyes to me, "It was approximately twenty of your years ago, Doctor. The first theft was of minor significance, we thought. It was merely some computer chips, micro circuitry, nothing that had any classified information on it. It was only much later that we connected that with some of the events that occurred on other worlds, including your Colony on Morgos."

The Captain and I looked at each other. We both felt the same surprise, the same tension.

The Captain asked, "And how was it connected, Administrator?"

"We believe that those micro circuits were used in the development of some of the machinery and tools used in the research facility on Morgos. I personally believe that they were also the basis for several other developments, such as the technology that allowed the mercenaries to abduct you, Doctor Thorne."

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. The Captain looked at me, I could feel his concern. He was surprised as well, even though we had known that the Agrints and their associates had probably stolen their technology. We had both wondered who it had been stolen from, and if we could become allies with them. I suppose we should have guessed it was the Hegrioans.

I found my voice, "How do you know about that? It was before we came here, and we didn't speak of it to anyone else here."

The Administrator tilted his head, his purple eyes gleaming, and said, slowly, "We know all about you, Doctor. We have had an interest in you for quite some time. We have followed your career, and we were ever so relieved when you were finally assigned to the Draco with Captain Bianchi."

I gaped again. I couldn't think of anything to say. Why in the Universe would they be watching me? And how? I hadn't left Earth until a year ago, and there were no Hegrioans on Earth. I sat and shook my head, trying to clear it. All the while, that undercurrent of pain and fear was there, wearing me down. The Captain was growing angry. He did not like this idea of someone watching me, manipulating me. What else were they up to? What did they want from me? From him?

He said, trying to control his voice, "Administrator, we will assist you as well as we are able. We do not need to hear the entire history of these thefts, at least not right at this moment. What we do need is to return to our Ship, temporarily. We will want to go to the island, but not today. Doctor Thorne needs Medical attention and rest. She can best be taken care of on the Draco."

I turned to look at him, but he wasn't looking at me. All I felt from him was his warmth, his love, and some residual anger.

The Administrator shook his head. "That will not be possible, Captain Bianchi. I cannot allow you leave when we are not allowing anyone else to do so. We need to maintain our plan of action, you cannot be seen as above the law."

The Captain continued, "We must, Administrator. We can leave at night, or we can simply Transport up to the Ship. No-one needs to know."

My heart flipped over in my chest. I knew that the technology that had allowed a Transport signal to be hijacked had come from here. What was to prevent the saboteur from using it on us now? I opened my mouth to speak, but the Administrator beat me to it.

"All right, Captain Bianchi, you may go. I cannot let you leave in your Shuttle, it would attract too much attention. You will need to Transport. I will allow you to Transport from here, this office is shielded against interference. I do not believe it is possible to get through the shielding to redirect your signal." He turned his eyes my way. "You need not be concerned, Madame Doctor."

I looked at him carefully, trying to get a reading from him. It was difficult, until suddenly I could sense everything from him. It was as though a dam broke. I could feel his power, his intelligence. I felt his coolness, his confidence, his absolute belief that we were safe, here, in his office. I nodded my head to him.

"Thank you, Administrator. I appreciate your trust in me, thank you for allowing me to feel your self."

He smiled and bowed his head as well. Then he reached down and pulled something out of a drawer. A small card, which he handed to me. I looked at it, a long string of numbers and letters. I looked up questioningly, and handed the card to the Captain. The Captain took the card, watching us both, then breathed deeply, relieved.

He said, "I will call the Ship now, Administrator, if you do not mind."

"Go right ahead, Captain. The card is my private call code for when you wish to return. Your room at the hotel will be safe, and waiting for you."

"Thank you, Sir...Commander Walker."

The Commander answered immediately, "Yes, Sir. We are still working on the sensor data, Sir."  
"All right, Commander. Prepare to Transport myself and Doctor Thorne right away, directly to the Bridge."

"Sir?"

"Right away, Commander, no questions."

"Yes, Sir." There was a delay of about ten seconds, then, "Transporting now, Captain."

I said, "Thank you Administrator!"

There was that familiar brief jolt of cold and dark, then we were on the Bridge. The Commander was there, brows lifted, questioning, but he couldn't ask anything until the Captain invited it. The rest of the Bridge Crew on duty were Lieutenant Masters, the Communications officer, and Ensign Alben, one of the science officers. Everyone else was down on the planet. I knew they would be relieved and be able to go down there in a couple of days but I still felt badly for them. I smiled at them, then looked at the Captain. He tilted his head in the direction of the ready-room, so I left the Bridge and went next door to wait. I know when he is in Command, and I will not question him in front of his Crew, ever.

As I walked away, I heard the Captain say, "Commander, we have a lot to discuss, forward the sensor data to my ready-room terminal and then join us in there."

"Yes, Sir. May I ask, what is happening? Is there a situation?"

"Commander, we will discuss all of that, but not here. Join us when you are ready."

I went into the ready-room and took off my uniform jacket. Underneath I only had on my usual tank top, but I was wearing a pair of black cargo pants instead of the khakis I usually wore. It was as close to the regulation Federation uniform as I was going to get, not being an Officer of any sort. I took off my boots as well, I knew the Captain wouldn't mind. Just as I was settling myself onto the sofa to wait, he came in.

"Commander Walker will be here shortly. We must review the data that has been collected, and we must decide what, if anything, we can do to help the Hegrioans. I wonder, though, if there has been trouble, why did they not contact us?"

I said, "Captain, I think it's because they didn't know if they could trust us. If they have been watching us as they say, they will have seen our recent conflict with the Agrints. And if they have been watching me, specifically, they would have seen that I only want to help, not harm. However, I can't wait to find out what has been going on, I wonder if there would be Records of Hegrioan history?"

"Go ahead and begin that research, my dear. For now we need to get the details of the most recent events, and see if we will be able to assist."

I got up and went over to him. He had sat down in his chair behind the desk. I sat down in his lap. He put his arms around me and looked into my eyes.

He said, softly, "You will be cautious. I will not have you put yourself in harm's way. And you will arm yourself, as will I. We will have to clear it with the Administrator, but this will be non-negotiable."

He leaned in and kissed me, lovingly, thoroughly. I felt his warmth, his love, flowing over me, through me. I heard the Commander come into the room and stop short at the door. He cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, Sir. Shall I come back?"

The Captain said, against my lips, "No, that will not be necessary, Commander." Then he turned toward Commander Walker and continued, "You have sent the data to this terminal?"

"Yes, Sir."

I got up and went back over to the sofa and sat down. The Commander cleared his throat again, then went behind the Captain's desk to turn the terminal to the correct screen. They stood there, reading, reviewing, for a few minutes. Then they both raised their heads and looked over at me.

"Elizabeth, please come here. You need to see this."

I went back over to the desk and looked at the screen. At first I didn't know what I was looking at, then it became clear. I gasped.

The island was not just an island. It was a manufacturing facility, a factory of sorts, much larger than it looked from our side. The data suggested that this was where the Hegrioans developed or made their computer chips, their sensor pads, their circuitry. Our data sensors could not penetrate fully into the building, but it also appeared that the facility extended far underground, under the ocean. The part that we could see was only the topmost layer, there were many levels below.

The event from last night had left a crater. The building was half blown apart, the smoke had been the result of an explosion. The terminal data showed some chemical analyses, it looked to me as though it was still analyzing the specifics of the explosive, or the device. Of course, there was no way to know who had set it off, or if it had been an accident. We had been told it was sabotage but we could not confirm, not until we were able to examine the remains in person.

I turned to the Captain. "We need to go there, Captain. It's the only way we'll know what happened. We have to see it in person. I still feel the pain, and it may well be coming from there. Someone may be injured, we need to try to rescue them."

"That may be, Elizabeth, but as I told you, you will not put yourself in danger. We will explore the island. But not until we are prepared. Commander, is there anything else you can tell us?"

Commander Walker shook his head. "Sorry, Sir. That is all we were able to get with our sensors. It is difficult to break through the interference that surrounds the planet. They don't seem to want to be spied on."

I felt a flush come over me, anger, and said, "But they sure don't seem to have any qualms about spying on us! Isn't there any way you can boost the sensors, or something, to get more information?"

The Captain said, "We know there is a way. Commander, get on it. We have to know what, if anything, they are hiding. We cannot be certain, even now, that they do not mean us harm. I still wonder why the Administrator let us leave so easily. He had to know what we were going to do when we got here."

Commander Walker nodded, then bowed his head to the Captain, turned and walked out of the ready-room in the direction of the lift. I turned to the Captain.



"So now what?"

"Now, you will come with me to our quarters. You are in need of rest. I know you did not sleep last night. The Commander will contact me when he has more information."

"All right, Sir, but don't be surprised if I don't get much rest. I don't plan to let you get any, either." His warmth, wafting over me, began to get warmer. My left hand began to tingle. I smiled, and went back over behind the desk. I stopped in front of his chair and began to pull off my shirt.

"Are you sure you want to go all the way down to our quarters? Sir?"

His eyes sparkled as he watched me, then his hand went to the terminal keyboard. I saw something on the screen about the doors to the ready-room. I hadn't known he could lock them remotely.

"I would have preferred to do this in our hotel room, perhaps on the terrace overlooking the water, but..." When my clothes were all on the floor, I went to work on his uniform, jacket first, then unbuttoning his dress shirt. Slipping the shirt off his broad shoulders, following my hands with my lips, sliding my hands down to his trousers, which joined my own on the floor beside the desk. My fingers stroked his body, his skin hot, his passion increasing. As I looked at him, he gazed back at me with those wonderful grey eyes that seem to see deep into my soul. My heart swelled with love, and my body tingled all over, hot chills running up and down my spine. Skin tingling, pulses pounding, he took me in his arms, and lowered me to the floor, kissing my face, my shoulders, my neck. Caressing my back, pulling me on top of him as his strong fingers massaged. Sliding his hands down, to my backside, my thighs. I found his mouth with my own, lips hot, tongue searching. As he lay back on the shag rug, his fingers dug into my sides, pressing my body to his. His breath quickened, his skin flushed. My legs wrapped around his, my hands moved on his smooth hot skin, slipping under his shoulders to hold him tight. Our heat merged, washing over both of us, as we moved together, perfectly.

There was no memory or feelings of pain in those moments, all I felt was my passion and the love of my husband. But after, as we lay on the rug on the floor of the ready-room, the throbbing pain made itself known once again, building. I shook my head, trying to clear it, but the throbbing remained.

"Paolo, something is very wrong. Whatever happened down on the planet, on the island or wherever, it's bad, and it isn't over."

He drew me to him, his thoughts and feelings of love and concern flowing over me.

"We will find out what is happening, Elizabeth. And we will do our best to fix it."

I reached over to the pile of clothes, separated it into mine and his, and began to dress. He did the same, watching me all the while. His eyes showed his worry for me, he had seen me become overwhelmed in the past.

"Paolo, I am not feeling overwhelmed. At least not yet. This is different. I feel that someone needs my help. I have to find out who was hurt, what is going on. I'm not sure about what the Administrator was saying about thefts, I couldn't tell if he was holding back. But there is something, some reason they have been watching me. However creepy that is, they don't feel like evil people and if I can help them I want to."

"All right, Elizabeth my love. We will wait for Commander Walker to return. And we shall see what we can learn."

The Captain brought another chair around behind the desk, and we sat and looked at the terminal screen, trying to make sense of the data that had once again begun streaming from the sensors. I didn't understand much of what I was seeing, but then I did recognize something. I jumped out of my chair and pointed at the screen.

"Captain! Those are our vines! Where is that?"

"Elizabeth?"

"Captain, those are the same vines as the ones we have." I held up my left hand. "The same ones they used at our ceremony. Where is that? Is it on the island, in the factory?"

"Let me see, my dear... it appears so, yes. I wonder..." He hesitated and shook his head.

"Yes, I wonder, too. Do they grow there naturally, or are they farmed? There must be a tremendous amount of them, for it to register on the sensors, right? The sensors don't normally pick up plant life, do they? How is it that we see them at all?"

"No, they do not normally detect plant life, Elizabeth, there must be a lot of them, indeed, or..."

"Or?"

"Or there is something in them that the sensors are detecting, something technological. We will need to continue to scan more deeply. I do not know that our sensors, even enhanced as they are, will be able to tell us any more."

"So we need to get down there!"

"In the morning, my dear, it's almost dinnertime now, we will stay onboard tonight. I will contact the Administrator in the morning and make arrangements for our return. All right?"

I pouted, jokingly, then grinned. "All right, my Captain, if you say so. Our bed is much more comfortable than this floor, don't you think?"

He grinned back at me, "Yes, indeed." He pulled me into his lap.

We were sitting there, holding each other, kissing, when the door chimed.

"Yes, Commander, come in."

Commander Walker entered, then stopped short and looked at the wall. His eyes roved, looking everywhere but toward us. His disapproval would have been obvious to anyone, not just someone like me, who could feel it like a cold breeze.

"Sir, the Engineers have extended the sensors as far as they can go. I'd like to go over what we've found, if you have time."

The Captain shook his head and said, "Commander, come in, come in. Elizabeth, please get up, you are embarrassing the Commander."

I kissed his nose, then got up and went over to sit on the sofa, patting the seat next to me.

"Please join me, Commander."

Commander Walker came over to sit on the sofa next to me, uncomfortable about doing so, but he looked over at the Captain, who nodded and motioned him to sit.

"Captain, Sir, the Engineers have been working overtime trying to get more information from the sensors. We have reached the limit of our abilities, I'm afraid. What you see there is all we can get from here." The Commander shook his head. "We are unable to penetrate past ten meters below the surface of the island. And what we do see is garbled. If you'll look at this screen here..." He got up and went over to the desk, and turned the terminal toward himself, pressing buttons as he did so. "You'll notice that this shaft here, it looks like a lift, perhaps? It goes diagonally downward, past where we can see. But this one... this one ends at almost the ten meter mark, and continues into a horizontal tunnel. However, the entrance to the tunnel is collapsed, I don't think we would be able to get in there."

I went over to the desk as well to look at the screen. There was something in the tunnel, something very big.

"Commander Walker? What's this over here? It looks like it's moving."

He peered closer at the screen. "It does look that way, doesn't it. Unfortunately that's all we can tell from here. The other thing I wanted to bring to your attention is this." He changed the screen again. This one was a view of the far side of the island, the side we hadn't yet seen. It was hard to see in the night vision, and I had to squint and lean closer to the screen. It showed another building, this one intact. About three stories high, the same sparkly stone. But there was something else, something, or someone, moving. It was too big to be a person, I couldn't tell what it was. Then I realized it wasn't on the surface, it was underground. There was another tunnel down there, at approximately the same depth as the one on the other side.

The Captain said, "All right, then, that," he pointed to the screen, "will be our destination. We three, and Colonel Zuajko, will investigate the island tomorrow. Elizabeth, where is the card with the Administrator's number?"

"It's in your pocket, Captain."

"Oh, yes, of course." He found the card, then touched the buttons on the terminal to make the call.

"Good evening. Administration Office." It was not the Administrator's voice, and there was no picture on the screen.

The Captain said, "Good evening. I understood that this number would connect directly to the Administrator. Is he available?"

"I am very sorry, Sir, he is not in the office at this time. Please try again in the morning."

"Thank you, I will." The Captain disconnected the call, then looked at me, and Commander Walker. "There is something very wrong here. The Administrator was concerned about security, so much so that he insisted that we Transport directly from his office. We will need to advance our schedule, I'm afraid. Commander, collect our weapons and meet me back here. Elizabeth, head down to your Lab and gather your supplies. We do not know what we will run into."

"Aye, Sir, on my way!" I turned and started for the door, right behind the Commander.

He touched his communicator. "Colonel Zuajko. Prepare for immediate departure to the planet. Meet us in my ready-room in thirty minutes."

The Colonel answered immediately, "Yes, Sir!"

I hesitated at the door. "Captain?"

"Yes, my dear. It's all right. Go on, get your things."

I reached out to him, and all I felt was his warmth, his power, his determination. He smiled at me, and

held out his left hand. I felt an extra burst of warmth, concern. But the concern was for me. He knew that the pain I felt was coming from the island, and that was where we were heading, directly into the heart of whatever was going on. I held out my left hand to him as well, it was tingling, almost hot. Then I turned and let myself out, and went over to the lift to go down to my Lab.

The Agro-Lab is on Level Twelve. Actually, it's more than half of Level Twelve. As I opened the door to my office, I looked out the window. It was a marvelous view, I could see part of the planet, and the moons, as well as the usual stars. I am not good with remembering constellations, there are too many different ones, as seen from so many different planets. I only know what I see as beautiful, and this view was beautiful. I took a deep breath, then another. It occurred to me that I had a few minutes to myself, so I took the opportunity to do some stretches, and a couple of yoga poses. I needed to try to keep my head clear and calm and my emotional receptors from overloading. The throbbing pain was still there, in my head, in my heart, unfocused and yet sharp and clear. Those few minutes of relaxation could make all the difference later. The terminal chimed. It was Jenny.

"Liz? We've been recalled, has something happened?"

"I'm not sure Jen, maybe. Sorry to disturb your vacation, but you'll have to learn to deal with interruptions if you're going to continue a relationship with an Officer of the Fleet."

"Oh. Yes, I understand. Are you all right?"

"So far, Jen. I can't tell you anything until Captain Bianchi has briefed the Officers. You'll get information as soon as it's safe."

Her disappointment was clear, but she handled herself professionally. "OK, Liz. See you soon, then."

We clicked off. I took one more cleansing breath and went through into the main Lab area. It was empty of people, my two Ensigns were down on the planet, enjoying their leave. Ensign Parker and Ensign Miller had been assigned to me as my team when I boarded the Draco a year before, and it had worked out splendidly. They were both wonderful, pleasant young men, knowledgeable scientists, hard workers, good team players, I couldn't have asked for better.

My Lab bag was on the worktable, waiting. I checked the supplies. I had collection containers for soil, water, plant life. Pincers, gloves, masks, and a magnifier. My backup distance viewer, not as good as the one I had left back in our room at the resort, but good enough.

I looked around at the Lab. It is simply amazing. As far as the eye can see, rows of plants, in soil and in fluid. Flower beds, bushes, food plants. And way on the other side of the gardens, my trees. The trees that supply a large percentage of the Oxygen for the Ship, a grove of huge, sweet smelling trees. Their heart shaped leaves make a comforting shady canopy, the ground beneath always cool. A tranquil, serene place. My Captain and I often found ourselves here, after hours, or even occasionally during the workday when he could steal a few minutes. It's very spiritual, very restful. I was tempted to walk through the gardens, to run my fingers along the rows of plants, to touch the bark of my lovely trees. But there was not time for that, my thirty minutes was almost up. I took a last look around, sighed, and picked up my bag to leave.

As I was going out the work area door, I picked up one more item. There was a handlight on the worktable. It used a rechargeable solar power cell, and it was fully charged. You never know. It went into my bag, and I went out the door, bag over my shoulder.

When I arrived back on Level One, I went directly over to the ready-room. I could feel something, someone besides the Captain in the room. I passed my hand over the sensor pad, and the door slid aside. Lieutenant Quinn and Jenny were inside, sitting calmly on the sofa. Commander Walker was standing by the Captain's desk, taking weapons out of a case and laying them out on the desktop. I stopped short in the doorway and looked at the Captain.

"Hello, all. What's going on?"

Jenny got up and came over to me. "We're going to stay up here while you and Captain Bianchi and Commander Walker are on the planet. We can't leave the Ship unmanned, you know."

I put my bag down, as the Captain came over and handed me a laser pistol. I looked up at him, nodded, and put it in my pack.

"Sorry, Jen."

"Don't be, Liz, you need to get down there. The Captain has told us some of what's happening. You just please take care of yourself, OK?" She was emanating fear, concern for me, her face taut, her eyes glistening.

I put my arms around her. "Jen, we'll be all right. I will be all right. This is the only way we can find out what's really happening and fix it."

"I know, Liz, but don't ask me not to worry." She squeezed me, then held me at arm's length and looked me over. "You look worn out, Liz. Please be careful."

I took her face in my hands and kissed her cheek. "Don't worry, I will have the Galaxy's best Officers with me, protecting me."

The Captain interrupted. "All right, ladies, we need to get started. I have asked Lieutenant Quinn here for another reason as well. Lieutenant, would you stand up, please?"

The Lieutenant started, then stood to attention. "Yes, Sir!"

"Lieutenant, under normal circumstances, we would be having a full ceremony, with all the attending rituals. However, unfortunately, that will have to wait. I have been authorized by Admiral Wilson, and by the President of the Federation, to perform this action here and now."

He turned his terminal screen around so that it was facing out into the room. On the display was Admiral Wilson, standing in his office. We all stood a bit straighter, the Officers saluted.

"Admiral. Sir!"

The Captain stood, and picked up a small box from the desk.

The Admiral smiled, and lifted his hand for silence. He spoke, "Lieutenant Mark Quinn, I hereby promote you to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, effective immediately, with all of the responsibilities and privileges thereof. Please remove the insignia from your collar."

Poor Lieutenant Quinn was speechless. His mouth opened but nothing came out. Then he pulled himself together, and pulled the bars off of his collar. Jenny was smiling, vibrating with pride, looking from the Lieutenant, to me, to the Captain. The Captain opened the box, and we saw, on a velvety cushion, the bronze-colored star, surrounded by a wreath of vines. He pulled it off the cushion, pinned it to the Lieutenant Commander's collar, then stepped back.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant Commander Quinn."

The brand-new Lieutenant Commander saluted again, and said, a bit shakily, "Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Admiral. I will do my best to make you proud." He put out his hand, and the Captain took it in both of his. I felt the pride, the satisfaction, the admiration from both of them, and I caught my breath. It was indeed a special moment. I smiled at Jenny, she was about ready to burst with happiness and pride. And I thought I felt a smidge of arousal as well... not my business. Sometimes a Sympath can feel too much. The Admiral smiled wider, I wished I could feel his pride at that moment. He did so care about his Officers, I knew he would be just bursting.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant Commander. You have earned it. We are all very proud of you. I must go. Captain Bianchi, your mission is set, keep me posted. End call." He nodded to someone off screen, then his picture disappeared.

Commander Walker stepped forward and put out his hand.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant Commander Quinn. You certainly deserve the honor." Then he turned to the Captain. "Sir, we have everything we need, and Colonel Zuajko should be here any minute."

Just as he said that, the door opened and the Colonel came in, dressed in his fatigues, and carrying several large weapons, and well as one laser pistol.

"Reporting as ordered, Captain." He turned to me, looking down at me seriously. I could feel his resolve, even a hint of... pleasure? "Doctor Thorne, please do me the honor of carrying my pistol. It does not do you justice, Ma'am, but it may come in handy for you." He bowed his head, and handed me the pistol, handgrip first. I took it, and nodded to him.

"My pleasure, Colonel."

The Captain and his other Officers watched this exchange with great amusement. When I had first met the Colonel, it had taken him a long while to warm up to me. Even though I was qualified in all manner of firearms, I had been participating in his firearms classes for months, and he even allowed me to assist some of the Crewmembers with their training. It actually was only after I had been forced to shoot and kill an intruder who was about to shoot the Captain that he began to show any respect for me. But I didn't bring that up, and no-one else did, either. Everyone had seen the initial tension between us, and the mutual respect that had developed over the past few months had proven to be a source of speculation amongst the Crew, and the MPs as well. I didn't mind, but I did not share my observations with the Colonel. He is a dedicated, committed Officer, and very proud. There would be no purpose in making him self-conscious.

I checked the pistol to make sure it was safety-locked, verified the charge, then put it in my jacket pocket.

"Thank you, Colonel. I will try to earn your trust in me."

The Captain looked around at all of us, then said, "All right, then, we are ready. Commander Walker, you have the maps in your tablet?"

"Yes, Sir. All set."

"Good." He went back to his desk and touched the buttons to contact Engineering. "On our way, Lieutenant Dalton. Ready the Transport." He turned back to Commander Quinn and Jenny.

"Take care of my Ship, Lieutenant Commander."

"Yes, Sir!" Commander Quinn led Jenny out the door, toward the lift. She looked back at me for a moment, I nodded to her, sending her what comfort I could.

"OK Lieutenant. We four are ready."

I heard Lieutenant Dalton's voice, "Aye, Captain. Transporting now."

Then came that brief moment of cold and dark.

Night on the island was dark, very dark, no lights anywhere. The moons were hidden by the overhanging canopy of trees, I couldn't see anything but shadows. But I felt my Captain next to me, and the other Officers a few feet away. The Colonel brought out a handlight, and turned it on, pointed toward the ground so as not to blind us. When my eyes had adjusted somewhat, I looked around. We were in a clearing, grassy underfoot, surrounded by tall trees and some low shrubbery. It was completely silent, except for the slightest breeze through the leaves. The trees smelled familiar, almost the same as my trees back on the Draco, the same as the trees on the mainland, by the beach. I went over closer to one, and reached out to touch the rough bark.

The Colonel intervened, grabbing my arm from behind and pulling me away.

"Don't do that, please, Doctor. We don't know anything about this place. We have to assume that everything is hostile until proven otherwise."

He was emanating his usual powerful control, but also concern. I couldn't be angry, especially since the Captain was also concerned, and grateful.

"Sorry, Colonel, I'll be more careful."

Already, though, the constant throbbing pain I had been feeling for over a day was increasing. It felt almost like when I had been ill as a child, running a high fever. Underlying heat, combined with an unpleasant feeling all over, like insects on my skin.

The Commander was looking at his tablet. "I believe I have oriented us, Sirs. The building should be to the west of us, this way." He looked to the Captain for permission, then settled his pack, took the safety off his weapon, and headed off.

We all followed, carefully, picking our way through the underbrush by the light of the single handlight. We didn't want to attract any attention, if there was anyone out there to see. The Commander went first, then Colonel Zuajko with the light, then me, and the Captain last. I was trying to push away the pain and fear I was feeling, and I could feel my Captain doing his best to support me. His warmth and love were a constant reassuring presence in my head and my heart. The fact that he had his rather large firearm held at the ready, his eyes darting all around, his senses primed, was of great comfort as well. I did my best to balance my pack on my back, and went as carefully as I could.

After what seemed like hours but was probably only a few minutes, the Commander stopped and held up his hand. The building was just in front of us. I hadn't seen it as we were walking up, it was almost totally camouflaged in the dark. Now that we were right next to it, I was amazed once again by the ingenuity of the Hegrioans. The stone was flawlessly carved, placed so that I could barely see any seams. The moonlight reflected off of whatever made it sparkle, but only up close. I wanted to touch it, but held back. From what I could tell, the building was undamaged. But it was impossible to determine what its purpose was simply by looking at it.

The Captain spoke, "This must be the entrance. It seems to be half covered with something. Colonel, shine your light here please?"

When the light hit the entrance and we saw what was covering it, we all gasped. Especially me. It was the vines, our vines. Beautiful, dark green, shiny leaves on deep brown stems climbed up the wall, wound around the door frame, hung down in curtains from the second story almost to the ground. I reached out my hand, I couldn't help myself.

The Captain pulled me back.

"Elizabeth, don't!"

I shook my head, I was beginning to feel dizzy. The throbbing increased. My left hand tingled and grew hot.

"I have to, Captain. I'm the only one who can." I don't know how, but I knew that I was the only one of us who would be able to move the vines out of the way. I reached out my hand again, toward the door handle, hidden as it was under the blanket of vines.

The vines moved. They moved aside, off of the handle, they shrank back off of the door frame. I hadn't touched anything. The men were standing still as statues, watching in amazement. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that they had each drawn their weapons, and were holding them at the ready. I went closer, the throbbing in my head increasing with each movement. I put my hand out once more to turn the handle. The door opened, on its own, I still hadn't actually touched anything. As the door swung open, silently, I felt a sudden burst of pain. Stabbing pain, through my head, my heart, knocking me to the ground.

The Officers came back to life, rushing over to me.

"Elizabeth! What happened?" The Captain's love and fear cut through the fog in my brain.

"I don't know, Paolo. I think I'm all right, though. Help me up, please."

He took my hands and pulled me to my feet. He took my face in his hands and looked into my eyes, searching. I put my hands over his and looked back at him, questioning.

"Am I all right, Captain?"

He kissed me, tenderly, his love flowing through me.

"I think so, my dear. We will take this one moment at a time. Please, be cautious. Please."

Colonel Zuajko picked up my pack and swung it over his shoulder. I nodded my thanks. Commander Walker was trying to look inside the building, through the now-open doorway. It was pitch-black. I couldn't see anything past the door frame.

I went over to the Colonel and put my hand on his arm.

"Excuse me, Colonel, may I?"

He turned his head to me, and raised his brows. I reached around, unzipped my pack, and retrieved my handlight. I held it up to him, and he smiled. He motioned me to turn it on, then turned back to the Captain.

"Captain, we're good to move on?"

"We are, Colonel, lead on."

We walked through the doorway, Colonel Zuajko first, then Commander Walker with his tablet, looking carefully at the map, then me with my light, then the Captain, holding his weapon ready.

As I stepped over the threshold, I felt a slight prickling on my skin. I shone my light around the door frame, over the vines that were now about a half meter away from the frame. Nothing visible, but I couldn't shake the feeling of something, something almost electric.

"What is it, Elizabeth? What do you see?"

"I'm not sure, Captain, I don't see anything, but I feel something. Something odd."

"Well, stay on your toes, we will all need to keep our eyes and ears open. Commander, are you getting any odd readings?"

Commander Walker touched a few buttons on the tablet and shook his head. "Nothing here, Sir, only us, nothing unusual. The shaft leading to the tunnel is just ahead here. Follow me, Sirs, and Doctor."

We walked slowly down a dark corridor, our footsteps echoing on the stone. I felt an opening on my right, and turned my head. I didn't see anything, but I could feel a slight cool breeze. Then the Commander tapped Colonel Zuajko on the shoulder, and motioned to his right.

"Down there, Colonel. The entrance should be just down there."

My head was still throbbing, the slight tingle of electricity getting stronger. And now there was something else, a coolness, quite pleasant, welcoming. The lift door was open, waiting for us, but the interior light was out. I followed the Officers into the lift, the door closed, and we began our journey down. None of us had touched any controls, it was really as though it had been waiting for us. Or rather, for me. I wondered what, or who, we would find when the door opened.

The lift stopped, and the door slid open. The Colonel and I shone our lights out into the corridor, or rather the tunnel. This was the beginning of the tunnel we had seen on the display. The Captain stepped out of the lift, and stopped. He looked ahead down the tunnel, then motioned to the Commander.

"Commander Walker, it's your lead. Show us the way."

"Aye, Sir. This corridor leads to some sort of large room, or more specifically, a cavern. Colonel, the light, if you please."

We moved out of the lift, and started down the tunnel. I shone my light around the walls. They were made of the same stone as the building above ground, only this stone was not carved, it had been blasted. The air was cool and fresh. I wondered where the fresh air came from, we were pretty far underground.

"Commander, how far down are we?"

"Our depth at the moment is approximately ten meters, Doctor, but the tunnel slopes downward. Every step brings us farther down."

"Thank you. Where do you suppose the air is flowing from? It feels fresh."

"I can't tell, Doctor, perhaps we will see a shaft or circulation system as we go."

I continued to follow the Officers, the Captain immediately behind me. My head was becoming more foggy as we went, the constant undercurrent of pain growing stronger. I concentrated on my breathing, deep breath in, deep breath out. Cleansing breaths, one after the other, trying to clear my brain. Through the fog I felt my Captain, his warmth wrapping me like a blanket. I turned back to smile at him.

There were shadows, moving. "Paolo! Look out!"

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the laser pistol. The Captain lifted his weapon, it looked as big as

a rocket launcher to me. The Officers stopped, and lifted their weapons as well as they turned around. Then I saw them, the vines, traveling along the wall, following behind us. As soon as I cried out, they stopped moving. I lowered my pistol, and walked over to the wall. As I approached, the vines shrank away. My hand was tingling more than ever, my head still full of fog, but I just had to reach out. I thought hard, trying to focus. I put my hand out, the vines stopped moving again, and I gently brushed my fingertips across a few of the leaves. They were smooth, slick, cool. And I could have sworn they trembled when I touched them. Then one of the vines pulled itself away from the wall and wrapped itself around my wrist. I yelped and tried to pull away.

Then I felt it, right inside my head. Pain, need, sorrow. From a plant? How?

Laser-fire hit the wall in front of me. Several shots, whizzing past my arm, just missing the strand of the vine. The burning smell was accompanied by a crackling sound, as the laser shots bounced off the wall.

The vine tightened around my wrist, causing me to cry out again. "No! Stop!"

I hadn't been paying attention to the men up to that point, but I saw Colonel Zuajko out of the corner of my eye, his weapon aimed at the wall in front of me. I put out my free hand to stop him.

"No, Colonel, let it be! Please! Give me a moment."

He looked at me as though I was crazy, then looked back at the Captain, who nodded and motioned his arm downward. The muzzle of the laser rifle moved to point toward the ground.

I focused as hard as I could, trying to understand. I don't get feelings from plants, as far as I knew it wasn't possible. A Sympath can feel others' feelings, but only other Humans, or Human-like aliens. Not plants, I had never heard of such a thing. Once again I had to wonder what the Hegrioans had been doing here all these years. What had they developed? What were these vines, really? Only then did it occur to me that it was my left hand in the grip of the vine. The hand that contained some of what I thought of as its relatives.

"Captain? Do you feel anything? Is your hand reacting to the vines?"

"I feel some tingling, my dear, I thought it was you. You are still thinking these vines are relatives of the ones we share?"

"Yes, indeed, Captain, I do still think that. I can feel something here, something I've never felt before. These vines and ours must be the connection."

I focused again on the vines, the glossy leaves, the pain and sorrow. Trying to understand what they were trying to convey to me. As I stood there, transfixed, my head began to clear, the fog lifted. I still felt the pain, but it was muted, as though it was being smothered purposely. The vine around my wrist let go, and contracted back against the wall. My hand still tingled, though, and I lifted it in front of my face, turning it back and forth.

"Paolo. Look at this."

"Elizabeth?"

"My hand. The vines are growing, or coming to the surface. I can see them now. Look."

I shone my light directly onto my hand. The Captain looked, then gasped. The Colonel and the Commander stepped closer, and did the same. My hand showed lines throughout, deep green through the brown of my skin. It looked almost like a lace glove, delicate. I still couldn't really feel anything, except the slight tingling sensation. I took my husband's hand and aimed the light on it. There was a hint of lines beginning to show through on his hand as well. He looked, and shook his head, confused.

I said, "I don't know what is happening, but I feel more confident, and my head is much clearer now. Let's keep going. I don't think these vines will be giving us any trouble, they aren't the problem."

The Captain said, "You are certain, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, Captain, I am certain. Let's go."

We continued down the corridor, in our usual formation. I noticed that the vines were creeping along the wall behind us, keeping their distance, but following. I felt comforted by that, I don't know why, but I did. As we made our way down the tunnel, I noticed the air getting cooler. We were still heading downward, toward the large room, or cavern, that we had seen earlier on the display. I knew that was where we had to get to, I was thinking of the something I had seen, moving. We walked for a while with no disturbances. Then, suddenly, the Commander stopped, and held his hand up for us to stop as well.

"We are almost there, Captain. Just ahead, the cavern. And the sensor is picking up something, it's hard to tell exactly what. It's alive, but not Hegrioan, nor Human."

The Captain moved forward to look at the tablet screen. He tapped a couple of buttons, then looked again, closely.

He said, "Colonel, you go first, check it out."

"Yes, Sir."

The Colonel lifted his pistol and held it in both hands, ready, as he walked slowly toward the cavern.

Commander Walker held the handlight, to light the way, following a few paces behind. They disappeared



around a curve, the light fading as they went. The Captain stayed with me, waiting, both of us holding our weapons, safeties off, poised for action.

Colonel Zuajko's voice came back to us after a few minutes, "All clear, Captain, but be careful walking in, it's a bit slippery."

We followed them into the cavern, walking slowly, the Captain first, me following behind. As I entered, I felt my foot begin to slide out from under me, and I had to fight for balance. I directed the light toward the floor, and saw that it was wet. I continued, gingerly. Then I almost fell again, as I stopped short, in awe. The cavern was huge, with walls of sparkling stone, glistening in the light. The tunnel must have gone quite a way down, even though the slope hadn't seemed too steep as we were walking. I couldn't even see the ceiling, my light disappeared into the heights as I pointed it upward. As I looked across the cavern I saw a glint of something, water? An underground lake? That would make sense, the vines would need fresh water. I moved the light around, trying to see everything. The Captain was in front of me, watching me, waiting. He kept looking down at his hand, troubled by the appearance of the lines in the flesh. I went over and took the hand in my own, and brought it to my cheek as I looked into his eyes.

"It's all right, Paolo. It's all right, I feel it."

"I will believe you, Elizabeth. But you must admit, it is a bit of a shock."

"Yes, it is, but it's going to turn out to be a good thing, you just wait and see."

He put his free arm around my waist and gathered me to him, and kissed me on top of my head, then on my forehead. He caught his breath, and held me tighter, but still holding his gun. I could feel it against my back. Then he moved his hand, turned my face up and kissed me on the mouth, deeply, passionately. I was surprised at first, we were in the middle of a mission. But then I didn't care. All I could feel was my Captain, my husband. I leaned into his embrace, put my arms around him under his uniform jacket, and returned his kiss with complete abandon. His skin grew warmer under my hands, as I ran my fingers up and down his spine, and down over the curve of his backside. He moved his hand from my face, slid it down my neck, and down to my breast. My breath began to come faster, my body tingled all over. As he began to slip his fingers under the fabric of my shirt, I heard a cough behind me.

We broke the kiss, slowly, and looked around. We both shook our heads, blinking, wondering what had come over us so suddenly to make us forget where we were. Commander Walker was standing there, holding my laser pistol and my handlight that had slipped out of my fingers. He held the pistol out to me, grip first. I nodded, and took it from him and put it in my pocket. Then I took the light and put it in the other pocket.

"Captain. Sir, we have found something on the far side of the cavern that you should see. Especially you should see it, Doctor Thorne."

I felt his discomfort, his confusion. He was wondering what had come over us, and he wasn't alone in that. I was confused too, we shouldn't have lost control that way. But it had felt so good, so right at the time.

The Captain took a deep breath and said, "Lead on, Commander. Show us what you have found." He didn't have to acknowledge the Commander's discomfort, or address his actions. He was the Captain, after all. We followed Commander Walker over to the other side of the cavern, where I had seen the glimmer of water. I had been correct, it was a lake, a freshwater lake. But it was what was around the lake that drew my attention. There were vines, masses of them, all around the lakeshore. I got out my light, and walked toward the mass of green. As I approached, I shone the light on the vines. They were beautiful. Glossy dark green leaves, chocolate brown stems, intertwining in complicated patterns, all over the floor of the cavern, and up the walls, some as high as my light could show me. I could smell their fresh fragrance, so comforting, I couldn't resist going closer. The Colonel started to follow me, weapon drawn, but the Captain held him back.

I knelt down next to the closest group of vines, and put out my left hand. One of the group separated itself out, and moved toward me. I took a deep breath and moved closer, as it snaked its way out and wrapped itself around my wrist. The surprise and fear washed over me as the Officers reacted, and I motioned with my other hand for them to stay where they were. I sent as much comfort as I could, but I was concentrating on myself, and this lifeform that was discovering me. I focused as hard as I could, trying to get some sort of real reading from this creature. It couldn't have been solely a plant, it had to have some sentience, something that allowed it to communicate. There had to be more to it. And it was communicating, or trying to. I sat down on the floor, and closed my eyes.

I don't know how long I sat there, eyes shut, blanking out my thoughts as best I could, aiming my consciousness toward the vine that was gripping my hand, climbing ever so slowly up my arm. Suddenly I felt it, the pain, the sadness, the anger. It hit me like a blow, then softened just as quickly. There was a sense of loss, of despair. Nothing specific, just enough to let me know that this was the same pain that I had been feeling since the night before. I opened my eyes and looked around, to see my Captain right next to me, on the floor. He held his gun loosely in his lap, but his eyes were watching me intently. I looked

down at his hand, the lines now sharp and dark green against the skin, running all up and down and across, and creeping up past the wrist to his forearm. My own hand and arm were covered with the live vine, all the way up to the elbow. My jacket sleeve was pushed back, up to the elbow, perhaps the motion of the vine had done so. I held my arm up in front of my face, turning it back and forth, examining. The pain in my head was constant, but just enough to make its presence known, mild, not intense. As I lowered my arm, the vine began to recede, unwinding itself, shrinking back into the larger mass. As it went, it left a mark, a pattern of itself, on my skin. I watched it go, until it had detached itself, then touched my arm softly. It didn't feel any different, but the pattern remained, like a tattoo. I now had a replica of the vine, the leaves and stem, wound around my arm, from wrist to elbow, an intricate pattern, perfectly duplicated. It looked almost alive.

"Elizabeth? Are you all right? What is happening?" His fear was still wafting over me, he was unsettled by what he had just witnessed.

"Yes, my Captain, I am fine. I don't know what is happening, but it's bigger than we had thought, more complex. These plants are alive, more alive than anything I have ever experienced. They do not mean us harm, they need our help. Unfortunately, they can't tell me what the problem is, they can't speak, so we have to figure it out. I only know that we, you and I, are connected to this place somehow. We should look around this cavern and see if there is anything else here that will tell us what has happened, or perhaps lead us in the right direction."

Colonel Zuajko broke in, "Captain, Doctor, if you are all right, we should get moving. This cavern is huge, and we've only seen a very small piece of it."

The Captain answered, "You are correct, Colonel." He turned back to me, "Let me help you up, my dear."

I gave him my hands, and he pulled me to my feet. I felt a slight tugging, in my head, and I looked back at the vines, massed on the floor, the walls, reaching out toward the lake water. I shook my head, and ran my fingers up my left arm. The tattoo design remained, as did the constant undercurrent of distress.

"I can take my pack now, Colonel, thank you for your assistance."

I patted my pockets, making sure the laser pistol and the handlight were there, then reached out and took the pack from the Colonel, then slung it over my shoulder. "OK, which way, Sirs?"

All three of the men were still staring at me, the Captain with love and concern. The other Officers were confused, and a bit fearful of what they had witnessed. They of course didn't know what to make of it, of me. I didn't blame them, I only hoped that things would become more clear soon, so that we all could feel more comfortable. All I knew at the moment was that the vines were the source of the distress call, as I thought of it.

We didn't find anything else of great interest in the cavern. Of course it was fascinating in its own right, an underground cavern, carved from crystalline stone. I had an impression of stalactites, sparkling up in the heights. But there were no matching stalagmites below. The floor was smooth, as though carved, paved. The lake was quiet, placid, the only sounds we heard were the slight plinkings of the water dripping from the leaves as the vines moved back and forth, to and from the shore. I did get a sense of how huge the mass of vines was, going back further into the cavern than we were able to see. We could not get through, as there was no path and I was not about to let anyone step on them for the sake of exploration. I thought I got a brief whiff of something, but then it was gone. I shook my head and moved on.

Commander Walker was taking readings, as well as video, of everything we saw. He would input the data into the terminals on the Ship when we returned. Then he and the science Officers and Engineers would analyze every detail. I couldn't wait to review the data myself about our vines, and perhaps find out, finally, what they were, really.

The Captain looked at his timepiece.

"All right, we have been down here too long. Move out, we need to leave before someone comes back. Now that we know what is down here, perhaps we can make more sense of our sensor data. Let's go."

The journey back up to the surface was uneventful. We were on the lookout for anything else unusual, any movement or sounds, but nothing appeared. When we got to the lift, the Colonel motioned to the rest of us to be still, while he checked it out. The door was still open, the light still out. He shone his handlight into the opening, then turned to us and beckoned us in.

"All clear here, Captain, Sir. I hope this lift will take us up as easily as it took us down here."

I walked into the lift, calmly, I knew it would take us where we needed to go. As it did. The door slid shut, and the lift rose smoothly to the first floor. At the main doorway of the building, the Colonel stopped once again, and listened carefully, holding his pistol in both hands, ready. Then he let his breath out, and nodded his head. We followed him out, into the predawn darkness. I hadn't realized that so much time had passed, it was very close to sunrise. We walked for a few minutes down the path we had arrived by, then the Captain halted, and held up his hand. He touched his communicator.

"Lieutenant Dalton."

A slight hesitation, then, "Yes, Captain!"

"Ready Transport, and proceed."

"Aye, Captain... Transporting now."

The brief moment of cold was intensified, it seemed to cut through to my bones, much more so than usual. I saw the others disappear, the flash of light. But the flash was much brighter, and lasted longer than ever before. Then there was only darkness, the almost-light of the island dawn, the leaves of the trees rustling over my head. I reached for my pistol, and turned around quickly, looking, hoping. There was no-one there, I was alone.

I touched my communicator.

"Captain? Commander? Anyone? Is anyone there?"

No answer, nothing but silence.

I inhaled deeply, and let my breath out, very slowly. And again, gripping my pistol tightly in both hands, heart pounding.

"All right, Elizabeth. Now what?" I didn't have a tablet, I had no map, no sensors. All I had was my Lab supplies, my viewer, my light, my gun. I took another trembling breath. "Now you have to move, Elizabeth, you can't stay here, you'll be found in no time. And not necessarily by your own people." I briefly debated going back into the building, to the cavern where I knew I'd find comfort. However, the Draco's sensors wouldn't see me there. It was too far underground, and they couldn't distinguish me from the other life, the vines. All we had seen on the display had been the mass, nothing specific. I just stood there, trying to think, listening for any slightest sound. All I could hear was the breeze in the trees, all I felt was the constant sensation of suffering from the cavern below. But now, it seemed to be increasing again, getting stronger, more insistent.

I began to see the barest beginnings of sunrise, the light was increasing. I looked toward the sun to get my bearings. OK, the mainland was over that way, toward where the sun was rising. I decided to head that way, maybe I could get to a place where I could signal someone on the beach, or at the pier. The island wasn't that big, the forest wasn't really a forest, it wasn't that far to the other side. I kept repeating all that to myself. I would be on the far side of the island in no time. However, there was no

trail, no sure footing, and it still wasn't fully light. I got out my flashlight, glad that I had made sure to keep it fully charged. I headed off through the trees, pack over my shoulder, pistol in one hand, light in the other.

As I picked my way through the trees, stepping over the rocks, I had to stop a few times to remove thorns from my pant legs. I didn't notice at first that there was a noise, a rumbling, coming toward me. Suddenly, the trees ended, before me was a strip of grass, leading to a walkway. I had forgotten about the other building. The building we had seen, destroyed, smoke rising from a crater. What I had thought was the source of the intense pain and fear I was feeling. I caught my breath as it came into view. It looked just like the building we had visited on the other side of the island, three stories, sparkly stone carved to perfection. The difference was, this one was half blown apart. I could see the interior levels, blackened, wafts of smoke still rising from the debris. There were glimpses of what may have been machinery, tools, unrecognizable implements. No Hegrioans, no bodies, only the wreckage of the building itself. The light had increased to the point where I was able to see without assistance. I put the light in my pocket, then put my bag on the ground, to get out my distance viewer. The viewer didn't show me much, except that it verified that there were no people about. That fact did not comfort me, though, I did not let go of my pistol for a second. No-one was there but me, but there was still that rumbling noise, getting louder. It seemed to be coming from beneath my feet, and yet it was in my head. I reached out with my receptors, but didn't feel anyone there. Just the ever-present undertone of the pain and anger from the cavern. Now that I was alone, and away from my Captain, it was getting harder to control the emotions I was receiving. My head was beginning to throb again, my hand was tingling. I decided to take the opportunity to rest for a few minutes. It had occurred to me that I hadn't slept for over two days. I wasn't going to be any good to myself, much less anyone else, if I got careless, or fell, or simply dropped from exhaustion. I was still some distance away from the beach, I didn't have the strength to continue without rest. I dropped my pack on the ground, and sat down, hard, on the grass beside it. I lay on the grass, head resting on my pack, pistol gripped in my hand, for just a few minutes, as I told myself. When I awoke it was full daylight, the sun was shining into my eyes. But that wasn't what had wakened me. I felt something, or rather someone, close, and coming closer. Whoever it was, wasn't Human, other than that I couldn't tell much. My pistol was in my hand, I lifted it as I stood up and turned to look around me. As I swept my gaze past the burnt-out building, I saw him. A Hegrioan, tall, purple-skinned, wearing what looked like a raggedy robe.

"Administrator?" I lowered my gun.

"Doctor Thorne. Yes, it is I. I am so sorry to see you here, this was not my plan. But as I am sure you have realized, my plan has gone somewhat awry." He tried to smile.

"Administrator, how did you get here? What happened? Why was I unable to Transport with the others?"

"Doctor Thorne, I will tell you what I know. But first, please join me. I have found fresh water that was not contaminated by the explosion. We shall drink, and we shall talk."

I looked at him, and reached out to his emotions. He seemed genuine enough, I didn't sense any deception, though there was an underlying something that I couldn't identify. So I nodded, picked up my bag, and motioned him to go ahead of me. I was still holding the pistol at the ready, I was not prepared to fully trust anyone at this point.

He led me down the walkway, toward the building. But not to the doorway, or where the doorway would have been, instead we went around the side, to where he had cleared a small area. He had a small fire going, and he had found a couple of vessels capable of holding water. I saw a larger vessel, filled almost to the brim with fresh, clear water. I smiled, and dropped my bag. I was very thirsty after my long walk, and from having slept on the ground without having been able to refresh myself. We drank, and to me the water tasted better than anything I had drunk for a long time. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was until I had the water in my hands.

I looked at the Administrator. The last time, the only time, I had seen him, he had been sitting in his impressive office, behind a beautifully carved desk. He was the most powerful person on the planet, the head of what the Hegrioans used for government. Now, his clothing was dirty and torn, his fingernails cracked and broken. His face looked sad, and I felt something, disappointment? Frustration? The very same day that the Captain and I had visited him, had it been only yesterday? he had disappeared from his office, someone else had answered his private communicator.

"Administrator, please tell me what is going on. In the two days I have been on this planet, I have witnessed an explosion and felt the pain of an entity I could not identify. I have made contact with this entity in a cavern below this island. I have been separated from my Crew and my husband. Not to mention the fact that I have found out that an alien race has been keeping tabs on me for how long? Years? What is going on here, and what has all this to do with me?"

"Doctor Thorne, you must listen. We had to watch you in secret. We could not let you know of our

interest, that would have defeated our purpose in letting you develop your talent independently." He sighed. "When I told you of the recent thefts and their connection to your mission and your Colony, that was only part of the story."

I nodded. "Go on."

The thefts he had referred to were more than we had been led to believe. More than just some circuitry. The Agrints and their mercenaries had stolen their stealth technology, the same stealth technology that had allowed them to hide from us last year. That same technology had allowed them to sneak up on the Draco, and come very close to destroying us. They had also gotten their claws on the transponder devices that had been used by the mercenaries who had abducted me and the Captain. Apparently, the Hegrioans had not been diligent enough in their security measures. They had not thought that their utopian society was of interest to anyone, and had not taken proper precautions.

"By the time we realized what was happening, it was too late. We tried to correct the problem, but we are not experienced in war, in violence, in military tactics. You, my dear Doctor, you had been brought to our attention originally when you went to work for the Federation. We have many agents on Earth, keeping their eyes on the status of the politics, as well as looking for extraordinary Humans. Like you. You do not realize your power, Doctor Thorne. You are the key to resolving our problem, as well as your own."

I felt a flush come over me, my face got hot. No-one had ever told me I was extraordinary before. Well, no-one besides my husband, and he is somewhat biased. Although deep inside I knew that he was only trying to make me more comfortable, it was quite pleasant to be so complimented. However, the business at hand was more important than my vanity.

"How am I the key to anything? I don't even really understand what the problem is. How would I be able to help you? The technology is already gone, and the Colony on Morgos was destroyed years ago." I thought for a moment, then looked around me, at the building, in ruins right next to us. I thought about the matching building on the other side of the island, the cavern underneath with its hidden treasure. "And what does all this have to do with you being here? And me not being able to Transport home?"

The Administrator reached out to me. I stiffened and lifted my pistol. He pulled away, then pointed at my arm.

"You have a new friend, yes?"

I took off my jacket, slowly, switching the gun from one hand to the other as I did so. I laid the jacket on the ground next to my pack, and held out my arm.

"You mean this?" I turned my hand over, back and forth, noting the dark green latticework spreading over the skin, front and back, climbing up my wrist, up to the elbow. The delicate leaves and stems wrapped around and around, gently winding, intertwining. Suddenly there was the barest hint of tingling, a hint of heat. After a brief mental kick, I closed my eyes and clenched my fist, focusing. As hard as I could, I thought, "My Captain, are you out there? Can you feel me?"

The Administrator watched me, staring steadily.

I felt something then, a warmth, like a blanket wrapping around me. It was in my heart, and my mind. Softly, "Elizabeth, I hear you. We are coming."

I blinked slowly, still wary of the Administrator, and breathed deeply. "Where are you?"

Before I could feel his answer, I felt something else. The rumbling, closer, louder. I could feel it through the ground, but it was still in my head.

"Administrator? What is that?"

He looked at me strangely. His aura was a bit confused, but he covered. "I believe we should move, Doctor. Come with me."

I didn't stop to think. I threw my jacket back on, and picked up my bag and the light.

"Lead on."

He led me over to the building, where the door should have been, and motioned me to proceed. I hesitated for a moment, then went ahead. I walked gingerly over the debris, heading in the same general direction that we had gone in the other building, toward where the lift should be. There was a noise behind us, crunching. I walked faster, the Administrator right behind me. I turned on the light, to watch my footing, and kept the pistol ready in the other hand. When we got to the lift, I gasped. It was intact. And as we approached, the door opened. I turned back to the Administrator and beckoned him inside.

"It'll be all right, Sir. And we must get out of here, out of the path of whoever that is behind us."

He frowned for a second, then followed me in. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him look back, behind him, and I felt a slight something, apprehension? Anticipation? I didn't have time to analyze that before the door slid shut and the lift began to move, downward. I wondered what we would find waiting for us, and kept my pistol lifted. We heard grinding, clicking, but the lift continued its downward motion. I breathed deeply, in and out, trying to slow my heartbeat. When the lift stopped, there was a slight jar, then the door slid open. The air was cool, a breeze came down the corridor in the darkness. Gun in one

hand, light in the other, I stepped out of the lift and began to walk. I looked around carefully. We had seen a tunnel, collapsed from the blast. This tunnel was intact, seemingly undamaged. I didn't have a tablet, didn't have the map, I had no way to know where I really was in relation to what we had seen in the sensor data. I had to trust my instincts, such as they were, that I was doing the right thing. As I went, the throbbing in my head once again made itself known. It got stronger, more insistent. I wondered what was at the end of this corridor, what we were heading toward. I heard something, a slithering sound. I hadn't seen any snakes on the island but that didn't mean there weren't any. I don't know anything about snakes, I don't know which of them are poisonous, and which ones aren't. I walked faster. Then I felt it, the tingling in my skin, up my arm. I shone the light around me, toward the floor, toward the ceiling, then down the wall. There they were, the vines, creeping along the wall next to me. I stopped, and motioned to the Administrator to be still. I reached out my hand to brush my fingertips against the glossy, dark green, heart shaped leaves. They trembled at my touch, as a segment of the vine lifted away from the wall and wrapped itself around my wrist.

The Administrator gasped. He was standing still, about a meter from me, staring.

"Doctor? Are you all right?"

"Yes, Sir. It's fine. Somehow these plants know me. Did you not know? You saw my arm, my hand. This should not be such a surprise to you. You knew about the wedding ceremony. Do you know that my Captain has some of the vines growing in his arm as well? And most important right now, do you know where this tunnel ends?"

"I do, Doctor Thorne, I do. There is another cavern here, just the same as the one opposite. I believe they actually connect, but we have yet to find where. We should continue, we will be safer there than in this narrow corridor." His demeanor belied his words. He was much more self-assured and confident than he wanted me to think.

I nodded agreement. "You are probably right, Administrator." I pulled my hand back slightly, and the vines unwound themselves, to shrink back against the wall. The throbbing in my head subsided somewhat, softened as though smothered.

Listening carefully, trying to hear if someone was following us, I heard nothing but my own breathing, and that of the Administrator. I motioned him to continue, and we turned back to our path. The corridor was sloping downward, the same as the one on the other side of the island. I felt a coolness, fresh air, and it felt moist, humid. The stone wall on my left suddenly vanished, and there was a huge open space beyond. I shone the light inside, along the wall, and upward toward where the ceiling should be. The light vanished into the heights, and I continued to run the beam along the walls, the floor.

"Come inside, Administrator. It's just like the other one, as you said. The water should be just ahead, there." I directed my light toward where the lake should be, and sure enough, I caught a glimmer of light on water. I also felt something, something familiar. I walked to the lakeside, keeping my light pointed ahead of me, to guide me. This mass of vines was huge, much larger than the other one. It reached most of the way around the lake, as far up the walls as I could see. I kept moving closer, drawn to it, the throbbing once again building in my head. I began to feel dizzy, began to wobble a bit as I went. I felt the warmth, my Captain reaching out to me. My hand grew warmer, the heat moving up my arm.

"I am on my way, Elizabeth, stay strong."

The sudden stabbing pain knocked me to the floor. The light flew out of my hand but I managed to keep hold of the gun. Through the fog in my brain, I saw the Administrator, still over by the entrance, looking at me. He was smiling. Smiling? I sat on the floor, feeling around for the light with my free hand. My hand met some resistance, and I saw that it was one of the vines, creeping out of the mass toward me. It touched me, gently, then pulled away. I moved my hand closer, following it as it shrank away. It stopped, then came back to touch my hand again. I lifted my hand, then brushed the leaves with my fingertip. It moved again, then suddenly extended itself to wrap around my hand, and moved up my wrist. I closed my eyes, focusing. The feelings came slowly, softly, then gradually increasing into a sensation of pain, anguish, sorrow. The fog in my brain began to lift, and I saw something, against my closed eyelids. A strand of the vine, bright, and green and glossy. A glimpse of something metallic, perhaps machinery? Then a feeling of heat, of pain. And the stem turned brown, the leaves crumbled, fading into dust, blowing away. I caught my breath, gasping as I opened my eyes and looked around. The vine had unwound itself from my arm. There was now a cleared space, a path for me to walk through. I got up, carefully so as not to put my feet on any of the vines, then followed the path, into the heart of the mass. From the doorway, I heard, "Doctor Thorne, are you all right? What is happening?" I glanced back at him and saw that he was still grinning. I couldn't feel anything from him, the sensations from the vines were too strong around me. But I had to speculate, briefly, what had brought him here, and why he seemed so happy to be down here in the cavern. Had he manipulated us once again? What wasn't he telling me?

"I am fine, Sir, stay where you are. Please. I will be back soon."

I put the pistol back into my pocket, and kept walking, stepping ever so carefully. The vines converged behind me, even as they opened up in front of me. Back into the depths of the cavern I went, far enough to lose sight of where I had come from. I was completely surrounded on all sides by the writhing mass of vines, I couldn't even see the lake anymore. But I felt completely safe, it never occurred to me to be afraid of these vines, these plants, that were so much a part of me.

Then I saw it. The burnt patch, a patch as big as my whole Lab on board the Draco. The throbbing began again, and was as quickly stifled. I smiled, they were protecting me. I reached out to touch the damaged area. It was well and truly burnt, destroyed almost beyond recognition. I had no way to know if this had happened before the blast, or during the blast, or if somehow these vines had been the cause of the blast. I gently brushed my fingers across a few of the burnt stems, feeling their crumbling dry leaves, wanting to bring them back to life. I wondered if this was localized, or if it was in more than this location. What if it was a disease, and not caused by the explosion at all? It was possible that this was a separate event, or that the explosion was a result of this damage instead of the other way around.

I said, out loud, "I want to help you. But I can't do that until I know what exactly is wrong, what happened here. May I take some of you back to my Ship? To my Lab? Is that possible? I don't want to hurt you."

In all my life I had never gotten even the slightest sensation from any of my plants, except the pleasure that they gave me. I don't know what I was expecting. I just knew that if any plant was ever going to speak to me, this would be the one. And so it did.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw it. There was movement. The clearing I was standing in grew wider as the mass of vines pulled back. As it retracted, it left a piece behind. A stem, about a meter in length, detached from the rest. I bent down to pick it up, and it quivered slightly, then was still. It felt warm in my hand as I carefully wound it into a circle to more easily carry it out.

"Thank you."

I turned back, and the mass again separated to allow me to pass through. When I got back to where I had started, I saw the Administrator, still staring at me. Smiling. Looking satisfied, feeling satisfied. And something else was there too, he had not told me the whole truth. There was deception. I still sensed something hard and unyielding underneath that smiling visage. A sense of need I hadn't noticed before. This was indeed more than it had seemed on the surface.

"I knew you would be able to do it, Doctor. You are indeed special."

"You know, Administrator, you didn't have to go through all of this to get me down here, you could have simply asked." I was angry. I felt my Captain, still wrapping his warmth around me, closer, comforting.

"My dear Doctor, you don't think I arranged my own abduction? What purpose would that serve?"

"I don't know, Sir, but I do know that for some reason you advanced, powerful Hegrioans need me, my special skills. Why would I not think that you arranged to meet me here? Or that you were behind my not being Transported with the rest of my party? You have technology that allows for Transport signals to be redirected, even stopped altogether, you told us that yourself. You knew that your sudden disappearance would make us more curious, so that we would come here on our own. You shouldn't have come here, Administrator. If you hadn't, none of this would have occurred to me."

I took my laser pistol out of my pocket, and held it on him. His eyes widened, his lavender skin darkening almost to violet. And yet, that sense of satisfaction remained. He was still confident in whatever his scheme was. I moved my thumb over the handgrip, clicking the control to Stun.

"What I would like to know, Administrator, is are you going to let me go home now? I have what you wanted me here for. Given freely, as it needed to be. You knew you couldn't get a sample of this vine by force. If you tried, if someone else had tried, they might have been hurt, or killed. So again, may I go now? I can't do anything else here, I need my Lab."

He was quiet for a moment. Then, "Yes, you may go. Come with me back to the surface." I felt the deception, saw it in his face, heard it in his voice. He couldn't hide it, it was too strong in him. He wasn't going to let me leave, not alone, not back to the Draco.

"No." My pistol came up, and I fired. He dropped to the floor, stunned, unconscious.

I opened my pack, took out a sample container, and carefully put the segment of vine inside. Then I settled my pack on my shoulder, clicked the control on the pistol back to Kill, and ran out of the cavern. I didn't have my light, so I had to feel my way along the corridor as I went. I ran all the way back to the lift, hoping that the door would still open for me. When I arrived, breathing hard, the door was already open. I stopped, and felt with my mental receptors, to see if there was anyone near. I felt something, but not close, not in the lift, nor in the corridor. I stepped inside, and the lift began its upward journey. I was trying to focus on my breath, trying to calm myself. I could still feel my Captain's warmth wrapped around me, he felt so close. I wanted so badly to reach out and touch him.

When it stopped at the surface, the lift door opened. I took a deep breath, put my pack down, and peered around the doorway. I was holding the pistol in both hands, hoping there would be no further need of it. "Elizabeth."

Tears came to my eyes as I saw my husband standing there, waiting for me. "Paolo."

Stepping out of the lift, I missed my footing, and stumbled into his waiting arms. We both laughed, as he put those arms around me and lifted me up.

"My dear, we have to stop meeting like this."

He carried me out of the ruined building, sat me down on the grass, then went back and retrieved my pack. My eyes followed him as he went, drinking in the sight of him as my mind was drinking in the feeling of him. He came back and sat next to me, laying his gun down on the ground next to him, within easy reach. I crawled into his lap and his arm went around my waist. He turned my face up, and stroked my eyelashes delicately with his fingertip, brushing the tears away. I kissed his palm, then moved his hand away so that I could kiss his lips, gently, softly. He returned the kiss with enthusiasm, his love washing over me. His arms tightened around me as his emotions took over, one hand moved to caress my neck, to entangle itself in my hair.

"I was so frightened for you, Elizabeth. We had no idea what had happened to you. When you failed to Transport with us, we had to assume the worst..."

"Please can we talk about this later? I just want to go home now."

"Yes, indeed, my love. Our Shuttle is just over there."

I looked at him, questioningly, but then decided it could wait. We both had a lot to tell each other. But not now. I was suddenly so very tired. I had only slept for a couple of hours in the past few days, and the events, and emotions of the past days had been quite intense. It seemed to be late afternoon now, I had been down in the cavern for most of the day. I kissed his warm lips once more, then moved his arm so that I could stand up. I put my hands out to pull him up as well, as he smiled up at me. I was still worried, feeling anxious, and not only due to the constant feeling of suffering wafting to me, through me, from the caverns.

"The Administrator is down there, Captain. I'm not sure what's really going on but we should get out of here as quickly as we can."

"Indeed. Another piece of the puzzle. Let's go. I will carry your bag."



It was a short walk to where the Captain had landed his Shuttle. But the day was hot, I had to take off my jacket. I folded it and put it into my pack as we walked. The Captain looked back at me, I saw his eyes go to my arm. His brows lifted, I felt his concern. I looked back at him, calmly, sending him my confidence, comfort. He turned back to the path. He had landed in a clearing, not far from the ruined building. He had my bag over his shoulder, and his pistol in his hands. I had my own weapon, but as I was staying behind him I kept it pointed at the ground. We rounded the corner of the building, and I saw the Shuttle, and something else. There was a body, or what looked like the body of a Hegrioan on the ground next to the Shuttle. A pool of dark purple blood spread out underneath. The Shuttle airlock door was opening. I stopped short and lifted my pistol.

"Wait, Elizabeth. Commander Quinn, come out here, please."

Lieutenant Commander Quinn stuck his head around the frame as the door was opening, and grinned at me.

"Doctor Thorne, what a pleasure. Fancy meeting you here."

I grinned back at him. "A pleasure indeed, Commander. I owe you my thanks once again." I bowed my head, then looked up at him. "This is becoming a habit, Mr. Quinn."

"Always an honor, Doctor." He came out and down the steps, and took my bag from the Captain's hand. He stopped, staring at my arm, at the dark green lacy leaves against the brown skin, winding their way from my wrist up to my elbow.

I smiled at him, reassuringly, as I tried to soothe his mind. "It's all right, Commander. I'm not hurt."

"They told me about it, Doctor. But seeing it in person is a different thing. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare." What he didn't say was that he was also concerned about his Captain. His Captain who also had this alien tattoo on his hand. That was to be a recurring theme, of course, the Crew would be worried about their Commanding Officer. But my reassurance went a long way, as the Crew also knew that I couldn't deceive them.

"No problem, Commander, I'm sure you won't be the last person to stare at it. In fact, I think I like to stare at it as well." I moved toward the steps, and as I went I looked back at the Captain. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?" I motioned toward the body on the ground.

"We were not about to let anyone or anything stop us from getting to you, Elizabeth. That is all you need to know."

Commander Quinn just nodded his head, then moved back up the steps and disappeared through the doorway. I was left to assume that this was the person who had been trailing me and the Administrator. However, it seemed more and more likely that they had been working together.

The Captain took my arm, and led me up into the Shuttle. It was his own Shuttle, the one he uses for his own private missions, or when he wants to pilot himself. However, this time he wasn't interested in piloting. He sat down in one of the seats, motioning me to stay where I was. He clasped his harness, then pulled me into his lap. I put my arms around his neck.

"Captain, isn't this against regulations? Shouldn't I be in my own seat? I won't be harnessed in, this way."

"Elizabeth, I promise you that I will not let you fall." He brushed his lips against my cheek. "I promise." Commander Quinn said, from the pilot's chair, "Ready to go, Sir."

"Take us up, Commander, the sooner the better."

The Captain's arms tightened around me as we took off. And they did not loosen throughout the trip. The feeling of his hands on me, combined with the warmth of his love surrounding me was so very comforting. I fell asleep, I simply could not keep my eyes open any longer.

When I awoke, we had landed in the Shuttle Bay and the door was opening. The Captain was gently stroking my shoulder.

"Elizabeth. We have arrived." He pushed me away slightly so that he could unclasp the harness. Then he gathered me to him again, and headed out the door and down the steps. I clung to him as we went.

As we made our way out of the Shuttle, I saw a few Crewmembers standing there, at attention, waiting. My team, Ensign Parker and Ensign Miller, blinking at me, trying hard not to stare. Unsuccessfully, but at least they were trying. The Captain must have asked them to come back from their leave, and I sleepily wondered why. Then of course it hit me, we had work to do. R & R can only last as long as there is no emergency. There had been developments, I knew that I wouldn't be the only one with a story to tell. My team and I would be quite busy, analyzing not only the piece of the vine I had brought back, but me as well. I was now a test subject. That was a daunting thought.

I lifted my hand to the two Ensigns as we passed. They stood even straighter, saluting. I chose not to say anything, even though I knew they were saluting me, and not the Captain, at the time.

"Tomorrow morning, Ensigns, first thing. We have a lot of work to do. Please one of you get my bag? Put it in my office. Thank you."

"Yes, Doctor. Glad to see you back, Doctor Liz."

My Captain took me up to Level Six, to our quarters. Since his hands were occupied, I passed mine over the sensor to open the door. He carried me over to the sofa and set me down, then sat beside me.

"Elizabeth..." He was stroking my hair, my face, my arm. "I have never been so frightened as when we arrived back here and you were not with us. It took all of my willpower not to immediately go back. But, as Commander Walker reminded me, that would most likely have backfired. I hated to leave you there, on your own. I did know that you would be able to take care of yourself, but that is supposed to be my job." He pulled me into his lap. "You must rest now, you will need to recuperate from your adventure. I must go back to the Bridge, there are things that need doing. Come with me, my dear."

He stood, and carried me over to our bed. He laid me down, then carefully removed my boots, and my trousers, then slipped my shirt off over my head. I rolled over and took his hand in mine, and kissed his palm, noting the tracery of the green lines through the skin. He brushed his fingertips over my face, my mouth, then covered me with the blanket.

"You rest now. We shall talk in the morning." He bent down to kiss me. "I love you. More than anything in the Universe. Do not ever forget that."

I put my fingers in his hair, keeping him close, my mouth against his. "You know that I love you, my Paolo. Don't blame yourself for what happened. I don't blame you."

He started to speak again, but I didn't let him. He knew I could feel what he was feeling, he knew he couldn't hide his feelings of guilt from me. All I could do was send him my own feelings, of love, of faith, of comfort. He broke the kiss, slowly, then turned to leave. He stopped for just a second, then continued on his way out the door. I curled up deeper into the blanket and went to sleep, it was as though a switch was thrown. Once I allowed myself to relax, my body shut down. I really needed to recharge after the long day's events.

My dreams were vivid, which was unusual for me. I normally don't dream, when I sleep my brain needs to shut off, recuperate. During the day, I am constantly receiving, feeling, knowing, reacting, most of the time without thinking about it. That took many years of practice and hard work. When I was very young, I had to learn how to filter what I received. When a Sympath cannot filter, it is so easy to become overwhelmed. When you always feel what the people around you are feeling, it is a constant assault on your mind. The filtering process comes with practice, with diligence, with understanding of what you can handle. Growing up on the Colony, in my early years, I didn't know what I was, why I always had so many emotions swarming in my head. It was only after my classmates took issue with me that anyone thought to test me. I don't like to think about that, but in the end they finally proved me to be Alpha One. I was six, and not prepared to be told that I was different from everyone I knew, different from my family, my friends. But soon after, my parents were finally able to get us off the Colony and down to Earth, where they had proper tutors who were able to help me. One of the things I had to learn was how not to receive every emotion around me. How to back off, push it away, focus on what I wanted to feel, and not allow myself to be bombarded. I learned how to filter, to focus, to direct. But it takes a lot of energy, and one of my best recuperative devices is sleep. Simply sleeping, allowing my brain to recharge, refocus, clean the filters, so to speak. The other defense I have is to work out, work myself to exhaustion, blank out my mind.

Sleeping is the best way, though, and the process of blanking the slate usually does not involve dreams. However, I had, in the past, had several dreams, or visions, after an extended period of mental and physical exertion. This night's visions were of caverns, not surprisingly. Dark caverns, sparkling stalactites suspended from the heights. Dark green, glossy leaves floating in circles on a still lake. Vines, tendrils, climbing up rock walls, wrapping around a tall tree. In my dream, as I watched the vines climbing, my arm tingled and grew hot. I looked down at it, and the green leaved stems were moving, climbing up my arm, up to the shoulder. Wrapping around and around, tightening as they went. I heard the rustling of the leaves, smelled the green aroma.

I awoke in a sweat, breathing hard. I couldn't focus, couldn't place where I was. I felt something touch me, and shrank away.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth, where are you? It's me, it's Paolo. Please come back." I heard the fear in his voice, but I couldn't focus.

I shook my head, "NO! no no no. It's wrong, it's all wrong. They need to be together. It's not them. We have to help them." I felt my arm tingle, from the tips of my fingers all the way up to the shoulder. Then suddenly my head cleared, I woke from the dream. "Paolo? What are you doing here? I thought I was dreaming."

He was really there, kneeling on the bed next to me, holding both of my hands in his. He was bending over me, those gorgeous grey eyes looking directly into mine. He brought my hands to his face and kissed them.

"I felt you call out to me, Elizabeth. I rushed right down here, of course. You must have been dreaming, you were holding out your hands, and talking to someone. And there seems to have been another development." He pointed at my left arm. I lifted it up, looking.

It had really happened. The vines, or whatever they were, had indeed continued their winding way up my arm, all the way to the shoulder. They wound all the way around, and around, intertwining their brown stems, overlapping their dark green leaves. I touched the skin. It didn't feel any different. It didn't feel like anything was there. Except for that slight warm tingly feeling.

I said, more calmly than I felt, "Well, then, I guess I wasn't dreaming that part. Paolo, do you have to go back to the Bridge? What time is it?"

"I am going to stay with you, my dear. It is approximately Zero Three Hundred, so we still have a few hours before we need to think about anything."

He got up, and began to remove his clothes. I watched, fascinated as always by his exceptional body. I tried to take a few deep breaths but was too distracted. Instead of donning his pajamas, he simply left his uniform on the floor and climbed into the bed. He lay down, and pulled me against him, spooning, his strong hands on my belly, in my hair as he nuzzled my neck. My body grew warm as I snuggled closer, his arm tightened around me. I closed my eyes again, comforted, and fell asleep. I slept dreamlessly for the rest of the night, enveloped in my husband's warmth and strength, and his love and protection.

When I awoke, my husband's arms still around me, I looked over to the timepiece. It was Zero Seven Hundred, later than we were usually roused by the alarm. My Captain was asleep, breathing steadily, calmly. I carefully lifted his arm and slid out of the bed. After stretching my arms up, way up, then bending to touch my toes a few times, I decided to go ahead and work out. I felt refreshed, well enough to go through my routine, so I went into the Lounge. The stars outside were motionless, the planet below so beautiful in its shades of blue and green and brown. I briefly wondered what was happening down there, what was beneath that beautiful calm surface.

I moved the table out of the way and began. I needed to rejuvenate, to thoroughly clear my head. As I went through my yoga practice, from one pose to another, I looked at my left arm. The vines climbing, intertwining, delicate green leaves overlapping each other. I felt some slight tingling, but whether it was from the vines themselves or from my sleeping husband, I didn't know. After a while I was able to unfocus, to lose myself and shut out the reception of the emotions around me. The constant undercurrent of the pain from the planet below, the soft and yet intense flow of feelings from the Crew disappeared as I blanked out my own thoughts.

When I came back to myself, I saw that the table had been moved again, and that there was a pitcher of water and two glasses on it. I smiled, and looked around, but I didn't see the Captain. I poured myself a glass of the water, took a long sip, then carried it out into the living area. He was sitting at the desk, dressed only in a pair of shorts, looking intently at the screen.

"Commander, keep an eye on that. We need to discover what they are after. We cannot hold them off forever, and we need to be prepared."

"Aye, Captain." Commander Walker's voice.

I cleared my throat. "Captain? What's happening?"

"Ah, Elizabeth. How are you feeling?"

"Better, thank you. And thank you for the water, that was thoughtful."

He tilted his head at me, and furrowed his brow. "What water?"

I held out the glass. "Didn't you put this in the Lounge for me? I found it there when I was done with my workout."

He jumped out of his chair and grabbed the glass out of my hand. The water sloshed but did not spill, as he carefully went over to place it on his desk.

"Commander Walker! Get a security team down to my quarters immediately! And start checking our sensor data for any anomalies. Someone has been here."

I was standing still, too surprised to move, or speak.

"Elizabeth. Did you drink any of that water?"

"Yes, Sir, but not much, just a sip."

"Sit down, please... Doctor Palmer."

"Yes, Captain? What can I do for you?"

"Come up to my quarters, please, Doctor, and bring your scanner."

"On my way, Sir."

I went into the bedroom area and got my robe, and a shirt for the Captain. I slipped on the robe, then

went back and sat on the sofa.

"Captain, are you going to tell me what is going on? Here, put on this shirt before the Security team gets here. You don't want to embarrass them, as much as I enjoy looking at you in just those shorts."

He smiled at me, that special smile that makes my heart skip a beat. He came over, took the shirt, and put it on. I watched as his chest muscles flexed, his abdomen tightened with his breath. He looked at me steadily as he did up the buttons. My body grew warmer, my hand and arm tingled.

Just then, of course, the Security Officers arrived. The Military Police on board function mostly as security, internal on the Ship as well as when they are needed on missions. They are impressive individuals, all of them, but together in groups they can be quite intimidating. These particular MPs were familiar to me, I had met them many times during the firearms training classes. They saluted the Captain, then nodded to me.

"Doctor. Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you, Sergeant."

"Captain, Sir, where would you like us to begin?"

The Captain led them into the Lounge, and they began scanning everything. Floor, walls, ceiling. They held their scanners over everything in the room, even the windows. The Captain watched them carefully, then led them back into the living area, then the bedroom. I felt their unease, they were not at all comfortable with examining the Captain's Quarters. Especially his bedroom, and mine. I sensed that they were also uncomfortable with me, at the moment, sitting there in just my robe. There was the briefest wisp of a feeling from one of the men, one that I was not going to share with my Captain. But I pushed it away and it was replaced with embarrassment. I stayed where I was, watching, feeling. The men were becoming more and more agitated as they looked at the scanners. I so wanted to ask what they were seeing but couldn't. I would have to wait.

There was a chime at the door, and the Captain went over and opened it. Doctor Palmer was standing in the corridor, waiting. Jenny was running down the corridor toward us.

The Captain motioned her to come inside. "Please come in, Doctor. Miss Jennifer, you should not be here, but since you are, come in."

They stepped inside, uncomfortable, curious. Doctor Palmer asked, "What can I do for you, Captain? Are you all right? Hello, Liz."

I smiled at her, even as I pulled Jenny down next to me and hugged her. "Hello, Doctor Marla."

Doctor Palmer and I had become friendly on our mission at Morgos, when she had helped me to develop the cure for the disease that had ravaged the planet. We had kept up somewhat of a friendship, though we didn't have much in common, and neither of us had much free time. But we occasionally had a meal together, and she and Jenny seemed to get along well too.

The Captain said, "Doctor Palmer, please scan my wife for toxins. She has accidentally ingested something that may have been contaminated."

"What?" I jumped out of my seat. "Poison? How?"

"My dear, please sit down and let the Doctor look at you. There are still things you are unaware of. Humor me in this, please. I promise I will tell you everything."

"Of course, Captain." I sat back down. "OK, Doc, what do you need me to do?"

She knelt down in front of me, holding her scanner. "Nothing, Liz, just roll up your sleeves and pull that robe back a bit from your neck."

The Captain left us, and continued to follow the MPs around the rooms. I could hear them talking. "Here, over here." "This pitcher, this is not ours. Take it, and the glass." "Is this a fingerprint?"

Doctor Palmer ran the scanner over me, head to toe. I rolled up my sleeves, feeling her eyes go immediately to my left arm. Then I pulled the robe away from my neck, and over my shoulders. Her eyes got bigger. She reached out a finger, and gently touched my shoulder, where the vines ended. As she touched me, there was a shock. She gasped and pulled her finger away hastily.

"My goodness! What was that?"

I shook my head. "I have no idea, Doc. This is new to me. I plan to do a complete examination, but I haven't had time yet. So what did you find? Am I poisoned?"

She frowned. "No, Liz, you aren't. But there is definitely something weird here. I can see something that looks like toxin. But it's dead, inactive. It's being killed, washed away. I can't explain it."

The MPs came back into the room. One of them carefully picked up the water glass, poured the liquid into one container, and put the glass into another. He nodded to the Captain. The Captain then took the scanners from each of the MPs and loaded the data into the terminal on his desk.

"All right, men, bring these up to Commander Walker on the Bridge. He will know what to do."

"Yes, Sir!" They left, walking briskly, heading for the lift.

I shook my head. This was too confusing. Intruders? In my quarters? How was that possible? And poison, why would someone want to poison me? We were here on leave, although that wasn't happening. And I had been asked for my help. Doctor Palmer was looking at me, concerned, and confused as well. She didn't know what to make of the situation. If I had indeed been poisoned somehow, how was it that I wasn't ill? Why was the Captain so calm, did he know something?

I had the beginnings of an idea, but didn't say anything, I had to run my tests first. No point in making myself more of a spectacle than I already was, until I was sure.

"Doc, will you be available later? I may need some assistance when I get to running my tests."

"Of course, Liz. Anything for you. Oh, Captain." He had come up and sat down next to me. "She's fine, Sir, no trace of active toxin, nothing at all."

He let his breath out, slowly. "Thank you, Doctor Palmer. I will expect your complete report this afternoon. Please do not reveal what you have seen to anyone. You can see yourself out?"

She smiled at me, and got up to leave, pulling Jenny with her.

"Yes, Sir. See you later, Liz."

When the door had slid shut behind them, I looked over at my husband.

"So when do I get to know what I need to know? I think that the fact that I was just poisoned in my own home means that I need to be in the loop. Sir."

He reached out to stroke my hair, then pulled me against him. I could feel his heartbeat, pounding, his residual fear for me, his love. I leaned into his embrace, my body growing warmer, radiating my love, and my gratitude. I kissed his neck, feeling his warmth increase, tasting the saltiness of his skin. He pulled away, looking down at me, those gorgeous grey eyes gazing directly into my own. His aura became serious, decisive. I felt the change, from husband to Captain.

"All right, my dear. We have pieced together much of what must have happened to you, though I will want to hear the complete story directly from your beautiful lips. I shall go first, this situation has seemingly unfolded quickly. You are in more danger than we had anticipated."

I sat back, folded my hands in my lap, and listened.

When I had failed to appear with the others on the Bridge, all hell had broken loose. The Captain had immediately contacted Lieutenant Dalton in Engineering.

"Lieutenant, where is Doctor Thorne? Get her here!"

"I can't get a lock on her, Captain! I can see her, but I cannot grab her. I'm sorry, Captain, we are trying!"

"What is going on, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, we can see her on the display, but it's as though she is being shielded. The Transport can't lock on... Captain, she is moving. Toward the trees, we won't be able to see her once she's in there."

"Do the best you can, Lieutenant. Keep me posted and let me know the second you get a lock!"

"Yes, Sir!"

My Captain was distraught, he paced the Bridge, back and forth, hovering over the Officers.

"Commander Quinn, what did you see?"

"Sir, we didn't see anything. You were all together, there wasn't anything unusual. We saw the Transport begin, then there was a flash of some sort, a flash of light. It looked like it came from the ground. Then you and the Colonel, and the Commander were here."

"It came from the ground? Where?"

"Here, Sir." Commander Quinn went over to the science station terminal and pulled up the display. The screen showed the island, the building, the clearing where we were to have been Transported from. The Transport began. Commander Quinn slowed down the playback, and the flash of the Transport hesitated. There was something, a bolt of light, moving along the ground, from the front of the building, along the ground. He backed up the video and played it again.

"Captain, look at this. Isn't that where you came from? What is in there?"

"Commander, we don't understand what is in there. There must be more to it than we saw. However, there is an entity down in the cavern below the building with an interest in my wife. We must get more information. Quickly."

"Captain, if I may?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, what is it?"

Lieutenant Dalton, the head of Engineering, had an idea. She wanted to boost the sensors by increasing the power, using some of the energy from the shield generator. The Captain agreed. Hegrioa is a safe planet, after all. He had no reason to think that there would be any danger to the Draco if they reduced the shield for a while. He would still have more than half power, and the Draco is well armed. She has a full range of weaponry, from torpedoes to laser weapons.

The data began to flow from the sensors. The Captain went into his ready-room to review the data on his terminal. What he saw did not please him. He saw me, walking through the trees, and meeting up with the Administrator. He had no way to know who it was, he had no way to know that the person wasn't getting ready to kill me right there. I could only imagine his fear and frustration. I hadn't felt anything from him at the time, probably a result of whatever shielding device the Administrator had been using. When he felt me, communicating with him, it must have been such a relief. "My Captain are you out there? Can you feel me?"

"Elizabeth, I hear you. We are coming."

But then we continued, and went into the ruined building. He saw us get into the lift, and travel down to the cavern. He must have been so worried. I know I would have been.

Then, he got a frantic call from Lieutenant Dalton.

"Sir! Captain! There is a Shuttle approaching. The configuration is unknown."

"Red Alert, Lieutenant. Now."

He went back to the Bridge as the Klaxon sounded. Red lights began to flash all over the Ship.

"Commander Walker. Put the display on the main viewscreen. There is a ship approaching from the planet."

Just as he finished saying that, and the screen changed to show the ship, there came a flash of light. They were firing on the Draco. Not lasers, not any kind of weapon. It was bright, steady, aimed at a Level below the Bridge.

"Commander! What is that?"

"It's a scanner, Sir, they are scanning us... Sir! The beam has broken through the shield! Intruders on

Level Six! Security to Level Six immediately!"

The intruders had indeed broken through the shield, right into the Captain's private Observation Lounge at the end of the corridor. But by the time the MPs got there, whoever it had been was gone. No trace of them remained, only the overturned table in the Lounge. The Captain and the Bridge Crew watched on the viewscreen as the Shuttle circled the Draco, then headed back down to the planet.

"All right. I want to know what just happened here. This is not a coincidence. I want to know who that was, and where they came from, and what this has to do with my wife. Get to work." The Captain was furious that someone had gotten aboard his Ship, right under his nose.

He went back into his ready-room and sat back down at the terminal. I was still in the cavern, he could just see me moving around.

"I am on my way, Elizabeth, stay strong."

The Bridge Crew and the Engineers worked obsessively through the afternoon, trying to figure out a way to get through the shielding on the island. The Captain was alternately watching his display, and pacing the Bridge. He knew he had to let his people work, but he so wanted to push them, rush them, move the process along faster. It must have been so difficult for him to have to wait, and watch. Every so often he would get a whiff from me, a burst of my feelings. He felt when I discovered the vines, the damage. He felt my shock when they communicated with me.

"Captain? We have found something."

"Yes, Lieutenant, come up to the Bridge."

Lieutenant Dalton was on the Bridge in record time. She must have had a way to make the lift move faster, one of the perks of being Head Engineer. She had a tablet in her hands.

"Captain, we have found the frequency for the shielding over the island. It seems that after you and the Officers were Transported, they expanded the field to include the entire island. However, we can get through here..." She pointed, "or here. This second point would be best, it is closest to the blasted building, which is where we think Doctor Thorne is right now."

"How quickly can we get down there?"

The Lieutenant hesitated. "Sir, we still cannot use the Transport. We don't know how they blocked it, and we know also that they have ways of redirecting the signal. You will need to use a Shuttle. Sir." She hesitated again, then, "Sir, there's something else. When the data from the break-in was analyzed, we found something. A trace of something. It resembles the toxin that Doctor Thorne found on Morgos, Sir. I don't know how it could have gotten there. We are still analyzing it, Ensign Parker is working on it in the Agro-Lab."

The Captain's face hardened. "You will keep working on this, Lieutenant. Assist Mr. Parker in the Lab. We must know what the toxin is. It may lead us to the intruders. Get Doctor Palmer as well. I am sure she will have some ideas. Dismissed."

"Yes, Sir, on my way." She nodded her head, then turned to leave the Bridge.

Commander Walker broke in, "Captain, I can have your Shuttle prepped in five minutes, Sir. Shall we go?"

"No, Mr. Walker, you will stay here. Commander Quinn shall accompany me down to the planet. I need you here, in charge, in case something else happens. You have the Bridge, Commander."

He turned, and walked briskly off the Bridge, and into the lift. Lieutenant Commander Quinn was two steps behind him. On the way, the Captain called down to the Bay.

"Have my Shuttle opened, Ensign. And check the weapons locker, we will need to be prepared for anything."

"Yes, Sir!"

When they arrived at Level Fifteen, they went quickly to the Bay, and straight to the Captain's Shuttle. The airlock door was open, waiting. There was a large case sitting next to the steps, the lid up, containing several laser pistols and a couple of the larger rifles.

"Captain, we will be able to lift off in three minutes, Sir."

"Quick as you can, Commander." The Captain glanced at the weapons in the case, double checking the charges, then took out one laser rifle, and one pistol before closing the case and picking it up. He brought the case on board, and stowed it in the locker, then handed the laser pistol to Commander Quinn. They took off, well within the three minutes. The Shuttle headed around the far side of the planet, searching for the coordinates indicated on the tablet.

"There, Captain. Hold on."

The Shuttle angled downward, maneuvering toward the small flaw in the shield. As they went, they were buffeted by the atmosphere, then by the winds over the ocean. They saw the beach, the resort, then the island came into view.

"OK, here we go... They are tracking us, Sir. Wait, the shield is dropping."

"Commander?"

"They've dropped the shield, Sir, they must not want us to be harmed. Here we go, we're almost there... landing, Sir."

The Shuttle landed softly, in a clearing between the beach and the trees. As the airlock door opened, there was a flash of light. The Captain grabbed his weapon, the Commander did the same. They both moved to the door, as the next flash came, over the top of the Shuttle.

Commander Quinn stepped in front of the Captain, pistol raised, one foot in front of the other as he looked carefully out. He moved the pistol around the door frame, then poked his head out.

"One Hegrioan, Sir. I can take care of this."

He went out the door and down the steps, then fired his pistol, once, twice. There came a grunt, then a thump.

"All clear, Sir."

The Captain stepped out, weapon still raised. He looked down and saw the body on the ground, about five meters from the Shuttle, dark purple blood spreading from the wound in the head.

"Well then, Commander. It seems they were waiting for us." He went back inside, picked up the tablet, and looked carefully at the display. "Elizabeth is over there, in that building. I am going to get her, you will stay here and guard the Shuttle. Keep your eyes open, Commander."

"Aye, Sir."

The timing turned out to be perfect, I was just coming up in the lift as my Captain was walking up to the building. He felt me, felt my warmth, my fear, my fatigue.

"I was so relieved to find you there, my dearest. We had seen you traveling, on the displays, however we had no way to know if you had been hurt. All we knew was that you had met a Hegrioan, and had gone down to the cavern. Your feelings were so faint, so distant." He hugged me tightly. "I did not know what to think, though I knew that I would have felt it if something dire had happened. The sense of anticipation was so intense, I was so afraid that at any moment I would stop feeling you."

I put my hand out to touch his face, looking into his eyes. He pulled me into his lap, opening my robe as he did so. His warm hands slid over my skin, pushing the robe off of my shoulders. I shrugged out of the sleeves, letting the robe fall. My arm tingled, intensely, from hand to shoulder, as my Captain pulled me close. The kiss was electric, hot, as both of our bodies grew warmer. My hands found his shirt buttons, and began to undo them, slowly, one at a time, brushing his strong, solid chest with my fingertips. Our breath mingled, hearts pounding, skin touching. As I slipped the shirt off over his shoulders, I followed my hands with my lips, kissing, tasting.

"Captain?" Commander Walker's voice.

"What is it, Mr. Walker?"

"Sir, we have found some of the toxin in the water pitcher. I am sending samples down to the Agro-Lab. It seems to match what we found earlier in your Lounge."

"All right, Commander, stay on it. Captain out."

I felt the Commander start to say something, then the communicator cut off. I lifted my brows, questioningly. The Captain grinned at me.

"That can wait, my dear. You are here with me, nothing can harm you while you are in my arms. That is all I care about right now. Now, where were we?"

"Right here, My Captain." I took his hand in mine and laid it on my breast. "Right here." I moved closer and brushed his warm lips with my own, feeling his heat build as he responded.

His fingers moved down my neck, over my shoulder and down my arm. He traced the lines of the leaves and stems, and as he did so I felt the tingling intensify. He kissed me harder. I felt the surrounding warmth grew hotter, our bodies and minds radiating. He pulled his mouth from mine, and looked into my eyes, searching. I smiled, his eyes always seem to reach the depths of my soul. His fingertips so light on my skin, and yet I could feel the heat from them, tracing circles. He lifted me up, then laid me back down on the sofa, his eyes focused on mine as he moved, bending over me. Then he was pulling me close as he straddled me, his right arm under me as his left hand caressed my face, my mouth, moved down my body, gently stroking. His lips were soft as he explored mine. My hands roamed his body, feeling his smooth skin, I could feel his heart pounding. His muscles tensed, flexed and released as he moved. His hands traveling down my body, over my hips, his legs gently separating mine. Our heat grew ever stronger, my arm was burning, tingling. As our bodies merged, so did our hearts and minds, the sensations continued to grow, build, intensify. All there was in the Universe was us, just us and nothing else. Time slowed, troubles forgotten. All I could feel was my own emotions, my love for my husband, and



his for me.

As we lay together on the sofa, bare skin to bare skin, our breath slowing, I looked up at my husband.

"I have a lot of work to do, Captain. As wonderful as this is, as much as I would dearly love to stay here just like this, I have to go."

His finger traced the pattern of the leaves on my shoulder. "You must, I know. But you will not go anywhere alone." I started to interrupt but he put his finger over my mouth. "You will not argue with me about this, Doctor." His eyes were unsmiling, commanding.

I nodded. "Aye, Sir." I got up, slowly sliding out from my Captain's embrace. "I'll be going into the Refresh now, Sir. I need to get dressed before Ensign Parker gets here."

His smile came back. "Go on, I will contact your Ensign."

I looked him up and down, slowly, appreciatively. "You might want to put some clothes on too, Sir."

He swatted at me as I laughed and headed into the Refresh.

Ensign Parker was there waiting for me when I came out of the bedroom. He was standing at attention, just inside the door. My Captain was sitting at the desk, he had put on the same shirt and shorts from earlier. I raised my brows at him, I had expected him to be fully Uniformed and ready to get back to the Bridge. I reached out to his feelings, and received only his powerful presence, calm and confident. I let my breath out.

He just nodded at me, and motioned to Ensign Parker. "Your escort is here, Ma'am. I will see you later." He reached out his hand, beckoning. "Come here, my love."

I went over, bent down and kissed him on the forehead. He took my face in his hands and brought my mouth to his. The kiss was soft, gentle, hot. I felt the Ensign's discomfort, squirming as he stood there, looking around the room. I had to smile, as I put my hand over my husband's, and gave it a squeeze.

"Captain, the day is getting on. I want to get some work done, there's so much we need to look at I barely know where to start."

"You will forward your results to this terminal." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, Sir. We will. Come on, Ensign, let's go. I'm anxious to get started." I went to the door, and took Ensign Parker's hand. "See you later, Captain."

As the lift moved downwards, toward Level Twelve, I notice that the Ensign was still uncomfortable, uneasy.

"What's wrong, Ensign?"

He hesitated. "Um, Doctor? Are you really all right? We heard you were poisoned!" His fear came to the surface. I hadn't seen him this way before, he was normally calm, reserved.

"Mr. Parker. I am fine. Whatever it was, it didn't affect me, and Doctor Palmer says it's gone. Trust me, please."

I felt his disquiet, his concern for me. I tried to soothe his mind, sending calming warmth. I didn't want him to be so worried about me that he wouldn't be able to focus. And we both needed to be able to focus. There was a lot of work that needed doing. He seemed to calm down a bit, but all I could do was hope that once we began our work he would be able to concentrate on that.

"Is Ensign Miller down at the Lab?"

"Yes, Doctor. He will be waiting for us. He took over for me, looking at the toxin that was found in the Captain's Lounge from the intruders, and the samples from the water pitcher in your quarters. Did they tell you about that? It's a lot like the one from Morgos, also like the one that was seeded into the space-plant. Synthesized, you know. Regular, crystalline. Who would be developing such a thing?"

That was more like it. He was thinking about his work, what needed to be done. The puzzles that needed to be solved. We arrived at Level Twelve, and headed to the Agro-Lab. I directed Ensign Parker to enter the work area, and I continued down to my office. As I entered, I saw my bag, sitting on my desk, undisturbed. My arm was tingling, burning, I could almost hear the vines rustling. I took a deep breath and let it out, then another. Then I opened the bag, and reached in to get the sample container with the length of vine. My hand burned as I picked up the container. I lifted it carefully, then set it on the desk. I removed my uniform jacket, hung it on the hook next to the door, and reached for my lab coat. The burning increased, and I looked down at my arm.

The vines were moving. The leaves looked as though they were blowing in a breeze, the stems gently waving back and forth. All I felt was the heat, nothing more. My head swam.

"Ensign Parker, Ensign Miller please come to my office. Right away, please."

They must have heard the tremor on my voice, they were by my side in an instant. Staring, amazed, transfixed.

"Doctor? Are you all right?"

"I don't know, Ensign. You do see what I see, right?"

"Yes, Ma'am... does it hurt?"

"I don't feel anything unusual, Ensign. It feels hot, that is all." I shook my head, to try to clear it. "One of you please get a couple of slides, and a blood draw syringe. I'll get the scanner." I reached out my arm, looking at the pattern, turning my hand back and forth. Then I touched my communicator.

"Captain? There seems to have been another development, Sir."

"Elizabeth, what is it? Are you hurt?"

"I don't know, Paolo, but I think you may want to come down here."

I felt his worry come to the surface. Then a burst of surprise. I wanted to ask what had happened, but held back.

"On my way."

Ensign Miller came back with the syringe, and I sat down in my chair, resting my elbow on the desk. He backed up a bit, but I nodded at him to go ahead.

"Please, Ensign, go on, it's ok. I trust you."

His hand shook as he prepared the area on my arm, I could feel that he didn't really want to touch me, or the vines. I closed my eyes, sending out as much comfort as I could. Then the prick of the needle, and then it was done. I opened my eyes and smiled at him. I wanted him to think that I had been nervous and he had made me feel better. It was better that way.

I took the syringe, and went to my worktable to prepare the slides. The Ensigns watched me, staring at my arm, still very uneasy. I put the slides next to my micro analyzer scope and motioned to Ensign Parker.

"Get started on that, Ensign, and don't forget to forward the data to my desk, and our terminal upstairs. Thank you. Now, Ensign Miller, if you don't mind..."

The Captain came in at that moment. He had put his uniform on, and I couldn't help but catch my breath looking at him. So powerful, so commanding, so very sensual. I shook my head again, I had to focus on the task at hand. Which was my hand, and my arm.

I held the arm out. The vines were continuing to move, slowly, gently, as though in a light breeze. The dark green leaves swaying on the deep brown of the stems, back and forth.

"I can't feel anything but the heat and tingling, Paolo. Same as before, maybe a bit more intense. We've taken my blood for testing, and I was just getting ready to have Ensign Miller do a scraping of the skin. I also have this..." I went back to the desk and showed him the sample container. "The mass in the cavern gave me a piece of itself. It wanted me to help, it was trying to communicate with me."

He took the container out of my hand and gave it to Ensign Miller. He held out his own left arm to me. The hand, which two days before had been showing some green lines, was now covered in delicate lacy leaves and vines, just the same as mine. They ended a couple of centimeters up from the wrist, winding around his forearm. And they were moving as well.

"Captain? When did that start?"

"As far as I know, the same time as yours, my dear. Just a few minutes ago. Right before you called me. We seem to have a problem." He touched his communicator. "Commander Walker."

"Here, Sir."

"You are in Command, Mr. Walker. Doctor Thorne and I seem to have been infected with something. I cannot take a chance of contaminating the Crew. Be sure to take appropriate precautions against infection. We will probably be going back to the planet shortly."

"Sir? Is there anything we can do?"

"Just follow your orders, Commander. And have Doctor Palmer come down to the Agro-Lab, with protective gear. You have the Bridge until we have resolved the situation. I will communicate with you when we have more information. Captain out." He turned to me, and my team. "We will all have to be quarantined for the time being. What can I do to help?"

Hugging him tightly, I said, "You, Captain, can sit here, and let us work." I pushed him into my chair. He grabbed both of my hands, and pulled me into his lap.

I kissed his nose, then his lips. "I'm sorry, Sir, but I have to get back to work. Please behave yourself." I got up and went back to the worktable. The two Ensigns were standing there, at attention, very uncomfortable at having the Captain there.

"Come on, you two. Get back to it. Ensign Parker, please take that slide of the blood, and put it in the analyzer. Ensign Miller, come here and take a scraping of my skin... Well?"

They came to life, suddenly, moving quickly. They just needed a slight push from me, just a slight push. I didn't like to use my ability for that, to push someone do something, but it did work, and I needed to get them moving. They would be fine, once they got into the rhythm. I watched both of them for a moment, as each went to his task. Ensign Parker took the slides back into the Lab, to his workstation. Ensign Miller picked up the scraper and put on another pair of gloves.

I held out my arm to him. "It's all right, Mr. Miller, go on. I promise it's ok."

He took the scraping, hand only shaking a little, then he prepared a slide. I motioned him into the Lab.

"I'll be in there shortly. Go on." I watched them leave the room, then turned back to the Captain. "Take your jacket off, please, Sir."

He grinned at me. "Now?"

"Yes, now, Sir, I need to take samples from you as well. Please."

He took off the jacket, and I hung it on the wall next to mine. Then he began to unbutton his shirt. I put

my hand on his.

"Not necessary, Sir." I took a deep breath. "As tempting as it is to let you take all of your clothes off, right here, so that I can watch... it's not necessary, and it would be much too distracting." As I spoke I felt my body grow warm, reacting.

He put his other hand on top of mine, then held it to his heart.

He let out a sigh, then, "All right, what do you need me to do?"

I rolled up his sleeve, to expose the vines, waving ever so gently, the leaves still moving as though in a breeze. I lightly touched them with my forefinger, tracing the beautiful lines. They grew warm to my touch, his whole hand grew warm, as did mine. We both stared, fascinated, surprisingly not fearful, just curious.

There was a knock at the door, followed by the chime.

"Come in, Doctor Palmer."

The door opened and Doctor Palmer was there, masked and gloved, and behind her was Jenny, similarly prepared.

"Jen, what are you doing here? We're supposed to be quarantined."

"Yes, Liz, and I guess I'm going to be quarantined with you. Doctor Marla says this isn't really a contagion. Right, Doc?"

Doctor Palmer shrugged. "We don't know what it is, Jenny. But no, I don't think it's contagious. If it was, we would all have been infected long ago. The Captain and Liz have had these things inside them for close to a year. It was only when we came back here that they began to develop, but I am confident that they won't affect anyone else."

Jenny smirked at me, "See? Now get over here and give me a hug. Everyone's been so worried about you." As I hugged her I could feel her relief, her concern. She stepped back and held me at arm's length, looking me over. Then she looked closer at my left arm, gazing up and down, watching the hypnotic movement of the vines.

Doctor Palmer came over as well, staring. "Well, Liz. You've outdone yourself this time. I have never heard of something like this. It's just beautiful." Then she got serious. "You've taken samples?"

"Yes, Doc. My Ensigns are reviewing them in the Lab right now. I was just about to take some blood from the Captain when you arrived."

"Don't let me stop you. I'll just go in and see if I can help your team." She turned and walked through my door into the Lab.

Jenny sat on one of the sofas under the window, and folded her gloved hands in her lap. "What can I do?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, Jen, we have to analyze all the samples, and the vines themselves. Somehow we have to figure out what they are, and what happened on the island. And we have to do it from here, without full information about the technology, or the explosive involved in the incident."

I turned back to the Captain, and picked up the syringe. "Ready, Sir?"

Jenny cringed and looked away.

I prepared slides, with my Captain's blood, and a scraping of skin cells from his wrist. I brought them over to my worktable, to the analyzer, and laid them down. Jenny and the Captain watched me closely. I sat on the stool, and put the first slide on the scanner bed. As soon as my eye went to the eyepiece, I saw them. Slowly moving, single-celled organisms, they looked like algae cells, but they were mobile. I transferred the scanner screen to my viewscreen, behind me on the wall.

"Captain, Jenny, look at this." I touched my communicator. "Ensigns, Doc, please come in here."

When we were all assembled, I asked my team, "You found these cells in my blood as well? What do you make of them?"

"Yes, Doctor," Ensign Parker spoke. "We were trying to isolate a few of them to analyze separately in the micro-analyzer. We haven't seen anything like them before. They are plants, algae, but they are also mobile, animated. Do you think these are what your vines are made of?"

"I do, Ensign. We need to determine if they are a danger. And if they can be transmitted. We were assuming that they were limited to only the Captain and myself, and we still have no reason to think otherwise. But if you two," I motioned to my team, "and you two," I turned to Jenny and Doctor Palmer, "are ever to leave this Lab, we must find out for sure. You will keep on this, Ensigns, keep looking for a way to determine how these cells replicate, what they eat, what they want. I will begin working on the vine itself. I know that somehow it was trying to communicate with me, and it offered a piece of itself for our research. It needs to be me working on it, I feel it. All right then, let's get moving."

The Captain spoke up. "Excuse me, Doctor Thorne? Will it be all right to have some food brought down here? It is getting on to dinnertime. I am getting hungry, and it seems that it will be a long night."

I tilted my head at him. "Why, yes, Captain Bianchi, I think that would be all right. Thank you, you may

proceed." I waved my hand at him dismissively.

The Ensigns were both standing still, not sure what to make of us. Of course they had seen us together before, they were fully aware that we were married, but we normally kept our personal life private. They were too much in awe of the Captain to feel comfortable with anyone, even me, being so casual with him. It made them uneasy, they found it disconcerting. Too bad for them. My husband and I have an understanding. Work is work, play is play, but sometimes they overlap, like now. We each have a sincere respect and admiration for the other, and our work. We can't hide our feelings from each other, our minds and hearts are linked. We were stuck there together, all of us, until we found some concrete answers. He knew I had to be in charge of this, it was my purview, not his. So if I wanted to have a bit of a jest with my husband while I worked, that was my prerogative. I felt him watching me, and I smiled, his warmth wrapped around me.

Our eyes met, and I got up from my stool, grabbed a couple of blank slides, and went over to the desk. I picked up the scraper and brandished it at him. He took the scraper out of my hand, carefully, and laid it back down on the desk. He pulled me into his lap again, enfolding me in his arms. Then he looked around at our audience.

"Dismissed, all of you. Go about your business. Somewhere else. And close the door behind you."

They all got up, without comment, and moved quickly into the Lab. Jenny went last, blowing kisses at us on her way out.

I watched as the door to the Lab slid shut. Then, "Captain, I really need to continue my work, but I find you quite distracting. Even fully clothed." I unbuttoned the top few buttons of his shirt so that I could slide my fingers under the fabric. He looked at me steadily, those deep grey eyes so intent, so focused on me. His fingertips stroked my cheek as he leaned in to kiss me, his lips so soft, so warm on mine. The kiss grew more intense, passionate, as we held each other more tightly. I ran my fingers through his soft hair, stroked his neck as he roamed his hands over my back, my legs. I was beginning to lose focus, beginning to allow myself to be lost in our emotions, our heat. Then I suddenly got a chill, and pulled away.

"Paolo, what are we doing? What is going on here? We both know there is work to be done. And yet we keep getting distracted. Although I'm not complaining about the mechanism, I think there's a pattern here. Remember what happened in the cavern? There's more to these vines than any of us thought." My hands continued to move over his body.

He shook his head, confused. Then he took hold of my hands, and nodded. "Yes, my dear, of course I remember. Poor Commander Walker, I think we traumatized him. But you are correct, there is something going on here. I will stay here, you go ahead into the Lab and get back to your work. Perhaps you can add this to your list of things to figure out. You can send Miss Jennifer in to keep me company." It was so hard to tear myself away, but I forced myself to get up.

"And don't forget to call the Kitchen and have some food brought down. We're going to need it." As I put my hand over the sensor to open the door to the Lab, I looked back and added, "We'll continue this conversation later."

Ensign Parker was seated at his workstation, Doctor Palmer standing behind him looking over his shoulder at the terminal. Ensign Miller was at the analyzer, changing the slides on the scanning bed, and looking through the viewer. I could see the green of the plant cells on the terminal screen as I approached.

"What did I miss?"

Ensign Miller jumped. "Doctor. Not much, really, Ma'am. We've separated the cells of the plant from the blood cells, and now we're trying to determine what they are. They are moving more slowly now, I think they are dying now that they're on their own."

"That's probably correct, Ensign. If it's our blood they need, they won't survive long without it. In the meantime, do we have anything on their structure, their composition? Anything to indicate that they are part of some sort of compound organism?"

Doctor Palmer motioned to me. "I think you will want to see this, Liz."

I went over to the workstation, and put my hand on Ensign Parker's shoulder. He started, then relaxed. His discomfort was dissipating, good. I needed him to be fully focused on his work, not on his feelings about me. He pointed to the screen.

"You see this, here? It looks like a nucleus. We are increasing the magnification to try to see it clearly. If we can get to the nucleus, we can find the DNA." He turned around to look at me. "Doctor, we weren't expecting to find a nucleus at all. When we thought it was a toxin or disease, we almost didn't look closely enough. I apologize. We would have made more progress if I had thought to micro-analyze these cells sooner."

I smiled at him. "It's all right, Ensign. You did think of it, that's what matters." I glanced around, and saw Jenny sitting on a stool by the door.

"Jen, what are you doing all the way over there? Anyway, I think Captain Bianchi could use some company in my office, do you mind?"

She came over and hugged me. "Of course. Maybe he'll let me call Mark, too. I mean, Lieutenant Commander Quinn."

I gave her a squeeze, then pushed her toward the door to my office. "I'm sure he will if you're nice to him. Go on, then. And make sure he gets us some food."

Turning back to Doctor Palmer, I asked, "Doc, have you determined anything from my blood itself? Am I poisoned, really? Did the plant cells kill the toxin?"

"So far as I know, they did, Liz. I'd like another sample from you, though. I think a comparison is in order."

"OK, whatever you need."

She took another vial of blood from my arm, then labeled it. I motioned to the scraper sitting on the table, she nodded and picked it up. Ensign Miller reached out his hand.

"I can take care of making the slides, Doctor Palmer, if you like."

"We'll do it together, Ensign. Thank you. I need to keep busy. As soon as I get another scraping from Doctor Liz, we'll get started."

They proceeded to prepare more slides with my blood, and the skin scrapings. Ensign Miller took another portion of the blood and put it in the centrifuge to separate out the red cells from the green. I watched them all for a few minutes, feeling their determination, their focus.

Then I did a double-take at the vial of blood.

"Does anyone else think this blood looks strange?" I peered closely at the vial. My red blood looked unusually purple. I hadn't been thinking clearly. My goodness. Purple. How did we all miss that? "Look carefully... What do you get when you mix red cells with green?"

Good grief. I sat down, hard, into the nearest chair. Why hadn't anyone noticed? Something nagged at me, something I should have been remembering, something important. But it wouldn't come to the surface.

"Doctor? Doctor Liz?" "Liz, are you all right?"

I felt someone touching my face, cold hands. I pushed them away.

"Yes, yes, I am fine. Doesn't anyone think it's odd that we didn't notice that my blood is purple? Where is the Captain's sample? Bring it here, please."

Ensign Miller went back to the worktable and retrieved the vial with the Captain's blood sample. I reached out and took it from him, looking closely, putting it up to the light.

"All right. We both have these cells in our blood. I really would like to know why none of us noticed the purple, but let's move past that for now. You all seem to have this under control, so I am going back to my office. Has somebody forwarded the data to my terminal? I don't feel that you all need me standing over you here." I was shaking. What was going on? We were being manipulated, but how, and by whom? My arm tingled, and I rubbed it absently.

"All of the data is streamed to your office, Doctor."

"Thank you, Mr. Parker. Keep at it, let me know the second you find something."

As I moved toward the door, I glanced over at the table, and saw the container with the section of the vine. I had forgotten about it. I shook my head, what was wrong with me? This was a major piece of the puzzle. I picked it up, and turned it over in my hands.

"I'll just take this with me to work on in the meantime."

Jenny was sitting on the sofa under the window, turned sideways, elbows resting on the sill. The Captain was still at my desk, looking at the terminal screen. He looked up as I came in.

"Done so soon, my dear?"

I held up the container.

"No, I just wanted to work in here, they'll be fine without me for a while. How are you two getting along?"

Jenny turned around to me. "Just fine, Liz, Captain Bianchi has been keeping me entertained with reports of Bridge activities and details on the care and feeding of Shuttles. We did order food, but it's not here yet." She turned back to the view. I felt her unease, her disquiet. She was worried, worried about me. She was also probably wanting to get back to her Commander Quinn, but there was nothing I could do about that. Not yet. I sent her as much comfort as I could, and I felt her relax as she turned back to smile at me.

I went over to my worktable and put on gloves and a mask. The analyzer was set up already, I just had to focus it. I took the section of vine out of the container, and took a deep breath. OK, here we go. When I picked up the snipper, I had a moment of doubt. What if I hurt it? I knew it could feel pain, what if this piece wasn't dead? I poised the snipper over the stem, close to the base of a leaf. I braced myself, and snipped off the leaf. Nothing happened, I didn't feel any burst of pain, nothing at all. I let my breath out, feeling my Captain's eyes on me. I must have broadcast my apprehension. I looked up at him and smiled.

"It's all right, Captain. Sorry."

The piece of leaf, under the scanner, looked like any other leaf. I increased the magnification, again, and again. Then, at the limit of the range, I saw something. It looked like a grouping of the same cells as the ones from my blood sample. I sat back and took another deep breath. All right, a starting point. I picked up my micro pincers, and cut into another leaf, then prepped several slides with cells from the leaves.

"Ensign Miller, could you come in here, please?"

"On my way, Doctor."

He came in a moment later, I handed him the new slides.

"These are from the fresh vines, Ensign. Please compare them to the ones from the blood samples. And give one of them to Doctor Palmer to test. She needs to see if they can replicate themselves and if they are parasitic. She'll know what to do. I'll be waiting for the data. Thank you."

His eyes widened, but he took the slides in silence, then left quietly, nodding.

I ran my fingers through my hair. What was next? Then I looked at my hands, realizing that I still had my gloves on. I sighed, and removed them, then reached for a fresh pair. I jumped as I felt something touch my shoulders. It was the Captain, he had come up behind me. I reached up and squeezed his hands. He continued to massage my shoulders, his hands warm, soothing. My body began to tingle all over. I tried to focus, to keep my head clear.

"Captain, we are making progress. I think. Once Doctor Marla tells us that the cells aren't parasitic, we can let Jenny go back to her quarters. But, even after that, we still won't be able to figure out what happened in the cavern from here. At least I don't see a way. There's only so much we can glean from cells. And, last but definitely not least, how are we being manipulated, and why? Why did they ask us to help, maneuver us to the island, let us leave without, well, without too much difficulty? What is it we are really supposed to be investigating? It's not thefts of technology, of that I am sure. We already solved the puzzle of Morgos Colony, and we know the technology was stolen from Hegrhoa. Why did we have to come back here? Oh yes, and why have they been watching me all this time?" My voice rose, cracking.

"Elizabeth, you are panicking. Please try to relax. I do not know how to comfort you, please know that I am trying."

I pulled his left hand to my cheek, and rested my head on it.

"I know you are, and I can feel it. I can. I just wish we had more answers. It seems we always have more

questions than we can answer, doesn't it?"

The door chimed.

"Doctor Thorne? I'll just leave this tray out here, Ma'am."

"All right, Crewman. Thank you very much. We'll wait for you to get back down the corridor before opening the door."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"Jen, could you get that, please?"

"Yes, indeed, Liz, on my way. And I'll get the others. You stay right there."

We all sat on the floor of my office, picnic-style, to eat. No-one said much, everyone was thinking about our dilemma. I could feel the mental activity, the concentration. I guessed that none of us would be able to remember what we ate. When we had finished our meal, I got up, and held out my hand to the Captain to help him up.

"All right, back to work. Doctor Palmer, your project is the most important right now. We need to ascertain whether the cells can be transmitted by other than direct input. You have begun the testing on control samples? Yes? Then, after that we can proceed with determining what they actually are, though at this point I am not sure how important that is. If we can find out how the cells destroyed the poison, that would help too, probably, but it's not paramount. Let me know if I can be of assistance, please. I'll be in there shortly."

Jenny followed the Ensigns and Doctor Palmer back to the Lab. She sent me a waft of gratitude, and love as she passed me. I reached out and grabbed her, hugging her tight.

"It's going to be all right, Jen. Really."

She hugged me back, then brushed her hand over my hair, and ran her fingertips over my cheek. I kissed her hand, squeezing it as I let it go.

"You're the best, Liz, I don't know what I'd do without you."

She nodded to the Captain, then let herself out.

I went back over the my worktable, and began to clear up. The slides went into a sample box, the vine went back into its container. I wiped down the analyzer, and put the tools into the sterilizer. As I was throwing the used gloves and masks into the recycler, the Captain came over to stand directly in front of me. He lightly ran his fingertips over the tracery of vines on my arm. I felt every stroke as though it was an electric shock. My body grew warm, reacting to his touch. He was watching the movement of the vines, winding around, swaying back and forth. His eyes glistened.

"Captain, please." I reluctantly pushed his hands away. "I still have so much work to do."

"All right, Doctor. Go on, then. I will stay out of your way."

I looked back as I went out the door. He was just sitting down at my desk again. I heard, "Commander. Status."

"Nothing new, Sir. The same ships in orbit, no new ships lifting off from the planet. How is it going down there, Sir?"

I sighed, shook my head, and walked into the Lab.

"All right, people, where are we? What can I do?"

Doctor Palmer motioned to me. "Liz, if you don't mind, we could use more samples. We've got blood from each of us running in the analyzer and so far there's no activity, the green cells are not attacking, or even reacting at all. So, using those as the control, we can do one more test to make sure that these algae cells, or whatever they are, don't want to replicate, or infect the rest of us. We're getting close."

Nodding, I went to the supply cabinet next to Ensign Parker's station, and got several draw syringes and vials. I put on a pair of gloves, then a mask.

"OK, who's first?"

While the new samples were running in the analyzer, I decided to do some research. I sat down at Ensign Miller's workstation and began to search our database on Hegrioia. Just random queries, I didn't know what I was looking for. I began with our resort on the beach. It had been there for a long time, over a hundred years. As the tourist industry grew, as the Federation Alliance Worlds grew more affluent, the Hegrioan officialdom had to authorize the construction of new hotels, resorts, shopping malls. We had only seen a small portion of the conglomerate, only a very small piece of the action. Hegrioia is a very wealthy world, people from all over the Galaxy go there for vacation, business conferences. But never for trade. The Hegrioans don't trade. I was surprised to find that out, I had thought they traded their agricultural products. Which were what, exactly? I found references to food crops, herd animals, there were farms and ranches all over the planet.

OK, so they could feed themselves. And they chose not to spread the wealth. That was their prerogative. I



searched further, one Record to the next. Not finding any references to the technological developments, their science. Nothing about their Universities, their Scientific Institutions that the Administrator had mentioned, or any Scientists who had been educated there. It seemed that Hegrioan was an ethnocentric world. I saw nothing to indicate that anyone from any other world had done anything of consequence there. Next subject, then. That would be my subject, Botany. The vines, what were they, how did they come to be living down in those caverns? I hadn't seen any light source, where did they get their food? But then, it occurred to me, we were there in the middle of the night, we might simply not have seen any apertures.

As I scrolled the data past my tiring eyes, it began to blur. I almost missed the reference. A single sentence caught my attention. "The caverns connect beneath the King Tree." It was camouflaged within another Record pertaining to the island. That Record was a fragment, it seemed to have been purged, leaving only a portion regarding the coordinates of the island, and a brief physical description of the two buildings. I wondered why they had left that one sentence in there. Why hadn't it been purged with the rest, why had that Record been left at all if someone was removing information. But it gave me a huge clue, one that I wouldn't have had otherwise. I couldn't wait to tell the Captain.

My hand began to burn. I looked down, the vines were still in motion. I couldn't feel anything there except the heat, and the tingling up my arm. I did, however, feel my Captain, warm and comforting, reaching out to me as always. Then a sudden burst of anger, not only from him, but from all over the Ship.

The Red Alert sounded. The red light over the door began to flash.

"Go on, Ensigns, go to your stations. We will clear up here... Captain?"

"Elizabeth, come here, I need you." His voice was calm, too calm.

I reached out to him, but all I received was his surprise, and his anger.

"On my way. Doctor Palmer, you'll secure the samples, please? Keep an eye on the analyzer."

I ran back through the Lab area and back into my office.

"Captain, what's happening?... Oh my."

The Captain was by my desk, holding his laser pistol. It was aimed at the Hegrioan intruder, standing by the window. My mouth opened, nothing came out. This Hegrioan was one of the tallest I had seen, and his lavender skin looked as though it had been polished. His purple eyes gleamed, his hands clenched. His dark lavender hair hung straight down to his collar, looking as though it was molded into place. He seemed to be unarmed, yet he was emitting such a powerful, intense field of authority, control, that I couldn't move. My head began to throb again. I had almost forgotten about the pain in the past few hours but it came rushing back as I looked at the intruder.

I heard the Security Team arrive, they were banging on the door. "Are you all right in there, Captain?" The Hegrioan spoke. "Doctor Thorne, I am here to warn you. You must not continue your research into our affairs." His eyes narrowed as he stared at me. There was something underneath his aura of power, something that led me to think that he was not quite trustworthy.

I found my voice. "But we were asked for our help. By the Administrator. He asked me to figure out what happened in the cavern, and what it has to do with some thefts that happened a while back... Security is trying to break down the doors, Captain. It feels like they are thinking of trying to blast through."

"The Administrator should not have done so, Doctor Thorne. The incident is being dealt with, we do not need your help. Stay away."

Then he disappeared. He simply vanished into thin air, no Transport flash, nothing. The Captain and I looked at each other.

"Captain, who was that?"

"I do not know, my dear. Nor how he got in here, nor how he knew where to Transport... Commander Walker. What have you found?"

I went over and opened the door, so the Security Team wouldn't have to break it down. They burst in, weapons drawn, stopping and milling around as they realized that the intruder was gone. Two of them went through into the Lab. I hoped they wouldn't frighten Jenny and Doctor Palmer too much.

The Commander was speaking. "We have determined where the intruder came from, Captain. The Transport originated on the shore, near the inlet across from the island. There seems to be a compound of sorts there. We are still analyzing the data, Sir."

I remembered what Jenny had told me about her boat trip. She had seen the compound, but it was unoccupied. Or so we had thought.

"Very good, Mr. Walker. Keep me informed." He turned back to me. "So, another piece of the puzzle. But where does it fit? Who are they and why do they want to keep us from finding out what happened?"

"And, Captain, he arrived just as I discovered this..." I went over to the terminal and pulled up my most

recent finding. The cryptic sentence, seemingly random. "The caverns connect beneath the King Tree. I can't help but feel that I was supposed to find that, Paolo. It was meant for me."

His arms went around me. "We knew that they were watching you previously. It seems that they have not ceased watching. I cannot stop them, apparently, not yet. But I can keep you close, you will not leave my side until we get to the bottom of this." He turned up my face to look into my eyes. "Understood?"

"Yes, Sir. Understood, Sir. Not a difficult order to follow, Sir." I stood on my toes to kiss him full on, my arms around his neck as his arms tightened around me.

"Um, Liz? Excuse me?"

"Yes, Doc. What's happening? Have the MPs left?"

"They're gone, yes. Liz, we're done with the testing, nothing's happening. At all. The green cells have expired, and they did not react with any of the blood or skin cells other than yours and Captain Bianchi's. And even then, only to meld with them, not to consume."

"So you're confident that it's not contagious? Or toxic?"

"Yes, indeed, Ma'am. We can lift the quarantine. Shall I call Commander Walker?"

I turned to the Captain. "Your call, Sir."

He nodded to Doctor Palmer. "Go on, then, Doctor. I suppose we can let Miss Jennifer get back to her quarters. I am sure that Commander Quinn will be glad to hear this news as well."

Jenny was ecstatic, of course. "Love, you, Liz. It's been fun but I have to go now. Bye."

I laughed, and pushed her out the door.

"I guess you'll be leaving too, Doc? I'm sure you have work of your own to take care of."

"Always, Liz, but this was more important. I'm glad we were able to come up with answers for you."

The Klaxon ceased. The silence was almost deafening after all that racket.

Doctor Palmer put her hand on my shoulder briefly, then turned to the door. I lifted my hand to her as she left.

"You'll be going to the Bridge, Captain?"

"Not without you, Elizabeth. We will secure your Lab, then we will go up... Commander Walker. Status." Commander Walker's voice was steady as he reported, "All clear, Sir. Engineering is still running the data."

"Very good. We will be there shortly. Captain out."

He turned to me, and motioned to the worktable. I nodded and went over to finish clearing up. When I had gotten all the supplies put away, I moved toward the door to the Lab. The Captain held up his hand to stop me. He looked around the office, then took our jackets down from the wall. He put his pistol back into his waistband, and nodded to the door.

He helped me get the workstations cleaned up, putting the slides in their secure containers, wiping down the analyzers. We made sure all the samples were secured, and the terminals were on night mode. I took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"All right, Sir, all set... wait. I forgot the container with the vine. I'll go get it." I went back to my office, the Captain following behind me. The container was still sitting on the table, but when I picked it up, it was empty. I looked around, I remembered putting the vine back. I held up the container to the Captain, showing him that it was empty. He raised his brows. I shrugged. We looked all over the office, on the desk, under the desk, under the table. In the cabinets, under the sofas, even under the rugs. It was gone. I knew the Hegrioan had taken it. I couldn't imagine how he did it, he wasn't ever alone, the Captain was there the whole time watching him.

"It's gone, Captain. I don't know how, or even why, but it's gone. I don't think that the Hegrioans can do anything with it, I don't think anyone can do anything with it but me. All right, Sir, we're done here. Nothing we can do, not until we can get back to the caverns."

He looked down at me, sadly. I felt his warmth, flowing over me, through me.

"I do not know when that will happen, Elizabeth. We'll go up to the Bridge and see what we can find out. I feel as though I must have missed much, being down here all this time."

He handed me my uniform jacket, then took my arm and led me out, toward the lift.

When we arrived on the Bridge, all the Crew present immediately stood.

"Captain on the Bridge."

Commander Walker came over, and handed the Captain a tablet.

"The reports, Sir. We are still working on the data from the break-in, but it seems to be the same technology that the previous intruders used to get on board. We don't know what they were after, any more than before."

"We do, Commander. They were after something from Doctor Thorne's Lab. Unfortunately, it seems that they were able to get it."

"Really, Sir? What was it?"

I broke in. "It was a piece of the vines from the caverns, Commander. Excuse me, Captain, if I may?" He nodded, and motioned me to continue.

"When we were in the cavern, do you recall anything unusual, Commander? Did you see anything that looked like a passageway, or something that would perhaps lead across the island?"

The Commander looked at me, curious, furrowing his brow. "I'm not sure, Doctor, but we can find out. We have all the scanner data in this terminal, here."

I followed him to the science station, and he pulled out the chair for me to sit. The data began to stream. I watched the flow of the data, scans of the island. Commander Walker reached over my shoulder to tap the keys, looking for the detailed scans of the cavern.

"Ah, there it is. Thank you, Commander. How do I make it move?"

He showed me how to make a three-dimensional image, then I could move through it as though I was walking through the cavern itself. I leaned in closer. The image rotated, showing the lake, then the mass of the vines. Climbing up the walls, disappearing into the heights. I continued on, looking for anything that looked like an opening. There had to be something, there had to be a light source, at least. I moved the image up, scanning over the walls, I wanted to see how high up I could go.

There, what was that? A dark spot, empty. I increased the magnification and focused on the area. The vines were reaching their tendrils into what looked like a large hole, a passageway. I backed up the image, retracing my steps, I wanted to know exactly where that passage was. It was on the furthest end of the cavern from where we had entered, of course, that was why we hadn't seen it. Way in the back, the darkest spot. The mass of vines grew around me on the screen, the passage disappeared from the image. I still hadn't seen anything resembling a window, but I had a feeling about that hole.

I backed all the way up, then went back to the view of the surface. I overlaid the image of the cavern onto the view of the island.

"I knew it."

"Elizabeth?"

I turned around, motioning to the Captain to come and look at the screen.

"Captain, the caverns, they..." A shock went through my body. The terminal was sending out sparks, smoke. My left arm went numb. I felt a burst of fear from my Captain, followed by anger and determination. I saw him start to move toward me.

"Elizabeth, get away from there!"

I had already started to push the chair away from the station. I saw the blast, felt the pressure of it forcing me back. Then my body went sideways, there was a sharp pain in my head, and everything went black.

When I awoke I was lying on the floor. I tried to sit up, my head pounding. Then I started, gasping, cringing backward and looking around me.

"Where am I?"

It was nowhere that I recognized. It seemed to be a large room, brightly lit, too bright. Clean white walls, clean white floor. The floor was soft, soft but not carpeted. The walls looked to be the same material as the floor. A sterile place, a blank slate. There was nothing, and no-one in the room at all, except for me. I got up slowly, holding my throbbing head. The floor felt a bit mushy under my feet. My bare feet. I looked down, and saw that yes, my feet were bare. As was most of the rest of me. All I had on was a lace camisole and panties. Perfect. No clothes, no shoes, no gun.

OK then, what now? I walked the perimeter of the room, brushing my hands over the walls. There was nothing. I did a complete circuit, at least I think I did, it was hard to tell in that completely blank room. I

may have lost track of where I started, there was no sense of perspective at all.

There was a noise, a sharp crack. Then lines began to appear in one of the walls. I stepped back as far as I could, until I came up against the far wall. Suddenly, there was a door, opening slowly. I pressed my back into the wall, knowing full well I had no defenses.

"Well, Doctor Thorne, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"I can't say the same about you, Administrator."

He was looking a lot better than the last time I had seen him, lying stunned on the floor of the cavern. His beautiful robes sewn with golden threads, his lavender skin glistening, his hands clean with polished nails. His face lit up with a big smile.

"Now now, Doctor. We mean you no harm. We still require your assistance."

"This is not the way to win me over, Administrator."

"My dear lady, as I recall, the last time I saw you, you shot me with a laser pistol. That's not a nice thing to do to your friends. One cannot be too careful."

"Friends? My friends don't manipulate me. What is it that you want? What am I doing here?"

He motioned to someone outside the door. A second later, another Hegrioan came in, carrying a cushioned chair, then another one came in behind him. I pressed my back harder into the wall, my feet braced on the soft floor. Then I had to look closely at the second of the newcomers. It was the steward from the Administrator's office. He didn't turn to face me, but I thought I could feel recognition from him, perhaps a bit of apprehension. I wasn't sure if that was directed at me, or at his boss. They each gave me the barest glance before setting the chairs down in the middle of the room, facing each other. They looked at the Administrator, then bowed and left, closing the door behind them. I could no longer see where it had been.

"Sit, please, Doctor Thorne. We shall have a talk. You must be aware that you are at a disadvantage here, so please do not give me any excuse to do something I will surely regret." He gazed at me calmly, radiating confidence. His gaze felt slimy as he looked me up and down, appraisingly. He seated himself on one of the chairs, then motioned to me to sit in the other. "Please."

I kept both eyes on him as I walked slowly over, and sat in the indicated chair. Raising my brows at him, I tilted my head questioningly. He grinned back at me, his purple eyes gleaming.

"We truly need your help, Doctor. Hegrioa is in the midst of a crisis of unprecedented dimensions. I cannot, unfortunately, give you all the details, but suffice to say that our planet is dying."

I sat forward in my chair. "I'm listening."

"Our technology, as you probably know, is ancient. Our society has functioned smoothly for millenia, based on the original design, expanding only as necessary to meet the needs of the growing population. There are no Hegrioans alive who know how things work, much less how to fix those things that are in disrepair. Unfortunately, over the years much of our Scientific knowledge has been lost. What we do know is that the basis of our technology is organic."

"Organic? As in living organisms?"

"Indeed. If you were to see our power facility, or any of our manufacturing facilities for that matter, it would not resemble anything you are familiar with. You have probably wondered how our people have managed this long without having the knowledge of the basic functions. All I can tell you is, it has always been this way, for as long as we have Records of our society."

"None of this tells me what you need me for, Administrator."

"Doctor Thorne, there has been a major disruption of our primary systems. You experienced it, you were there. Have you not guessed?"

My mouth fell open. "The vines. The cavern." My arm came back to life, suddenly, sharply. I looked down and saw the vines moving, waving madly as though in a gale. "How did it happen? Who hurt them?"

"We do not know, Doctor, that part of what I told you is true. We do not know why anyone on Hegrioa would want to destroy the very basis of our society, our basic functions. Nor do we know how they were able to accomplish the feat. That island is quite well protected, as you know."

"I'm still wondering what I can do. I am not an investigator, I'm a plant doctor... oh."

"Yes, indeed, oh. We need you to continue to communicate. Don't look at me that way, Doctor, I know that you communicated with those vines in the cavern. What we don't want is for the entire Federation to get involved. Just you."

"Is that why you blew up the terminal at the science station? You should know that Captain Bianchi does not take kindly to being attacked. Nor is he going to be very happy about me being abducted again."

"Don't you worry about that, my dear. We simply want you to continue doing what you do. You will be sent home to your Ship. You will be permitted to return to the island, if you choose. And I know you will choose."

"I can go home? Really? And all you want is for me to continue doing what I was doing?"

"Yes, Doctor, that is all." He lifted his hand, twisting his arm. My head began to spin, my vision blurred, then blackness returned.

I awoke in the Medical of the Draco. I was lying in the bed, covered with a light blanket, my arms on top of the covers. I looked around, not seeing anyone at first as my eyes adjusted to the low light. Then I saw my Captain, facing the far wall, leaning his head on his arm. His shirttail was out, his sleeves rolled up, his hair disheveled. I reached out to him, feeling sadness, frustration, anger. He lifted his head and turned around, slowly. When he saw me looking at him, his eyes widened.

"Elizabeth." He came toward me, radiating relief, and love, so much love.

I held out my hands, and he took them in his as he sat on the bed. He brought them to his face, kissing my palms, leaning his cheek on them. His face was wet with tears. I pulled my hand out from his, and stroked his cheek gently with my fingertips. As the blanket moved, I noticed that I was completely naked. The blanket felt so nice, so soft on my bare skin.

"Paolo, what's wrong? I'm back now. They let me go, it's all right."

"Let you go? What do you mean? You have been here, unconscious, for over an hour. I couldn't feel you, couldn't reach you. I thought I had lost you." He gathered me to him, holding me tightly, stroking my bare back, burying his face in my hair. "I thought I had lost you."

I clutched him, my love flowing out to him, emotions washing over both of us. His heart was pounding, his breath rasping. I felt his hands shaking as they held me.

"Liz! You're awake! My goodness, we were frightened."

I turned my head just enough to look at Doctor Palmer. "Yes, Doc. I'm not sure what happened. But I'm all right."

"Well, my dear, you're not really completely all right. You were sitting right next to that terminal when it exploded. You have some serious abrasions, and a few really deep cuts. As well as that head wound."

"Head wound?" I felt my forehead. It was bandaged, I hadn't noticed.

"Yes, Liz. You hit your head on the desk pretty hard. You'll be staying here for at least the rest of the night."

"Wait a minute. I've been here the whole time?"

"Yes, indeed, Liz. We brought you down here almost before you hit the floor. You were unconscious, almost in a coma. We couldn't rouse you at all. Even the leaves had stopped moving."

I held my arm out, looking at the vines. They were moving now, whatever had happened before. But what had happened? Was I hallucinating, dreaming? I shook my head, then put my hand back on my husband's neck, fingers twisting in his hair.

The Captain tightened his grip on me, and said, "I will stay here as well. Doctor Palmer, it's late. You go on, I will stay here."

She started to protest, then as quickly gave in. "All right, Sir. I'll just turn out the lights in my office. Good night."

After she had gone, I gently pushed my husband away so I could look at him. He scrutinized me carefully, looking directly into my eyes. My heart skipped a beat, his eyes just look right into my soul. Those gorgeous grey eyes, still filled with tears. His handsome face, so serious, so intense. He got up from the bed, and unbuttoned his shirt, then his trousers. I watched him, as fascinated by his perfect body as always. He laid his clothes carefully in the chair and climbed into the bed with me. I put the covers over him as well, and he pulled me close, running his hands all over my body. I snuggled in as close as I could. He ran his fingertips over my face, traced the outline of my lips. Then his lips were on mine, soft, warm, gentle. I stroked his chest with my fingers as we kissed, both of us grew warmer, my body tingling all over. His love washing over me in waves, his relief, his fatigue. I felt his fatigue, and had to let my own overtake me as well. We had both had a very long day, but now we were together again, and safe. I ran my fingers through his soft black hair, sending soothing warmth as his breathing slowed, encouraging his urge to sleep. We held each other, body to body, skin to skin, touching as much as possible, and we both slept soundly.

In the morning, I woke slowly, easily, to my husband's hand stroking my arm. His warmth flowing over me, through me. His hand moved to run through my hair. I was lying on my back, he was on his side, head resting on his hand, watching me. I lifted my hand to touch his powerful chest, his taut belly. As he leaned in to kiss me, his arm pulled me closer, his hand on my back, sliding down to my leg. I melted into the kiss, passion suddenly blazing. His leg moved over mine, his foot caressing my ankle.

I felt someone come into the room. Doctor Palmer. She gasped, then left as quickly as she had entered, slamming the door behind her. I heard the blinds slap shut on the view window. I smiled to myself as I realized that the blanket was on the floor. Poor Doc. Then I forgot all about her as I allowed my emotions,

my passion to take over.

My Captain is the pleasure of my life. More than anything else I have ever experienced, more than anyone I have ever known. His genuine love for me, unabashed, sincere, is the source of much of my strength. He knows how to touch me, his fingers know just where to stroke just so. My mind, my heart, my body react to him with the love I feel for him, the gratitude I feel for having him in my life. His body, muscular and powerful as his mind is brilliant, was pressing against mine. His hands, warm and strong caressing my body. My arms and legs wrapping around him, feeling his warmth, inside and out. He pulled me on top of him, caressing my back, moving around to my breasts. I bent to kiss him, hard, my tongue exploring his mouth, my hands moving along his sides. The heat grew, the tingling increased over my entire body as we moved together. Perfectly.

"Paolo, I think we should get up. Doctor Palmer has been pacing the other room for some time now. I can feel her anxiety."

His fingers continued to caress my back as he kissed me lightly. "I suppose so, my dear. We have much to discuss now that you are feeling better."

"But Captain, I wasn't hurt. As far as I knew I woke up in that other place, and they didn't do anything to me. All he did was talk."

"He? He who? What are you talking about?"

"Let's get dressed and see what Doc wants. Then we'll have a chat. OK?"

I rolled over and got up. I didn't see my clothes anywhere, but I knew where there was something I could put on. The cabinet on the far wall contained robes, and I went into one of the drawers and found one my size. Then I went back and sat on the bed, watching as my Captain dressed. He went to the door and opened it, waving to Doctor Palmer to come in. She came in slowly. I felt her discomfiture.

"Doc, it's ok. We should have been more careful." I sent her as much soothing warmth as I could, trying to ease her mind. She gave me a small smile, nodding.

"Thanks, Liz. Captain, the Admiral has been calling, and Commander Walker is anxious about putting him off. I told the Commander I would let you know as soon as you woke." She blushed and fell silent.

"Thank you, Doctor Palmer. I will contact the Admiral shortly. Please release my wife from your care, I need her. We have much to do."

"Yes, Sir. Liz, come with me."

She led me over to her office, on the other side of the Medical. As we went I heard the Captain contact Commander Walker.

"Commander. Status. Has anything happened overnight?"

"No, Sir, but Admiral Wilson wants to speak to you ASAP."

"That is next on my list, Commander, thank you. Captain out."

Doctor Palmer examined me briefly, checking heart rate, blood pressure, the usual. She nodded to herself, then entered the information in her terminal. Then she removed the bandage from my head and looked at my wound. She rinsed it, then patted it dry, nodding again.

"Good to go, Liz. Try to stay out of trouble today, OK?"

I hugged her. "I'll try, Doc. Thanks! See you later."

As I made my way out of the office I heard the chime of the terminal. Then Commander Walker's voice, greeting Doctor Palmer, and not in an official manner. I smiled to myself. There was hope for him yet. I would have to speak to her about that later.

The Captain was waiting by the door. He looked me up and down, smiling appreciatively.

"You are ready to go?"

"Yes, Sir."

"We'll go up to our quarters and change, then I need to contact the Admiral. And then we will have our talk." He put his arm around my waist and led me out to the lift.

The Captain was sitting at the desk in our quarters, uniformed, serious. I stood off to the side, leaning against the desk, watching and waiting. After we had both taken a few minutes to shower, I had changed out of the Medical robe into my usual work outfit of cargo pants and sleeveless top. My right hand kept unconsciously running up and down my left arm.

The terminal screen showed the Admiral's office.

"Admiral, Sir. What can I do for you? I understand you have been trying to reach me."

Admiral Wilson was behind his desk, in his big Admirals chair, in his huge office at Federation Headquarters. When I looked at the screen, it almost made me homesick. I hadn't been back to Earth for almost a year. I had lived on Earth most of my life, and I had worked at Headquarters for many years as

the Head of the Botany Department. Our job was to solve the problems facing the Allied Worlds, whether it was pests, algae growths, or, as on Morgos, toxic infections. I didn't get to speak to my old team anymore, but I still wondered how they were doing, hoped they were all well. We had been a good team for a long time, I missed them too. The Admiral and I had gotten to know each other fairly well over the years, and I had a great deal of respect for him. I had been in that office many times, making reports, chatting with him over lunch, getting my assignments.

The Admiral was speaking. "Captain Bianchi, I regret to interrupt your leave even more than it already has been, but we need you. There has been unrest on some of the Allied Worlds, there have been casualties. We think there may be a connection between that and what I have seen in your reports from Hegrio. Hello, Doctor Liz, it's good to see you up and about. I especially like your new adornment."

I grinned. "Hello Admiral, it's nice to see you, too. Are you sending us somewhere?" I stepped over closer to the desk and put my hands on my Captain's shoulders. He reached up and covered my hands with his own. Admiral Wilson's eyes were examining my arm. I could almost feel his curiosity. I wished we were closer so that I could reassure him.

"Yes, Doctor Liz, I am. But not far, just to the outer planets of the Hegrio system. We believe that is where the disorder is originating from. Captain."

"Yes, Sir."

"You will investigate the outer planets, check all of the moons, the asteroids, everywhere. See if you can determine who is causing the problems."

"Sir, if I may. What sort of problems?"

"There have been thefts, Captain, and possibly kidnappings as well. At least we think so. We are not sure what the end objective is. My investigators have followed all the leads they could find, and the only connection was this system. It's up to you to figure out the rest, and stop this before it endangers all of us. Any more questions?"

"Just one, Admiral. When do you want us to leave? Half of my Crew is still on planet."

"You may have another day to prepare, Captain. I will expect regular status reports, as usual. Good day, Doctor Liz, always a pleasure. End call." He looked off to the side, and motioned to someone. Then his image disappeared.

"Commander. We will be leaving this planet tomorrow in the afternoon. Get the Crew back A.S.A.P. Their leave will have to be cut short. I will have details for you later."

"Yes, Sir! On it, Sir."

The Captain turned to me. "Elizabeth. You seem to be an important factor in what is happening here, so I need you to tell me what you know. What happened to you, and why did you say they had let you go?"

"Let's sit, Captain." I led him over to the sofa. He sat first, I sat on the other end of the sofa, turned sideways so I could look at him. "Here's what I remember. I was at the science terminal, looking at the display of the island overview, matching it up with Commander Walker's recordings. I saw it. I saw where the caverns meet!" I motioned with my hands, bringing my pointer fingers together. "They do meet, Captain, I think I saw the tunnel that must go from one side of the island to the other. Anyway, as soon as I found that, I felt a burst of electricity in my arm, then it went dead. You saw what happened, there was a blast, and that's all I remember about that."

He had been watching me carefully as I spoke. His eyes grew wide as I mentioned the caverns, then narrowed with his concern when the subject of the explosion came up. He raised his brow and motioned me to continue.

I told him everything. The bright white room, my lack of clothing and equal lack of injury. The Administrator and his two helpers. The story about how the Hegrioans didn't know how their technology worked, and the fact that the technology itself is organically based.

"That's it, Captain. He said they need me to help them get their society back on track. Something destroyed a huge portion of those vines. I'm not sure how, but they seem to be the crux, the nexus. And, for whatever reason, I seem to be the one they trust, the vines I mean, I don't care about the Administrator. He did say that they didn't want the whole Federation involved, just me. Somehow I'm supposed to figure out who and what did the damage, and fix it. But no pressure." I frowned. "That's assuming that any of that is real, and I wasn't just hallucinating in my coma or whatever."

My Captain gazed at me, thinking. He got up suddenly and went back over to the terminal.

"Commander. Has anything come through from the surface in the past few hours? Any messages or transmissions?"

A slight hesitation, then, "Yes, Captain, there is a message for Doctor Thorne here. It was not marked urgent so it was being held for when she was feeling better."

"Send it to our terminal, Commander."

"Yes, Sir, right away."

I got up and went over to the desk. When the message came through, I gasped.

"Whenever you are ready, Doctor, you and Captain Bianchi are welcome to return to the island. There will be none to disturb you. All we ask is that you report to us what you find." It was coded from the Administrator, and his personal contact code was attached. I turned back to the Captain.

"OK. So what now? We have another day here to prepare for our mission to the outer planets."

He tilted his head at me. "You really want to go back there?"

"I do, Sir. I feel responsible somehow. Not that I caused whatever happened, but that I could fix it. And if I can, I want to. It's part of us, you know. Both of us. Besides, Captain, it's what I do. It's who I am."

"It is, isn't it, my dear? All right. Commander Walker can take care of getting the Crew back aboard. I see that they have kindly supplied us with Transport coordinates." He frowned. "However, I do have an uneasy feeling about this. We do not know what is really down there, what this entity actually is. If it is truly the power and technology source for this planet, we could be walking into something we cannot anticipate."

Commander Quinn's voice came over the communicator. "Captain, Sir, we have detected something on the long distance sensors. You and Doctor Thorne will want to see this."

"On our way, Commander." He put his arm around me and kissed my cheek. "We must go, you should put some shoes on, my dear. We will continue this later on. If possible, we will go back down to the planet."

I sighed, but went to get my boots.

When we arrived at the Bridge, I went to sit at the science station while the Captain was speaking to Commander Quinn at Navigation.

"Show us, Commander."

The main viewscreen lit up with a view of Space. Then it rotated, making me a bit dizzy, and



fast-forwarded through the Hegrio system. It slowed at the asteroid belt, zooming in on one particularly large asteroid. The view changed to what looked like an X-Ray, showing the interior. I wondered how our sensors were able to show us this much, the Hegrioans usually had better shielding, they didn't like being spied upon. We hadn't even been able to see more than ten meters down into the planet immediately below us, much less this kind of detail. Those thoughts were banished when I saw the next view. The asteroid was hollow. There were a few shafts running down from the surface to a huge open space in the center. There was a somewhat flat floor, and an uneven ceiling. Then the view expanded again, and I gasped out loud.

"Is that water? How?"

Commander Quinn said, "Look at this, Doctor, there's more." He added some data to the screen. I looked, trying to interpret what I was seeing.

"Commander, is that what I think it is? It looks an awful lot like an artificial sun."

"Yes, Doctor, we are pretty sure that's what it is." He added more data to the screen. "And we think it's to provide light for this." I squinted at the screen, raising my brows questioningly. Then my mouth opened, but nothing came out.

The Captain intervened. "Commander, expand that view."

The view expanded. Bigger and bigger, filling the screen. There could be no doubt. The lake, the mass of vines. It was the same configuration as in the caverns. But how? And why? And which had come first? My headache, which had abated since the night before, began to return. The throbbing pain that I identified with the damaged vines in the caverns was making itself known once again. I looked down at my left arm, the leaves were still active, moving back and forth, gently as in a spring breeze. I wiggled my fingers and turned my arm back and forth, there was still no sensation besides a slight tingling. Were they causing the headache, were they trying to communicate with me, was it them giving me the ideas?

"Elizabeth, are you all right?"

"Yes, Captain." I pointed at the screen. "We must go there. And as soon as possible."

I looked closer at the viewscreen. In addition to the huge cavern, there was a network of tunnels, running around the asteroid, close to the surface at various points. I noticed they all seemed to originate at or very near the shafts from the surface. My guess was that the shafts would prove to be lifts of some sort, and the tunnels would be the transit system from the lifts to the cavern. A couple of the tunnels looked to be blocked, I couldn't tell how or with what. I continued to be amazed at the detail of what we were seeing.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Elizabeth?"

"How is it we are able to see so much out there when we can't even see what's on the planet right below us?"

"We do not know, Elizabeth. But there does not seem to be much shielding on that asteroid. So, my thought is, either the occupants want us to see, or they are gone altogether. We will not know until we get out there. Which will be how long, Commander?"

Commander Walker answered. "We are still getting our people up from the surface, Sir. We should be able to depart at noon tomorrow at the latest. Then it's just a few hours journey."

"Get them up here now, Commander. We need to leave tonight. Get with Engineering and make it happen. We will be in the ready-room."

"Yes, Sir!" I felt Commander Walker's anxiety, then his determination took over. "Lieutenant Dalton. Prepare to Transport our people as quickly as possible. The schedule has been advanced. Lieutenant Masters, contact everyone still on planet, let them know they need to be ready to leave right away."

"I'm on it, Commander!" "Yes, Commander!"

When the door to the ready-room had shut, I turned to the Captain.

"Sir, do you think the Hegrioans will try to stop us from leaving? You know they can if they want to."

"I do not, my dear. I think the Administrator will know where we are headed, in fact I would be surprised if he does not know already. He will not stop us. Although..."

"Although there are some others that are trying to get us to stop investigating. The ones who sent whoever that was to warn me. And to steal the segment of the vine."

"We can hope that both groups will let us go, Elizabeth. We have no choice. Not only is it an order from the Admiral, but it's necessary for you to complete this. We are both tied to this somehow, we need to keep going, as far as we can."

I took his left hand in mine, looking at the vines, the same as mine, traveling from fingers, to hand, to wrist. They were softly moving, back and forth, so lifelike, so beautiful.

"Yes, my Captain. We will finish this mission, both of us, together."

It took another couple of hours to get all of the Crew back on board. While that was happening I took the opportunity to contact Doctor Palmer. The Captain was reviewing the scans at his terminal so I called her on my communicator.

"Doc, could you come up to the ready-room please?"

"Is everything all right, Liz?"

"Absolutely, Doc. I'd just like to chat if you have time."

She arrived a few minutes later, looking apprehensive. But she relaxed when she saw me and realized that everything was really ok. And she was more than willing to talk to me about Commander Walker. She kept glancing over at the Captain, but he didn't look up at all. If he was listening, he hid it well. Doctor Palmer and Commander Walker had apparently been seeing each other for a while. They had met during the final stages of our mission at Morgos, when we were re-introducing agriculture and life to the planet. They'd become quite close over the past months, and they'd tried to make sure their shift hours matched up as much as possible. They didn't want to make a spectacle or make anyone uncomfortable. Since she's not an Officer, his Rank didn't matter, but he is a very private person and very conscious of propriety. I didn't think that anyone else was aware of their relationship. I hadn't heard anything from the Ship's grapevine. She radiated happiness when she spoke of him, her eyes shone and her hands gripped her knees. It made me feel so good to see her that way, she deserved to be happy.

"I'll have to tell him we spoke, Liz."

"Are you sure you want to do that, Marla? He's already uncomfortable around me."

"It's fine, Liz. He knows we are friends. And I feel better now that you know. I don't like keeping secrets from my friends."

I eyed her, sensing that she was still keeping something from me. "Jenny knows, doesn't she? I wonder that she's been able to keep this to herself."

Apparently my friend Jenny was able to keep a secret. I didn't hold it against her, it wasn't her news to tell. My friends were happy, so I was happy. It was as simple as that.

I was amazed at how quickly they were able to accomplish the Transport of our people from the planet. Probably over half of the thousand people who lived and worked aboard the Draco were still down there when the Captain recalled them. Yet it seemed no time at all before Commander Quinn was reporting that all had returned and were heading to their duty stations. I sensed absolutely no resentment from any one of them. A bit of disappointment, yes, but they all understood why we were out here, and duty is honor.

"All right, my dear, are you ready?" The Captain looked down at me, radiating his love and concern. I also felt his confidence and power, and tried to absorb as much of that as I could.

"Yes, Captain. Ready." I glanced around. "Where should I be?"

"You will be with me, Elizabeth. I told you, you are not going to be out of my sight until we have resolved this situation."

"Aye, Sir!" I crooked my finger at him, beckoning. "Do you have one minute before we go back to the Bridge?" I went over and stood directly in front of him.

His arms went around me. "Why yes, I think we can arrange something."

I reached up to take his face in my hands, and stroked his cheek. He lowered his head and brushed his lips against mine. I pulled him even closer, kissing him harder, feeling the wash of his warmth over me, sending my own out over him. The warmth increased, sending tingling waves all over my body. As I entangled my fingers in his hair I felt his hands massaging my back. I began to lose focus, to forget where we were, what we were about to do.

Until the chime sounded. The chime that indicated that we were about to leave orbit. We separated, and I shook my head to try to clear it. I felt the confusion coming from my husband as he also had to pull himself together. We looked at each other, frowning.

"I am sorry, Captain. You should not be distracted now, you have work to do. I will stay out of your way."

He drew me to him again and kissed me hard, arms tightening around me. I felt his love, his determination. Then he pulled back, looking into my eyes. "You will not apologize, Elizabeth. Whatever is happening, the good of it is that it has brought us even closer together." He held up his left hand, showing me that the vines had moved another few centimeters further up the forearm. "We are strong, and even stronger together." He kissed me again. "However, the Captain is needed on the Bridge. Follow me."

I followed him onto the Bridge. He directed Ensign Alben to find me a chair so that I could sit at the science terminal.

"Thank you, Captain."

Ensign Alben is a pleasant young man, who lived on one of the Lower Levels with his wife and small son. I didn't get to speak with him much, so that was all I knew about him, really. He had helped me in one of my first missions on board, sending the probes into the space-plant to gather samples when I needed them. A determined, dedicated, resourceful young man. At the moment, however, he was emitting anxiety, understandable in this situation. But I also felt his fear, and it was directed at me. He was trying not to stare, trying to concentrate on his work as the Ship was beginning the process of debarkation.

"Ensign."

"Yes, Ma'am."

I lifted my arm so that he could see it clearly. "It's not contagious, Ensign, it's all right. You can look at it, even touch it if you want."

He stared. "No, no thank you, Ma'am. I am sorry." He took a deep breath and turned back to his station. His discomfort was still there, an undercurrent of nervousness that I would be unable to ease. And I wasn't sure I wanted to, perhaps it was a good thing to leave it be, we needed everyone to be on their toes. I sighed and sat back in my chair, then turned to watch the main viewscreen.

Commander Quinn was at Navigation.

"Course laid in, Sir."

The Captain nodded. "Take us out, Commander, steady as she goes. Everyone, keep your eyes open for any anomalies, anything at all."

I held my breath as the Ship began to move, forward for a bit, then turning to head out into the outer system. Nothing happened, all was smooth. I didn't feel anything unusual, all I felt was the various sensations from the Crew. The Captain was alert, much more so than usual, but I only felt his powerful determination, and his confident authority. The Crew, along with Commander Walker and Commander Quinn, were simply concentrating on their work. Their confidence in their Captain was absolute, they were not fearful or anxious about the mission. I smiled to myself, my heart pounding with pride, and I felt a burst of warmth from my Captain.

The stars flowed by as we watched the screen. There was nothing really to see, we were flying slowly through the system, toward the asteroid belt.

"Elizabeth, come with me, please."

I started, I think I had almost fallen asleep. "On my way, Sir."

He led me back into the ready-room

"We have a few hours until we reach the asteroid. And Commander Walker will alert me if anything unusual comes up. You will take this opportunity to rest... no arguments."

"Yes, Sir." I wasn't going to argue, I was suddenly so tired. I went over to the sofa, sat down and removed my boots. I lay down, and my husband covered me with a light blanket before going over to his desk. I fell right asleep. It wasn't that it was late, it was only about Twenty-One Hundred, but my brain needed to shut off. I was thankful that I had the time to recharge, I had a feeling that I would need my strength once we reached our destination. As I drifted off, I felt the wafts of warmth from my Captain flowing over me, comforting me.

All too soon, so far as I was concerned, the Alert sounded to indicate that we were getting close to the asteroid belt. I heard it, and I felt it as well when the Crew snapped to attention at their stations. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation. The Captain got up from his desk and came over to me. He sat down on the low table, and took my hands.

"We are almost there, Elizabeth. Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, Captain, I'm just fine. Where are my boots?"

"We shall wait until the morning to go down there, Elizabeth. It's quite late. You need more rest, as do I. The asteroid will still be there in a few more hours. And we will know if anything untoward happens." He touched his communicator. "Colonel Zuajko. Bring our weapons to the ready-room."

"On my way, Sir."

Commander Walker opened the door and peeked in. I found his burst of relief at finding us sitting separately quite amusing.

"Captain, we have the asteroid in view. Another ten minutes or so and we will be able to establish an orbit."

"Very good, Commander, I will be right there."

The Commander looked at me, then at the Captain. "Yes, Sir." Then he turned and went back to the Bridge.

After the door had slid shut behind the Commander, I laughed. "I think the Commander might be warming up to me, Captain."

His face lit up with his bright smile. "I believe so, my dear." He put out his hands and took both of mine, bringing them to his lips.

Colonel Zuajko arrived, carrying a large case. He nodded to the Captain, then put the case on the floor and opened it. Inside were several large weapons I didn't recognize, as well as two regular size laser pistols. I looked at the Captain, and he motioned me to take one of the pistols. He himself took the other one, then picked up one of the larger rifles.

"Thank you, Colonel. You and your men take the rest of these and go to your usual stations. We do not expect to need them on Ship, but we have been surprised several times recently."

The Colonel nodded. "Yes, Sir... Sir? Are you sure you don't want me or my men to remain on the Bridge? We may be of use."

"No, Colonel, we do not want to cause undue alarm in the Bridge Crew. I know that you all will make yourselves available if needed."

"Aye, Sir." The Colonel turned back to the door and let himself out.

The Captain put his pistol into his belt, then turned me around. He took my pistol out of my hand and tucked it into my waistband, then patted my backside.

"You are ready now, Ma'am. Let's go see where we are."

I followed him back onto the Bridge, where the Crew were all staring intently at the viewscreen. We were very close to the asteroid, I could see the craters clearly. Then something else came into view. I pointed.

"That must be one of the entrances we saw on the scan?"

Commander Quinn said, "Yes, indeed it is, Doctor Liz. We should be able to Transport you and Captain Bianchi very close to there."

The screen now showed another view, this time an interior rendering, even more detailed than the one we had seen earlier. The outer hatches led into what looked like lifts, which in turn led into tunnels. The closest tunnel to us looked clear, though there was debris of some sort. I looked eagerly at the screen to see the cavern.

It was amazingly huge. It filled the entire center of the asteroid. The data indicated that the asteroid itself was over two kilometers in diameter, so the cavern was almost that big across. I could see the flat floor, and the uneven ceiling, though there was no indication of what it was made of. There had to be some sort of artificial gravity, otherwise why have a floor and a ceiling delineated at all? Then I saw something else, something that looked an awful lot like...

"A tree?"

"Elizabeth?"

"Captain, don't you see that? It's a tree! There were no trees in the caverns on Hegrioa. My goodness it must be tremendous!" My heart was pounding, and I felt something else, a familiar undercurrent. I started to ask him if he would change his mind about going down there right away, but it's my policy never to question him on matters of Command. It's his Ship, his Crew, his decisions are for the good and safety of everyone.

"The scans do not show any life other than the plant life, so we will be secure where we are for the time being. Sorry, my dear, but we will wait until the morning. I need to sleep, and so do you. You can wait a few more hours." He was looking at me strangely, and I wondered if he could feel the undercurrent as well. When I reached out for his emotions, I felt confusion, and some apprehension.

I waited for him to make the next move, and when he turned back toward the ready-room, I followed. He took the pistol out of my waistband, and put it with his own on the table. Then he sat on the sofa and pulled me into his lap.

"Captain, we can't sleep like this." I smiled.

"You are correct, my dear. We cannot. However, I think that sleep can wait for just a few minutes."

His arms tightened around me, as his hands caressed my back, my legs. His lips were hot on mine, matching my own passionate heat. But I pulled myself away, reluctantly.

"Paolo. We have to rest. We have a busy day ahead." I lightly stroked his cheek, as he laid his head in my palm.

He kissed my hand, and said, "Correct again, Elizabeth. Come and lay down with me. This sofa is large enough for both of us."

We lay together on the sofa, spooned perfectly. And in easy reach of both of our weapons.

A few hours later, we were on our way to the EVA suit locker.

I hadn't actually used one of the suits before, though I had been thoroughly briefed and tested. We all had to be certified, just in case. There is a storage locker on every Level, easily accessible, though not all of the Crew have security access. We went to the Level One locker, and the Captain passed his hand over the sensor. When the door slid open, I stared at the contents. The suits are so ugly, and their make and

style have not changed in hundreds of years. There had been no real reason to change them, they weren't used very much. The only use for them, really, was either emergency repairs, or a mission such as ours, to an asteroid with no atmosphere. And that doesn't happen often, not much goes on in an asteroid belt. The Captain took down one of the suits, and unzipped the front. He motioned me to take off my shoes, and my trousers. I did so, then put on the form-fitting shorts and tank top that were standard garb under the bulky suits. I had to stop what I was doing and watch, as I always do, while he was changing into a matching outfit. I felt a flush come over me as I watched.

"After you, my dear." He helped me into the heavy suit. Held it out for me to step into, then pulled it up around me, making sure all the connections were where they should be, and checking the various tubes and wires.

I felt like a big marshmallow, as the suit puffed out as soon as it was zippered. It weighed a tonne, and the boots were like cement blocks. It was made of a slick, crinkly material, sort of a white-ish color, with leads and tubes everywhere inside. I didn't plan on being in it long enough to have to use any of them. I held the bubble helmet in front of me, and watched the Captain maneuver himself into his own suit. I helped him with his helmet, connecting the leads to the breathing apparatus. Then he did the same for me. We picked up our weapons, tucked the pistols into the suits' holsters, and headed to the Transport area.

There is a Transport Pad on every Level. They are centrally controlled by Engineering, there are cameras and sensors constantly monitoring the area. Even though it's possible to Transport to or from anywhere in the Ship, it's easiest for the Engineers to do it from the actual Transport Pad. The Pad is about two meters across, more than large enough for two people. Even two people in huge puffy EVA suits, one of whom is carrying a very large laser rifle. We stepped onto the Pad, and the Captain touched his communicator, the one built into the outside of his suit.

"Commander Walker."

"Yes, Sir. Here, Sir."

"We are ready to depart. Anything else we need to know?"

"Not at the moment, Sir. We will continue to feed data to your tablet."

"All right then, you have the Bridge, Commander... Lieutenant Dalton."

"Aye, Sir. Are you ready, Sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, we are."

"Transporting now, Captain."

I took in a sharp breath as the cold-dark of Transport hit me. I felt my Captain's warmth reaching out to me, even as our feet hit the surface of the asteroid. That was where the heavy boots worked their magic, as we were able to stand steady, and walk to the entrance hatch without too much difficulty. We both turned on our suit lights, attached to the sides of our helmets. I looked around eagerly, wanting to see everything. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. Barren, cratered, sterile. And yet it was beautiful, sculpted, even colorful.

"Here we are, Elizabeth. I am going to try to open this hatch. It looks as though this wheel should turn toward this arrow, see it? Stand back please."

I took a step backward but kept my light trained on the hatch so that he could see clearly. The hatch was imbedded in a rock, and it stood about a meter off the ground. The rock surrounding it was much larger, more than sufficient to hold a full-size lift. As the Captain turned the wheel I could feel his strain, his determination. Then it began to move smoothly, several times around. When it reached its limit, the entire hatch, the entire doorway into the rock face opened by itself. I could see inside, it did indeed look like a lift, though I didn't see any controls.

The Captain took his pistol out of the holster, then waved it at the doorway.

His voice came through the suit speaker. "Arm yourself, please. I will go first."

I took my own pistol out as he cautiously moved to the lift, peeking around the doorway, looking up to the ceiling and down at the floor. Then he motioned me to follow him in. As soon as I did so, the door began to shut. I felt a wash of anxiety, my own, then the comforting warmth from my Captain. As the door slammed shut, I tried to smile at him through the helmet.

The lift began to move downward. The Captain took his tablet out of his suit pocket and started a scan. I could see an overlay of the map I had seen earlier, and a new map tracking a path. It didn't take long for us to reach the bottom of the shaft, I felt the jar as we hit. And the door again opened on its own. I glanced at the tablet, but we didn't have any choice in which way to go. The tunnel led away from the lift, toward the huge cavern. My heart began to beat faster. And the familiar throbbing pain began anew in my head. I stepped out of the lift, holding my pistol carefully in my gloved hands, heading toward the source of the pain.

The passageway was narrow, we had to walk single file. The Captain went first, scouting, glancing at the tablet as he went. I followed, trying to ignore the feeling that someone was going to sneak up on me from behind. The pain in my head increased as we went. After a few minutes of walking, stiffly in the bulky suit, the Captain held up his hand. I stopped.

"What is it?" My voice sounded tinny through the speaker.

"There is an opening just ahead on our left. Stay here, I will check it out."

He went ahead, I saw him stop after just a few meters and look to his left. He lifted his pistol and stepped toward what I assumed was the opening. I saw him start to move, then he stopped again. I couldn't see what was happening, but I felt his confusion.

"Elizabeth, come here, please."

When I got to his position and looked through the opening in the rock, I gasped.

"My goodness. The scan sure doesn't do it justice, does it?"

"Elizabeth, stay back, there is some sort of force field covering the doorway. I need to try to break through it, or turn it off."

The glow was visible once I knew it was there. The air in the doorway was tinged with red, just at the edge of visibility. Through the bulky helmet I peered sideways at it, watching the flashes, like glowbugs flickering. An idea came to me.

"No, Captain. Don't you see? There has to be something to hold atmosphere in there. The plants can't grow in a vacuum. There has to be a way for us to get through without disturbing the field, what would be the point of having such a garden if no-one could get in?"

He bowed his head, or rather his entire upper body, the suits are too bulky to allow fine movement. "All right, Doctor, any ideas?"

I shook my head. I knew that I was meant to get in there, but I had no idea how. My head was throbbing, I was beginning to feel sick to my stomach. And my arm was burning. Then it came to me. Of course. I held out my left hand toward the opening, trying to sense the field. I couldn't feel anything, especially not through the suit. But when I stepped closer, suddenly my hand was in the field, and I still didn't feel anything, except a burst of fear from the Captain.

"Elizabeth, wait!"

It was beyond my control at that point, I couldn't stop. The red flashes quickened, concentrated around my gloved hand. I stepped through the field, feeling nothing but the slightest tugging on my suit. Once through, I turned to look back at the Captain. I could see him clearly, standing just the other side of the doorway. I motioned to him to try again, and sent all the encouragement I could. He hesitated for a moment, then tried putting his own left hand out, and this time it worked. He stepped through, cautiously, gingerly. He stopped next to me, I felt his relief, and his wonder.

I was quite dizzy, but put that aside the best I could. I shook my head inside the helmet. We looked around, curiously. The artificial sun was high up at the ceiling, burning brightly, we didn't need our helmet lights at all. The entire cavern was lit with a comforting yellow light, almost like Earth's sunlight. I saw the Captain looking at the tablet, taking readings as we walked. I headed straight for the lake, I wanted to see the vines up close. As we approached the water, the Captain put his hand on my arm, holding the tablet out in front of my face.

"Look at this. There is full atmosphere here, full gravity. Breathable air. Why? What purpose does this place serve?"

Somehow, this place was tied to Hegrio planet, tied to the events there. And tied to the events that Admiral Wilson had told us to investigate. And somehow, tied to me, and my Captain.

"I can't imagine, Captain. That's what we're here to find out. Oh, my." I had turned my head to speak to him, and caught sight of the tree. Or I should say The Tree. The most imposing, impressive Tree I had ever seen. Larger and taller than any Redwood Tree in Northern Province on Earth, where I had lived most of my youth. Twenty meters diameter at least, and I estimated probably two hundred meters in height, judging from the height of the ceiling. I didn't think to ask the Captain to measure it, I was too awestruck at the time. I walked toward it, slowly. As I got closer, the dizziness increased. My hand reached out of itself, drawn to The Tree, wanting to touch it, to feel the bark under my fingers. My head swam, vision blurred.

"Captain? Paolo, I feel something. Something odd. Does the scan show anything?"

He looked at the tablet again. "No, it does not, Elizabeth. Are you all right?"

"I think so... I feel... dizzy." I suddenly had to sit. It wasn't easy to do in that suit, but I sort of bent sideways and lowered myself to the ground.

"Elizabeth, watch out!"

I followed his pointing hand with my eyes as best I could. There was something coming toward me, slithering along the floor. I scooted back, turning. Then I smiled.

"Captain, it's the vine. I can't go to it, so it's coming to me." I tried to focus on it, then I had a thought. "I need to take this suit off, Captain. You said there's breathable air here, right?"

His reaction was apprehension, fear. But then he relaxed. I think he felt, as I did, that I wouldn't be hurt, not here. Whether this place was the work of the Hegrioan government, or of the opposition, neither of them could afford to harm the one person who was able to communicate with this entity. He nodded, and came over to help with my helmet. As soon as the catch was released, I heard the rush of air, and my suit deflated. What a relief. I unzipped the front, and wiggled out of the arms and legs of the suit, leaving it under me on the floor. My Captain's eyes were on me, watching carefully, and not only to protect me. The skimpy shorts and tank top didn't cover more than the absolute bare minimum. My skin flushed under his gaze... but I had to try to concentrate.

I breathed deeply, smelling the aromas of the plant life around me. The fresh, green scent of the vines, and the deep, brown scent of the Tree. The air was clean, these plants were doing their usual fine job of creating Oxygen. I briefly wondered if there was a recycler somewhere that traded the Oxygen for Carbon Dioxide. Since this was a closed system there had to be some sort of circulation, or else the plants would die. I looked around but didn't see anything resembling machinery. I knew the Captain was taking readings as fast as the tablet would scan, we would analyze them later.

Then I turned around to face the lake, and the approaching strand of the vine.

"Captain, I'll be all right, please don't interfere." I sent him my reassurance. I felt his acceptance, though still tinged with apprehension.

I saw the strand, and further back, saw the entire mass of vines writhing, moving. I leaned forward, holding out my hand. The tattooed vines on my arm were waving furiously, back and forth, up and down, around and around. I ran my opposite forefinger down the inside of the arm, and watched as the leaves followed my finger like a wake behind a boat. The burning increased as the live vine came closer.

Then it was suddenly wrapping itself around the arm, climbing up my forearm all the way up to the shoulder. I felt it, as a soft tickling sensation, felt it inside myself as well as on my skin. I looked around at the Captain and nodded my head, then closed my eyes. I felt him put my pistol in my lap, and touch my right shoulder. Then he pulled away and stood behind me, watching, guarding. I focused as hard as I could.

I think I cried out as the blast of pain hit me. I shook my head to keep the Captain from interfering. The vision came suddenly.

Against my closed eyelids, I saw The Tree. But it was on the planet, on the island. I was standing under it, looking up toward the canopy, when the ground under my feet began to vibrate. I looked down, and through the ground I saw the caverns. One on either side of me, mirror images of each other. Identical lakes, identical doorways, identical masses of plants congregating near and reaching toward the water. And directly between them, the passageway. The tunnel I had seen the beginnings of in our scan. The image was burned into my brain, I now knew exactly where it was. I saw the vines pull back, in the vision, they pulled back from the tunnel and revealed the burnt-out area. It was indeed much larger than what I had seen.

"But what happened? Who did this?" I didn't expect an answer, but I got one.

Apparently The Tree had been uprooted somehow, years ago, and brought here to this asteroid. That had begun a decline in the organic technology of Hegrioan planet. This was the original theft. I saw this in fast-forward, broken, as though watching an old video recording. The technology, the entire structure of Hegrioan society, as well as the Hegrioans themselves, is based on the same genetics as these plants. I saw chemical compounds that I didn't understand, then I saw something familiar. The same algae-like cells that we had found in my blood, and in my Captain's blood. The ones that had turned our blood purple, just like Hegrioan blood.

Over the years the vines had become hungry, they needed something that only the King Tree could provide. As they expanded through their caverns, they found their way almost to the surface, following the old root-path of The Tree. They had come upon some of the younger generation of Hegrioans, working on finding ways to overcome their dependence on the old technology, in the two stone buildings on the island. The combination of the old and the new proved to be explosive, literally. The vines reached into a machine that they didn't understand, and caused the explosion, which in turn caused a fireball that raced back along their path, devastating a huge portion of their mass. As I saw that fireball, I again felt the blast of pain, in my head, in my heart. I heard my own voice, distantly, screaming for help... calling out, reaching across a vast darkness...

When I came back to myself, I was laying on the ground, on my suit. The vines had retracted, gone back to the lakeside. The Captain was sitting next to me, gripping his rifle in one gloved hand, and my hand with the other. He had taken his helmet off and laid it on the ground. I figured that was so he could hear me, and speak to me if he needed to. I felt his warmth washing over me, and I drank it in, reaching out to him for more. I took his hand in both of mine, clasping them together tightly.

"I have one more thing to do, Captain. Then we're done here."

"You are all right, Elizabeth? I heard you cry out, and I heard you speaking to someone, not to me. I could barely feel you at all." His fear came to the surface.

"I'm all right, Paolo. I promise. Better than all right, actually." I sat up, and put my hand on his handsome face. He smiled, then kissed my palm. His warmth again flowed over me, matching my own. I crawled into his lap, facing him, straddling his legs. I put both hands on his face and kissed his lips, gently. He reached up with his gloved hands and clasped me close, increasing the power of the kiss, pressing my body to his. As well as he could, after all, those EVA suits are pretty unyielding. His suit communicator chimed.

"Captain? Are you all right? We lost your signal for a while."

"Yes, Commander, we are all right. There must have been a glitch." He looked at me, his brow furrowed.

"See what you can determine. We will be exploring a bit more before we return."

"Yes, Sir. We did detect an energy spike a bit ago that lasted for quite a while. But we can't identify the source. We were concerned when we were not able to reach you. We were getting ready to mount a rescue."

"Not necessary. And I think I may be able to assist with that, Mr. Walker. But it can wait until we are back aboard. We are safe, I will check in again shortly. Captain out."

"I suppose I should put that suit back on."

"Let me help you, my dear." My Captain helped me to stand, and began to pick up the EVA suit. His gasp caused me to whip my head around, frightened.

"What's wrong?"

He held the suit up by the sleeves. "Look at this."

My mouth fell open as I reached for the suit. There were slashes everywhere. As though someone had carefully slit the fabric with a razor. The sleeves, the body, the legs were full of holes, rendering the unit completely useless. My head began to swim again, there was a buzzing in my ears. I kept looking at the suit, willing it to repair itself, I refused to think of how it came to be this way.

Breathing deeply, in and out, in and out, I lifted my head to look questioningly at the Captain. His gaze was steady, but there was an undertone to his aura. His mind was churning, confusion mixed with fear, mixed with determination. His thoughts were jumbled, but I knew that he was quickly figuring a way to get me out of there. He handed me my pistol, then tapped his suit's communicator.

"Commander Walker... Get with Engineer Dalton. There has been a development. We will need to use the Transport system to get us out of this cavern. You'll need to get a Shuttle prepped to land. Verify the surface conditions and make it happen."

There was a noticeable hesitation, then, "Aye, Sir. We're on it."

"Contact me when it's set. Captain out."

My head was still spinning. Who, how, and why? I felt something, a tugging in my head. My eyes turned to The Tree. It seemed to be beckoning to me, though of course it hadn't moved. Then the realization came. The vines had moved, to surround the base of The Tree. The Captain held his rifle tightly, but encouraged me as I began to walk slowly toward the vines. My bare feet felt every inch of the rock floor, every step filled with tingling anticipation.

When I was within a meter or so of the base of The Tree, the vines began to move again. Tendrils reaching out across the floor to me, yet leaving a cleared area for me to step. The feeling of tugging increased, as did the foggy feeling in my brain. My left hand reached out, fingertips searching for something... the bark of The Tree was rough, yet soft to my touch. There was a tangible vibration, almost a heartbeat. A soothing sensation that penetrated my skin all the way to my soul. The heat and tingling increased in my arm, spreading to the rest of my body. And I was gratified to feel an echo of my feelings coming to me from my Captain, waiting a few meters away.

A sudden vision, a sudden burst of sensation, once again knocking me to my knees. The vines on the floor softened the impact, cushioning my fall. The wash of consternation came to me from my Captain, then as quickly was changed to wonder. Wonder, awe, amazement. Then someone was touching me, touching my arms, helping me to a sitting position.

"Elizabeth. What is happening? How is this possible?" His eyes were wide, but not with any kind of fear



or concern. It was sheer pleasure, pleasure of a new and joyful experience, completely different from anything he knew. He was kneeling next to me on the bed of vines, dressed only in his shorts, his EVA suit nowhere to be seen. He must have felt the question, he answered immediately, "I don't know, Elizabeth, one moment I was watching you, the next I was here. And according to my timepiece," he held up his wrist, "I seem to have lost about ten minutes."

"Ten minutes? Has it been that long?" I tried to think. It hadn't seemed that long. "I saw something, Paolo. This Tree, this is the reason I'm here."

"I saw something as well, Elizabeth. I do not know how, but I saw something. A glimpse. Yes, this Tree, on the island, towering above all. The vines were climbing, wrapped around the trunk. But there was something else." He stopped, thinking, considering. "Flowers, I think. An explosion of color." He raised his hand, showing me how the vines had extended, almost up to his elbow. Moving, gently waving back and forth. But now there was an addition. Not only the lovely chocolate brown of the stems, the bright fresh green of the leaves. Now I saw that there were small specks of color interspersed with the leaves. He reached over and took my left hand, raising my arm. Showing me that my tattooed vines were beginning to bloom as well. Tiny flecks of orange, visible at the base of a number of the leaves. Our eyes met, widening as understanding came. As one, we put out our left hands, to touch the soft bark of The Tree.

The vibrations increased. I felt every one, pulsing as a heartbeat. Electric tingling flowed through my fingertips, up my arm, into my body. I felt, rather than saw, the vines beginning to creep up the base of The Tree. Climbing upward in a spiral pattern toward the canopy. They avoided our hands completely, working their way around the trunk, heading skyward. I don't know how long we sat there, watching, feeling as the vines made their slow way. What would have taken years back on Earth unfolded before our eyes in fast forward.

Recognition came. I had seen this before. This exact scene, carved into the wooden desk in the Administrator's office. The vines, The Tree. When I had seen it then, I had recognized the vines, but how could I have recognized The Tree? It had seemed so familiar at the time. My head began to throb again. I heard something, a buzz perhaps. No, a chime. And again, more insistent. It came from a far distance, another lifetime, it didn't register as anything I needed to concern myself with. A brief wisp of a thought that there was something I should be remembering... then I didn't care.

Gradually, both of us came back to ourselves. The strands of the vines had climbed all the way up to the very top of The Tree. It was beautiful. The Tree was wound around with the glossy dark green, melding perfectly with the deep brown of its trunk. There were tiny buds, deep flame orange, appearing as we watched. We sat very still as the buds grew, bigger and bigger until they burst into full-blown flowers in front of our eyes. Clusters of tiny flame-colored flowers, each looking like a miniature rose. We drank in the aroma of the freshly opened flowers, sweet yet not too sweet. By unspoken agreement, we each removed our hands from the Tree trunk, and pushed ourselves to our feet, the vines on the floor moving out of the way. We each looked at our own arm, then each other's. The vines had mirrored the growth of the live ones. Clustered groups of tiny orange flowers, each individual floret looking like a beautiful rose, grew at the bases of the leaves.

This was what I had come for. This was why the Hegrioan government had been watching me. This was what my team was going to need in order to cure the live vines in the caverns below the island. My head was clearing, the fog lifting, and I wanted to get back to my Lab to begin work. Of course the Captain and I would need to be scanned, as usual, to be sure nothing contagious or infectious was brought aboard the Draco. The Shuttles were equipped with the same detection devices as the main Ship. Every time someone entered, either on foot or by Transport, a scan was run for disease, microorganisms, toxins. We had never set off any alarms, but no chances could be taken. In addition to the usual scans, we would be tested by Doctor Palmer when we arrived back on the Ship.

Which brought me up short. How were we going to get back? My suit was useless, and we didn't even know where the Captain's suit had gone. We were both wearing only skimpy cotton tanks and shorts, not even shoes. The boots that go with the EVA suits attached to them directly. I could have put them on, of course, but there wasn't much point in doing that. I remembered the chimes I had heard.

"Captain, how are we going to contact the Ship? I think I heard someone trying to contact us, before."

"Good question, my dear. Let's get back to your suit and see if your communicator is working." He took my hand, and we stepped gingerly through the patch of vines. They slithered out of our way, acknowledging that we were now free to go.

The suit was where we had left it, still shredded but the helmet looked intact. The Captain's suit was still nowhere to be seen. He knelt down next to the suit and looked at it, carefully, hands on his thighs. He drew in a deep breath, then touched the communicator button.

"Commander?"

"...Captain Bianchi! We have been trying to reach you for an hour! The Shuttle is on its way down to the surface, Sir. It will be there in just a few minutes."

"Lieutenant Dalton. Thank you. We will be waiting."

It seemed like forever before the communicator chimed again.

"Captain. We are landing just above you, Sir. Chief Engineer Dalton has worked out a way to get the Transport beam through the rock. We think. We are going to try Transporting something down to you, before we try it on you."

"Get on it, Commander."

There was a bright flash, then nothing.

"Captain? What did you see?"

"Transport flash, Commander Walker. But nothing materialized. What happened?"

"Don't know, Sir. Let us try something."

I interrupted. "Commander, see if you can Transport something to the outside of the cavern, please. Just outside the opening should do it."

I felt the question, felt the surprise, from the Captain as well as the Commander. But the Captain nodded, saying, "Try it, Commander."

This time it worked. We saw the flash, and the metal box appeared just outside the doorway. I nodded.

"They would have protected the cavern from unauthorized access from Transport as well, Captain.

Remember how you had trouble entering from the tunnel? Now we need them to Transport two more suits down. I think I can drag them in here without having to go completely outside... Although..."

"Although...?"

"I don't mean to worry you, Captain, but our suits were ruined, at least mine was. Why? How? What's to say something won't go wrong if we try to walk out of here?"

His mouth opened, then closed abruptly. "We shall have to risk it, Elizabeth. There is no other way."

Commander Walker's voice, "Captain! There's another ship approaching. Coming from the opposite side of this asteroid. Small, unarmed, looks Hegrioan, very like the ship that paid us a visit the other day."

"What is it doing, Commander?"

"I don't... it's getting ready to land, Sir. Just the other side of this hill. We can see the thruster flame... some sort of power buildup, Sir. Not weapons... unfamiliar... wait, it resembles our Transport frequency..."

The high-pitched squeal was deafening. I clapped my hands to my ears, trying to block it out. Impossible to tell where it was coming from, no way to know if it was from our Shuttle, or the Hegrioan ship, or from the cavern itself. The Captain's face contorted in pain, his hands reached out for me. The squeal dissipated, but was replaced by a blinding light. A painfully bright, bluish white light, piercing into my eyes, into my head. The burst of freezing cold was almost a relief, the sudden darkness even more so. Even as I realized that we were not where we should be.

"Elizabeth? Are you there? Are you all right?" The Captain's voice came out of the darkness.

"I'm here, Paolo. But where is here? And where are you?" I tried to feel around me, then as quickly realized that I couldn't move my arms or legs. OK, stop for a moment, concentrate. Deep breath. Focus. I seemed to be seated on the ground, legs straight out in front of me. Ankles bound together, not too tightly, but enough to keep me from wiggling out. My hands were in my lap, wrists bound, hands palm to palm. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I saw that it wasn't completely dark, there were shadows, distinctions. I squinted, trying to locate my husband. His voice had been close, to my right. I thought I caught a glimpse of a reflection, perhaps something metal?

"Can you see, Elizabeth? My eyes are covered, I cannot see anything. Where are we? Are you all right?"

"I can't see much, Paolo. It's pretty dark in here. But I think I see you now. Are you hurt?"

"I am not hurt, my dear. However, I seem to be immobilized."

I had located him. Not too far away, but it might as well have been a million kilometers at that moment. However, I could reach out and touch him without touching him, soothing his mind. His warmth was tinged with anger, with frustration, with confusion. My vision was adjusting nicely, and I tried not to project my fear and worry as I saw what they had done. The glint of metal I had seen was a large ring, set high into the wall. The wall itself was unremarkable, smooth and featureless from what I could see in the low light. My Captain's hands were bound together, and raised above his head as he sat with his back to the wall. A thick rope bound his midsection to two more rings, set about a meter away on each side. Another rope was tied to his ankles, the same as mine. It hurt me as I looked at him, then the anger came. What was going on here? And why would they blindfold him and not me?

It seemed we would get answers soon, as the whiff of feeling came. My senses stretched to the limit as I reached out to see who was approaching. The censure came in the form of an internal slap to the face. I felt it as surely as if someone had literally smacked me. I couldn't stifle the yelp that escaped me, much as I wished I could have.

"Elizabeth? What's happening? Do you feel something, do you see something?"

"I don't know, Paolo. Someone is there, close. Someone who can..."

"Someone who does not care to be analyzed or spied upon." The voice was immense, deep, I felt it in my bones.

I peered into the darkness, still unable to see anything except vague shadows beyond a couple of meters in front of me. I turned my head to look at my Captain. He was so frustrated, unable to see, unable to move. His breathing was rough, his chest shuddering with the effort to control and steady his breaths. My attempts to soothe his mind felt weak, I was losing my ability to focus, my head was filling with fog.

"And who would that someone be?" I surprised myself with my calm tone. "And why has that someone brought us to this place?"

The light increased, just a little. I began to make out the shape of a person, a Hegrioan. Tall, bulky, strength flowing over me in waves. He seemed familiar, yet where would I have seen him before? I gasped.

"It was you! You're the one who came into my Lab! You're the one who stole the vine from us. Why?"

"You are involving yourself in affairs that do not concern you or your people. You must desist. We are capable of resolving our issues on our own."

"If you are so capable, why haven't you fixed the problem yet? From what I've seen, there's a long way to go before this issue is resolved." I didn't know where this was coming from, why I felt so defensive. And why I was antagonizing this person who held not only my life, but that of my Captain, in his very large purple hands.

But he just laughed. "You are a wonder, my dear Doctor Thorne. We do not want to resolve things in the way that you mean. Our goals are not the same as those of our so-called government. You have no need of knowing the details. What you need is to go back where you came from, and do not come back." His words and his emotions were at odds, he did not mean what he was saying. I could feel that much, it was too strong in him to remain hidden from me.

"It was you, wasn't it? It was you, or your people, that uprooted The Tree? Why would you do that?"

"Enough."

As though a hand had been clapped over my mouth, I fell silent. This person was indeed powerful, no-one had ever been able to use my ability against me before. It was humbling, and it made me angry. He

laughed, and I knew he was sensing my anger, which of course only served to make it worse.

Up until then, this Hegrioan had ignored my Captain, sitting there bound and blindfolded.

"Well, Captain Bianchi. It's a pleasure to meet you again. I hope that you are enjoying your visit to our pleasant little world."

"Why don't you release me, and try saying that again." The anger was palpable.

"We are indeed going to release you both. However, you will not be permitted to interfere any further. We do not wish to damage you, or your people. Consider this a warning. We are creating a new way of life here, and we will not allow Humans or anyone else to keep us from accomplishing our goals." As he came closer and bent over me, I could smell his musky scent, quite unpleasant. My head felt full of cotton, I couldn't sense anything from him, couldn't get any reading at all.

But I saw the weapon in his hand as he raised the muzzle and pointed it at the Captain. It was no weapon I had ever seen before, with its long narrow barrel and strangely shaped, sturdy handgrip. The Hegrioan's aura was charged with not anger but amusement. Not heat, but an almost pleasant coolness. Before I could react, or cry out, he fired. I felt it in my heart as the beam went into my Captain's chest, and his body jerked. Then his head fell forward. Tears sprang to my eyes, the shock of it almost knocked me unconscious.

I strained against my bindings, screaming, "NO! No No No! What have you done?" I threw myself forward, onto my bound hands and knees, crawling as best I could over toward my Captain. Reaching out, feeling for his presence. I almost fainted with relief when I felt him, faint but still strong. Very much alive, merely unconscious, not even hurt. The wonder flickered through my mind, but the anger quickly overtook it.

The booming laugh followed me. "He will be fine, Doctor. This is merely a warning, as I said. A bit of pain is a good incentive, don't you think? But perhaps you are having difficulty thinking?" Another laugh. The confidence, the feeling of absolute faith in his own power flowed out of him, as though he was purposely directing it at me. Now the heat flared, his unbelievable hard focus on me an almost physical pain. But it seemed that it was not only coming from him, he was being supported. That almost made me feel better, he was not truly stronger than I, he had help.

It didn't stop the pain, however. My head still felt like it would explode. Conflicting emotions, pain, fury, worry, confusion. Overwhelming me, pushing me down, making the very air thick and hard to breathe. Then, suddenly, everything was crystal clear. As though a clean summer breeze had blown away the fog, banished the confusion. I directed my thoughts toward the Hegrioan, who was no longer smiling. As he stood over me, I felt his mind, felt his confidence being overtaken by surprise. His purple eyes darkened and grew wide, as his gaze moved to my arm. I followed his gaze, and saw that the flowers were now in full bloom, the vines themselves still moving gently. I couldn't feel exactly all that he was feeling, but I knew that there was much confusion, sudden anxiety. My thoughts at that moment were only that I wanted my husband to be freed.

He took a step toward me, then hesitated, and turned toward the Captain. I felt his indecision, then his thoughts clarified.

The knife he pulled out of his waistband was huge. The handle was ornately carved, the blade long and curved. My mouth opened but I couldn't speak. My eyes followed him as he took the last few steps, then stopped. He stood still by my Captain's feet, his eyes unreadable, his mind unreachable. I watched, horrified, as he brought the knife down in a sweeping motion. But the blade merely cut through the ropes. I let my breath out. The knife moved again, slicing through the sections of rope holding my Captain upright against the wall. When the rope was detached from the metal ring, it slithered to the ground with a slap, and his hands fell into his lap. His wrists were still bound, but his legs were free. And I felt him, reaching out to me. He was awake.

The Hegrioan was looking from me to my husband, his eyes dark, his mind once again in turmoil. My mind, however, was clear. I felt focused, I knew my husband was going to be all right, and for the moment we seemed to be safe.

Taking advantage of the moment, I asked, "Now will you please untie me so I can care for my husband?"

The response came in the form of the knife, thrown toward me, striking the wall, embedding itself halfway up the blade. As I made my way toward it, the Hegrioan disappeared. He was simply gone, the same way he had vanished from my Lab.

After a brief battle with the knife hilt, trying to pull it from the wall, it finally came loose. It was actually quite beautiful, with its heavy blade, a dull matte silver with carvings of our vines on the handle. I weighted it in my hands, it was quite impressive. It took me just a few minutes to slice my way through the ropes binding my wrists and ankles, then I was free to rush over to my husband. As I stood, my legs shook, and I massaged my thighs as I went, trying to get the circulation back. I knelt down by his side, breathing deeply, feeling for his warmth, his power. My hands trembled as I pulled the blindfold off his eyes. I gently kissed his eyelids, touched his face lightly with my fingertips.

"Paolo? Can you feel me?"

His eyes fluttered open, his beautiful deep grey eyes. Looking directly into my soul. Letting me know that he was all right. I cut the bindings on his wrists.

As soon as they were freed, my Captain's hands found their way to my hips. I gripped his arms, stepping back further to help him stand up. Instead, he pulled me down onto his lap.

"I do not think I can get up immediately, Elizabeth. I need a few moments please." His hands went to my waist, his fingers so soft on my skin.

"Captain, is this the time? We don't even know where we are, much less how to get home." But my heart was pounding with his proximity, my breath deepened as his fingertips massaged my belly.

"I do know where we are, my dear. We are on Hegrioa Planet. That nice gentleman said as much. I do not know exactly where on the planet, but my best guess would be the compound we discovered after the break-ins...Do you sense anyone here now?"

My mouth fell open. Then I mentally shook myself. "No I don't, Captain. But I didn't feel that Hegrioan until he was in the room with us."

"All right then. Since we do not know exactly where we are, and we have no light, I do not see the harm in taking a few minutes for recovery. You do recall that I was just shot?" His smile lit up the darkness, at least from my point of view.

His arms tightened around me. He gave me no chance to think any further, as his hand moved to my neck, into my hair, pulling me toward him. The kiss was hot, very hot, his lips so gentle and yet so insistent, so passionate. My entire body was tingling, electricity traveling up and down my spine, from my head to my toes.

We were both taken completely by surprise when the Hegrioan returned. He was just simply there, in the room, his aura confident once again. The Captain's demeanor instantly changed. His hands tightened on me as he lifted me up and moved me over to his side.

"What do you want from us?"

"My dear Captain Bianchi. I don't want anything from you." His smile was frightening as he turned to me. "Now, you, Doctor. That's another story."

Before I could register anything, the Captain was on his feet. The Hegrioan stepped back, probably feeling the absolute fury coming at him. But he couldn't move far enough or fast enough. The Captain's fist smashed across his face. I felt, as well as heard, the crack of bone on bone. All I could do was watch, and support. It seemed that Hegrioans, or at least this one, were not trained in any kind of fighting, our captor was completely at a loss. However, the Captain did not let that stop him.

I expected the Hegrioan to disappear again, but he did not. He tried to fight, I had to hand that to him. However, he of course was no match for Captain Bianchi, who was trained in all manner of techniques, from boxing to Tai Kwon Do. We sparred together from time to time, it was good practice for me. He even let me overpower him occasionally. This time was almost painful for me, feeling as I did the frustration coming from the Hegrioan as well as the anger from the Captain.

The Captain maneuvered the Hegrioan toward the wall. Then he feinted one way, spun the other, and kicked hard into the Hegrioan's midsection. It was a physical sensation for me, even as I watched I could feel the pain as the breath whooshed out and the Hegrioan slid toward the floor.

When I was grabbed from behind, it came as a total surprise. I had been concentrating so completely on the fight in front of me that I didn't notice the second Hegrioan when he appeared. His arms wrapped around me, feeling like they were made of metal coils. However, my senses and emotions were running high, and I reacted. Kicking backward as I leaned forward, I put him off balance and we both fell. He wasn't expecting me to have any fighting ability, I suppose, or maybe he simply didn't know much about Human females. But his surprise didn't overpower his determination. He kept hold of me as we fell, and we both hit the floor together and rolled. When his grip loosened somewhat, I took the opportunity to push myself away. As I rose to my feet in Tae Kwon Do stance, fists raised, knees bent, his eyes followed me. But his body moved too slowly. He rolled toward me, grasping for my feet and pushing himself up. I almost laughed out loud as I kicked his hand away and brandished the knife at his face. I shifted my weight, my foot lashed out and connected with the back of his head. The impact jarred my body, even as it knocked him over.

I somewhat heard and felt the Captain nearby, his support a warm glow around me. It was good to know that he was there, just in case, and just because. His opponent had regained his feet and his wind. The two were once again engaged in a tense standoff, alternating with sharp blows, mostly delivered by my husband. In a corner of my mind I was pleasantly surprised that I was feeling calm, not overwhelmed at all. Even with the heightened emotions of three other people bombarding me.

And then the Hegrioans, both of them, did disappear. I wondered who was controlling their Transport, who would allow his cohorts to be hurt, as well as humiliated that way. I couldn't imagine that it would

be good for their reputations, either of them, that they had been beaten so soundly by two puny Humans. It seemed that all was not rosy in the world of these revolutionaries.

The Captain was just standing there, chest heaving, catching his breath. My breath caught as well as I looked at him.

"My gallant defender of my honor."

The smile was audible in his voice. "Indeed it is my honor, Ma'am. Not that you needed it. You really are quite the warrior, as Colonel Zuajko would say." He came and knelt in front of me, taking my hands in his. As I looked into his beautiful grey eyes, my body tingled, electricity streaming up my spine as I pulled him to his feet.

When the flash came, I realized that at least part of the electricity I had felt was from our Transport. The blast of cold and dark was quickly replaced by the bright light of the Transport Pad on Level One. We both put our hands over our eyes to block out the light, it had been quite a while for us in the dark of wherever we had been.

I felt a comforting presence behind me. Jenny. She was putting a soft blanket over my shoulders, even as Doctor Palmer was doing the same for the Captain. As we both blinked like baby owls in the light, we pulled the blankets around us, allowing Jenny and the Doc to help us to our feet. Just as we were stepping off the Pad, Commander Walker arrived.

"Captain, Sir. Doctor. Thank goodness you are all right."

"We are, Commander. We were not harmed." His hand gripped mine, tightly, he was telling me not to speak. "How did you find us? And how long has it been? My timepiece seems to have been damaged."

I looked down and realized that I still had the knife in my hand. I held it out to the Captain, and he took it from me and laid it down on the Transport Pad. Commander Walker watched, then looked at it and nodded.

"It's been almost half a day, Captain, it's almost Twenty Three Hundred. And we didn't exactly find you, we were led here. Um, Sir, if I may, can this wait until you have been to Medical? We are in stable orbit, and we have been assured of our safety for the time being." There was something else, an undertone that frightened me. Commander Walker is the consummate Officer, calm under extreme circumstances, yet there was something there. His usually bright eyes were clouded, his face taut. "And Captain, I will get that knife to Engineering for analysis."

"Indeed, Commander, thank you. I can see that Doctor Palmer is anxious to put both of us under the scanner. All right then, as you were. We will return shortly." He turned to Doc. "Doctor Palmer, lead on. To Level Ten, after you." He bowed and motioned toward the lift, with great flourish. I was the only one who knew that he was covering, he had noticed something odd about Commander Walker's attitude as well.

Jenny kept hold of my hand as we followed Doc into the lift. Her anxiety had not dissipated at all. There was something she wasn't saying. She wanted to, but for some reason was holding back. Was it because the Captain was nearby? She gripped my hand ever tighter as she felt my attention.

The lift opened at Level Ten, and we followed Doc to the Medical Bay. We went into the examination area, and the Captain and I both sat on the bench. Our hands found each other, entwining fingers for support. As we each pulled off the blankets from around our shoulders, I felt the shock and curiosity coming from Jenny, and from Doc Palmer. Jenny reached out her hand to me, then pulled back.

"It's all right, Jen. Go ahead."

Her fingertip brushed my arm, along the outer tricep. She watched closely as the vines reacted to her touch, flowing in a wave pattern behind her finger. She smiled as she pulled the finger away, her mind calming.

"You're really all right then?"

"Yes, my friend, really. Now, Doc, scan away. We're ready."

The scans didn't take much time at all. I could tell there wasn't anything to see, just by watching Doctor Palmer's face. She didn't find anything that hadn't been there before. But she took blood samples anyway, and after marking them, put them into her analyzer.

"I'll send the results down to the Agro-Lab for you and your team to go over as well, Liz. But I don't see anything unusual here. At least not unusual for you." Her bright smile was reassuring. "And you, Captain Bianchi, you are in perfect health as well." She hesitated, "For someone who has been recently shot with a stun pistol."

His smile shone through in his voice. "You will keep this confidential, Doctor? No need to worry the Crew if I am fully recovered. Yes?"

"Yes, indeed, Captain."

"And now, Doctor Palmer, we will need use of your replication unit. I do not wish to take the time to go back to our quarters for clothing."

"Of course, Captain. We'll leave you to it. Come, Jenny."

Jenny's reluctance was almost physically painful for me. I wanted so badly to go up and grab her, and beg her to tell me what was wrong. She shook her head at me, her lips tight, her fists clenched at her sides. Then she turned and followed Doctor Palmer out of the Bay.

The replication unit was in the recovery area. It wasn't used very much, except in emergencies when we needed a lot of a certain medication. But the Captain was of course authorized to use anything on the Ship at his discretion. So he got himself a uniform and boots, and trousers and shirt for me. I passed on the shoes, it had been my experience that replicated shoes were just wrong enough to be extremely uncomfortable. If it turned out that I needed shoes for some reason, I would send someone to my closet. But I didn't feel that it was urgent. After all, we had just been in several alien locations and my lack of shoes had not been a deciding factor in what happened. Nor, for that matter, had my lack of clothing. But that wasn't an option here on the Draco. I pulled the lever to shut the blind, and reached for the pile of clothes.

As I pulled the tee shirt over my head, I felt my husband's eyes on me. His appreciation for my physical form is almost as rewarding as his respect for my mental capabilities. Even at inappropriate times, such as now. I couldn't blame him for watching me, I always watch him when he is near me as well. His physical form is quite spectacular, and given an opportunity I will, at the very least, watch him dress, or work out, or just anything.

My thoughts had wandered, and I was taken by surprise when his arms went around me from behind. I was only half dressed still, and his warm hands felt so wonderful on my skin. Stroking my belly, slipping down to my hips, moving to the inner thigh. One hand moving upward under the tee shirt to caress my breast, as his lips pressed into my neck. My hands moved to his arms, amazingly strong, he is so powerful, yet so gentle. I briefly wondered why he wasn't dressed yet either. Then I didn't care. I just turned my body around, and thrust both hands into his shorts, feeling his heat increasing. Breathing hard and fast, hearts pounding, he pulled me even closer, pressing my body to his, skin to skin. Our lips met in a blaze, tongues searching each other. I heard a low moan and realized it came from me. As we both let go of any hesitation, focusing only on each other, there came an insistent knock at the door. Our eyes met again, and we both shook our heads.

"Just a moment. Almost done here, Doc." I pulled on my trousers, straightened my shirt. "Captain?"

"Yes, my dear, all set." He sat on the table, buttoning his shirt. "Come in, Doctor."

She looked at both of us, questioningly, then, "Admiral Wilson would like to speak to you, Sir. His office is holding a call. What should I tell Commander Walker?"

"I will be there in just a few minutes, Doctor. Tell the Commander I will let him know when we reach the ready-room."

"Yes, Sir." She eyed me again, then turned and walked quickly out the door.

"Don't say anything, please, Elizabeth. I do not have any more answers than you do. We shall go and see what the Admiral has to say about our lack of success on our mission."

"Lack of success? How can you say that? We found the original theft! We know that there is big trouble brewing on Hegrioa, more than there ever has been in their history. Though what it has to do with unrest on other planets I have no idea..."

"Correct, my dear. Our mission was to find out how the events here influenced the occurrences on those other planets. I do not see how the genetics of the Hegrioids, however fascinating it might be, fits into our current agenda."

"Captain, we are the current agenda. Do you honestly think that these young Hegrioids are able to work out new technology on their own? I don't believe they would know where to begin, it's not part of their culture. However it began, it's grown into a much more complicated issue than even they were anticipating. Not only this," I held up my left arm, the vines weaving their slow dance, "but their entire society is riding on what we do here."

I refused to believe that any of the residents of Hegrioa would be willing to see their society destroyed for the sake of a little technological development. Somehow, the original theft of The Tree, meant though it was to encourage progress, had led to more thefts. And perhaps some of what my friend the Administrator had said were thefts were actually illicit deals with these revolutionaries.

The Captain looked at me steadily, absorbing. "You may be correct, my dear. It may very well be true that the current government has gotten us involved in their interior politics under somewhat false pretenses. It also may be true, now that you have voiced it, that the mercenaries and rebels we dealt with last year were not the only villains in that story."

"It occurs to me, Captain, that Hegrioa has been so well protected over the centuries, why would it be so suddenly and so completely vulnerable? There had to have been some, I hate to use the word traitors, but

someone on the planet assisting in the removal of the technology.”

“All right. Let’s go speak to the Admiral. Let him speak first, please, I want to know what he knows before we say anything. I am still concerned by Commander Walker’s strange attitude when we arrived.” His face was solemn, his eyes sad.

I followed him out, holding his hand as we entered the lift. Thinking about Jenny, and wondering what was wrong with her.

“Bridge.”



When the lift opened on Level One, we went immediately to the ready-room. The Captain's office was as he had left it, terminal, monitor, tablet. The engraved glass case containing his Honor Medals. The comfy sofa and the matching low table. It looked like nothing at all had happened, and yet something was different. Out of place.

"Captain. What's this?" I picked up a message tablet from the table. The light was flashing, indicating a message was waiting. He took the tablet from my hand and pressed the access pad.

"This will be our only communication," an unfamiliar, gravely voice said. "You are aware that we are capable of infiltrating your vessel. Note that we have done so more times than you know. Your Captain and Crewmembers are safe. For now. Follow these coordinates to our meeting place. You will agree not to investigate our affairs, and they will be returned to you. Then you will leave orbit, and not return. That is all."

We looked at each other. Who was that? The Captain tapped his communicator.

"Commander Walker, come to my ready-room. Now, please."

"On my way, Sir."

The door slid open, Commander Walker came in, slowly. He was so fatigued, so drawn.

"Captain. I need to debrief you... oh. I see you have found our little love letter."

"Indeed. What did that mean, Crewmembers? What else has happened, and why was I not informed immediately?"

The Commander took a deep, somewhat shaky breath. It had all happened very fast. He and Commander Quinn had landed the Shuttle on the asteroid, just above where the Captain and I were, in the cavern. When the Hegrioans arrived, they powered up... something. It was not a weapon. They were working on the analysis, their best answer so far was that it was some sort of field generator. It occurred to me that it might have been the same sort of machinery that created the force field in the doorway to the cavern. I would have to bring that up to the Captain, but not now. There was a flash of light, like a Transport beam, inside the Shuttle, and then Commander Quinn was gone. Just gone, with no warning.

Commander Walker had tried to raise us on the communicator, and of course we didn't answer, we weren't there anymore either. The message tablet had been Transported into the Shuttle.

"We don't know how they got one of our message units." He ran his hands through his hair, nervously. I was taken aback, Commander Walker does not normally allow himself to become agitated.

The Commander had piloted the Shuttle back to the Draco immediately, and they followed the coordinates. He had noted right away that they matched almost exactly the coordinates of the island. Luckily the sensors had been recently enhanced, and the Ensign on duty at one of the Navigation stations was able to locate the exact building in the compound where we were being held.

"But, Sir, we have been unable to locate Lieutenant Commander Quinn. Either his communicator is broken, or he is not on the planet."

The Captain said, slowly, "There is one other possibility, Commander."

I caught my breath. Jenny. My goodness, no wonder she was in such a panic.

"Captain, do you need me here? I need to get to Jenny."

"Have her come here, Elizabeth. The situation has changed for the worse, you are not to be out of my sight."

"Yes, Sir... Jen? Can you hear me?"

"Liz, where are you?"

"Come up to the ready-room, Jen. We know. Please."

"On my way." Her voice broke at the end, her fear cutting me to my heart.

Commander Walker looked to the Captain. "Sir? What next?"

"Go back and keep an eye on the sky, Commander. Keep me posted. I want to know the second you find Commander Quinn. Dismissed."

"Aye, Sir. Oh, Sir? The Admiral is still waiting to speak to you." He turned and left.

I paced the room, waiting for Jenny. My thoughts were racing. We had found one answer, and opened a whole box of new questions. Our latest adversaries were way ahead of us technologically, they had resources we couldn't even imagine. But what were they after? I still believed that they couldn't want to undermine their entire society. Or could they? Why? Did they not know how closely they were tied to the very things they were trying to destroy?

The door chimed, I ran over and swiped the sensor.

Jenny was standing there, just standing still. Her fear, tension, anxiety washed over me, and I took a step forward. She came to life and threw herself into my arms. Clinging tightly, cheek to cheek. I pulled back and brushed her hair off of her face, looking into her beautiful blue eyes. My own eyes smarted with tears as I saw hers. I squeezed her to me, trying to soothe her mind. But I didn't have the conviction. I didn't know what had happened to Commander Quinn any more than she did. I kissed her wet cheek, and led her over to the sofa. We sat together, holding hands as the Captain sat at his desk looking at the terminal.

He left us alone, but he was feeling anxious. But more than that he was angry. My attempt to soothe him didn't make much difference. He tapped a few keys.

"Captain Bianchi on the Draco, for Admiral Wilson."

"Yes, Captain Bianchi, the Admiral is waiting. One moment."

A few moments passed, then the Admiral's voice, "Captain. You seem to have stirred up a hornet's nest out there. My investigators are looking into the situation but I want your take. What is going on out there?"

"Admiral, I have not had the time to make my report yet. And one of my people is still missing. All we know right now is that someone has technology we are not equipped to defend against."

"How is Doctor Thorne? I got a brief report that she was with you during your ordeal."

"Yes, Admiral. She is fine. We are both fine."

"My people have informed me that you have discovered a connection between the Hegrioans and the thefts. There was a suggestion that there may have been a collaboration between the Hegrioans and the mercenaries. Is there anything you'd like to elaborate on? No-one has been able to say what you found on that asteroid. Have you found something tying the Hegrioans and their missing tech to the unrest?"

"Sir, Doctor Thorne will file a complete report on her findings. For now, we can agree that there is a connection. We cannot say how it all fits together."

There was a pause, then, "All right then, Captain. File your reports as soon as you can. Go find your Navigator. Good luck. End call."

The Captain pushed his chair away from the desk and sat back, hands on the back of his head.

"Well. The Admiral has some very good sources of information. How do you suppose his investigators learned what we found? It has only been one day. And we did not tell anyone what we heard, or what we discussed."

"Paolo, we know that the Hegrioans have been keeping eyes on me for years." I felt Jenny's sudden burst of surprise, I shook my head at her. Later. "Is it so unlikely that someone in the Federation knew about it and is taking advantage? Perhaps there is an informant here on Hegrioia. Perhaps the Admiral knew about this all along."

"It is possible, Elizabeth. I am not sure how likely, though. The Hegrioans are expert at keeping secrets. However, we cannot discount the possibility that there was, or is, someone telling tales out of school. We cannot trust anyone... Ensign Alben."

"Yes, Sir!"

"At ease, Ensign. Come to my ready-room, I have a task for you."

"Yes, Sir!"

When Ensign Alben arrived, he was flushed, anxious. Wondering what he had done wrong.

"Reporting as ordered, Sir."

"Ensign. I have an assignment for you. You are not to share this with anyone who is not in this room right now. Understood? Good. Now, run a diagnostic on our internal sensors. See if you can turn up anything unusual. Then run a scan for any unauthorized recording devices. Any at all. Anywhere on the Ship. Have you got all that?"

"Aye, Sir!"

"Dismissed, then. Back to your station. Do not let anyone know what you are doing, report directly to me when you are finished, or the exact moment you find something."

"Aye, Sir! Thank you, Sir!"

After Ensign Alben had gone, I smiled. "He is terrified of you, Captain. But he's a good Officer, I don't feel any deception from him at all. He'll do a good job for you."

Jenny had been sitting next to me, gripping my hand. Now she was shaking, trembling. My arm went around her shoulders, pulling her close.

"Jen, we'll find him. We will... Captain, I feel something. I don't know what, something faint, distant."

It was very faint, but directed at me. I was sure of it. Where could it be coming from? Who? It was questioning, searching. Not coming from within the Ship. I pulled my arm down and clasped my hands

in my lap, closing my eyes, trying to focus on that faint sensation. Jenny took one of my hands, I felt my Captain take the other as he sat down on my left side. I accepted their help, pulling strength from both of them. Focusing on that distant voice. Voice? Whose voice? Where?

On the planet. Yes, focus on the planet. The island. Of course, the island. I took my left hand from my Captain's right, and reached for his left. Our hands grew warm, the vines waving madly up and down the arms. My arm tingled, grew hotter as our hands clasped tightly. I heard myself cry out as the feeling suddenly came rushing in. Amplified not only by my husband and my best friend, but by the vines. The vines inside us, and the vines in the caverns.

"He's down there! The cavern!"

"Liz? What?"

"Jen. He's down there. In the cavern. The one under the blasted building. There's a shield, something, I can feel it. That's why the sensors don't see him. But I can feel him, we have to get down there." I responded as best as I could, focusing on my knowledge of our Commander Quinn, trying hard to let him know that I had received his call. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused hard. Please feel me, Commander. We're looking for you!

"Elizabeth. Are you certain? It isn't a deception?" The Captain was suspicious, naturally.

"As certain as I can be, Captain. How can we get down there without whoever abducted him knowing?"

"I have an idea. You have a free pass from the Administrator, Elizabeth. We shall call him. First thing in the morning. He may have resources we can use. Our Commander Quinn is not hurt?"

"I don't think so, Captain, but I can't be sure of that."

Jenny's fingers dug into my hand.

"All right, ladies. It is quite late and there is not much we can do until the morning. We should all try to get some rest. Miss Jennifer, you may stay in our quarters if you wish... Commander Walker. Set the night shift and go get some sleep."

"Sir?"

"You heard me, Commander. Do I need to make that an order?"

"No, Sir. I'm on it, thank you, Sir."

"Good night, then." He got up, letting go of my hand. "Shall we?"

I put my arm around Jenny's shoulders and escorted her out the door. All the while keeping one corner of my mind focused on the faint sensation coming from the planet. Anxious, not fearful, not pained, just anxious. And angry. Of course I was angry as well, we were all being manipulated, in some complicated scheme. We didn't even really know who it was doing the manipulation. But I was now feeling that the Administrator was being played as well. He was surely not my friend, he was much less than honest, but right then it seemed that he was trying to keep his society from being destroyed. Another flush of anger came over me as my mind churned. He could have asked for help ages ago. He could have told us the truth, instead of giving us misleading information. If they had been spying on me as long as he said, didn't they know that I would have wanted to help? Even if only to save the vines, and The Tree. Speaking of which, that was another reason to get back down there. To the island, to the caverns. I had something to do down there, something that would get them on the road to recovery.

While I had been running all that around in my head, we had arrived at our quarters.

"Jen, I'll get you some pajamas. Come with me." We went into the bedroom, and I pulled out some comfy pjs for her, and for me. She was so quiet, so pale, her eyes were reddened. After we had changed, I took her hand and led her back out to the living area.

The Captain was seated at the desk, reviewing data on the terminal. He was checking on Ensign Alben's progress, but it didn't look like they had found anything yet. I didn't think they would, the Hegrioans were quite adept at secrecy. Without turning around, he held out his hand.

"Elizabeth, why don't you and Miss Jennifer take the bed? I will be busy for a while." His hand clasped mine and drew me closer. His other hand lifted to my face, lightly stroking my cheek, then my lips. I kissed his fingertip, then bent to kiss his lips, so warm and soft.

"All right, Paolo, but please you need to get some sleep too."

"I will, my dear. Go on."

I pulled the curtain and beckoned to Jenny. "Come on, in you go. I'll help you sleep, Jen."

It was difficult to give her the support she needed. I wanted to so badly, but I didn't know what we would be up against. But I did know that she was and is my very best friend, after my husband of course. And I had to help her as I was able. What I was able to do was encourage her fatigue, easy enough since I was pretty tired myself. I just had to give a little mental push, just slightly, to get her to relax. We lay down in the bed, she curled up against me and laid her head on my shoulder. As I stroked her hair, I sent her as much soothing comfort as I could, along with that slight push of fatigue. Breathing slowly and deeply,

we both fell asleep, her presence a comfort to me as well. There's something about a best girl friend that fills a need even a husband doesn't satisfy.

Sometime during the night, I felt as my husband came into the bedroom to change. I opened my eyes, watching him as he went into the Refresh. He smiled at me, reassuringly. For a moment, I thought of going in after him, but sleepily decided that we all needed rest. I cuddled closer to Jenny and went back to sleep.

I awoke to a touch on my shoulder.

"Paolo? What time is it?"

"Zero Five Thirty. Time to get up and get ready, my dearest." His lips brushed mine as he spoke. I pulled him closer, fingers in his hair.

Jenny rolled over, away from me. I smiled, I knew she was awake and pretending not to be.

The kiss blossomed, lips burning, breath deepening. He sat on the bed, gathering me to him, holding me close, his bare chest hot against me. I could feel his heartbeat, even through my pajamas. His hand slipping under my top, raising the fabric as he stroked my back. My fingers entwined in his hair as I pulled him even closer. He put his hands on my arms and pushed himself away, reluctantly.

He brushed my lips with his fingertip. "We must get ready, Elizabeth, we must not be distracted.

Commander Quinn is relying on us."

Jenny tensed next to me. My hand went out to stroke her back, then her hair. "Jen, we'll get it done. I promise. All right, Captain. Give me a few minutes to refresh and dress, then we'll get going." As I got out of the bed, I asked, "Has Ensign Alben found anything? Anything to indicate we're being spied on?" He followed me into the Refresh.

He had not gotten much sleep after all. A couple of hours earlier, Ensign Alben had contacted him. It seemed there had been several unreported communications. Encrypted. Sent yesterday, as well as each day before, since we arrived in this system. So far they had not been able to decode the messages, but they seemed to have all been sent to the same location. On the planet below us.

I ran the water in the shower, and began to unbutton my pajamas. "My goodness. The compound. Who are these people? Do you think they are also communicating with the Federation investigators? Why?"

The shower water was steaming. "Captain, you should leave, no distractions. I'll be out in a few."

He sighed heavily. "Yes. You are correct." He turned and left the Refresh, closing the door behind him as my pajamas slipped to the floor.

"Captain Bianchi? Why do you think they're leaving us alone? Why haven't they done anything since you escaped?" Jenny was sitting on the sofa, still wearing my pajamas, hands clasped tightly in her lap. I went over and sat with her, putting my hand over hers.

"They do not want to start a war with the Federation, Jennifer. They have to know that we would prevail, even with all their fancy technology. Whatever their goals are, they will not risk war. Because if they do, and we were to land in force on the planet, we would surely find out their secrets. At the least, we would have to interfere with their plans. They let us escape, for their own reasons. But they know that we will do what is necessary to get our Commander back. And I think they may have realized they had bitten off much more than they could chew when they abducted me, and my lovely wife."

"Because you are the Captain?"

"No, my dear." His smile lit his face. "Because we two are tied to their planet, much more than they had known or planned." He turned to me. "I did feel it when you outwitted our captor, Elizabeth. He went from overconfident bully to meek schoolboy in an instant."

I shook my head. "I didn't do anything, Paolo. It was a surprise to me too. All I know is that my head was spinning, then all of a sudden it wasn't. He stared at my arm, then his emotions grew jumbled. When he took out the knife I thought he was getting ready to kill us both. When he freed you it was a complete surprise to me. That was it."

Jenny was shaking her head. "Liz, I don't understand how you do it."

"You do what you have to, Jen."

The terminal chimed, a message came up on the screen. The Hegrioan Administrator had answered the Captain's contact. He had sent us instructions. My heart pounded as I read the message. We were to use a special contact code when we were ready, letting him know. He would Transport us down to his office, using his own device, bypassing security. That worried me, we knew that the Hegrioans, government and revolutionaries alike, had ways of intercepting both messages and Transport frequencies. I could only hope that they couldn't do it to their own, and that whoever was sending them messages from the Draco was not aware of this plan. I refused to stop and think of what it meant that there had been contact from the Ship to the planet. Right now we had to think only of getting our Lieutenant Commander Quinn back, safe and sound.

The Captain had not mentioned anything about the kidnappers' condition. He had no intention of letting the issue of the thievery drop and leaving the system. Not only had he been given specific orders to find the connection between the unrest on the outer planets and the Hegrioan thefts, but he had a personal stake as well. His Ship had been violated, his people hurt. Nor was he about to leave before I was able to resolve the bigger issue of the caverns, The Tree, and the future of the Hegrioans themselves. We had become involved, and we would see it through. Especially after we had been threatened. It might also turn out that the Hegrioans were responsible for letting their technology get into corrupt hands, or claws as the case may be. Whether purposely or not, the best candidates were the revolutionaries, trying to undermine their heritage for their own reasons. There was a connection between these troublemakers and the unrest, as the Admiral had called it. We would find out what it was.

My fingertip brushed my left arm, absently. The tingling followed my finger, I looked down to see the bright flame-colored flowers waving back and forth as in a breeze. It was tempting to sniff them, much as I knew they were only an image. My Captain watched me, as his actions matched my own. I reached down to tie my bootlaces, then got up to get my uniform jacket. He went to his private lockbox, and took out two laser pistols, handing me one and putting the other into his waistband. I put mine into my jacket pocket, feeling Jenny's eyes on me.

"Liz, be careful. Please." She came over and hugged me, tight.

As I returned her embrace, I whispered, "I promise, we'll bring him home, Jen." I kissed her cheek, then pulled away, turning her toward the lounge. "Go ahead in there and relax for a bit. Make sure you keep your communicator on you."

She nodded, then went over to the bedroom and retrieved her communicator, holding it up for me to see before pinning it to her top. I sighed, ok here we go. We had no idea what was awaiting us on the planet, nor how we would be received by the Administrator and his staff, even though he had agreed to help us get down there. There was always a chance that this plan would backfire on us. I put my hand in my pocket, grasping the handgrip of my laser pistol.

"Captain, are we ready?"

The distant sensation of distress was getting stronger. It was still directed at me, focused, not at all hazy,

completely clear. I knew it was Commander Quinn. I had felt his emotions before, we had been working together for a year. But now there was something additional, it wasn't just him. There were others, others directing their emotions at me? Who? Why? My hand tightened on the handgrip as the Captain came closer, holding out his hand.

A loud squeal suddenly pierced the quiet of our room. It was the same high-pitched squeal we had heard in the cavern. So loud, so painful, it knifed through my head. I saw the Captain and Jenny as they also held their hands to their ears, faces contorted, their confusion and pain coming at me, adding to my own pain. I managed to raise my eyes to my husband's as he moved his hand to his weapon. The next thing I knew, the brighter than bright flash was blinding me, and my hand moved of itself, pulling the pistol out of my pocket.

I heard Jenny's voice, crying out, questioning, as the blinding light was taken over by the cold and dark of Transport. My anger was matched by what I felt from my Captain. Fury, it was, actually, how dare they do this? And what did they hope to accomplish? I assumed it was the revolutionaries, it couldn't be the government, we were coming to them anyway. All this took just a second or two to go through my head, in the time it took the Transport to deposit us... where this time? When the squeal and the dark had dissipated, I blinked to clear my vision, looking around to see where I was. The jolt of fear made me whip my head around.

"Jenny?" It was her, indeed. The Captain was not with us.

"Liz, what is going on? Where are we?" She was panicking, it washed over me. She looked so small and frightened, so unprepared, in her pajamas and bare feet, her eyes wide. I had to calm her down somehow, I wasn't going to be able to think.

I looked around, breathing deeply and motioning to Jenny to do the same. In, out, in, out. Come on, Jen, you can do this. Work with me. Deep cleansing breaths. It wasn't easy for me to control my own emotions, either. I had no idea where we were. The room did look familiar, sort of the same way the Administrator's office had, but it felt cold. Cold and humid, like the cavern. That was it, the walls were the same rock as the cavern, the same sparkly stone. My eyes roved the walls, the ceiling, there were no openings except a single wooden door. I knew better than to try to open the door, it wouldn't have made any difference. The floor was that same lovely smooth carved stone as the floor of the caverns. A low wooden table accompanied by three wooden, uncomfortable looking chairs were the only furnishings. Jenny's breaths were slowing, finally, her aura calming as she reached out for my hand. I let her take my left hand, as I had the pistol in my right. She gripped the hand tightly, soaking up my encouragement as my hand grew warmer and began to tingle.

"Whoever you are, come on, show yourself." Maybe I shouldn't have started by antagonizing our hosts, but I allowed my anger to surface. I figured it was better than showing my own agitation. The door cracked open, outward. I pushed Jenny away from me, behind me as I faced the door with my pistol raised. She backed up a few paces, her fear coming to the surface again. As the door swung fully open, I felt a familiar aura. I lowered my hand.

"Commander?" I let my breath out in a rush.

Lieutenant Commander Quinn came into the room, or rather he was thrust into the room by someone behind him. Whoever it was had pushed him hard enough that he lost his balance and fell against me. At least I thought so, until he grabbed the pistol out of my hand, turned and fired at whoever it was in the doorway. He put himself between me and the door, and fired several more times. There was no return fire, but I felt more than one presence beyond the doorway. The door slammed shut and the last two or three shots went into it, burning small holes in the wood. My head swam, the familiar throbbing pain underlying the fog once again beginning to seep in.

"Mark!" Jenny stepped out from behind me and ran over to him, throwing her arms around his neck. My cheeks flushed hot as I felt their relief, their adoration come over me in unconcealed waves. Usually I don't pay attention to such things, it's not my business, but in this case it was impossible to filter. My head was beginning to throb harder, my control was slipping. I felt nothing from my Captain. I took several deep breaths, trying to focus. Still I felt nothing, I was being blocked somehow. It took all of my training not to panic, to overcome the fear and anger at the implications of these people who could obstruct my reception. I mentally shook myself. All right, Elizabeth, you have to focus, calm down, you can handle this.

"Commander, where are we? Who were you shooting at?"

He loosened his grip on Jenny and turned to face me again. "Sorry about that, Doctor Liz. I'm not really sure where we are but I got the feeling that we were underground." I nodded, then motioned him to continue. "As for the who, they seem to be a group of rather tough young Hegrioans. They don't want anything from me, it seems they want you. I overheard some of them talking about you, and something about flowers and a tree? Whatever it is, they don't care that they've attacked the strongest Ship in the

Federation Fleet."

"I guess they wouldn't, Commander. They certainly seem to be able to get what they want, they've gotten through our shields several times, and you've noticed that they Transported me and Jenny here without our consent. Or Captain Bianchi's for that matter."

He raised his brows. It had just occurred to him that it was just us, no Captain. Then he collected himself, Officer that he is, and held out my pistol to me. "Here you go, Ma'am. I don't think it'll do us any good but hold onto it." He led Jenny over to the table, and sat her down in one of the wooden chairs. I put the laser pistol in my pocket and followed. When we were all seated, I asked him to please tell us what had happened to him since he had been brought here, wherever here was.

"And why have they left us three together, alone?"

When Commander Quinn had been Transported, he had found himself in a darkened room. No weapon in hand, he had immediately reached for his communicator and tried to contact the Shuttle, or the Ship. Of course there was no reply. His quick mind had turned over the possibilities, coming to the obvious conclusion. Though how they had gotten him back to the planet via Transport was inconceivable, the Federation had never been able to get a Transport signal to go that far.

The Hegrioan who entered his cell sounded like the same one who had abducted the Captain and me. Tallest of the Hegrioans we had seen, shining polished purple skin. He had introduced himself.

"You may call me Maverick. It is not my name, but it will serve. We have no plans to harm you, however you will not be permitted to leave here until our demands are met by your Captain."

"And what demands would those be? Maverick, that's a name with connotations."

"That is not your concern. Please do not attempt to escape. Your Ship has been notified of your situation, and your Captain will be returned there shortly. We do not wish to restrain you, but we will if necessary." Another young Hegrioan had entered, carrying a tray, which he set down on the floor. He nodded to Maverick, then let himself out. Commander Quinn, resourceful as he is, knew that he was in a bad spot and had few options. He had no way to know how many rebels there were, nor even where he was. So he sensibly decided to wait and see what happened. He had spent the next hours sitting on the hard cold floor of his cell. Until he suddenly sat up, and literally smacked himself in the head.

"How could I be so stupid? I can at least try!"

So he bowed his head, closed his eyes, and directed his thoughts at me. As hard as he could, he focused on me, sending me his anger, his frustration. He had no way to know whether I was receiving anything but he kept trying. Then, just when he was about to give up, he did feel something, heard something in his heart.

"We're looking for you!"

I could only imagine what it must have been like for him. To feel something like that, suddenly, not having experienced it before. I had shared feelings with him previously, when he had helped to rescue me from our traitorous Doctor last year. But this was different, and I was amazed myself that it was even possible. The only person I had been able to communicate with in that fashion had been my husband. I didn't have time to concentrate on what my abilities were becoming, but it was apparent that something was developing.

When he had felt my communication, he had been able to relax somewhat. He'd had the comforting sensation of my caring warmth to keep him company while he waited for rescue. It made me feel good that he had felt it, and it had helped him to deal with the frustration.

"A couple of hours ago they came to my cell to bring me food and water. While the door was open I heard someone talking, that's when I heard them mention you, Doctor. I'm almost sure they wanted me to hear it, they've seemingly not let their guard down before. So. What is it they want you for? Any ideas?"

I stood up and took off my jacket. "I think it has something to do with this, Commander."

His jaw fell open and his hand reached out. "Wow." He looked up at me questioningly.

"It's a long story and I don't have all the details. But this, this is why I was summoned to Hegrioa in the first place." I felt the objection coming. "Yes, Commander. Summoned. No matter if we thought it was our idea, we were manipulated into coming here. They have been spying on me for years, apparently, waiting for their chance." I laid the jacket on the chair closest to me, then held out my arm to him, motioning him to go ahead and touch it. As his finger gently brushed the arm, the vines moved, the flowers moved. He couldn't feel the warm tingle that followed his finger but it sent chills up my spine. He pulled his hand away, and reached out for Jenny's.

"To answer your other question, Doctor, I don't know why they've left us alone, especially for this long. I'm sure we'll find out what their plans for us are, soon enough... I don't suppose you've been able to contact our Captain?"

I shook my head. "No. They are blocking me somehow. They did it before, when the Captain and I were taken from the asteroid." His surprise was unmistakable. "Oh, you didn't know about that, I'm sorry." I

described what had happened to us, feeling guilty that we had been able to get away and he had not. "So, here we are. Wherever here is. It feels familiar here, you said you thought we were underground? Why?" "I saw what looked like recycling devices, and the air here is cool and damp, unlike anywhere else on the planet. Besides, if it's you they're after, the caverns seem to be the likeliest place for them to want to bring you to. Right?"

I sighed. Of course. I did have to wonder, though, had they been here the whole time? What about that compound on the shore? That was where their Transport signal had come from when they had infiltrated the Draco.

"OK. Well then, I wish they would get on with it. We were coming down to the planet anyway, you know." I shut my eyes for a moment, trying again to reach out to my Captain. Still nothing, it was quite disconcerting not to feel him at all. "But of course we were going to see the Administrator."

The door suddenly swung open again. I moved my hand toward where my pocket would be, but my jacket was on the chair. Commander Quinn was up and in front of me in a split second, putting himself between me and Jenny and the door. He held his arm out, motioning me back toward where Jenny was sitting.

"Well, then. My dear Doctor Thorne, how nice to see you again." I recognized that voice, the voice belonging to the Person who had shot my husband. "We have been waiting for you."

My cheeks burned as I stepped out from behind the Commander. "Waiting for me. That's just great. And it's not true. Obviously you could have brought me here at any time, you seem to be able to override our Transport, as well as our shields." Anger was surging through me, my arm tingling hot. "And why, if you need me, why won't any of you just ask me to help? You might be surprised by my answer. I don't know what any of your agendas are, yours or the official government's. Just please tell me what it is you want from me! If it's something I can do, I just might do it willingly." I realized that I was clenching my fists, my nails cutting into the flesh of my palms. Jenny was standing by her chair, extremely agitated, feeling my anger as though it was her own. Even Commander Quinn was taken aback, looking at me in alarm.

Maverick, however, was gazing at me calmly. His shining lavender skin darkened a bit as I was speaking, but he managed to remain unconcerned, at least outwardly. He seemed to have forgotten about, or at least gotten over, his recent physical battle with my Captain husband. Then, all of a sudden his face contorted strangely. I felt surprise, confusion, then something else, something not coming from inside the room. My focus shifted. Then I burst out laughing.

"We're here, my Captain. I feel you now."

"Liz?"

"Jen, it's fine, we're fine. He's here." He was close, very close and getting closer. My heart warmed to his presence, the tingling spread over my body. Jenny came up next to me and out her arms around me. Her fear was dissipating, being replaced with relief. That may have been a bit premature, but I didn't want to say or do anything that would cause her more distress.

Maverick was just standing there, just standing still as though he was waiting for instructions. He was hesitant, unsure of what to do next. The decision was made for him as the door burst open. Two of the young Hegrioans came hurtling into the room, pushed in from the outside. They were followed in by Captain Bianchi, holding his huge laser rifle, and Sergeant Anderson, one of our Military Police, with his own impressive rifle. I also felt that Colonel Zuajko was close by, in the corridor perhaps. Our Officers used their weapons to force the Hegrioans back against the far wall, lined up in a row. Sergeant Anderson held his weapon on them as the Captain stepped over to me, and Commander Quinn and Jenny. He was breathing hard, but he wasn't hurt.

As his arms went around me, he whispered, "Elizabeth. My dearest. What have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Paolo. We're still waiting to find out what it is they brought me here for. Speaking of here, where are we? And how did you get in here?"

"No time for details now, Elizabeth. Suffice to say that we are underneath your island. There is a tunnel that goes under the Bay between the compound on the shore and this island. If my bearings are right we are quite close to the cavern under the damaged building."

I looked into his eyes, his wonderful deep grey eyes. "All right, my Captain."

His hand stroked my left arm, the heat increasing with each motion. As he lowered his head to kiss me, I felt the burst of anger from behind me.

I pulled away, and the Captain lifted his weapon, aiming it at the three Hegrioans lined up against the wall. Maverick was staring at me, I could feel his attention, his need. I took a step toward him, the Captain held me back.

He said, "You, on the end. Come here." He nodded at the Sergeant, then touched his communicator. "Colonel. Status."



Colonel Zuajko's voice, "All clear here, Sir. Targets are immobilized."

I wondered briefly what he meant by that, then I decided it didn't matter.

"Come in here, Colonel."

"On my way, Sir."

The laser fire came as a shock to all of us. We heard shouting, and laser shots hitting the corridor walls. Colonel Zuajko appeared in the doorway, still firing down the corridor.

The Hegrioans all smiled.

Maverick spoke. "You didn't think we would be so completely unprepared, did you, Captain?"

The Colonel stepped quickly into the room and slammed the door shut. There was still shouting coming from the corridor. A shot came through the door as he was standing there, and, as though in slow motion, I saw something go into his shoulder. Time slowed as I watched the blood begin to flow, through his uniform, dark spots appearing on his sleeve. He looked down at it, curiously, calmly, then slid slowly down to the floor.

I came out of my stupor and ran over to him. "Colonel!" I cradled his head in my lap, and held my hand over the wound, trying to staunch the flow of blood. My thoughts were jumbled, I wasn't paying attention to anything around me. But I knew I had to help this man, I focused hard, sending him as much comfort as I had. He was so weak, more so than this shoulder wound should have made him. What was that weapon? Someone touched my arm, and handed me a folded piece of fabric, or towel, I had no idea where it came from. I held it over the wound. Jenny was there at my side, I hadn't noticed her coming over.

As I came back to myself, the anger came back. "What is wrong with you people? Why can't you just ask for help instead of going through all this?"

Jenny took my hand and put her own over the Colonel's chest to hold the towel on the wound. She moved herself so that she could take his head and put in her own lap, pushing me out of the way and motioning me to get up. "I'll take care of him, Liz."

The others were still at the far end of the room, and Commander Quinn was with Sergeant Anderson, keeping eyes on everyone. Maverick was standing close, his back to me for the moment, my Captain holding him at the end of his laser rifle. But he was still smiling, his aura once again confident, calm. I reached out to him, trying to sense what he was after. All I got in return was a feeling of need, of desperate need. My hand and arm burned, the vines were waving furiously, the flowers swaying back and forth. I flexed my fingers as the tingling increased, and I saw my Captain doing the same.

Maverick turned and tilted his head at me, then held out his hand. When I didn't move, he reached out further, then suddenly took a step closer and grabbed my arm, my right arm. The Captain took in a sharp breath, then moved to put his body between me and Maverick, weapon raised, eyes narrowed. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and feeling, was this Maverick really going to pit himself against the Captain again?

Maverick moved quickly, very quickly and suddenly for such a large person, his arm whipping out and knocking the Captain's weapon to the floor. He never even flinched, even though I knew that rifle was quite heavy. The Captain dropped and rolled to his knees, reaching out to grab the rifle. He raised it and got off one shot, then a second, before the rifle was almost knocked out of his hand again by a swift, direct kick of Maverick's foot. I felt the shock of that kick, it hurt me as though it were my own hand. I did see that at least one shot had hit Maverick, though, the deep purple blood began to seep through his shirt. And his surprise and sudden pain hit me like a slap.

The emotional bombardment was overwhelming me, I wasn't prepared to be in such a situation. Anger, turning to fury, coming at me from all sides, as well as fear, confusion, and even the sparkles of confidence and strength were causing me to lose focus. My head spun, my vision swam.

"NO! Stop! Please! Captain, I can go with him. It's ok. He won't hurt me, he can't. Right, Mr. Maverick? If you'll get help for our Colonel, I'll go with you willingly."

He looked down at me, frowning, his skin darkening even more. "You are correct, Doctor Thorne. We will not harm you." I gasped as I felt his sadness. Sadness? "Please come with me. I will send someone to care for your friend."

The Captain broke in. "All right. We shall both go." He came closer and put his arm around me. "Not negotiable. If Doctor Thorne is going anywhere, she is not going alone." His commanding, defiant demeanor would have intimidated anyone. He turned to Commander Quinn, who had been watching and waiting for instruction. The Commander had been unable to intervene when the Captain had looked like he might have been in danger, and he was very upset about that. It was his job and his honor to protect his Captain. But he had been too far away, unarmed, plus he had Jenny to worry about as well. I had to reach out to him and soothe his mind. I knew that the Captain was not upset with him at all, but would never say anything to him either way.

The Captain motioned with his rifle, directing Sergeant Anderson to bring his two captives over.

"All right, then. Out you go." He pushed Maverick toward the door. The Sergeant moved forward, his rifle

barrel raised as he nodded to the Captain. They forced the three Hegrioans out the door, keeping their weapons trained on them.

Sergeant Anderson raised his brows, questioningly, at the Captain. "Sir?"

"Indeed, Sergeant..." He touched his communicator. "All right, Commander Walker. Now."

Just as I opened my mouth to speak, the bright flash of Transport took my breath away. Next thing I knew, we were standing on the Bridge of the Draco, surrounded by our Crew. Jenny was still holding Colonel Zuajko's head in her lap, holding the fabric over his wound. She looked around, stunned, as Doctor Palmer came running onto the Bridge.

I found my voice. "Captain? How...?"

"You have friends in high places, my dear Elizabeth. The Administrator was kind enough to give us the means to override the override, so to speak. We can now get through the force shields as easily as they can get through ours. Not a perfect scenario, but it helps to level the playing field."

My goodness. They must have wanted my help really badly. They didn't give up their technology to just anyone, at least not purposely.

A couple of Medical interns came onto the Bridge, looking quite intimidated by the sight of all of us. They hadn't been onto the Bridge before, and we all looked like we had been through a battle. Doctor Palmer managed to get their attention, and directed them to take the Colonel down to Level Ten.

"He'll be all right, Captain. We can fix him up."

"Thank you, Doctor Palmer. Keep me informed."

She looked him, carefully, then I felt her decide to leave it. She wanted to examine all of us, but she knew the Captain well enough not to push the issue. She nodded at me, letting me know that she was available when I needed her. Then she turned and left the Bridge.

Jenny was trying to get my attention.

"Liz? Are you all right?"

"Yes, Jen, sorry. You'd better go ahead and see to your Lieutenant Commander. He needs you. And get yourself cleaned up. You're a mess."

She burst into giggles. "Yes, Ma'am. You don't look much better yourself, Ma'am."

I looked down at myself. My hands covered in drying blood, splashes of blood on my pants, my boots. I shrugged. "You are correct. I'm on it, Jen, go on, get out of here."

My Captain, who had of course been listening, said, "Yes, Miss Jennifer, take the Commander and go get cleaned up. I cannot have my Officers so unkempt on my Bridge." His smile lit up the room. "And I intend to follow my own orders as well... Commander Walker."

"Aye, Sir."

"As you were, Commander. Keep your eyes on the sky. And on the planet. I will return shortly."

"Aye, Sir."

My Captain took my hand and led me out, and into the lift. As the lift began to move, he put his arms around me, pulling me close and kissing me, hard. Breathing heavily, his arms tightened around me. We both felt that we couldn't get close enough, couldn't kiss deeply enough. When the lift opened on Level Six, he lifted me in his arms, and carried me to our quarters. Once inside, he set me down, but kept hold of me, his lips so hot on mine. But I pulled away, showing him my sticky, bloody hands, and making a motion toward the Refresh.

"I'll just be a minute, my Captain."

In the Refresh, I pulled off my dirty clothes, and ran the water. The hot, steamy shower water felt so good as it washed away the blood, running red into the drain. Once clean, I looked at myself in the mirror. None the worse for wear, it seemed. Even though I hadn't really been able to get my workouts in for a few days, my body was in top shape. Smooth brown skin, bruise-free for a change. Tight belly, firm breasts, slim toned legs that made my Captain so happy. The vines and flowers moving ever so slowly in their weaving dance up and down my arm. So beautiful, I couldn't help watching the movement. Hypnotic, it was. As I watched, my vision began to blur, my head filled with fog.

"Oh no. Not again." As I slipped to the floor, trying to brace myself against the vanity, I called out in my head. "Paolo. Please I need you." Before I lost consciousness, I felt him come in and wrap his warmth, and his arms around me.

The same bright white room. Too bright, I blinked to clear my eyes as they watered. The soft floor, pleasant under my feet. The same two cushioned chairs in the middle of the room, waiting, as was I. But I was relieved to find that he had me clothed, shorts and camisole, instead of being naked as I actually was.

"What do you want from me now, Administrator? Come on, let's get on with it."

The doorway opened, and he came in. Flowing robes with golden stitchery. Polished lavender skin, calm purple eyes gazing at me as he entered and motioned me to sit.

"Doctor Thorne. A pleasure. I understand that you have had quite an eventful day."

I frowned. "I'm sure you know all about it. Why am I here now? What do you need to say to me that couldn't wait? Why the show of force? It wasn't my idea to meet with those youngsters."

He shook his head, his flowing purple hair brushing against his collar. "No, I suppose not. But there are things you need to know, and we do not have a lot of time."

He got up and came close, and took my chin in his huge hand. I flinched and tried to move away. The vision burst into my head as his eyes stared into mine.

The King Tree, surrounded by a river of the vines. The vines creeping upward, just as the Captain and I had witnessed on the asteroid. Then, the burst of pain, ripping through me as it ripped The Tree from the ground. The sound was deafening, I put my hands over my ears even as I knew it would do no good. The Tree, aboard a ship? It must have been a ship larger than any we had, to have the power to transport such a cargo. I got an impression of fear, of regret. Though whose it was, was not obvious. The asteroid, carved out by immense machinery, the artificial sun put in place, the water pumped in.

The scene changed, I was in the middle of what could have been a holographic display. Of microscopic images, magnified hundreds of times. Cells, green algae-like cells, with large nuclei. The same cells that had infiltrated my own blood, and must be the ones swimming through the blood of the Hegrioans. I saw the nuclei, split apart to reveal their interiors. The DNA strands, their helices tripled, interwoven with proteins that I didn't recognize. The cells swam, merging with red blood cells, giving an overall impression of a lovely purple color. I shook my head, so much coming at me at once. Don't get overwhelmed, Elizabeth, you can't afford that now. Wait til later. Deep breath.

My eyes cleared and I looked at the Administrator. "What is all this about?"

"Your destiny, my dear Doctor. You are meant to know this, meant to fix this."

"I plan to. But I would like some answers first. Who brought The Tree to the asteroid? And, if you all knew about this, for goodness' sake, why did you not tell us the first time?"

He frowned at me, and shook his head. "I do not know who did the original damage, Doctor. All I know is that it was done, without anyone knowing until it was too late. As to the other, we had to wait until you were ready. It is all about you, you know. You are the first to be compatible with our technology. You and your Captain Bianchi, that is. And we must repair the damage, before it is irreparable. Our people are already feeling the effects, not knowing what is wrong with them."

Aha. He had mentioned the thing that had been on my mind for almost a year now.

"So the tribal leader who married us was in your employ, then? He was waiting for us that night?"

He sighed, and nodded. The leader had indeed been watching for us. He had been instructed to see what we would do, how we would react, and indeed so far as to see if the rings would even work on us. The way it was explained, the organic makeup of the rings can sense the wearer, and won't embed itself if the environment isn't right. Apparently we were the right environment, my Captain and I. The rings were made of a very rare metal mined in the deepest caverns, even deeper than the ones we had been in, mixed with some of the DNA from the plant cells. I flexed my fingers as I listened, my hand and arm tingling hot. They remembered the pain of that event, as the ring had spiked through the bone of my ring finger. The drink we had been given was the catalyst, to allow the transformation to take place.

But it was nice to get an explanation after all this time.

"And the telepathic bond?"

"A bonus side effect. I am certain you have found it to be useful."

"Yes, indeed. Though I am not thrilled with the fact that you and your people are able to use it against us." I waved my arm around the room. "Like now, for instance."

"There is always a price to pay for such a gift, my dear Doctor. The emotional bond, as well as the physical one I am sure you have noticed, come with certain, shall we say, responsibilities."

His eyes grew distant for a moment, then he looked at me, seriously. "I must go. You know what you have to do. Do not let us down."

My Captain's warmth washed over me, suddenly as my head began to clear. The transition was gentle, and I found myself lying on the sofa in our quarters, my husband cradling me in his lap. He had apparently begun to undress when I had called to him, I felt his bare chest against mine as he held me. His hands tightened on my body as I opened my eyes, he bent down to kiss me. Ever so gently at first, then stronger, hotter as his relief flooded through me. I brushed his cheek with my fingertips as the kiss deepened, his hands caressing my back, my legs.

He crushed me to him, stroking my hair, nuzzling my neck.

"My dearest Elizabeth, you were so far away. I could not feel you." Anger was beginning to surface. "I cannot abide this. No-one should be able to take you from my side, ever." His lips trembled as he spoke, the fear he had felt replacing the anger. His finger brushed my lips, then tilted my face up toward his. "No-one has, Paolo, and no-one will. I'll tell you all about it, but not now. I have other plans for you right now."

His smile melted my heart, his eyes looking into my soul as he lowered his head to kiss me again. My hand in his hair, his wonderful soft hair. Moving down to stroke his muscular chest as he breathed so deeply. He laid me down on the sofa as he moved to lay next to me. His hands moving over my body, so gentle, so strong. Legs entwined as we explored each other, my fingertips stroking his smooth skin, muscles rippling under my touch. My breath quickened as his hand moved to my breast, the nipple hardening to his caress. Our thoughts and feelings of love merged as he pulled me under him, gently running his hands over my hips, down to my thighs. My fingers dug into his sides, pulling him closer, as close as possible, hot skin to hot skin. Nothing else in the Universe except us, just us in those moments. The hot tingling spread over my body as we moved together.

We had almost fallen asleep, laying comfortably together on the sofa, breaths slowing, heartbeats slowing, when we were startled awake by the insistent chime of the terminal.

"Yes, what is it?" He spoke brusquely, he had been sleepy and cozy and not ready to be disturbed. But the Captain is always on duty.

"Captain, we are getting some strange readings from the caverns, Sir. Something is happening down under the island."

"All right, Commander. We will be there in a few minutes. Let me know right away if anything emergent develops."

"Yes, Sir."

After a very quick shower, we dressed and left our quarters. In the lift, we couldn't help embracing, and we were still kissing when the lift arrived and opened at Level One. The Ensign who was waiting at the lift door gasped, then stammered something like Excuse me, Sir, and quickly got out of the way. We stepped out, the Captain nodding to the Ensign, and headed across the corridor to the Bridge.

"Captain on the Bridge." All the Officers looked up, and sat straighter at their stations as Commander Walker came over to us.

"Sir. We've found something interesting. Here." He touched the nearest terminal, directing it to show the display on the main viewscreen.

The screen replaced the view of space with a map. A map of the island, overlaid with a grid. The grid showed the buildings, the tunnels. And more than that, it showed several rooms, not the caverns, but on the same level. That must have been where they had held Lieutenant Commander Quinn. I hadn't known where we were, I never asked. There was movement, but not in the rooms. The corridors, the

movement was in the corridors. I smiled to myself. The vines, of course.

"Doctor?"

"Commander, it's the vines." I held up my arm, the leaves and the flame-colored flowers swaying slowly. "They have a need, and they know they are close to fulfilling it. Those youngsters are getting in the way. They have their own plans, which may or may not include providing assistance to their benefactors." I pointed at the screen. "Those plants are the source of all life on Hegrioa. Their source of nourishment has been taken away and they need help."

"And you think that they know that we are going to help them and those folks aren't? How can that be?"

I shrugged. "Trust me, Commander. It's what I do, after all."

He looked to the Captain for confirmation. "Sir?"

"Take her at her word, Commander. All right, then, Elizabeth. What next? I suppose we need to go back down there?"

I nodded. "And soon."

"Yes. But we will be prepared. Lieutenant Commander Quinn."

"Here, Sir." The Commander stood at his Navigation Station.

"You will accompany us. Gather a few of our MPs and have them prepare weapons for all of us. We will leave first thing in the morning, we all need some rest." The Captain looked at the viewscreen. "It does not seem as though a few hours will make the difference. Continue monitoring, and update me as needed."

"Aye, Sir!" "Yes, Sir!"

My husband held out his hand to me, and we walked off the Bridge, and over to the lift. As it opened and we stepped in, I said, "Level Twelve. Agro-Lab."

He looked at me, surprised, then nodded. "Of course, you will want your gear. All right, we shall gather your supplies and then try to get some sleep." His bright smile lit his face. "Sleep, my lady. It has been an eventful few days and we need rest."

The Lab was deserted, naturally, it was after dinnertime. My Ensigns had been taking good care of it, it was spotless, everything in its place, all the terminals shut down. I breathed a sigh of relief, I had a great team. My supplies and my bag were waiting for me on the worktable. I double-checked the gear, making sure the bag was fully stocked, adding a fresh handlight to the outside pocket. It was so hard to leave without making my usual tour of the plantings, it seemed forever since I had been out there, touching my plants, breathing in their fragrances. I could see my trees in the distance, at the far end of the Lab, near the recycler intakes. My beloved, very special Oxygen-making trees. I briefly debated going into my office to check my terminal for any new results or developments, but decided against it. We already knew that we weren't contagious, and my team were continuing to analyze the plant cells. The Captain and I would be an unending source of material for research. Just as I completed the thought, he held out his hand to me.

"Finished? I will get your bag. Come with me, Ma'am."

We locked up the Lab and headed for the lift. "Level Ten, Medical."

"Elizabeth?"

"I need to see Colonel Zuajko, please, Captain."

Arriving on Level Ten, the lift opened and I stepped out. The Captain stayed put, saying, "You will let me know what is happening. I need to make a report for the Admiral. I might as well get it started while you attend to our Colonel."

He kissed me and pushed me gently toward the Medical Bay.

Doctor Palmer came out to the examination area. She looked at me, surprised for a moment, then beckoned me into the recovery area. I looked at her carefully, her aura had changed. She was giving off a warm glow of great contentment, completeness.

"He's doing much better, Liz. I'm not sure what he was shot with, it's not like our laser weapons. But the wound is healing and he's conscious. Come on in."

The Colonel was laying in the recovery bed, so still, so pale. But I felt his strength, underlying all. He opened his eyes as I came into the room, and his face broke into a smile. The first real smile I had ever seen on him. He should smile more often, it does wonders for his already handsome face.

"Hello, Doctor Thorne. I have been wanting to thank you." He held up his hand to forestall my protest. "Yes, thank you. You have a most wondrous gift. What you shared with me helped give me strength when I needed it. For what it's worth, I will never question your abilities again." He held his hand out.

I went over and took hold of the offered hand in both of mine. "My pleasure, Colonel. You look like you are healing nicely. Is there anything else I can do for you? Anything you need?"

"Not for me, Doctor. Go and take care of business. I know you have a mission to complete."

I sent him a waft of comfort, I knew he hated being incapacitated when there was work to be done. That got me another smile, and I squeezed his hand before laying it gently back down on the bed. Doctor Palmer beckoned to me from the doorway, and I nodded to the Colonel before going back over to her. "What is it?"

"Liz, do you have a moment? I want to show you something."

She brought me over to her terminal and pointed to the display. I gasped. On one side was the Colonel's blood scan. The other half showed what looked like mine. But both scans displayed evidence of the dark green mobile cells. That shouldn't be possible. We had determined that they didn't move from host to host. I looked closer. The Colonel's scan showed that his white blood cells were attacking the green.

"What is going on here?" I glanced around, then saw the scope. "May I?"

She nodded, and I went over to look through the eyepiece. What I saw was unbelievable. The green cells were attacking the red. But they weren't succeeding in doing any damage. They succumbed to the white blood cells almost instantly. I reached for another slide, and the vial of blood. When I looked at the new slide, it showed me the same thing. All right then. One more blank slide, this time I asked for the micropincers so I could get a single cell. The magnetics of the pincers allow us to select the smallest unit of whatever the sample is. They are a bit temperamental, though, so I don't use them often. But they had been of immense help last year when we were trying to find the cause of the Morgosian catastrophe.

"All right, Doctor Marla. While I'm doing this, why don't you tell me what's happened between you and our Commander Walker. I've never known you to feel so joyful."

She started, then relaxed. "Liz, I never have been."

Apparently, over the past few days, the Commander had found the time to sweep Doctor Palmer off her feet. They had been together for a while, but the events of late were enough to make anyone re-evaluate their priorities. Since they both work long shifts, most of the time they can only meet during the Ship's night. Which is good for a couple who want to keep their relationship quiet. They'd met in the Level Eight Lounge for late dinners, sitting together watching the stars through the huge view windows. He had even once brought a picnic breakfast to her quarters. I was pleasantly surprised to hear all of this. I hadn't realized that he could be so romantic. It took the right woman, I suppose. I hoped that soon they would be able to take real time to be together. Our leave had been canceled, this time, but hopefully soon there would be another. She had told him of her conversation with me. Although not thrilled, he accepted it.

I would make a point of making sure that on our next R & R, Commander Walker was among the first let off duty. This time, unfortunately, he had drawn Bridge duty that first day.

I finished isolating the cells for the next slide, and this one showed me what I wanted to see. The very same type of cell that I had been shown in the vision. The nucleus was plainly visible, and I wanted to crawl inside it and examine it. However, the task at hand was to determine what had happened to the Colonel. I took another cell sample, this time of the red blood, and introduced it to the slide I was viewing. The alien cell instantly moved to attack the red. My mouth fell open as it, what, chewed? chewed its way into the red cell membrane, causing it to explode. I flipped the switch that would send the data to the terminal. Once more, new slide, this time adding a white cell along with the red. The alien cell had no chance, it was overtaken immediately and absorbed. I let my breath out.

"Liz? You did see what I saw, right?"

"Indeed. I guess we know what was in that blast, then. Apparently, everything on Hegrioa, from the grass to the weapons, is made up of the same basic cells. Much like on Earth, I suppose. But on Earth, those cells don't try to take over everything they come in contact with."

"Yes, thank goodness we have strong immune systems. I'll get this data to your Lab to collate with the other data we collected. Ensign Miller has been working overtime trying to analyze the cells. I believe he has begun running the DNA scans to get a concrete genetic sequencing."

"Thank you. That could turn out to be important. Also, please send it to the private terminal in our quarters, the Captain will want to see this."

I hugged her, and thanked her, then took one more quick glance into the recovery area before heading out to the lift. Colonel Zuajko was resting comfortably, and I encouraged his sleep, he needed as much rest as he could get.

"Level Six. Captain's Quarters."

As I entered our quarters I noted that my husband was sitting on the sofa, dressed only in his sleep shorts, tapping the keys on a tablet. I began to strip off my clothes, leaving a trail behind me as I went into the bedroom area. When I came out of the Refresh, he was just walking into the bedroom. As I moved toward the bed, he took my hand in his, pulling me to him. Kissing me, hard, his hands running down my back. I put my hands on his chest, taking a deep, shaky breath as I felt his muscles moving

under his skin.

"I thought you said we should be sleeping."

His warmth blazed into heat as his lips pressed into my neck. "I have changed my mind." His fingertips stroked down my spine, chills following. "Is that a problem, Doctor?"

I reached for his backside, caressing the smooth skin as his muscles tensed. "No, Sir! Whatever you say, Sir!"

He gathered me into his arms, our lips met, tongues searching each other. He lifted me up and tossed me lightly onto the bed.

"Oho, so that's how you want to play." I grabbed for his hand and pulled him onto the bed. Of course, I could only do that since he was willing, he is much bigger and stronger than I.

I rolled him over onto his back, pushing myself up to straddle his legs. Taking his hands and placing them on my thighs. Resting my hands on his chest, feeling his breaths. His hands moved, caressing my belly before his fingers reached for my breasts. I leaned into his hands, lowering my body to bring my lips to his. Brushing his hair back off of his forehead, fingertips lightly stroking his cheek, his neck. My breath caught as I looked into his sparkling grey eyes, hands slipping under his shoulders to hold him closer. He lifted me up, flipping me over, rolling on top of me, his body a welcome weight as he held me tight. Kissing me, deeply, thoroughly as my legs wrapped around his. Our skin so hot, the tingling spreading as we loved each other, moving together as one.

We slept holding each other, his arm over me, my head on his shoulder. Feeling so safe and comforted. Not concerned at all about what the next days would bring.

But when I awoke, I was alone in the bed. Sighing deeply, knowing we had a mission to accomplish, wishing we had more down time, I threw back the covers, reaching out for my Captain. I smiled as he responded, his loving warmth washing over me. Tinged with the intensity that told me he was already working. All right, then, here we go again.

Once dressed, I went back to the living area, carrying my secondary pair of boots. The others were ruined, they had gone into the recycler. The Captain was at the desk, examining the display of the island map. I looked around, smiling as I noticed that our clothes had mysteriously vanished from where we had tossed them. I sat on the floor next to his chair to pull the boots on, then stood by him, hands on his shoulders as I peered at the screen.

"Good morning, my dear. We will be ready to leave shortly. Mr. Quinn is preparing my Shuttle right now."

"Your Shuttle? Oh, ok. I guess they won't stop us from landing." I was thinking of my conversation with the Administrator.

"While we wait, would you like to share your insights? What happened while your mind was so far away?"

Describing what I had seen was more difficult than I had thought it would be. The visions of The Tree, and the obscure feelings of regret. The way the single cells had shown me their makeup and how they merged with our red blood cells to form... what? I didn't know. The fact that we had been manipulated from day one, brought here to Hegrioa for their purposes, not ours, and the wedding ceremony had been at the very heart of their grand plan for me, for us.

My husband pulled me into his lap, enfolding me in his arms.

"You cannot think, after all we have been through, that we are together for them? You know as well as I do that we would be together regardless. Inevitable. I am as sure of that as I know my own name." His eyes gazed into mine, his love for me as obvious as mine for him. His absolute certainty that we were and always would be partners, in every sense of the word.

"My Captain, I have been in love with you since the very first moment we met. I have no doubt that we are meant for each other. None whatsoever. I just hate that we have been exploited to some unknown end. As pleasurable as the exploitation is..." I pulled him closer, fingers in his hair, kissing him gently, sharing my affirming warmth.

The chime of the terminal was an unwelcome interruption.

"Captain? We are ready, Sir."

Still holding me tight, he answered, "On our way, Mr. Quinn." One more deep kiss, then, "Off we go, my dear. Ready?"

I nodded, wishing I felt as confident in my abilities as he did. The wash of pride and support almost knocked me off my feet as I walked over to the door, picking up my Lab bag on the way.

The Shuttle Bay was buzzing with activity. The Maintenance Crew were making final preparations to the Captain's Shuttle. Lieutenant Commander Quinn, coming out of the Shuttle, tablet in hand, kept his eyes on the Crew as they cleared away their tools. The two MPs were waiting by the airlock door, holding their large laser weapons. Standing tall, at attention, they are quite impressive, and intimidating if you don't know them. They always make me feel as though they will do absolutely anything to protect their Crew. But I didn't plan on giving anyone an opportunity to test that theory. The various implements were taken away, as the Commander made a last scan of the engines. He was confident, everything was as it should be.

"Captain, Sir. Five minutes, Sir."

The Captain nodded. "Very good, Commander."

I knew that he was busy, but I couldn't resist visiting Commander Quinn as he ran his final pre-flight. His mind was occupied, but under all was the current of warm affection for Jenny.

"Commander?"

"Come on in, Doctor. Would you like to help?"

Shaking my head, I sat in the co-pilot chair. "I don't think the Captain would appreciate that, Mr. Quinn."

He tilted his head at me. "You want to know what my intentions are, don't you."

Putting my hand on his arm, letting him see my great admiration for him, I said, "You are a large part of why I am alive right now, Commander. I know you saved me more than once, and I don't ever forget that. However, this is my friend's heart we're talking about. Don't break it. Please."

His mind instantly rejected the notion that I felt such gratitude to him. However, he did instantly light up when we spoke of Jenny.

"That's what I wanted to know, Commander." I felt his question. "You can't hide your feelings from me, Mark Quinn. Remember that." My stern look turned into a big smile, answered by his.

He was done with the preparations, so I stood and made to move back to the door. He grabbed my hand.

"I won't let you down, Liz."

The Maintenance Crew departed, satisfied that they had done a good job. That was reassuring to me, they were the best in the Fleet, of course, but one couldn't be too careful or overconfident.

"... Commander Walker. We will be taking off in five minutes. Anything I need to know?"

"No, Sir. Nothing new. I have sent the latest scans to your tablet. Safe trip, Sir."

The trip down to the planet was uneventful. I was a bit nervous, we were heading into what we knew was a very treacherous situation. But nothing interfered, the planetary defenses weren't turned against us. A relief, even though deep inside I knew that they wouldn't dare stop us.

"We've entered the atmosphere, Sir. Just a few minutes til we can see the island." Commander Quinn smiled. "It's becoming second nature, Sir, I don't think I even need the scan map anymore."

I watched the display. First we flew low over the ocean, then the island came into view. So beautiful, so deceptive. I held my breath as Commander Quinn brought the Shuttle in for a perfect landing on the strip of beach near the ruined building. The same place he had landed previously when he and the Captain had come for me. I mentally shook myself. All right, here we go. Into what? That was the question.

The question was answered almost immediately.

As the Shuttle airlock door swung open, I felt them. Maverick and his friends, close, very close. My eyes turned to the Captain. He nodded and motioned to Commander Quinn to arm himself. I pulled my laser pistol out of my pocket, gripping it tightly in both hands as I followed the men out onto the sand. My pack was heavy on my shoulders as we stepped slowly out. The Captain held his hand up, stopping me in my tracks, as the MPs carefully stepped around the Shuttle. Both Officers had their laser rifles raised, sighting as they followed.

There was a shout, then a burst of laser fire. Then nothing... the Captain came back and held out his hand to me. He didn't say a word, just took my hand and led me over to the path that led to the blasted out building. The airlock door clanged shut behind us.

Commander Quinn was looking at the tablet screen.

"Captain, we need to go around to the other side. That's where this tunnel starts, it connects to those rooms we saw."



"Lead on."

We followed the map, around the building, to the far side, opposite where I had entered with the Administrator. There must be another way down to the caverns from here. The youngsters had their meeting place down there somewhere, there had to be a lift of some sort. Gradually, as we walked, the familiar foggy pain made itself known in my head, my mind. As we got closer to the building, the pain grew stronger. I felt the opening before I saw it. Before the Commander said a word.

"There, Captain! We can get in there."

"Elizabeth?"

"Trust me, Sir. Commander Quinn, what do you see on your scan?"

A slight hesitation, then, "You are right, Doctor Liz. Sir, there's a shaft, probably a lift, just down that way. And, it doesn't look like we need to look for a door..." He pointed. The wall was crumbled away, we could simply step over the rubble.

Picking our way across the floor was not as easy as it had seemed. There were broken stones and pieces of wood, and twisted metal all over. I could smell the burnt, acrid smell of the explosion, still strong enough to dry our throats. The lift, thankfully, was not very far, and we managed to reach it without incident. I felt the presence of the Hegrioans, closer, and I knew they could sense me as well. But we all moved to the lift, and as we approached, the door slid open.

"Elizabeth. Do you sense anything?" The Captain looked at me carefully, even as Commander Quinn handed him the tablet.

"Just a sense of people, Captain. Our friend Maverick and his cohorts. I think they know I'm here."

"All right, then. We are prepared as well. Onward." He motioned with his rifle, and I stepped into the lift. He turned to the MPs. "One of you stay here. We may need assistance on our way out."

The trip down was short, and the door slid open silently, onto a dark corridor. I pulled out my handlight and directed the beam forward. Commander Quinn went first, watching the map. I was right behind him, and the Captain behind me, alert for any noise, weapon at the ready. Sergeant Anderson took the rear, guarding all.

When I felt Maverick's presence ahead, I stopped in my tracks. The Commander turned around to look at me, I had let my anxiety escape.

"Elizabeth?"

"They are here, Captain. In that room to our left, around the corner. I think it's the same room as before."

He held up his hand. He motioned again to the Sergeant, I didn't catch the signal. But he put his hand on my arm, silently telling me to remain. The men went on, up to the wooden door, staying to each side. They looked at each other for a moment, then the Captain fired his laser rifle at the door handle. I covered my ears as he kicked the handle off the door and it swung open, outward. More laser fire came from inside the room as my two men jumped into the doorway, and returned fire. Sergeant Anderson took a few steps back, toward me, his rifle never wavering as it pointed toward the fray.

The deep voice came from inside the room. "Stop. Please. We will not continue to fight you. Please." I felt it as Maverick directed his thoughts to me. "And Doctor Thorne, thank you for returning."

The Captain and Commander Quinn entered the room, their rifles leading. It seemed a long while before I heard, "Elizabeth, you may come in now."

There were three Hegrioans in the room, against the far wall, at the point of Commander Quinn's rifle. They all looked defiant, but their demeanor changed as I entered the room. They stared at me, their apprehension obvious, their fearfulness wafting over me. I stared back, wondering why they were suddenly afraid of me.

"Captain?"

"Elizabeth, these fine people here would like us to go with them to the cavern. Since we left so suddenly before, perhaps we can do them that favor now." He motioned to Maverick. "All right, then, lead on. Let's go."

There was a slight momentary hesitation as Maverick looked back at me, then turned to the doorway.

My Captain motioned to me to get behind him and he kept the laser rifle at Maverick's back.

We three went out the door and turned to the left, Maverick in the lead. The strange smell in the corridor turned out to be a body, the body of one of the young Hegrioan revolutionaries. He had been shot several times with a laser weapon, his clothing had several burn holes and the blood had coagulated around them, even as it had dripped onto the floor. I shook my head, it made me so sad to see what all the secrecy and deception had brought.

As we walked down the corridor, I began to feel the familiar ache of the vines. We were getting close. My eyes roved the walls, in front and behind, hoping to see them as we had before, but there was nothing

following us. I almost ran right into the Captain as he stopped in front of me. There was something up ahead, just ahead of us on our right. An opening in the rock wall. The cavern, not the same entrance I had been through with the Administrator, but definitely the same cavern. The vines were there, I felt their presence, my head throbbing, but softly. The Captain stayed still, the point of his rifle at Maverick's back.

"Captain?"

"Elizabeth, it's up to you now. Go ahead." His warmth came to me, wrapped up in encouragement, and faith in me.

I stepped around him, and took his left hand in mine, entwining our fingers as I stood on my toes to kiss him. Our hands warmed to each other, and held tighter as we kissed, lips tingling. I could feel that he was worried about me, but even more than that was staying alert for any sign of movement or trouble from his captive. My Captain's hand tightened on his weapon as I felt his focus shift away from me and once again direct toward Maverick, and the cavern. I turned away and took another step toward the opening in the rock.

I looked at Maverick, standing still as stone, waiting. He turned his purple eyes to me.

"Please just do what you do best, Doctor. Care for our plants. Our lives, all of them, depend on it."

My jaw dropped. "Really. Is that what you want? If that's the case, why are you in such conflict with the Administration? And why were you trying so hard to get us to leave? You poisoned me, for Earth's sake! There has to be more to it."

"My dear Doctor Thorne. You are indeed a precious resource. You have no idea how valuable you are. Our illustrious government has been trying to get you to further their agenda, and going about it quite admirably. We, however, have our world's best interests at heart. Moving away from our dependence on using only this ancient technology without any understanding of how anything works is the only way for Hegrioa to progress. Our cellular structure itself is dependent upon the compounds in these plants, Doctor. We do realize that we cannot survive if we suddenly dismantle our source of power. But there has to be a way to amend, expand our scientific knowledge, our ability to help ourselves. Unfortunately, our experiments had more of a detrimental effect than we anticipated, and we have been becoming weaker."

"So you need me to heal these plants? How do I know you won't start all over again?"

He looked at me sadly. The Captain watched us both, listening intently.

The King Tree had been uprooted about twenty years before, as I already knew, but not by this particular group, and they didn't have proof that it had been the government. I knew the Administrator had said it wasn't them, but he hadn't been honest about a lot of things. The Tree had been brought to the asteroid, and the cavern recreated. Whoever it had been had known that the Tree, and the vines, were the real source of the Hegrioans' power, even their lives. They hadn't been willing to destroy it, even as they hoped that they would be able to work out a way not to need it. So now they needed me, my special relationship with these plants, to cure them, and bring back their power.

"And you attacked our Ship, and poisoned me why?"

"To make sure you were what we thought you were, of course. We had to know that you were the real thing, Doctor. The only way to be certain was to introduce a known danger and see what the hybrid cells would do." Such a simple explanation for all the trouble that had been caused.

I shook my head, my face flushed hot as the Captain pushed his rifle barrel into Maverick's chest. His fury washed over me, through me, echoing my own.

"You do realize, Mr. Maverick, that if my wife had been killed, you would have begun a battle you could not win." So calm and quiet. I knew he was beyond anger.

"Understood, Captain Bianchi. But we are in a desperate predicament. If our Doctor Thorne had turned out not to be compatible, we would all have begun to die soon ourselves anyway."

OK, there it was. The irony, of course, was that both sides of this conflict wanted the same thing. For different reasons, perhaps, but in the end they all needed these plants. I happened to agree with Maverick, they did need to advance their technology to a point well beyond where they were. The fact that none of them understood or even had access to how things worked was extremely troubling, and I was still amazed that they had let that continue for so long. But then it occurred to me that the government had a stake in letting things continue as they were. Notwithstanding the fact that the occupants of this beautiful planet would soon become ill, if they hadn't already, if the people didn't know what they were missing, they couldn't be unhappy. But it had never occurred to them that someday someone would come along who wanted more? Technology that works like magic is all well and good, as far as we tourists were concerned, but it wouldn't be enough for everyone, forever. That, of course, brought up another factor. How had the technology all developed in the first place? Who had built the machinery that made it all possible? Someone had to have made the first of the vehicles, programmed the first terminal, built the first of the beautifully carved and engineered buildings. I wondered, where were the Records?

The fact that these youngsters, as I thought of them, had attacked us, abducted us, tried to kill me, all to get me to this point, was a worrying factor. But it was out of my control, and I didn't feel any deception coming from Maverick now. I took a couple of deep breaths, to clear my thoughts, and briefly touched my Captain's handsome face with my fingertips. He nodded. All right then, here I go.

Before I knew it, I was in the cavern. Standing in the doorway, looking over the lake, the vines only a few meters from my feet. The cavern was awash in a soft light, diffuse as though coming from everywhere at once. I wondered for a brief moment why the Administrator hadn't turned the lights on when we were down there together. I guessed he had wanted me off balance. No matter now.

My head was aching, my arm burning. I stood there for a few moments, then sat down on the floor to remove my jacket and boots. The vines were creeping closer to me as I got up and walked over to the lakeside. I watched them out of the corner of my eye, then knelt down and plunged my hands into the cold water. So nice, so cold. My Captain's warmth stayed with me, flowing through me, supporting me as I sat back, waiting for the vines to come to me. I was on the opposite side of the lake from where we had come in before. I could see the opening that we had used.

The vines reached me, finally. I stretched out my hand, brushing my finger over the glossy dark green leaves as they trembled, matching the tattooed version on my arm. A strand of vine crawled over my foot, then the other, so soft and smooth against my skin. I picked up another stem in my left hand, looking at it closely, so beautiful. I could see the veins in the leaves, the varying shades of green so perfect against the deep chocolate brown of the stem. The stem that suddenly moved in my hand, wrapping itself around my wrist, tightly. The ache I was sensing became almost unbearable, it was a stabbing pain in my head, my heart.

The Captain came into the cavern, pushing Maverick ahead, and motioning for him to sit. Still keeping the rifle pointed at him. I felt, rather than saw, as my husband came closer to me, sitting himself down so that he could watch me, and still watch Maverick at the same time. My eyes closed, I bowed my head, focusing. The vision came suddenly.

Feelings of pain and loss became images. Images of fire, of sparkling stone. Images of leaves, bursting into flame in mid-air, crumbling into dust. A symbol, burning in space, a planet... no, a globe. And something that reminded me of the old Unit Twelve, the Colony I had been born on.

I saw myself walking through an undulating mass of the vines, a path clearing under my feet as I walked. My bare feet feeling the stone, occasionally touching a leaf that hadn't pulled back quickly enough. The unimaginably burnt patch of vines, hurt, dying but not quite dead yet... Crumbling leaves under my feet, crunching, the stems breaking away. The vine constricting around my wrist, climbing up my arm, but then it was just a piece, broken, separated...

"Oh my." The burnt patch of vines surrounded me, almost as far around me as I could see. The live vine was indeed around my arm, separate. It directed my arm, pointing ahead, toward what looked like an opening in the rock. The rock wall was about ten meters ahead, covered with live vines mixed with burnt ones, and there was an opening, with tendrils leading in. Something caused me to look upward, and that was the biggest shock yet. A huge gaping hole in the ceiling, a curtain of vines hanging down from it. Surrounding it. I could see where the opening narrowed, how the roots of The Tree had worked their way down from the surface, down into the cavern. Leaving a trail for the hungry vines to follow. My headache had abated, the sharp pain softened, buffered.

"Elizabeth!" From a great distance, my Captain's voice. I couldn't tell if I was actually hearing him with my ears, or with my heart.

"I am all right, Captain. Not sure how I got here, but you can tell me about that later. I'm ok. I wish I had a way to get a scan of this."

"Can you get back?" The worry was back.

"Yes. But first I need to determine why I was brought to this spot." I thought I knew, but apparently I wasn't in control of this situation either.

I held out my left hand, reaching out, watching the vine to see what it would do next. It simply wrapped itself cozily around my arm, settling in, as I thought. The tattooed flowers began to move, reacting to the movement of the leaves and stems, opening ever further until my entire arm was a blaze of fire-colored flowers. They almost hid all of the leaves, they were so profuse. I flexed my fingers, waiting. What came next was not completely unexpected, yet it came as a surprise.

My eyes saw only black for a few seconds, I thought I was losing consciousness. But then, sight returned, and my Captain was standing next to me. Blinking, shaking his head, turning his eyes to me. I caught my breath as those gorgeous deep grey eyes looked into mine. Even in the midst of his confusion, he still gave me his slight smile, making my heart skip a beat.

"All right. We are both here now. Where everyone on this planet seems to want us to be. Though via quite a circuitous path, I must say." He was trying to find reason where there was none. Trying to make

sense of the situation.

"Paolo, where is our friend Maverick?"

"He is probably still over by the entrance, trying to watch us, Elizabeth." He turned, squinting in the direction of the doorway. I could see something, perhaps the shape of a Hegrioan, it was too far to tell. But he wouldn't have left, not when he was so close to accomplishing his mission.

The Captain was still holding his weapon. He looked down at it and shrugged. "I doubt that we will need this." His eyes turned to me again. "And what now?"

"I have no idea, Captain. I don't know what they expect me to do. I don't have my gear, it must be back where I started, and all I keep getting is a vision of the destruction. Maybe we are somehow supposed to get into that tunnel? It was shown to me a couple of times now, and I was brought directly to this spot. The Tree came from here, you know."

"Yes, I gathered that." His gaze moved to the ceiling.

I stretched out my hand toward the gap where the Tree roots had grown. "What am I to do?"

Once again I was rewarded with an answer. My gaze fell on something unfamiliar, a piece of something, a stem that didn't match the vines. Hanging from the ceiling, from the side of the hole, snaking down toward us. A root? A leftover piece of Tree root? It was moving, growing, coming closer. I reached out, as high as I could, standing on my toes, til I felt myself lifted up. My Captain was lifting me by my waist as I reached upward toward the root. It came to me, to my hand, encircling my wrist, just the same way as the vines had.

It was cool, pleasantly cool, and slightly damp, as though it had just worked its way through soil. As it wrapped itself around my wrist and then my arm, I felt a presence. A strength unlike anything I had known. Pulsing through me, into me, a heartbeat. My husband's hands tightened on my waist, he felt it as well. He lowered me back to the floor, the root following, still attaching itself to my arm. My hand found his, left hand to left hand, entwining fingers. The heartbeat of The Tree pounded through us, our blood thrumming to the rhythm of that inescapable beat. The flowers and vines on our arms swayed in time to that same beat, all in concert as though to a beautiful piece of music.

Then the reverie was broken, abruptly, as the end of the root plunged itself into my skin. The shock of it was so great I couldn't even make a sound. Just a quick intake of breath as I watched the sharp end go into my forearm. No blood flowed out, but I felt as the pulsations continued. My Captain was still gripping my hand, and he watched, horrified, as the Tree root embedded itself into my skin. I couldn't tell if it was giving or taking, but I had the impression that it was both.

"But to what end?"

"Elizabeth?"

As I continued to watch, trying unsuccessfully to calm myself, I tried to explain the sensation. "Paolo. I can't tell if it's taking something from me, or if it's giving me something. I'm only hoping that when it's done I'll understand what I'm expected to do next." Deep breath, Elizabeth, in and out, slowly. Calm yourself, you won't be any good to yourself or anyone else if you let yourself get overwhelmed now. My husband didn't know what to do, he simply kept his fingers entwined with mine. Giving me as much of himself as he knew how, supporting me, comforting me. Strangely, there was no pain, only the shock and surprise of the event.

How long we stood there, watching, staring at the glossy brown root as it burrowed into my arm, I do not know. Hypnotic it was, as our blood continued to match the pounding rhythm of its pulsations. Until all of a sudden it stopped. The cessation of the pounding was almost as much of a shock as the start. The end of the root pulled away, and it unwound from my arm, slipping off and shrinking back into the heights of the ceiling. As it went, we saw that the end was no longer sharp, a bit had broken off, presumably into my arm.

The Captain did not let go of my hand, he held on tighter. But we both reached over to touch the arm, hoping to feel... something. Something that would tell us what had happened. It wasn't rational, of course, but it was a natural reaction.

"Elizabeth, are you all right? Do you feel anything?"

I shook my head. "No, Captain. Not yet..." But then I did. And he did as well.

We were back in the cavern in the asteroid. The artificial sun overhead, The Tree enrobed in its lovely shawl of the vines and flowers, just as we had seen it last. I could feel his amazement as he realized what was happening. We had not shared a vision before. As we stood under the shady canopy, the vines on the floor came closer, climbing over our feet. They reached up to me, I felt their need, their hunger. I saw the lake, the water rippling slowly, and the dry brown stems reaching out to dip into the coolness.

Then the vision changed again. The dark coldness of Space. Stars, constellations, Ships. Federation Ships. I gasped. The Federation Globe, the symbol I had seen earlier. I shook my head, denying. No, that could not be. The Federation was not involved in this. Again I saw a Colony Unit, this time a different one. And a Human who looked slightly familiar. The Captain made a startled sound. We both got a strong feeling of satisfaction, though where it came from we couldn't tell. The last image was of one of the lovely green cells that had invaded our blood. The nucleus was huge, oversized, the helices of its DNA pushing against the membrane.

The visions released us, gently, and we came to ourselves, sitting close together on the cavern floor. We were surrounded on all sides by the beautiful, fresh green of the live vines. When I picked up a piece to examine, I saw that there were a few tiny buds just barely beginning to emerge on the stems. Just a very few, but a sign that we were heading in the right direction. I felt the Captain next to me, trying to absorb what he had seen and felt. He was also denying what we had witnessed, he didn't want to believe.

I reached over and touched the insignia on his collar. The silver Globe, surrounded by vines, the symbol of our Federation Alliance. His Captain's Rank. He put his hand over mine, bowing his head.

"How can this be?"

I didn't know what to say. How could I comfort him when I didn't understand?

"Captain, who was that? He looked sort of familiar to me, but it seems you knew him."

His deep sigh cut through me. "That, my dear, was our old friend Peter Knowles." He turned to look directly at me, feeling that I was still confused. Then he nodded as understanding came to me. "Yes, that Peter Knowles. The husband of our Doctor Amy Morris. The one who was supposedly lost in the destruction of the Morgos Colony."

My head pounded. His sadness and guilt were flowing into me, he was desperately trying to make sense of this. I tried to focus and think. Peter Knowles. All I really knew about the man was that he had been the one that Doctor Amy Morris had married after she had abandoned Captain Bianchi. He had been involved somehow with the Federation's Colony on Morgos, and presumably was a member of the research group who had developed the mycotoxin that had almost destroyed the planet. There was no Record of what had happened to him, but we had assumed that he had been killed with the rest of the Humans on the Colony. Why had he been shown to us now? And what did he have to do with the Hegrioans?

The answer was obvious, but I didn't want to believe it. I don't relate to mercenaries, I can't fathom their reasoning. I don't understand why anyone would take part in something that could prove to be so devastating, simply for credits. Yet we had dealt with these types before, they were all over the Galaxy, working for anyone who would pay them. It seemed to me that even though our former Doctor was personally and deeply involved with the research on Morgos, her husband was only in it for the fun and the money. Else why would he have disappeared into the Galaxy, letting everyone think he was dead, leaving her to take care of her mission on her own? I thought of the Ships that had been stolen from the Federation, that had been used against us. I thought of the unrest that Admiral Wilson had told us about on the outer planets. The current state of affairs in the Federation and beyond smacked of a planned diversion. Though what a mercenary could possibly get out of annihilating an entire race was something

I couldn't wrap my mind around.

"They didn't know."

"Elizabeth?"

"They couldn't have known. I can't believe that a paid thug would be able to plan that caper. It must have been those youngsters back there, or rather their predecessors." I pointed in the general direction of the cavern entrance. "I wonder where they got a ship powerful enough to transport The King Tree. I also wonder why in the Universe anyone would think it was a good idea to get rid of something that they depend on for everything."

"You do not believe Maverick's explanation?"

"No, Sir, I don't. At least not all of it. I do believe they thought they could overcome their dependence by advancing their Science. And they could, and they will. But I don't believe they thought it through. Whoever came up with the plan to relocate the cavern didn't stop to think what it would mean to the inhabitants of this planet. I think they were hoping that by simply removing the source, they would adapt." I sighed. It was such a basic thing, at least back on Earth. We all learned early on that evolution doesn't take place in a day, or even in a thousand years. If these folks had no scientific knowledge or experience, they couldn't have known what would be involved. But luckily someone, probably one of the young revolutionaries, had realized that they were going about things the wrong way. How that translated into the Hegrioan government formulating their strategy of watching and waiting for a scientist compatible with their cellular makeup, I had no way to know.

"Captain? Sir? Are you all right?" Commander Quinn's voice.

"Yes, Mr. Quinn, we are all right. We are heading back to you."

"Very good, Sir."

My Captain looked at me. "Shall we?"

"We shall."

It took us more than a few minutes to pick our way back to the lakeside where we had started. The live vines on the floor moved out of our way as we went, but the dry, dead leaves and stems had to be avoided, they couldn't move themselves. I was inundated with feelings of sadness, of pain. The Captain was trying to hide his guilty feelings, but of course he couldn't hide that from me. We both knew that there was nothing he could have done to prevent what had happened, but it was just one more thing that he regretted. What would he have done, all those years ago, if he had known what Doctor Amy was up to? Or who she was really involved with? We couldn't know. And if he had stopped Peter Knowles from completing his part of the mission, who was to say that it would have ended there, anyway? My attempt to console him was ineffective. He had to work it out on his own.

We arrived back at our starting point, to find that Maverick had not moved. He was still sitting where he had been left, watching us approach. He looked at us curiously, he badly wanted to ask us what had happened. But then he suddenly stood, and took a step toward me.

I stepped back, and the Captain stepped in front of me, raising his laser rifle. Maverick held up his hands, shaking his head.

"My apologies, Doctor Thorne. I meant no harm." He pointed at my left arm. "You have made contact, have you not?"

The arm was still tingling a bit, and when I glanced down I saw that the flowers had receded and the leaves were once again fully visible. Only now there was an addition, a small but noticeable circle, reddened, where the root had punctured the skin. My fingers flexed. I took a deep, somewhat shaky breath, and sat on the floor to put my boots back on. As I finished, I picked up my jacket, and my pack.

"Indeed. And we have somewhat of an explanation for your situation now. One that does not entirely match what you, or the Administrator, have told us. However, we agreed to help, and we will. For them," I pointed back toward the lake, and the vines, "not for you. Captain? I think we should go up to the surface now, there's something we need to do."

Maverick was taken aback, but said nothing. The Captain looked steadily at me, his deep grey eyes thoughtful.

"Yes, Elizabeth. All right Mr. Maverick, back to your men. Go on, you first, please." His words were emphasized by the motion of the barrel of his rifle.

We were greeted by Lieutenant Commander Quinn and Sergeant Anderson both standing in the center of the room, their weapons trained on the doorway. They both instantly relaxed when they saw their Captain.

"Glad to see you back, Sir, Doctor."

"Have these been giving you any trouble?"

"No, Sir, we've been having a nice chat. Isn't that right?" Commander Quinn looked pointedly at one of

the captives. The man just nodded, then looked away. "If I may, Sir, what's the plan?"

"We will be leaving, Commander. Our friends will not stop us. But just to be safe, we shall leave them in this room. We will make certain that they cannot open the door easily from the inside."

"Aye, Sir. Understood."

We all backed away toward the door, I was closest and was in the corridor first. The three Officers all stepped carefully backward, still aiming their weapons at the Hegrioans. When we were all in the corridor, the Captain looked at me and motioned to me to cover my ears. I was glad I did, the noise of the three of them firing at the door echoed all down the corridor. When they stopped firing, the door was almost unrecognizable as such. The frame was melted, the hole where the handle had been was a molten, misshapen mass. The metal of the frame had melted in such a way that it had flowed down the door, forming a sort of cage.

"All right then. Let's go." The Captain was as satisfied as he could be, the cage wouldn't hold them for long, but it was another message to them that we were stronger than they had given us credit for.

The frustration of the captives followed me as we made our way back to the lift. I pushed it away, it didn't matter now. They would escape soon enough. When we arrived back at the surface, we were met by our Sergeant Russo.

"All secure, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Sir. Welcome back."

"Go back to the Shuttle, Commander, and take Sergeant Russo. Prepare for takeoff. We will join you shortly."

"Captain?"

"We have something more to accomplish, Commander Quinn. Prepare the Shuttle."

"Aye, Sir." He turned toward the beach, motioning to the Sergeant to follow. His mind was clear, unquestioning. Orders are orders.

The Captain took my hand, still holding his rifle at the ready with his other hand. Unhesitatingly we headed out of the ruined building, in a different direction from where we had entered. Sergeant Anderson walked behind us, alert for any threats. He followed us, not knowing where we were headed, but having complete trust in the Captain. It was such a reassuring feeling, knowing that these Officers all had such trust and faith in each other.

When we reached the treeline, the Captain and I hesitated for just a moment. My hand gripped his tightly as we continued. After a short while, not as long as I had expected, we made our way through the underbrush and unsurprisingly tall weeds to a large clearing. The sensation of power was unmistakable. Only the Sergeant was unaffected, he merely stood at the edge of the clearing, waiting, his rifle held lightly in both hands. He nodded as the Captain laid his rifle down on the ground next to him, then took my pack off my shoulder as well.

The Captain and I walked cautiously through the weeds that came almost up to my knees, as I was feeling ahead of me with my mind. The surge of unbelievable power struck me abruptly, and I sank to the ground, pulling him with me. I crawled forward, running my hands along the ground, until suddenly there was nothing. Well, nothing in the sense that the ground sloped sharply away, the high grass had hidden the opening. As I came closer to the hole, I could see that it was at least two hundred meters across, and deeper than was visible.

"This is it. Help me, please, Paolo." I continued my slow crawl, right up to the edge, and he stayed by my side. The ground was soft, it seemed freshly turned, the gritty dark smell of the soil strong in my nostrils. I lay down on my stomach and plunged my arms, both of them, deep into the soil. The sensations were so vibrant, so clear, almost visual but not quite. Power, of course, but more than that, responsibility and duty, need and distress. I pulled my right hand out of the soil, and reached over to grab my husband's left. His apprehension was overtaken by curiosity as he let me put his hand into the soil, close enough so that he could clasp mine. As soon as our hands met, a shock went through us, not quite electric. The sensation of pulling and pressure was indescribable in my arm. It felt as though the soil was taking my very essence, and yet it was an almost pleasurable feeling. I knew that the essence being released was not mine to keep, it was merely that I had been its temporary guardian. The ground shook under us, the soil around the edge of the cavity rippled like water, exposing what looked like broken ends of roots. The same dark brown roots that had visited us in the cavern below. There was a brief impression of a... something, a computer terminal? A display. It showed columns of symbols, perhaps numbers. Yes, letters and numbers in a strange pattern, but one that looked familiar. I had seen those symbols before.

"Oh my. I can't believe it."

"What is it, Elizabeth?"

"It's their DNA! Those symbols, it's their genetic code. I know them. The symbols, I mean, not this

sequence." I shook my head, confused. "I need to get back to my Lab, Captain. Doc Palmer told me that Ensign Miller had been working on sequencing the DNA of our alien cells. At the time I thought it might turn out to be significant, but not so immediately."

Sergeant Anderson's anxiety at seeing his Captain laying on the ground at the edge of what must have looked like a precipice was lessened greatly when we both rolled over and sat up. He relaxed further when the Captain stood up and held out his hands to help me. I could almost feel his sigh of relief, and stifled my urge to smile. Then I felt the waft from below, triumphant.

"Captain, our friends have escaped their prison. We should get back."

He picked up his weapon, and my pack. "All right, then. Onward. Sergeant, lead on... Commander Quinn. We are heading to you now. Stay alert, the captives are loose."

"Understood, Captain."

We walked carefully back to the Shuttle, listening, watching. The afternoon sun was dipping down over the beach, shining almost directly into my eyes. The day was more than half gone. Nothing disturbed us, and I didn't sense anything directed at us other than the feeling that we were being monitored. Sergeant Russo was standing by the Shuttle airlock door, at full attention, but keeping his eyes moving.

The Captain brought my gear on board, and stowed it. We sat next to each other, both silent, contemplating. Commander Quinn eyed us, then shrugged and closed the door.

"Commander Walker. We are headed your way."

"Understood. Shuttle Bay is ready for your arrival."

I motioned to Commander Quinn. "May I?" He nodded. "Commander Walker? Would you please have Ensign Miller and Ensign Parker, oh, and Doctor Palmer, meet me in the Agro-Lab? We have a lot of work to do and not much time."

"Aye, Doctor. Will do."

"Thank you." I turned to the Captain. "I think I may know now what we are looking for. We have to get that sequencing done, right away."

His hand reached out to just barely brush against mine. I flushed hot at his touch, and breathed deeply. I watched as the vines on his arm moved lazily among the flowers, so sensuous. My hand grasped his, and held tight as we took off from the island and all the way back up to the Draco's Shuttle Bay.

Commander Walker was waiting for us in the Bay. He took the tablet from the Captain, and waited for us to proceed.

"Go on ahead, Commander. All of you, go. We will be right behind you. A moment of your time, please, Doctor?"

The other Officers were barely concealing their amusement, I even saw the barest beginnings of a smile on Sergeant Russo's face. I narrowed my eyes at them, pushing just a tiny bit, and every one of them gasped. Then they straightened their shoulders and marched out of the Bay, doubletime.

"Now then, Captain, what was it you wanted?"

His answer was to grab me by the waist and pull me to him, tightly. His arms encircling me, his hands under my jacket. As he pressed my body to his, he kissed me, hard. I could feel his heart pounding, his skin warming as the kiss deepened. His fingers ran down my spine, then his hands moved to slip my jacket over my shoulders. My breath quickened as I felt his warm hands on my skin, fingertips slipping under the fabric of my shirt. I forced myself to break away, lightly touching his face, brushing my finger over his lips.

"Captain. Paolo. I, we, have work to do." Another deep breath, another hot, thorough kiss. "Really. Please."

"All right." He let out a loud sigh. "We will continue this later. You'd best go quickly."



My team was waiting for me in the work area of the Lab. They had already set up the terminals, and the micro-analyzers were humming. The displays showed running columns of data, symbols looking almost exactly like what we had been shown. The DNA sequencing. My expertise does not extend to genetics. That is a specialty I had not had much use for. It is helpful in my field to know the basics, how traits are passed from generation to generation, how chromosomes determine the characteristics of each species. We'd been tasked previously to develop solutions to genetic defects, to cure diseases that developed as a result of some fault in evolution. For that we had used our micro-analyzers to determine a specific defect, and fabricate a cure. But analyzing DNA, sequencing each individual gene in the helix, perhaps to create a new form of life altogether, that is a discipline I don't have much experience with.

Doctor Palmer came in. "Liz! So nice to see you back. You'll be pleased to know that our Colonel is recovering nicely, he'll be back on duty probably tomorrow. He's one strong man."

"Thanks, Doc, that's wonderful news. Did you send the data on the cells down here?"

"Yes I did, it should be in your terminal."

I nodded, wanting to go and review the results, but also not wanting to leave the workstation. The data was running faster now, and I watched, fascinated, as it streamed. My two Ensigns monitored the analyzers. The program had been running for over a day now, it was close to completion. But there was no point in standing there when I could be working in my office.

"Doc, would you join me?"

She followed me into my office, and I turned on the terminal, looking for the data on the slides I had taken last night. There wasn't much they could tell us other than what we had already seen, but we reviewed everything.

I pushed my chair back and ran my fingers through my hair. Nothing new, as I had thought. I didn't have anything else to research at the moment, I had to wait. We went over to the sofa under the windows, and watched the stars while we waited. I forced myself to be calm and not go back to look over the shoulders of my team. They were good at their jobs, and they would let me know as soon as they had something. And it had been they who had begun this analysis, before I had asked.

My thoughts began to wander as we sat there. The beauty of black space and the slowly moving stars was a perfect backdrop to my daydreams. My fingers brushed my arm as I remembered the feeling of the cool soil, the power of the Tree roots shaking the very ground. I wondered again what it was trying to tell us, what did the mercenaries have to do with our current state of affairs? What was the significance of the DNA, besides the fact that I, and my Captain, were somehow compatible with it? Why was someone directing their hostility at me?

What? I sat up straight. Someone was hating me, right at that moment. The sensation was like fire ants, crawling on my skin. Not strong enough to be coming from the Ship, it was still quite disturbing. Doc was looking at me strangely, sensing that something was wrong but obviously not knowing what it was. I reached over and took hold of her hand.

"Help me, please, Marla. Lend me your strength."

She stared at me apprehensively, her eyes wide, but nodded. We clasped our hands together, holding tight as I shut my eyes, focusing. I reached out as far as I could, searching for the source of the emotional assault.

The stabbing pain, not unexpected, fortunately didn't last long. But it doubled me over, it took my breath away. What the perpetrator probably didn't realize was that that same stabbing pain would give me a direction to focus on. Fighting for air while trying to pinpoint the source of the pain at the same time almost knocked me completely over.

"Elizabeth!" The Captain came bursting into my office, and ran over to me. He knelt in front of me, hands on my knees, looking into my face with great concern.

"Captain," I gasped, shakily, "I'm all right. Just give me a moment. And your hand. Please." I gripped his hand tightly, still keeping hold of Doctor Palmer's hand as well.

OK, Liz, focus hard. Where is it? Not on the planet, the sensations were further away than that. One of the outer planets? Our Hegrioia was fourth from the sun, but there were ten planets in the system. We hadn't been to any of the others, but I had heard that a couple of them were habitable. Another jolt stabbed through my head and I jumped. The Captain started as well, and put his free hand on my face.

"What can I do, Elizabeth? Please tell me."

"We need to scan this system, Captain. There's someone out there watching me. Not Hegrioan, it's Human. And it's strong, determined." I let go of Doctor Palmer's hand. "I think it's our mercenaries."

"We will get on that right away. In the meantime, you must rest, my dear."

"I can't, Captain, the sequencing is almost finished."

"It will have to finish without you, Elizabeth. You are going to rest. That is an order from your Captain. Understood?" He took my face in both of his hands and looked deeply into my eyes. "I cannot have my Head of Agrics incapacitated at this critical time. You will be notified when there are any developments."

"Aye, Captain, as you wish." I grinned and put my hands over his. "I am certain that my husband would say the same."

He gave me the full bright burst of his smile, then leaned in to kiss me. Doctor Palmer got up quickly and I heard her footsteps heading out to the Lab. I pulled him onto the sofa next to me, swung my legs over his, and put my arms around his neck. The kiss deepened, his hands so warm and soothing on my body. I pressed closer.

The shock of the renewed assault on my senses rocked me so hard that I lost consciousness for a moment. Just a moment, but in that moment I knew where the feelings of enmity were coming from. I pushed back, as hard as I could, sensing that I had been correct. There was a very brief, yet distinct, sensation of surprise, and satisfaction.

My Captain held me tight, lips brushing my face and neck.

"Captain. The ninth planet."

"Elizabeth, are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be without going there, Captain. That is where I sense this emotional assault coming from."

His eyes narrowed. "All right... Commander Walker. Begin a full scan of the planets in this system. Concentrate on the ninth planet. Let me know what you find."

"Yes, Sir, right away."

He slid out from under my legs, then went over to the cupboard to get the blanket and pillow.

"You rest here. I know you will be less likely to stray if you are close to your Lab." He put his finger over my mouth. "No arguments, Ma'am. I will be on the Bridge... Ensign Miller."

"Yes, Captain, Sir!" I could see the Ensign in my mind's eye, jumping to attention from wherever he was.

"Ensign. Doctor Thorne will be attempting to rest in her office. Be sure to notify me directly first before you disturb her. We await the results of your scan."

The hesitation was noticeable, the Ensign was nervous. I felt his unease. "Aye, Sir!"

As my husband laid the blanket over me and brushed my hair back off of my face, I couldn't help but grab his hand and pull him closer. He bent down next to me and lowered his head to mine.

"You really have to stop intimidating my team, Captain. You know they are terrified of letting you down." He didn't let me finish speaking. The kiss was hot, passionate. I put my hand in his hair, holding him close. But he pulled away, sighing, stroking my cheek.

"Rest now, dearest. I will check on you later."

He let go and I let my hand fall back onto the blanket. As I closed my eyes I felt the pain return, then a soothing warmth that pushed it away. I smiled to myself as I cuddled into the blanket, feeling my husband's love washing over me as I allowed myself to fall asleep.

I was awakened by Doctor Palmer, gently touching my shoulder.

"Liz? The Captain said to wake you when we finished the sequencing scan."

I sat up. "It's done? Let's have a look! Did you have them send it in here?"

"Yes, of course. It's all set up for you. And the two Ensigns are reviewing the data as well, in the Lab." She was acting a bit strangely, nervously.

"What's wrong, Doc?"

"Liz, I'm sorry but you needed your rest. We all needed rest. As the Ship's Doctor I made the decision to let us all get some sleep. It's morning now."

I narrowed my eyes at her, searching. But she was absolutely sincere in her desire to take care of me, of all of us. I couldn't be angry, actually I was wondering whether she had made sure that the Captain had gotten sleep as well.

We sat at my terminal. The data streamed down the screen. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I believed that I would recognize it when I saw it. Gradually, the columns of symbols and numbers began to blur, run together. An hour went by as I watched the flowing columns, my eyes were getting sore. I pushed my chair back, running my hands through my hair. The symbols were hypnotic, I couldn't take my eyes off them for long. Then I saw something, a pattern. My hand moved of itself, reaching over to stop the flow. Scrolling back to the previous page. That grouping was familiar. I scrolled back further. The same grouping, with one difference. Another page back, another grouping, looking the same but different. I set the scrolling forward again. There it was again, another grouping, repeated.

"Doc. What is this? I could swear it's a code of some sort. It doesn't look like the normal DNA groupings. Does it? Or is it just my eyes tricking me because I want to find something?"

She hesitated, peering at the screen. "Liz, I think you may be right. But even if you are, we don't have anything to match it to. A code needs a cipher, or a reference."

An idea was formulating in my head, but I couldn't put it into words. She was correct, we didn't have any reference point. But this DNA, the basic genetic makeup of all life on Hegrioa 4, was it somehow more than that? It had to be more than the connection between me and my Captain and the vines. It had been shown to me, to us, for a reason.

"Triple helix."

"Liz?"

"Marla, all the DNA we know of is a double helix. This one is triple. Is there a way to separate out the third strand from the rest?"

She reached over and tapped a few keys. The view changed, the columns rotated. The helix came up on the screen. So beautiful, the beaded strands gyrating, mesmerizing. The paired strands, their ladderlike formation spiraling, were joined in their dance by the third. I followed the rotation with my eyes, keeping track of the strands as they spiraled down. A column appeared on the side of the display. Symbols and numbers, the representation of the extra row of beads. I unfocused my eyes and let the data stream past, to see if the pattern would show itself again. It did. After a few moments, I began to notice a definite recurrence of the same groupings. I reached for the communication pad on the terminal, but just as I was about to speak, the Klaxon sounded. We were leaving orbit.

"Elizabeth. We have found a settlement on the ninth planet, just as you said. Please come up to the Bridge."

"On my way, Captain."

Doctor Palmer stood. "I'd best get back to my Medical Bay. I wish I could be of more help to you, Liz, but this is beyond my scope."

I hugged her. "You have been of more help already than you know. Thank you."

She left, heading back to Level Ten. I went into the Lab work area to check on my team.

"Well, Ensigns. We have ourselves another puzzle here. Keep on it, please. There's something in this data, something to let us know if we're on the right track. I noticed patterns, see if you can identify what they are. I'll be on Level One, contact me if you find anything."

"Yes, Doctor. Do you know where we're going?"

"To the outer planets of this system, Mr. Parker. Hopefully to find the rest of our answers." I put a hand on each of their shoulders, letting them each feel my confidence in them. They sat up straighter, and turned back to their terminals with renewed energy.

When I arrived on Level One I went straight over to the Bridge entrance. The door slid open to reveal a bustle of activity. All of the Science stations were manned, and the Communications and Navigation Officers were all speaking at once. It was jarring to me, the loudness of the emotional tide sweeping through the room. I hesitated at the door, collecting myself.

Commander Walker came up to me and put his hand on my arm. "Doctor Thorne, are you all right?" His concern was genuine.

I took a deep breath, held it for a second and let it out. "Yes, Commander, thank you. Just acclimating myself. What's happening?"

"Captain Bianchi would like to see you in the ready room, Ma'am."

Trying not to glare at him, since he knew how much I abhor being called Ma'am, I nodded. "Thank you." Then I saw his smile, his eyes crinkling. He'd been joking with me. Wow.

In the ready room, I found the Captain on a call with Admiral Wilson.

"Hello, Doctor Liz. I understand you have been having quite an interesting time of it."

"Good to see you, Admiral. Yes, we have been keeping busy."

"I think I am up to date on the situation out there now. Captain, as I was saying, you will be joined by the Phoenix and the Hydrus. Do not approach the base without backup. We don't know what we're up against yet."

The Captain frowned. He wanted to get out there and investigate. But it would take us a few hours to get out as far as the ninth planet, it was further out than the asteroid belt. A few hours after that, the two sister Ships would be there. Waiting a few hours would be a small price to pay for added security. In the meantime, since we would be traveling at interplanetary speeds and not in Hyperspace, we would continue to scan the planet. And hopefully be able to get detailed information about the settlement, or base, as the Admiral had called it.

The Admiral had more to say. Apparently, the Federation investigators had found a gang of mercenaries in a system just a few light-years from Hegrioa system. They had made reference to the unrest we had

been told of, and the fact that the instigators had come from the vicinity of Hegrioa. I got the impression that the Admiral agreed with me about the disorder being a diversion. But at this point we only had the most tenuous of theories about what we were being diverted from. And I took note that the Captain did not mention the name of Mr. Peter Knowles.

When the Admiral was done with us and had disconnected, the Captain and I looked at each other. The fact that the Federation was sending not one, but two Warships was disturbing. As was the fact that the investigators had again confirmed that the source of the disorder was the Hegrioa system. We both knew who was at the bottom of it. What we needed to verify was why, and if I was right about why, we needed to stop him, them, immediately, before more damage was done.

"Captain, may I see the scan data?"

"Come with me, my dear."

We went back onto the Bridge. Though still buzzing with activity, it was less of an assault on my senses than earlier. We went over to one of the Science stations and he motioned to the Ensign on the station to move away. The screen was displaying a view of the asteroid belt, with our asteroid marked with a bright green point. I moved the display to the outer planets. There was a mark on the second to last planet, a red X. As I magnified the view, the continents came into focus, and the X was centered over the largest.

"That's the settlement? Is this the best view?"

"Yes, and yes. So far. We will get clearer details as we move closer. We will be moving out of the planetary plane for convenience, so we are hoping that whoever is out there will have greater difficulty seeing us." He wasn't convinced, but he wanted me to be more comfortable. "And when we are joined by the Phoenix and the Hydrus, we will have their scans and the additional personnel to assist."

I nodded, knowing that those people, or at least one of them, could sense me, could direct their venom at me. It didn't matter whether we were within the planetary plane or not. I was just hoping that I would be able to sense more from them as we got closer.

Standing up from my chair, I asked, "OK, Captain. Do you need me to stay here? I should get back down to the Lab."

He put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me back into my seat. "Yes, I do need you to stay here. Ensign Parker and Ensign Miller will keep you informed as to the progress of your experiments."

Ignoring the sideways glances, and the smiles of the Crew, he bent down and kissed me, so gently, so carefully as his hands tightened on my shoulders. As he pulled back, his demeanor changed. "Belay that, Doctor. You go on. We will be traveling for quite a while, and I know you need to be down there." He took my hands and helped me up. His hands were so warm and strong as they clasped mine.

"I do, Captain. I will see you later. Sir."

His warmth followed me as I made for the door.

My Ensigns were still hard at it when I arrived back in the Lab. They were both scrolling through the pages of data, searching for anything that would give us a clue as to what the patterns in the third strand represented. We all felt that it had something to do with how and why I, and the Captain, had been drawn into the current series of events.

The Admiral had said that his people had found connections between the fighting on various Federation planets and the incidents of the past years on Hegrioa. We knew that the subversive activities of the younger generations of Hegrioans had begun the process when they had arranged for the removal of their Tree. The paid mercenaries who had accomplished that massive feat, whoever they turned out to be, had apparently not been satisfied with their payment. I still could not wrap my mind around the fact that anyone would cause what amounted to a war simply for the fun of it. There had to be more to it, but we were being stonewalled, blocked at every turn. I wondered if our Admiral Wilson was aware that even he wasn't getting all the facts. The feeling that there had to be some sort of conspiracy within the Federation itself was strong in me. We'd come up against traitors before, people who were certain that they were doing the right thing by forwarding their own agendas, notwithstanding what it meant to the rest of the Galaxy.

The feeling that someone was watching me, sensing me, was ever in my mind. It was quite a disconcerting sensation. It occurred to me that it could be another Sympath. There weren't all that many of us out there, and I hadn't ever personally met one. I couldn't imagine a Sympath being able to live comfortably with such people as these mercenaries. The negative emotions and uncaring attitudes, not to mention their normal predisposition for hostility, would have been overwhelming. There's only so much negativity one can deal with before it would take over. As an Alpha myself, I have a difficult time dealing with strong negative emotions, especially over periods of time. They hurt. They go against everything I am. I suppose a Sympath who isn't Alpha might be able to better deal with it over time because they aren't quite as susceptible. But it would still get into their hearts and minds, much much more so than someone who didn't have direct access to the emotional sphere. That was a daunting thought. A Sympath with a proclivity toward selfishness, perhaps violence, given that access to a society of people with the

same personalities, could be a devastating weapon against an unsuspecting Galaxy.

"All right, you two. Let's take a break. Let the program run for now. It'll collate the common groupings and we'll be able to separate them out. Staring at the screens isn't going to help make it go faster." The Ensigns both sighed and pushed their chairs back from their workstations.

"Good. Go take a walk, get some food, take a nap. We should have a bit of time before we are able to do anything, even when we arrive at our destination."

I shoed them out of the Lab. They would have stayed there all day if I had asked, but they were grateful to be let go. When they were gone, I made a quick circuit of the Lab work area, making sure everything was cleared away, then smiled to myself. I finally had a moment to go into the plantings.

I had really missed my plants. I had been days away from them, and that was very unusual for me. My lab coat thrown on the newly bared worktable, my workboots tossed on the floor under the table, I walked eagerly into the main Lab. The plants greeted me with their usual sighing rustle. That is such a wonderful sound, the sound of life, of growth. Not surprisingly, my left arm grew warmer with every step. I brushed my fingertips over some of the leaves, feeling their cool smoothness. The magenta flowers of the hybrid Dahlias were beginning to bloom, just barely giving off a hint of perfume. The hydro-pods were lush and bright green with the latest growth of our enhanced lettuces, an example of how we sometimes used the genetics of plants to create solutions to various problems. In this case, we had discovered that the longer we bred the same species of food plant, the weaker the strain was. We'd had to cross-breed several different strains to get one that was hardy enough.

Ah, my trees. The beautiful, tranquil, spiritual trees. Besides creating much of the Oxygen for our Draco to cycle, they are my personal haven. The peacefulness, the tranquility of the grove is one of the ways I have found to escape temporarily from the constant onslaught of emotions. Whether direct or not, there are always feelings coming at me, surrounding me, that I have to filter. Most of the time it's automatic, sometimes it's more difficult, but it's always there. Here, among the descendants of some of the most ancient trees on Earth, it was somehow easier. I breathed in their deep, rich scent, felt the wash of the newly created Oxygen as it made its way to the recyclers. The cool grass felt so good under my bare feet. While I walked, I contacted Jenny, first reaching out to be sure she was alone. I had seen her Commander Quinn on the Bridge earlier, but I wouldn't have wanted to interfere if they were together. She was only too happy to talk to me. We hadn't had much time to chat, and we usually speak every day. She and Commander Quinn had been finding more time to get together. Especially after she had been drawn into the recent events. I think she hadn't realized, even though she had been living on the Draco for many months, how tenuous things can be. Jenny is a loving, caring woman. However, even though she had been working for the Federation almost as long as I had, she hadn't been exposed to the darkness, the corruption that exists in our Galaxy. Not, that is, until a few days ago. Perhaps we had all done her a disservice by protecting her, but I knew she would be able to overcome her initial trepidation. She is much stronger than even she is aware.

I got the impression that she again was holding something back. She had to know that I had spoken to Commander Quinn, was she upset about that? I asked her, point-blank.

"No, of course not, Liz. If anyone has my best interests at heart it's you. But I'm just not ready to share all of everything yet. It's all new to me, Liz, this love thing. You understand? I need to keep it to myself, for now." She was really in love, then. She was beginning to get a sense of what it would be like to have one person who was like your other self, necessary to your very existence. I didn't reach out to her feelings, I would wait for her to let me know it was ok.

When we disconnected, I was left with a feeling of calmness. My friend was indeed happy. Good.

After a few more minutes of walking aimlessly, I sat down under the largest of the trees, just sat and breathed, deeply, clearing my lungs and my body and my mind.

It was the next natural step to work on a few yoga poses, and I slipped out of my trousers, laying them on the ground. As I moved through my practice, the pain and confusion of the past few days began to float away from me. My mind freed of restraint, just simply existing in the moment, not thinking, not feeling. Until I was startled into awareness by a blast of the by-then familiar anger. My mind, still partially blanked, reached out toward the source of the pain.

It vanished, as quickly as it had begun. But I had a line on where it was, and who it was. As I had reached out to it, I had gotten a sense of the person behind it.

"Elizabeth!" My husband came into my field of view. He was out of breath, and his relief was pouring out of him. "Why did you remove your communicator? I had to track you." He touched my right arm, where my tracker implant was located. "Do not ever do that to me again." He threw himself on the ground next to me and pulled me into his lap.

As he wrapped his arms around me, I brushed my fingers gently down his cheek. His deep grey eyes gazed into mine, probing, loving.

"I apologize, Paolo. I wasn't thinking. Actually, I wasn't thinking on purpose, I had to clear my head. But I am sorry to have worried you, I should have known better." My hand in his hair, I moved closer, nestling into his powerful embrace. His hands tightened on me as our lips met, his fingers massaging, stroking down my back to my bare leg.

The coolness of the grass was so pleasant next to my skin as he lowered me down on my back. His body so warm, he is so strong, yet so gentle. Our passion erupted in a blaze of heat as our hands moved over each other. Lips and fingers touching, exploring. Clothing scattered across the grass. The rustling of the leaves and boughs overhead made a beautiful musical counterpoint. There was nothing else in the Universe, no mercenaries, no complex strands of DNA. Only the feelings of love as he pulled my body to his, legs entwined, lips burning as they tasted the saltiness of his smooth skin. Hot tingling all over our bodies, inside and out. The trees stood quiet guard over us as we moved together.

"Captain? Sir?" Lieutenant Masters' voice, muffled.

We looked at each other and sighed. I extricated myself and crawled over to where my Captain had tossed his jacket.

"Yes, Lieutenant. What is it?"

"The Captain of the Hydrus is on the Comm. for you, Sir."

"All right, put her through." There was a momentary silence, before the communicator clicked. "Captain Foster. Welcome to Hegrioia system."

While my Captain spoke with the Captain of our sister Ship, I retrieved our clothes. As I dressed, I watched him. He is so graceful, so masculine, so perfect. His eyes were on me as well, his appreciation obvious, it flowed over me like a warm spring breeze.

"Thank you, Captain Bianchi. We will continue our scans and compare notes when we get closer. But from what we can tell so far, there is only the one settlement, and less than fifty occupants. They have certainly caused a lot of trouble for such a small group."

"Indeed. They are quite determined. We will speak again soon."

The interlude was over, we had work to do. In unspoken accord, we headed back out of the Lab. I touched the rough bark of my trees as we passed through, thanking them. After composing a message to my team, requesting that they continue their project, I followed the Captain into the lift and up to Level One.

By the time we arrived at the ready room, the Captains of the Hydrus and the Phoenix had been Transported over and were waiting for us. They looked at me curiously, knowing that I needed to be there, but unaccustomed to working with civilians in the normal course of their business. I looked back, as calmly as I could, waiting for my Captain to begin the meeting.

It was quite straightforward. We would wait until the settlement crossed over to the night side of the planet's rotation. Then a team from each Ship would be Transported down. Captain Bianchi was to lead the mission, the other Captains would coordinate from their own Bridges. The first order of business would be reconnaissance, of course. But, we would have to be prepared for anything. Details of team members, weapons, supplies were discussed, I didn't pay much attention to that. Someone would let me know what I needed. Captain Foster of the Hydrus and Captain Crawford of the Phoenix went back to their Ships to finalize the organization of their teams. After they had left, my Captain contacted Colonel Zuajko.

"Colonel. You are feeling better?"

"Aye, Sir, thank you. I am getting my men outfitted with their gear. They will be in your office shortly with your supplies."

"Very good, Colonel. Thank you."

When the MPs arrived, with their gear and weapons for us, I was pleased to see that it was Sergeants Anderson and Russo. I felt comfortable with them. Though there was a brief moment of intimidation when I saw what they were handing me. It was the same huge model of laser rifle that the Captain usually carried. I hefted it in my hands, feeling the weight of it, checking to be sure that I remembered how it worked. The men watched me carefully, but all I received from any of them was admiration for how I was handling myself. All right, then. Rifle hooked onto the wide leather strap, hung over my shoulder. Deep cleansing breath. Then we were heading over to the Transport Pad.

"Commander Walker. We are heading out. Keep my Ship safe."

"Aye, Sir. You can count on me, Sir."

"Good... Lieutenant Dalton. Ready to Transport."

The cold dark of Transport gave way to the cold dark of Hegrioa 9. We were met by the teams from the other Ships, all men, all tall, well-built, strong and focused. They made me feel very small and weak, until I felt the encouragement from my Captain, supportive and full of pride.

I reached out toward the settlement. The overall impression was one of calm confidence. Shaking my head, as I continued searching for the one who had contacted me, I followed the Officers. The night was black dark, no lights anywhere. The moon must not have risen yet. My eyes adjusted slowly, while the MPs in the lead of our group moved cautiously through what felt like a field of tall grasses. I felt as we neared the huts, the MPs separated, moving off in several different directions to surround the encampment. I didn't have a viewer, I had to rely on the men to lead us. But then it didn't matter. I felt it, the sensation that someone was watching me. I stopped in my tracks, and the Captain stepped back to me.

He whispered, "What is it?"

As quietly as I could, "He's here, Captain. And he knows I'm here. I don't think he can sense all of you, just me. But he would assume that I'm not alone."

"Acknowledged, Elizabeth. Wait here."

He moved forward, tapping Sergeant Anderson on the shoulder and putting his hand up for him to remain silent. I saw them whispering together, then Sergeant Anderson motioning to Sergeant Russo to be more cautious. He tapped his communicator and spoke quickly and quietly, telling the others the same thing.

Suddenly we were blinded by bright lights, shining in our eyes from directly ahead. Every one of us raised our weapons, blinking to clear our vision. The stabbing pain in my mind directed my gaze toward a point off to the side. There, it was coming from there. My feet began to move toward the feeling.

"Elizabeth! What are you doing? Stop!"

"I can't, Captain. This is why I came here. He's here, Sir. Peter Knowles."

"How do you know that?"

"I think he's Sympath, Sir. And he's been trying to contact me."

The Captain shook his head. He was absorbing this information, collating it with the other facts we had. It was all starting to make sense now.

I kept walking toward the feeling, my Captain by my side. When Sergeant Russo realized what we were doing, he ran up to follow behind us. When Peter Knowles finally stepped out from behind a doorway, the feeling of familiarity was overwhelming. But I knew that I had never seen that rodent-like visage, or heard that menacing, creepy voice before.

"Well, Doctor Elizabeth Thorne. We meet at last. You are even more impressive in person, my dear, our surveillance pictures don't do you justice."

Heart pounding, head throbbing, I tried to keep my voice steady. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir."

Deep breath, stay calm. "You wanted me here, and here I am. What is it you think I can do for you?"

"You have knowledge we need, Doctor. You are going to help us interpret some information that we have acquired."

"Really. And what makes you think I am going to help you?"

His smile was so sinister, so threatening. "You will assist us because if you don't, we will have to kill your Officers, one by one. I'm sure you don't want that?"

The Captain tensed his fingers on the trigger of his rifle, as did I. Sergeant Russo took in a sharp breath as he moved to place himself in front of me. I put my hand on his arm, even as I felt the rest of the Officers, surrounding us.

"Why don't you tell me about your problem, Mr. Knowles."

"Follow me, Ma'am. Just you and Captain Bianchi. Please."

There was movement behind us. We were indeed surrounded, not only by our own men, but by a larger number of Knowles' men. All were fully armed, intense, angry, ready to start firing at a moment's notice. I turned to the Captain and he nodded, his aura strong, confident. We walked toward the hut, slowly, our men watching closely for any sign of betrayal.

As we stepped through the doorway into the shabby room, we were each grabbed by a huge guard, one from each side. Disarmed, communicators removed, we were led into a second room and pushed into hard wooden chairs.

"So sorry for the accommodations. We do the best we can."

The Captain was fuming now. "Tell us what it is you want, Peter."

The voice made me shiver as Knowles directed his attention to my Captain.

"Paolo Bianchi. It's been a long time, my friend, how have you been? I heard that you killed my wife. No, wait, you didn't. That would be this lovely lady here who accomplished that. No matter, it needed to be done. As for what I want, it's simple. Your wife is going to translate some documents for us. We came across them in the course of an operation, and we have discovered that they have infinite potential."

"Documents? Translate?" I broke in, the surprise was too great. "I am not a linguist. I think you have the wrong person."

His gaze returned to me. "You are exactly the right person, Ma'am. Take your jacket off. Please. You too, Captain."

My mouth opened, but my Captain shook his head at me not to argue. We removed our jackets. Knowles looked hungrily at the vines, at the flowers swaying gently on both of our arms. I cringed as he came closer to me, clenching my fist as he ran his dirty finger down the outside of my arm.

"Amazing. Absolutely amazing. Do you have any idea how special you are? Do you even know what you have here? And you, Captain," his voice was thick with jealousy, "do you understand what this is, what it means?"

My Captain took in a hissing breath, wanting to smash Knowles' face in, but knowing that he had to restrain himself.

"Why don't you tell us, since you know so much?"

As we listened, the rest of the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. All the events of the past days came together into a cohesive picture. We each felt that we were finally being told the truth, nothing left out. This person had his own selfish agenda, and only that. He had no reason to lie, or deceive, he was confident that he was in control. And he was probably right. I could feel the emotions of the standoff happening outside, our men being kept in check by the thugs. The thugs who would not have hesitated to start shooting. Nobody wanted that.

We already had a good portion of the story. Years ago, a group of young Hegrioans had decided that they needed to try to get out of the deep rut they were in. They wanted to learn how their technology had developed, how it worked, how to move forward and evolve their society. Again I felt sympathy for them, I never had understood how they had lived so many thousands of years in the thrall of unknown forces. They had come up with a plan. Since the only thing they did know for sure was that The King Tree and the caverns were the source of their power and knowledge, they decided to remove them from the equation. In all the time it had to have taken to put the plan into action, none of them stopped to think that perhaps it wasn't such a great idea to suddenly delete half of that equation. Our new friend Peter Knowles and his band of mercenaries were only too happy to assist in the caper. It was a challenge for them to work out a way to uproot The Tree without anyone being the wiser, and to transport it to the asteroid belt. Unfortunately for the Federation and much of the rest of the Galaxy, part of the payment they had received was the circuitry that had begun the trouble on our Morgos Colony. Living, organic technology that could be adapted to almost any application if one knew how.

The asteroid was carved out, the cavern created. An amazing feat of engineering, performed by such a small group. The Tree was removed, as were a great portion of the vines from the caverns. We weren't told the details of that. The pertinent part, for us, was that Knowles and his men had taken the time to examine The Tree and its surroundings when they were manipulating it. What they had found had begun their tireless search for someone like me. It just so happened that their course was running parallel to the Hegrioan government, who were keeping tabs on various Humans. When they discovered me and began watching me, Knowles was only too happy to tap into their surveillance. It had not taken him long to realize that I was the one they were looking for, and it must have been so frustrating for him to have to wait all this time. It had greatly amused him, however, that it hadn't occurred to the Hegrioans to try to actually solve their problem instead of trying to return to the way things had always been.

"I'm still confused. What is it about me that makes you think I can translate documents? These," I raised my arm, "didn't make me a Comm. Officer, I'm still just a plant doctor. And where did the documents come from?"

"You are still not paying attention, Doctor Thorne. Have you not been listening? We found it. We have found the keys to the kingdom. And we believe that only you will be allowed to use them."

The Captain said, "Show us."

Even with all we had just heard, and all that had come before, we were still not prepared for what came next.

We were herded into another room, weapons pointed at our heads the entire time. When I saw what was in that room, I promptly forgot all about that. The room was a sort of Mission Control. Not at all



resembling the outer area, this was a modern, fully functional Operations. Huge viewscreens covered two of the walls, terminals scrolling data on a long table next to the doorway. The data looked like battle plans, I could see ships, weapons, and what may have been locations, coordinates. It occurred to me, in the few seconds I had to look around, that this was also their base of operations for their diversionary tactics. They'd had to keep the Federation Officials busy elsewhere, and these were their schematics. I had a feeling I knew how Admiral Wilson was going to react when he got this report.

There were a few people on the far side of the room, grouped around a desk that held another terminal and what looked like a smaller version of my micro-analyzer. But what caught my eyes and held them was on the nearest wall. A blown up printed picture of The Tree, but as a transparent grid, with various markings and symbols scattered about it that looked somewhat familiar. Along the bottom was a drawing, a sketch of what looked like a root system, and several long equations. I felt a burst of surprise from my Captain, and he unconsciously ran his right hand along his left arm. My own left arm was growing warmer, the designs in full motion. I reached out my hand as I walked over to the printout.

"What are these markings?"

The smugness of his attitude made me want to throw him to the floor. "Those, my dear Doctor, are the keys I was telling you about. The basis of a technology beyond all of us. That display is only a part of what we need you to decipher."

That set off bells in my head. Decipher. Code. Doc Palmer had said that we had a code that needed a cipher. She had been right, but backwards. Those equations were like a code, and what we had uncovered back in my Lab was the cipher! Somehow, the hybrid blood cells contained the secret. I tried to hide my revelation but I knew that Knowles sensed it, sensed something. He couldn't know what I was thinking, but he had to have felt my surprise. He was trying to read me, but this time I was ready for him. I pushed back, hard. His rifle wavered as his hand shook.

I didn't back down. "Don't try that with me, Mr. Knowles. That's a fight you won't win."

His confidence somewhat shaken, he still wasn't giving up. "Well well well. You do have some tricks, don't you?" He was trying to distract me with words.

"I'm stronger than you gave me credit for. Tell me, Mr. Knowles, which of your men was bright enough to realize what you had found? Surely it wasn't you." As I spoke I heard my husband's voice in my head, telling me to be careful. I stifled my smile. This miserable excuse for a Human Being could never know the joy, the comfort and security that came from having such a soulmate.

However, it turned out that it didn't matter what I did, because just then we heard a disturbance outside. Laser blasts, shouting. The outer door slammed open, and we heard heavy booted feet running through the rooms.

Just before the door to the room we were in was broken down, the Captain, ignoring the weapon still pointed at his head, rushed over to me and pushed me back against the wall. He placed his body between me and whatever was to come. In the ruckus, the thugs guarding us had their attention divided, and fortunately for us decided to pay more heed to our Officers bursting in. What followed was largely a blur to me. At some point the Captain got hold of one of the rifles and was covering me whenever it looked like someone was coming close.

It all happened so fast. The guards outside had been taken completely by surprise. They hadn't expected our men to start suddenly shooting when they were so outnumbered. But, as well-trained Officers, they were able to coordinate their attack silently, and efficiently. It didn't take them long to subdue the guards, who were not trained, not really. Upon entering our building, they made quick work of the few guards left, and came to find us.

Peter Knowles, Sympath though he was, was no match for me, not once I had gotten control. While he allowed himself to be overwhelmed by the shock of our attack, I took advantage of the situation. I let him know, in terms that he could not deny, what I thought of him, and his plans. With a force I didn't know I had, I pushed him. When he felt my revulsion, my disgust, he gripped his head, sinking to the floor. It almost pained me to watch him, but it did seem a fitting punishment. And the Captain was supporting me, encouraging me.

I did see where he looked, though, when he didn't realize I was physically watching him as well. He confirmed where the information was, what we would need to figure out the rest of our puzzle. I thanked him, silently, even as I was truly disgusted by him and what he had done. As the MPs gathered all of the mercenaries outside for Transport up to the Phoenix, I watched Knowles. He was still smug, even after we had beaten him. I wondered what was up his sleeve. I wasn't able to read his thoughts, just his emotions, and much as I wished it, I couldn't tell anything specific.

The landing party separated, each team to their own Ship. The captured mercenaries were taken to the Phoenix, to be imprisoned and taken to Earth. The Hydrus' Officers saluted the Captain as they were Transported. Captain Crawford called down to Captain Bianchi to congratulate him, as did Captain Foster. But I couldn't shake the feeling that Peter Knowles still had a few tricks left.

We went back into the Mission Control room to properly examine the research. Our Sergeant Anderson had remained with us, to assist, and to guard as we went through the base. They had been unbelievably thorough. The analyzer was running, the data indicated that the material was a piece of the bark of The Tree. I frowned. How dare they? I was drawn back to the printout on the wall. My fingers traced the lines of the trunk, the sketch of the root system. The symbols and markings were so foreign, yet so familiar. I went over to the desk where I had sensed Knowles' attention. Whatever he had been hiding was there. Underneath the bare desk was a large metal crate, intricately embossed with leaves and flowers. It looked ancient, and dirty, as though it had been... buried. Buried. I felt the strength of it even as I looked at it from a meter away.

"Captain."

"Elizabeth?"

"They really found it. The source. Help me with this, please?"

He came over and we moved the crate to the middle of the room. Thankfully it had already been opened, so we didn't have to take time to work that out. When we both put our hands on the lid, there was a jolt. Not electricity, exactly, but the same type of tingling that the Tree and the vines caused. My arm burned, the flowers burst open. I took a long, shaky deep breath as the lid came up, smoothly and silently.

Inside the crate was the treasure and history of an entire world. Carved wooden and metal plates, covered with writing. Symbols, equations, thousands of them. I reached down and picked up one of the sheets of metal, cool and smooth in my hand. I watched in fascination as the vines on my arm reacted, waving madly, the leaves peeking out from between the flowers as they moved. The Captain had another of the metal sheets and was holding it up to the light. He looked from the sheet in his hand to the equations on the wall, and back again.

"This is indeed their keys to the kingdom, Captain. These formulas are the basis of their technology, and even their cellular structure."

"And you can decipher this? It does not look like anything I have ever seen."

"That's the beauty of this, Paolo. Nobody has ever seen this, not since it was finalized and hidden."

Apparently underneath The Tree, where no-one would or could look for it. However, now that we have these, we can indeed figure it out. We have the cipher, it's been there all along." I reached over and ran my finger down his arm, watching as the vines moved behind the motion.

His brows raised, eyes widened. "The cells. The DNA."

"Yes, indeed, my love. The cipher is within their own DNA. If they had found this crate they would have had all the tools they needed. Unfortunately, they didn't have the knowledge to use those tools. That's where we came in. The hybridization of our Human cells with theirs is what brought us to this point."

"You mean that's where you came in, my Elizabeth. At least they were intelligent enough to figure out that you were the one who could help them." His arm went around my shoulders. "So, now we get this back to the Draco. Sergeant Anderson?"

"Yes, Sir. Engineer Dalton is awaiting your request for Transport."

"Signal her, then, Sergeant. We'll need to get to Level Twelve."

We reluctantly closed the lid of the crate and waited to be Transported. I knew that very shortly this place would be swarming with our Crew, packing up the terminals, the displays, the materials. But I wasn't going to let this treasure chest out of my sight until we could get it catalogued. And I couldn't wait to start plugging those formulas into the analysis programs. My Ensigns were going to be thrilled.

At the Transport Pad on Level Twelve, we were greeted by Ensign Parker and Ensign Miller, who were almost dancing with anticipation. They loaded the crate onto a cart and directed it toward the Lab. The Captain put his hand on my arm.

"I will be on the Bridge, Ma'am. You will keep me apprised of your progress."

"Aye, Sir."

His stern expression changed, his bright smile lit his face as he pulled me close, one hand running through my hair. Our eyes met as he lowered his head to kiss me, hard. I flushed hot as I felt the joy, the love that matched my own for him so perfectly. My hands tightened on his arms for a moment, then I had to pull away.

"I will be in my Lab, Sir. We have much work to do. Give Admiral Wilson my regards."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Even though we now had both the code and the key, the work was by no means close to being finished. We had to scan all of the sheets, with their innumerable equations, into our terminals, then try to organize them. Which, since we didn't know exactly what they were, nor were we able to read them yet, was a losing proposition. After staring pointlessly at the mind boggling tangle of symbols, I finally decided to do one sheet at a time.

Ensign Miller had the DNA sequence up on his terminal. That third strand, the one that held the cipher, so beautiful and so mysterious, rotated on the screen. The multicolored beads were all marked with their individual symbols. When we had the first set of equations separated out, I set the program to compare the symbols.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr. Parker."

"Once we've worked this out, I guess we will be handing the information back over to the Hegrioans?" He looked at me as I nodded. "Will we be staying to help them?"

"I don't know, Ensign, but I wouldn't think so. Although..." I stopped myself. Who were we going to give this to? If we gave it to the Administration, were they going to use it, or try to hide it again? "I wonder." Perhaps we should give it to the youngsters after all. I would have to speak to the Captain about that, although I had a strong feeling that our Admiral would have us give it to the government.

The other, more immediate problem, was still the fact that the Hegrioans themselves had been affected. I was hoping that somewhere in these equations would be something to give us a way to strengthen the actual physical makeup of the Hegrioans themselves. We knew that we had been brought here to solve both problems, our bodies infiltrated with their DNA... oh, good grief. Why had we not seen this before? It couldn't be that simple, could it?

"Ensign Parker! Come here and take a blood sample from me. Please."

"Yes, Ma'am."

When the vial was filled with my blood, I had Ensign Parker take a slide and run it through the analyzer again.

"Then compare that to the sequence. And the third strand." I took another slide, went to the storage cabinet and got out the samples from our previous experiments. The theory forming in my brain was almost ridiculous in its simplicity.

And when I looked at Colonel Zuajko's blood sample, the one that had been mixed with the Hegrioan cells, I knew I was onto something. His immune cells had taken over the alien cells and killed them. On the other hand, my blood cells had merged with them without any competition. Separating out more single cells from the samples, I added my own purple blood to the green of the Hegrioan. The result was like the tumblers clicking into place in one of those ancient combination locks. We had seen already that my red cells merged with the green alien cells. But when I took the hybrid cells and added them to the green, they merged again. I could almost feel the DNA combining. Under the highest magnification of the micro-analyzer, I examined the single cell that resulted. Perfectly formed, stable and beautiful. We hadn't thought to continue working with the single cells once we knew that they weren't contagious.

Events had swept us along, taking us down a single path to the exact point where we were. What we needed to do now was to get back down to the planet and attempt to formulate a cure for the vines, and for the people. For that we would need samples of the vines. Wait.

"Captain? Have they finished clearing out the materials from that hut?"

"I believe they are still working on that, Elizabeth, what are you thinking?"

"Where are they securing the things they are taking? They had samples of the bark, I was hoping there were also pieces of the vines."

"Lieutenant Dalton will contact you if they come across anything. They will be sorting through the items now."

"All right, Captain."

I went into my office, to be alone to think. The stars were moving outside the window, and I wondered when we had begun our journey back. Sitting on my sofa, watching the Galaxy flow by, I allowed myself to unfocus. The thoughts streamed of themselves, the events and discoveries of the past days working themselves out. My fingertips stroked my arm absently, the warm tingling growing stronger as my brain organized the various components into a whole. What we needed was a way to transform the hybrid cells into a remedy for the Hegrioans' decline. In my work as a Botanist Researcher, I often had to cure plant

diseases, but I was not a Medical Doctor. All right, then, treat this as a plant disease. The Hegrioans have plant DNA interwoven with their humanoid DNA. If we were treating plants, we would take genetic material from other plants, perhaps from a different strain of the same plant, to use as an immune booster.

"Captain!"

"Elizabeth? Are you all right?"

"Yes, Captain, sorry. Where are we headed, Sir?"

"We are going back to Hegrio 4 to deliver what we have found, and then we will head back to Earth."

"Sir, could we make a detour on the way? I'd like to visit the asteroid once more." I sensed him, trying to read me. I sent my reassurance, and my confidence that this was something that would prove invaluable.

"Indeed, Doctor. Consider it done."

"How long will it take us to get there? I could use some sleep."

His smile came through in his voice. "Yes, it has been a long day. I will meet you in our quarters."

The timepiece on the wall said Zero Four Thirty. We had been working almost round the clock for days now and I was exhausted. The emotional bombardment was a large part of it, not only the physical exertion. My batteries needed recharging. We would be a few hours in transit to the asteroid at interplanetary speeds. Plenty of time to catch up.

The Ensigns and I cleared up the Lab, leaving the analyzer running. Ensign Parker took a portable tablet with him so he would know when and if the program finished, or if it found something. Then I pushed them out the door, admonishing them not to come back until and unless I said so. They needed to rest as well.

My Captain was waiting for me in our quarters. He had actually changed into pajamas, another sign to me that we all needed sleep. I went through into the Refresh and did the same. We got into the bed, cuddling together, and were asleep almost as soon as our heads hit the pillows. A few hours later I heard the chime of the terminal, but he got up and took the call quietly so I didn't bother myself. His voice rose at one point, the surprise hitting me like a wave, but it disappeared quickly. That made me smile. He was learning how to cover, to protect me. He didn't want me to be disturbed, so I let it go. I could wait. When he came back to bed, he simply put his arm around me and held me as we both fell back to sleep. When we arrived back at the asteroid belt, we were notified by the proximity Klaxon. Not the most pleasant of alarms, nonetheless it was a welcome sound. We were looking forward to this day. We both stretched comfortably, feeling rested for the first time in over a week.

"Ready for this to be over, Captain?"

"I will not be sorry to see the last of the Hegrioans. We will have to find another planet to take our leave next time."

"Next time? I'm still waiting for this time!"

He grabbed me and pulled me closer, rolling on top of me as our lips met. My hands slipped under his pajamas, feeling the smoothness of his skin as it warmed to my touch.

Without moving or letting go, he said, "We still have a mission to complete, my dearest."

"Yes, Captain."

"We need to get going."

"Yes, Captain." I kissed him harder, my fingers digging into his sides. Against his lips, tasting him with my tongue, I said, softly, "I can't get up while you're on top of me, Sir."

His laugh shook us both, and his reply was to crush me to him, rolling us both over so that I was on top of him. "I cannot let you shirk your duty, Ma'am." His hands tightened on my arms as he kissed me again, then sighed deeply. "When this is done, we will have our vacation. I promise."

When the Captain had gone up the the Bridge to check our location and status, I contacted Ensign Parker.

"Any new developments, Ensign?"

"I think we're almost there, Doctor. Your hybridized blood seems to be stable when combined with the pure Hegrioan cells."

"Good, thank you. I will be going down to the asteroid again today. Please keep at it."

"Will do, Doctor."

I contacted Jenny. Her happiness and contentment was apparent in her voice, but she was still holding something back. She was just exiting Commander Quinn's quarters. He had already gone down to the Shuttle Bay to begin preparations, but she had been staying with him. She had tried to keep that from me at first, but then realized that it was all right. She felt badly about not trusting me with that information at first. We had grown up together and it seemed that we had never not been friends. However, things change, life happens, and since I had been married she had felt a bit awkward. Even

around me, the person who knew and loved her best.

"Jen, we have to find time to get together, after we're done here."

"Absolutely, Liz. I miss you. All three of us need to have a talk."

"OK, Jen, I promise."

I met the Captain and Lieutenant Commander Quinn in the Shuttle Bay. The Commander was just finishing running his last minute preparations.

"All set, Sir. Ready when you are."

The trip down to our asteroid was only made more difficult by the motion of the rest of the asteroids in the belt. I hadn't made the trip in the Shuttle previously, I was impressed with our Lieutenant Commander's piloting skill.

"Thank you, Doctor." He smiled back at me.

Our landing was smooth, considering the rocky terrain. Then, the moment I had been dreading arrived. The EVA suits. The Draco was of course fully stocked with all sizes and shapes of the suits, and one had been put aboard the Shuttle for each of us. My suit had been destroyed the last time I had used it, and I had been hoping never to need one again.

But the Captain and I stripped down to our underclothes, then encased ourselves in the ugly, uncomfortable suits and headed out the airlock door. The hatch was still there, open as we had left it, and the lift was waiting for us as well. We looked at each other, almost surprised but not quite, and stepped inside.

The corridor felt longer than before, since I knew what was at the end, and was anticipating the sight of the beautiful cavern. Once at the entrance, we both hesitated briefly before reaching out our left hands and stepping through the force shield. And even though we had been there before, the sight of the artificial sun overhead, and the lake, and The Tree, was still enough to cause us to stop and stare. It seemed forever since we had been there, and at the same time seemed only a moment.

The Tree was still wrapped, from base to canopy, in the winding vines with their flame-colored flowers. The layer of vines was still surrounding the base. We both reached up to remove our helmets, and simultaneously breathed in the aromas of the life around us. I began to unzip my suit. The sudden blackness took my breath away, but just as suddenly my vision returned, and I grinned.

"Well, we seem to be welcome, Captain."

We were both standing in the middle of heaps of the vines, EVA suits gone, clad only in our shorts and sleeveless shirts. The Tree was close enough to touch, and I did. The bark so rough and yet so smooth, the flowers sweetly fragrant against the deep woodsy scent of The Tree. The fingers of my left hand were drawn to the ripples in the bark. My Captain was next to me, touching as well. We both sat on the hard ground, and put our left hands together as the vision appeared.

The sheets of metal, with their complicated equations. The DNA tripled helix of the Hegrioans. The sequence we had discovered, the one that would unlock the language of the equations. And a feeling that someone was out there. A vague sense that the ones who had created the Hegrioans' DNA, who had originally adapted them to their planet, who had developed the technology, were still out there, somewhere. We saw the carvings, the ones from the crate, but the vines were moving. They felt like they were getting stronger, gathering nourishment. The last image was of my office, and the feeling was one of confidence, and thanks.

When we returned to ourselves, we were lying on the floor near the doorway, our EVA suits next to us. And I had a gift. A piece of the rough, deep brown bark, and a long strand of the vine were on the floor, next to my helmet. I looked over toward The Tree, wondering if it knew what was happening, or whether it was truly just a tool of some unknown race of ancient people. But I lifted my hand in thanks, before moving to put the suit back on. We dressed in silence, each contemplating what we had seen.

We made our slow way back to the Shuttle, and were greeted cheerfully by Commander Quinn.

"Welcome back, Sir, and Doctor."

"Ready to go, Commander. Take us home."

"Yes, Sir." He was curious, but asked no questions.

Once back on the Draco, we headed up to Level One.

"Take us out, Commander, to Hegrio 4. The sooner the better," the Captain said, as we passed through the Bridge and headed over to the ready room. He took my hand as we entered the room, and brought me over to sit on the sofa.

"We will be at Hegrio 4 in a few hours and there is something you need to know." He looked at me carefully. "There was a coup on that planet. Our old friend the Administrator is no longer in charge. I think you will guess who is."

I gasped. This was unprecedented, there had never been any kind of revolution or war on Hegrio 4. Then,

relief. "Maverick. Our young friends. Well, I have to say I am not sorry to hear that. If anyone can get those folks back on track, I think he can."

"Once they have your cure, of course, my dear. You will be going back to work, I assume?"

"Aye, Sir." I lifted myself up and moved to straddle his legs. "But you need to do something for me first." My arms around his neck, feeling his hands on my back, body tingling, I kissed him, ever so softly, just barely brushing his lips with my own. I felt his intake of breath as his lips hungrily found mine again. The kiss deepened, as our arms tightened around each other, and our bodies warmed. My skin tingled hot as his fingers slipped under my shirt, lifting the fabric as they massaged my back, sliding around to my breasts. His mouth began to roam, down my neck and chest. My breath quickened as his tongue touched one nipple. My fingers entwined in his hair. Our passion growing, beginning to lose ourselves as we usually do, it was a physical shock when the terminal chimed, then again.

"Sir, Captain Crawford is calling from the Phoenix."

He pulled my shirt back down before answering. "Put him through here, Lieutenant. Thank you."

I got up and moved away so that he could go over to the desk. The terminal lit with a display of Captain Crawford, an older gentleman, distinguished-looking, impressive.

"Captain Bianchi. I am afraid I have some disturbing news for you. One of our captives has escaped."

I went cold. I had a horrible feeling that I knew what he was going to say next.

"Tell us what's happened, Captain Crawford." My Captain was feeling that he didn't want to hear the news. If his counterpart on the Phoenix could feel what I could, he might have been a bit more tactful in his manner. The anger flowed over me like a splash of freezing cold water. The hairs rose on my arms.

"Peter Knowles has vanished. We don't know how it happened, but he got hold of a weapon and escaped in a life-pod. He must have had some associates waiting in the area, because we found the pod shortly after, empty. We don't know where he went."

Captain Bianchi sat very still. His rage was so extreme that I was frightened for him. He clenched his fists and stared into the display. My heart hurt for him, he blamed himself.

"You could not track him? How is that possible?" His voice so quiet, so strangely calm.

"There was interference, we didn't see where it came from. My Crew is working to find out how he acquired a weapon."

I thought I knew how that had happened, and stepped in front of the display. "Excuse me, Sir? I may have an insight into that."

Captain Crawford turned to me in surprise. He wasn't used to dealing with civilians on his Ship. That was an attitude that I was becoming accustomed to.

"Sir, Peter Knowles is Sympath. He may have been able to influence a member of your Crew. Even a slight push could have led an unprepared person to leave a weapon unattended, or even to have handed one to him. And they might not have been aware that they had done so. Unfortunately, Mr. Knowles has trained himself to use his abilities to the harm of others."

I saw him try to accept what I had said. He didn't want to believe that his people could be influenced that way, but he'd been around the Galaxy enough to know that anything was possible if given a proper opportunity.

"Your input is appreciated, Doctor Thorne. We will look into that. In the meantime, I simply wanted you to be aware of the situation."

My Captain answered, and I could see and hear that he was gritting his teeth. "Thank you, Captain Crawford. You'll keep us updated?"

"Indeed. Safe travels, Captain."

When the call had been disconnected, the Captain stood and beckoned to me. He took me in his arms, silently, and held me tight. He was shaking with anger, his body chilled. I hadn't ever seen him like that, I didn't know how to react. My natural instincts kicked in. My warmth and support, my love and admiration flowed out of me. Gradually, he began to relax somewhat, his breathing evened, and his muscles loosened from their strained intensity. Still without speaking, I led him back over to the sofa and sat him down, and sat next to him, simply holding his hand. We sat quietly together, reaching out to each other, until the proximity Klaxon sounded again.

We had arrived. I didn't feel anything directed at me, nothing at all. Just a stillness, a serenity, underlined with anticipation.

The Captain squeezed my hand. "Thank you, Elizabeth."

"Anything for you, my love."

We went onto the Bridge. The viewscreen showed the familiar blue and white marble that we knew as Hegrio 4. Such a lovely view, such a treacherous, deceptive place.

"Captain? Someone is signaling us from the planet, Sir. He says his name is Maverick."

"Put him through, Lieutenant Masters... Mr. Maverick. I understand that congratulations are in order." The deep voice was tinged with self satisfaction. "Thank you, Captain Bianchi. Is Doctor Thorne with you?"

I looked at the Captain. He nodded. "Yes, I'm here."

"You will have noticed that we have not contacted you, nor interfered with you since you have left. We are hoping that you have been able to resolve our situation, as we discussed."

"I believe we have, Mr. Maverick. We have data for you, as well as what we hope will be the remedy for your people's physical decline." I wished I could have seen his face.

He did hesitate before asking, "When will you be able to meet with us?"

The Captain answered, "Very soon. We will be in contact." He motioned to Lieutenant Masters to end the communication.

Turning to me, he asked, "You will be returning to the Agro-Lab? We need to be sure that you have all of the data organized before we travel down there. I do not wish to spend any more time here than absolutely necessary."

"Aye, Captain. We should only need a short while to get the scans and testing finished."

"All right, Doctor. Dismissed." He smiled a real smile, he was relaxing again.

Ensign Miller was at the micro-analyzer when I arrived back at the Lab. He started when the door slid open, then settled back down. The display showed the newest hybrid cells, beautiful darkest royal purple, spherical and smooth. As the Ensign carefully added a Human white blood cell to the slide, the purple hybrid moved toward it. The immune cell tried to attack, but was unable to get a hold. There was a brief standoff before both cells moved away from each other. It was quite a dance to watch. But it told me that we had done it. The Hegrioans could use this information to formulate their immunization as well as treat the current malaise sweeping their planet.

Combined with the Records we had taken back from Knowles' base, all the details they needed were at hand. What I had to do was to make sure that we, the Federation, had proper copies of those Records. We could not afford to let this opportunity slip away. Especially since it seemed that there was an unknown race of aliens out there who had the power to create, or at the least, alter the evolution of an entire planet. Someone had developed, modified, engineered the vines, The Tree, the very DNA on which all life on Hegrioa was based. It was almost inconceivable in scope. We had to be prepared, there was not a chance that Humans would never again come across their work, and it was quite possible that they knew about us and our efforts, now that we had disturbed one of their projects.

So we scanned all of the metal sheets, and I made certain that they were properly transcribed into our terminals. The actual translations would have to wait, but since I had the cipher running through my veins, and the Captain did as well, we had time for that. It took quite a while to get the scanning finished, but eventually it was done. I stood and stretched, reaching out to my Captain, letting him feel my assurance that we had everything we needed.

The Ensigns and I repacked the crate, neatly stacking all of the sheets. We had no way, at the moment, to tell what order to put them in, we just wanted to be sure they were not damaged in any way. As the lid of the crate was closed, I had a slight feeling of sadness, of regret that we wouldn't be around to see the fruits of our labor. But when the Captain sent me his warm acknowledgement, it didn't seem to matter any more. And I knew that we would always be connected to this place, perhaps sometime in the future we would be back.

We moved the crate out to the lift for transport to the Shuttle Bay. After thanking my team, and releasing them from their duties for the rest of the day, I entered the lift and directed it to Level Fifteen. When the door slid open, I was met by two MPs, who took possession of the cart and began to move it into the Bay. There was another presence behind me.

"Liz!" Jenny was vibrating with excitement.

"Jen. What are you doing here?"

She straightened her face, trying to be serious, then broke into a huge smile. "Mr. Lieutenant Commander Mark Quinn has asked me to marry him. What do you think about that?"

I grabbed her and swung her around. "That's wonderful! Congratulations! I mean, assuming you said yes, of course."

"Of course I said yes! He's perfect, you know. You were right. As usual." She was remembering when I had first been asked aboard the Draco, and I had told her that Mark Quinn would be good for her. She hadn't believed me at the time. Things had indeed changed, not long ago she would never have admitted that she had been wrong about a man.

She hugged me, and kissed my cheek. "You'll stand up for me, right?"

"Naturally, Jen. When is the big day?"

"We can't set a date yet, not til we're done here. But soon. I just wanted you to know right away. I know you have to go now."

"Sorry, but yes, I do. We'll talk later."

She backed away, and blew kisses at me as I turned to the Shuttle Bay door. Her joy and excitement followed me, warming me. As the door slid open and I saw my Captain standing there waiting for me, my heart swelled with my love for him, and his for me. And Commander Quinn's emotions were running high as well, his affection for Jenny uppermost in his mind. Until the Captain spoke.

"Ready, my dear? The crate is already aboard and secured."

"Yes, Captain. Ready."

The Shuttle took off, smoothly as ever, heading into the atmosphere. Commander Quinn's piloting skills are impeccable, I never felt any disturbance or any jarring as we completed reentry and flew down to the continent. We didn't land on the island, we set down on the beach next to the compound across the bay. There was a large gathering of Hegrioans waiting for us. They were all fairly young, and all had the



same confident, satisfied attitudes. Their leader, of course, was our friend Maverick, and he came forward as we exited the Shuttle.

"Welcome. We greet you in peace, and with thanks." He bowed to me, then to the Captain. "We wish to offer apologies for our methods, we did not know that Earth Humans would be so willing and able to assist us without being forced." His mind was clear. There was absolutely no deception. We were finally seeing his truth.

The Captain motioned to Sergeant Anderson to bring out the crate.

"Mr. Maverick. We have a great treasure for you. We cannot call it a gift, it is not ours to give. It is yours, your people's, we merely discovered its location."

The crowd went still and silent as the MPs brought out the huge crate. They recognized the carvings, the symbols. When it was placed on the ground in front of Maverick, he took in a sharp breath.

"I have no words to express the gratitude of my people, Captain. This is almost unbelievable. After so many generations, to be given back the knowledge that was hidden from us is indeed a gift we cannot ever thank you enough for." His purple eyes turned to me. "Doctor Thorne, I am loathe to detract from this historic moment, but you did say that you had a cure for our bodies as well?"

"We do. It is indeed part of and an extension of what you have here." I pointed to the crate. "We have data for you that will allow you and your crew to translate the Records, as well as samples of newly created hybrid cells that can be used as the cure. I have prepared instructions on how to fabricate and replicate the hybrids. The means to help yourselves is all there, see that you make good use of it." I still felt sad. We had worked so hard to unlock the secrets, to unwind the helices, it was difficult to leave the process in someone else's hands. "And, we believe that once you have set the treatment in motion, the balance will return to the plants as well. Your interference in the workings of the ecosystem here can be overcome, once you have initiated this plan."

As a career Botanist, I had never come across a humanoid, or even a single-celled organism, before, that was part animal and part plant. Much less likely than that, was the fact that those plant/animal combinations were tied to the very existence of the planet itself. Even though these people had manipulated us for years, had put me and my husband in grave danger, and had interfered with the workings of our Federation, I was almost sorry that we would be leaving immediately. This was something that might not be repeated anywhere else in the Galaxy. I felt my Captain's warmth flowing into me as he reassured me that we would not let this drop, that I would be able to continue my research. But not here.

And, I reminded myself, there was still the issue of the aliens who had done the original manipulations. They were out there somewhere, perhaps waiting for us. We couldn't forget that. Not only for the Hegrioans' sake, but for our own, the people of Earth and the Federation needed to know more about these powerful beings.

Maverick was speaking. "We would be honored if you and your Crew would stay with us and allow us to show our appreciation. We do know how to throw a good party." His smile, when he let it shine through, was quite attractive.

But the Captain shook his head. "I am sorry but we cannot stay. We have been called back to Earth and must leave right away. However, we will allow you to contact Doctor Thorne, through official communications only," his face was stern, his expression unyielding, "if you come up against difficulties." We shook hands with all of the assembled youngsters, and I felt their determination. They were the hope of their own future, and they knew it. As we turned back to our Shuttle, that fact, added to the appreciation and gratitude washing over me, was a great reassurance that we were doing the right thing. We traveled back to the Draco in silence, each considering the past few days and their possible impact on the future. Our future as well as the future of our beloved Federation Alliance. Perhaps someday Hegrio would join the Federation, and their talents and knowledge would enhance our own.

"Commander Walker, we are in the Bay. Prepare to leave orbit."

"Aye, Sir. We are heading to Earth?"

"Yes, Commander. Make it happen." The Captain turned his eyes to me. "Before you ask, we are called to Earth for the Advocacies. The thugs we captured will be Advocated for treason, among other things, not the least of which will be the fact that they incited the unrest and the skirmishes all over our Galaxy for the past few years."

I let out my breath in a long sigh. We had testified at Advocacies before, and I had found that the participants tended to be more interested in me and my talents than the actual reason for the trials. Oh well, it had to be done in order to put this to rest. I was not looking forward to those events, but my Captain would be with me every step of the way.

And afterwards, I promised myself, we would have our vacation.

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