

BUTTERFLY SCALES

By

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Prologue

May 7, 2038 Tampa, Florida

“She's *what?*”

“She gone, Vince. Been lookin' everywhere for the last two hours,” said Jamal.

“Kyra's been gone for two hours and you just now calling me? No--save it. Where you at?” He ran a large hand over his close-cropped cap of black hair, his face darkening as Jamal reeled off an address. “Stay there, I'll be there in a few.”

He took the corners hard, pushing his Eternity S-5 as fast as he could. Maybe she was just lost--maybe she'd gone to another club and left that loser Jamal behind. He didn't want to let his thought wander anywhere near his darkest fear--that his little sister was the latest in a string of abductions that had been going on in the Tampa Bay area lately. *Please, God, anything but that ...*

The Liar's Club was well off the main strip of Ybor City, Tampa's oldest and most historic district. A few streets away the lights of the main drag were still glowing though it was three o'clock in the morning.

Kyra--she was his baby sister, his only sister. She'd only been two and he'd been fourteen when the drunk driver had claimed their mother's life. The state had sent them to live with their grandmother here in Tampa. Nana Gertie had done a fine job with them both but Vince couldn't help feeling that he'd half raised Kyra himself.

If that fool has hurt her.... He'd never liked Jamal in the first place. Kid was a two-bit player and he already had one minor bust for dealing. All Kyra's talk about Jamal being on the straight and narrow cut zero ice with Vince Roberts. Vince was a homicide detective but he'd spent some time in Vice and he knew that dealers, even minor ones like Kyra's new boyfriend, seldom quit once they had a taste for it.

He pulled up outside the Liar's club and spotted Jamal at once by the vivid 'live' tattoos that crawled all over his upper body. Jamal, or J, as his friends and Kyra called him, wasn't wearing a shirt so the neon orange and yellow tiger that circled his rangy dark-brown torso could be seen plainly, lashing its tail and arching its back when he moved.

Vince slammed the car door of the Eternity S-5 with more force than necessary and was up the curb and in Jamal's face in seconds.

“Boy, I oughta bust your ass for bringing my baby sister to this shit hole this time of night. Where is she?”

“Hey, chill. I *told* you, I don't know. All I know is one minute we're up in the club and then she say she feels sick--all the time sick lately--like every damn mornin'. She came out here to get some fresh air and I followed her only she didn't want me

to see her puke. She went around the side of the building. When I went to get her, she was gone. Can't find her nowhere--like she disappeared or somethin'."

The words sent a deadly coldness to the pit of Vince's stomach. He gripped Jamal by the back of his skinny neck.

"Show me where she was."

"Ow! *Chill*, man! Over there."

The side alley of the Liar's Club was a dim expanse of dumpsters and garbage that hadn't quite made it into them. Vince felt even colder when he saw the industrial-sized green metal bins, dingy and crusted with years of filth. How many times had he seen bodies, usually the bodies of hapless young women who were at the wrong place in the wrong time, buried in bins like these?

"You didn't hear anything? Nothing at all?" Vince shook the little punk and the tiger tat's voice module roared, drowning him out for a moment. He took a moment to wonder how Jamal, who was supposedly on the straight and narrow, could afford the expensive voice module chip--VM--implanted under his skin, which made the sound effect possible to go with the equally expensive 'live' tat when he was working at Burger King. *VM like that'd go ten, twenty thou easy. That's a lotta whoppers.*

"Man, I ain't heard nothin'." The dark face was sullen now, closed like a fist, as though Jamal couldn't understand why Vince was making such a big deal out of the whole situation.

"Look, now!" Vince shook him again. "We aren't talking about you losing your latest toy out here. This is my *sister*, you little asshole!"

"Man, she's nineteen, it ain't like she's a baby. And why you all up my ass like it's my fault?" Jamal kicked a stray piece of garbage into the gutter with one scuffed MoonDock boot.

Vince tightened his grip on Jamal's neck. "Let me explain some things to you, *J.*" His deep voice was a menacing growl. "This isn't the safest place in town to be, especially at three o'clock in the fuckin' morning on a Friday night. I told you and

Kyra that a couple of girls have disappeared from around Ybor lately but you brought her here anyway. So yes, I *do* hold you responsible if something has happened to her.” He shook the scrawny neck fiercely for emphasis.

“I'm going to call for some help, then you're gonna help me look until we find her. You better pray to God she's all right or I'm gonna walk all up and down your skinny punk ass. Got it?”

Jamal nodded sullenly and the ‘live’ tiger tattoo roared again.

“And turn that Goddamn thing off.” Vince shoved him away and went to call for back-up.

* * * *

They searched for hours, set up a perimeter, dredged the dumpsters--over the top for a simple MP case but she was his baby sister and he called in every favor he could think of. It didn't matter though, there was nothing. Vince felt like the icy coldness in his stomach had spread to his entire body. Numb, he was numb.

How the hell was he going to tell Nana Gertie about this? She'd be up and saying her morning prayers by now, she started every morning with worship. She hadn't approved of Jamal either but neither one of them could tell Kyra anything lately. His little sister had gotten so headstrong, thinking she was all grown up since she was due to start at Florida State in the fall. Vince had been worried about her going so far from home but glad that she would be getting away from Jamal. And now she was gone ... just gone....

“Hey, Vince.” The voice broke the closed loop of guilt and fear in his mind and he looked up quickly to see Terrance Chambers, a crime scene tech with bright red hair, motioning to him. The tech's skin was pale and freckled in the early morning light and there were dark circles under his eyes. They'd been searching hours for nothing.

“You found something?” He walked quickly to where the man was kneeling

beside one of the dumpsters.

“Yeah, but you're not gonna like it.” The tech held up a glittering, iridescent scale the size of Vince's palm, gripped carefully in forceps. “Wouldn't have seen it but the light hit it just right.”

Vince looked at the scale, still powdered with the golden specks of 'fairy dust' that made it sparkle, and all the strength ran out of his legs. He slumped heavily to the concrete, feeling sick.

The glittering scale was proof that whoever had taken Kyra was the same sick bastard who'd already abducted three other young women from around downtown and Ybor City in the last month and a half. None of the girls had been found yet either dead or alive.

“It's the Butterfly, isn't it?” the tech asked with sympathy, carefully bagging the delicate scale. Butterfly was the name they given their serial abductor since he always left the same signature, one or two scales from the wings of a Lepid butterfly, at the scene of the abduction.

“Yeah, it's him. That's him, all right.” Vince stared at the concrete, still seeing the plastic wrapped scale in the edges of his vision.

Kyra was gone and he didn't know if he'd ever see her again.

Chapter 1

August 10, 2038 Tampa, Florida

Dr. Laura Albright stepped out of her ramshackle townhouse into the humid Tampa morning. Laura yanked on the door, swearing steadily under her breath, until it jammed closed, knowing she would have a hell of a time opening it again when she got home from work.

She lugged the heavy carry-all bag that doubled as her purse and work station out to the decrepit Mercedes Z-class and fumbled inside it for her keycard. She found it at last and slung the carry-all over her shoulder as she jammed the card into the lock. The card went half-way in and stopped. *Come on, come on ...* Laura jiggled it impatiently and was rewarded by a brittle snapping noise as the fragile polymer card broke off in the lock. *Son of a bitch!*

She hefted the carry-all to the hood of the car and dug around inside until she found her spare keycard. This time she managed to finesse the passenger's side door open and wriggle in, dragging her bag behind her. The effort made her sweaty and tired and she wished she could go back inside and take another shower but she had to get to work.

“Pleashe shtate your deshtination,” the slurred, sluggish voice of the Z-class said.

“Work,” Laura snapped impatiently. Really, she needed to get the Z's voice modulation unit fixed but the damn thing was so expensive even a simple part like that was out of her price range. Her grant paid enough for her to live while she continued her research on artificial intelligence, t not to live very well. She had warned her ex not to buy such a ridiculously overpriced machine but as usual he had gone and done exactly what he wanted. So now she was stuck with the aging Z while he drove a brand new Ford Arctic Raker.

“Shouldn't have given him a no-fault divorce,” she muttered under her breath.

The auto-drive engaged and the Z started with a jolt that scattered papers and her Message Buddy, which fell with a dull clunk from her carry-all, and then chugged jerkily along the street. Laura stooped with a sigh to gather the papers and the Buddy. She didn't know why she even bothered to keep it, it wasn't like her schedule ever varied any more and she certainly didn't care to receive any messages from her ex-husband. But it held all of her work notes handily and she couldn't afford a newer system.

As the Mercedes Z waited to merge into oncoming traffic, Laura glared at herself in the overhead viewer. Tired eyes caught somewhere between blue and green were framed by dark circles--she wasn't sleeping so well lately and the early morning calls from her crazy parents didn't help any. Her Dad always had something new to rant about and her stepmother, Gloria, just egged him on.

Laura's thick blond hair was pinned in a tight roll to the back of her neck and her face looked naked without make-up. Digging in the ravaged bag by her side she pulled out a few color sticks and got as far as lid shadow and lip tint before she gave up.

The Z finally merged onto Sligh and dragged past the battered sign, which read, *Armenia Garden Estates*, Laura's neighborhood. She made a face as the sign slid by. She lived off of Armenia all right but there were no gardens and the run-down row of townhouses she called home would hardly qualify as an estate. Sometime back at the turn of the century before she was born, someone had gotten the bright idea to name all the neighborhoods in town, maybe to help boost tourism. Tampa had gone downhill since then. The rusty signs with their hopeful and unrealistic names were all that was left of the idealistic plan.

The car was headed for Channelside where her lab was located. It wasn't the safest part of town, but it was one of the cheapest. The grant from the University of Tampa wasn't large enough for her to have all the equipment she needed *and* a secure place to work on it. Her main insurance was that the area was mostly deserted and no one would think to look for a woman alone there in the first place. Her back-up insurance was the tiny metal canister of Atomic Pepper spray *Powerful Portable Protection for You!* somewhere in the black-hole of the carry-all bag.

The Z was taking Dale Mabry although she had repeatedly tried to program it to take back streets instead of main roads. Laura cursed its outdated Map-Quest system and resigned herself to a longer drive--it wasn't like anyone would care if she was late.

Dale Mabry narrowed from four lanes to two and the soundproofing of the Z's interior wasn't good enough to keep out the honking horns and curses of impatient drivers caught behind her in the fast lane. The vehicle might be outdated, but when it was new it had been the top of the line, and it still insisted on driving in the inside lane as though it was leading the pack. This was another piece of programming Laura had been unable to change. To drown out the noise from behind her she activated the radio and flipped it to her favorite station.

“One-oh-one-five the *Point!*” screamed a pre-recorded voice. “The station that *ownsthetwenties!*” Hyper-punk suddenly filled the Z's cramped interior, Genital

Menace singing a re-mix of *Girl Scout Cookies from Hell*.

The heavy bass tones filled the car with blue and purple flowers exploding violently in mid-air and obscuring her vision. Laura sighed and switched the radio off as Menace began the second verse. One feature on the Z she *wished* would break was the outdated sound transference amplifier--she enjoyed music much more when she couldn't see it. Besides, hearing songs from her unhappy adolescence suddenly made her feel old. *God, you know you're getting over the hill when they devote an entire radio station to the music of your misspent youth*, she thought grumpily. And on the heels of that, *Get over it, Laura--you've barely hit thirty. You're not exactly ready for the rest home yet*.

Since the Z wasn't even making the minimum speed of one hundred thirty miles per hour she had time to notice the blinking neon sign in the distance and direct the vehicle to exit the road at the Paradise Pancake House. She might as well get breakfast, she reasoned. The commute was taking forever anyway and maybe the worst of the traffic would be past when she finished her waffles. A crooked marquee below the blinking neon sign proclaimed, "Welcome to Paradise!" Laura smiled sourly. *If this is Heaven I'd sure hate to see the other place*.

She deactivated the Z and waited an eternity for the door to swing up and out, reminding herself to clear a space on the passenger side so she could crawl back in after breakfast. That was probably going to be her method of entry into the Z from now on, she couldn't imagine having the money to get the driver's side door-lock fixed anytime soon.

She straightened her navy-blue skirt and white blouse and touched the back of her neck to be sure the thick roll of blond hair hadn't slipped out of place. Then, taking a deep breath, she walked into the diner.

Actually, it wasn't too bad because the place was practically deserted. The trucker at the counter was tired and so was the middle-aged waitress who was pouring him coffee. Other than that there was a mixed group of twenty-something's in the far left corner, obviously trying to wake up after a long night of partying. None of

them were close enough to *feel* and Laura wanted to keep it that way. Keeping her head down, she walked quickly to the booth in the far right corner and seated herself with her back to the wall.

Using a napkin from the dispenser, she brushed away the crumbs left by the booth's last tenant and perused the laminated syrup-sticky menu. Blueberry waffles looked good although she knew the blueberries were probably synthetic--most fruits and vegetables were these days. *Looks like you're carrying a few extra pounds there, darling. You might want to re-consider those waffles--they'll go straight to your thighs.* Laura squeezed her eyes closed for a moment to banish her ex-husband's voice. It had been a full year since she's seen him but he was still pissing her off. She'd have waffles if she wanted too, why not? It wasn't like there was a man in her life to care that she was a size twelve instead of a size six. Or a size two like ... never mind. She sighed.

While she waited for the tired waitress at the counter to get around to noticing her, Laura looked at an old *Time* magazine someone had left curled up behind the menu rack. On the cover under the logo was a picture of a black hand clasping a white one. In the background, surrounding both hands, was a set of iridescent blue Lepid wings, speckled with a golden, pollen-like substance. The glittering gold specks had been dubbed 'fairy dust' by the enchanted media who had idolized the interstellar visitors as soon as it became clear that they weren't planning a hostile, Hollywood-style takeover of the planet. The caption read, *the re-integration of America. Can the Lepids help?*

Idly, Laura flipped to the article. It was old news. The Lepids, short for Lepidoptera or butterfly, the Earth species they most resembled, were also called Butters, Flies or Bugs by the more xenophobic of the tabloids. The Lepids had come back in '34, just after the presidential election, promising peace, friendship and intergalactic trade, not to mention cures for most of the nastier diseases including most forms of cancer and AIDS.

Almost no one got sick or went to war anymore and for the first time since President Williams, the first African American president, had been elected and assassinated, sparking riots across the nation, people in America were coming together again. The 'Separatist societies' like the one Laura had been raised in were slowly losing popularity. Although her father and step-mother stubbornly refused to move out of their guarded and gated community, most people were coming to their senses and being politically correct had come back into fashion.

It was all due to the Lepids, despite the Harris administration's attempt to garner some of the credit, but the aliens who were largely responsible were also largely invisible. The soft-spoken race with their slender seven-foot tall, bible-black bodies and glittering, iridescent wings confined themselves voluntarily

to their ship and a few restricted areas around the world. One of them was MacDill Air force Base in South Tampa, where they had first made contact. Where Laura had first met them.

Every once in a while one of the graceful aliens would make a special appearance with a local or national politician or some CEO of a Fortune 500 company but vocal communication was difficult and tiring for them. For long conversations or mediation they required a human who was 'sensitive' to the emotions of others to interpret their emotion-based language.

Laura, pushed the magazine away with a shiver as the waitress finally made eye contact. *Nopointthinking about it.* The Lepids were old news, the past, and it was better not to dwell on the past. Better not to think about how it felt to be wrapped in those huge, glittering wings, so bright to look at and so cold to touch. Better not to remember the absolute zero chill of an alien mind inside her own.

Up until about a year ago, Laura had been an interpreter for the alien race--it was about the only thing her crippling sensitivity to the emotions of everyone around her was any good for. She and her ex had run a business that specialized in Human/Lepid communications. Since her divorce, she was back to being a plain old freak, just trying to make it in the outside world. *Just trying to sit in a restaurant and order waffles without losing it.* Laura sighed and pushed the thought away.

The tired waitress nodded at her but instead of coming over she yelled for someone in the back. A sullen-looking teenaged girl slumped out from behind the swinging metal doors behind the counter and ambled over to Laura's table, grabbing a cup and saucer with a nerve-jangling clatter on the way.

The sight of the new waitress hunched Laura's shoulders and made her breath catch in her throat. Fatigue was a simpler emotion to deal with than irritation or anger and she could tell at once the girl was a *projector*--everything she felt was like a shout in the ear, a slap in the face. Dark blue hair obscured hooded eyes and she smacked the chipped china cup down on the table in front of Laura and tapped her foot on the sticky floor tiles.

“What'll it be?”

Laura sat back as unobtrusively as she could as the girl's emotions washed over her in angry waves. *Great, teenage angst, just what I need.* It tied her stomach in knots and her craving for waffles suddenly vanished.

“Just coffee, please,” she said politely, hoping to get rid of the girl quickly.

“Fine.” The girl twisted to grab a pot from the warmer on the counter and turned back to slop some of the hot brown liquid indifferently into the cup. It splashed out and puddled on the sticky tabletop in front of Laura.

“Trina!” The senior waitress behind the counter had seen the spill. “Din't I tell you to be careful? Coffee's hot, ya know.”

“*Sorry,*” the girl mumbled savagely. She leaned over, pot still in hand and swiped a handful of napkins from the dispenser to mop up the mess. Her jerky motions caused more steaming coffee to slosh over the rim of the pot directly onto the front of Laura's white blouse. There was an instant, searing pain but it was the scalding splash of resentment, more than the blistering coffee down the front of her blouse that made Laura yelp and jump away.

“Ohmigod, I'm *really* sorry.” This time the girl was sincere but she was also upset. Her mind was a gray/black scribble of fear, anger, irritation and angst. She reached out with the napkins to dab at the sopping blouse and Laura felt a lump of terror slide down her throat like a cold waffle. *If she touches me ...* Touching made it so much worse.

“Excuse me.” Laura shoved her way out of the booth with panicky haste. Behind her the coffee pot dropped from the girl's fingers and shattered like a bomb.

“Goddammit, clean that up!” Laura heard the senior waitress snarl. And then to her, “Hey ... hey, don't you want nothin'? On the house, we're real sorry 'bout the spill!”

Laura kept walking. She could feel the intense interest of the other customers nibbling at her skin like fish in a pond as she plucked the coffee-stained shirt absently away from her burned chest. *Ought to go back, ought to say something ...* But getting out into the clear was more important.

She banged through the double glass doors clumsily, wobbling on heels that were suddenly too high, and went to lean on the dirty white side of the Mercedes Z. Throwing her head back she took a few deep breaths of the muggy August sunshine, not caring that she was already starting to sweat in the humid heat. She felt as though she'd gotten out of a room filled with poison gas just in time, her lungs burned and her body wanted to shake.

Laura straightened up and forced her legs to support her. This was no good. It was stupid-weak. *The girl was a projector, I couldn't help it ... Bullshit!* She shouldn't have allowed herself to react so strongly no matter how loud the girl's emotions had been. *It's my own fault, holing myself up for days with nothing but Artie and the other AIs for company. At least when I was still married and working on the base my tolerance was higher. Teens are always harder though.* She knew it was a lame excuse.

Laura looked down at her sopping blouse. *Ruined.* Well, maybe she had a change at the lab. At least her thighs were safe from the waffles.

Chapter 2

“Roberts, don't make me tell you again to give it up.” Captain Wilcox gave him a frown that would have melted steel but detective Vince Roberts was not deterred.

“Captain, look, this isn't just about Kyra and you know it. Girls keep disappearing and we keep finding scales--there's gotta be a connection.”

“Yeah--we know the connection. Some sick bastard's swiping girls and leaving the scales as a signature. It's the same theory we've always had up until a week ago

when you had to go crazy.” The Captain looked harassed, as usual. There was never a dull day at the Tampa PD.

“It's not crazy. Think about it, Captain. The scales....”

“Are *not* that rare. You can buy 'em on e-bay for Pete's sake.”

“But not cheap,” Vince pointed out. “I've been checking--you can't get them for less than a thousand apiece. Why would anybody spend that kind of credit for a signature?”

“I don't know--to be unique. To get our attention.” Captain Wilcox tapped his writing stylus impatiently on his blotter and looked out the window to the busy Franklin street intersection below. The sound of horns and electric engines could be heard faintly through the glass.

“If he wanted our attention so bad he'd be taking white girls and you know it.” Vince pushed aside a pile of paperwork and sat on the edge of the Captain's plastic-wood desk. “But that's not the kind of girls he's taking. Blacks, Latinos, hell, the last one was Asian-a Thai girl named Ploi Nygen. Except for Kyra and the last one, none of them were anybody you'd miss. Working girls, drop-outs, homeless, unwed mothers....”

“I know all this, Roberts. What I don't know is why you've suddenly decided that the perp isn't human.”

“I never said that. I'm just saying I don't think we can rule out some involvement by the Butters, Captain. It's got to be someone who's got some kind of connection to them.”

Captain Wilcox ran a pudgy hand through his thinning gray hair. “So you're coming in here, expecting me to believe that our pretty friends from outer space, friends who just happen to have cured most of the fatal diseases on Earth *and* stopped the wars in the middle east and the race riots here--you want me to believe that the fucking *Lepids* are suddenly responsible for snatching girls from Ybor and

downtown Tampa? Roberts, will you listen to yourself? You have a better chance of pinning this on the Pope!”

“You're not listening.” Vince kept his voice low and controlled. “I never said it was them. But someone who has access to them has to be involved and if that's the case there's a good chance the Butters at least know about it. Look, Captain, I *know* how it sounds, but nothing else fits.” He frowned and rubbed a hand tiredly over the sandpapery shadow on his face. “You mean you don't *want* anything else to fit,” his Captain said softly. He got up and walked around the side of the desk to face Vince, putting a hand on the detective's broad shoulder. There was concern in the faded blue eyes. “Look, Vince, I see how it is. Kyra was your little sister and you loved her. It's been almost three months. If it's a human perp, well, she's probably gone. But if the Butters snatched her then there's a chance she might be up in their Mother ship somewhere still alive. I understand, really I do.”

Vince shrugged the hand off angrily. “No, you *don't*. But I told you, it's not about Kyra--at least not all of it. I feel like I'm onto something here.”

Captain Wilcox threw up his hand and retreated back around his desk. “I don't have time for this today, Roberts. I just got a brand new double homicide across my desk not five minutes before you walked in. Matter of fact, you can have it.” He held out a plain manila envelope with paperwork jutting out of it. Someday the Tampa PD would get around to using vid-screen clipboard units like the rest of the modern world. Someday.

“Wait a minute....” Vince raised his hands to chest level, palms out. “Captain, my plate is full and you know it.”

“Not anymore it's not. As of now I'm taking you off the Butterfly case and assigning you to this one. I'm sorry, Roberts but you're making me do this. You're too close to the case--you've lost perspective. Martinez and Blanco have been covering the paperwork end of it; they can pick up where you left off pretty easily.”

“Captain....”

“Roberts, I don't want to hear another word. Take the case.” He pushed the file into Vince's hands. “You said you wanted to talk to somebody close to the Butters--here's your chance. This guy and his wife ran HLC, Human-Lepids Communication. The only interspecies communication company in the Bay area.”

“Yeah, I know.” Vincent had a sinking feeling. “Please tell me the stiff isn't Gerald Hoyt. I had an appointment to talk to him today.”

The Captain nodded. “Fraid so. They have an office on Davis Island. Secretary came in this morning and found them both dead, shot point blank and blood everywhere. Called 911 hysterical. There's a black and white already there and the meat wagon's on the way. I want you to go see what you can dig up. These two were prominent citizens, friends of the Mayor, the whole bit. Gerald Hoyt was actually the first guy to make contact with the Butters, *everybody's* gonna want to know what happened.”

In other words, this case is more important than a few low-class ethnic girls that nobody gives a shit about. Vince bit back the angry words with difficulty. Despite the racial tensions within the department Captain Wilcox had always played it straight with him and in a round about way, he was still giving Vince a chance to check into the Lepids. Although with the only 'sensitive' who could talk to them in town dead, his investigation had just gotten a lot harder. Grasping the manila folder tightly to his chest he walked out of the office without a word.

* * * *

Davis Island wasn't far from downtown, where the Tampa PD was located. Vince hopped in the Eternity and cruised over the bridge that connected the small piece of land to the rest of Tampa Bay, checking out the Hoyts' file as the auto-drive took him to their office. Hoyt had a Ph.D. in bio-chemistry but had branched out quickly into Lepid/Human communications in '34 when they first made contact. Vince frowned. How did you go from bio-chemistry to Alien/Human communications?

He hadn't been able to tell much about the man over the vid-phone when he'd made the appointment for the interview. Narrow features, thinning light brown hair and hazel eyes. Gerald Hoyt had been a 'sensitive' but his gift certainly hadn't shown on his face. He had parleyed it into a shit-load of money though, Vince saw. He whistled, a low surprised sound, while he flipped through the cursory file. A condo in Hyde Park and an office on Davis Island--both paid for outright, no mortgage. Of course, sensitives were rare--only about one in five hundred thousand people was the last estimate he'd heard--so he supposed Gerald Hoyt could afford to charge what he wanted for his services.

The homes whizzing by the car's windows began to grow richer and farther apart and then he came to the main strip, an area taken up by exclusive little boutiques and fancy bistros. Beside a real-estate office that was advertising a 'charming' little two bedroom/one bath bungalow for just three million credits the car hummed to a stop. Already parked outside the curb was an ambulance and a black and white with two uniformed officers. One of them, an officer Vince recognized as Liza Rodriguez, had her arm around a semi-hysterical older woman. Her partner, Ben Turner, was talking to the driver of the ambulance.

Vince took a deep breath and blew it out. He grabbed a pair of latex gloves from the box he kept in the dash, slid out of the Eternity and nodded at the two uniforms.

“Rodriguez, Turner, what do you know?”

“We don't know much more than you, only got here twenty minutes ago,” Turner explained, thumbs hooked in his belt. “Didn't touch anything, I swear.” He held up his hands and shook his head. “Bodies are on the floor in the main office, looks like somebody got trigger happy but no gunshots were reported. Also, no sign of a forced entry. The secretary,” he jerked his head at the weeping woman beside his partner, “says she let herself in with a key just like always and didn't know anything was wrong 'till she went in to say good morning. Crime scene guys are on the way, make yourself at home.”

“Thanks, Turner. Good job.” He grinned and the young officer flushed to the roots of his blond hair. He was bucking for detective and Vince knew it. For only being on the scene for a few minutes Turner had gathered some useful information. He'd have to get word back to the Captain, if he wasn't still persona non grata around the station.

The interior of the main office was dim and cool. Vince donned the latex gloves and turned on the lights, steeling himself for the sight. No matter how often he worked a homicide, the first look at a dead body still got him. It wasn't so much the method of the murder that bothered him. It was the fact that a living being had been killed, that the corpse at his feet had been a breathing, thinking, feeling person and someone had decided to snuff out the spark of life that made them unique forever.

Vince stared down at the two bodies sprawled on an expensive-looking Persian carpet that covered the polished hardwood floor. The carpet had soaked up most of the spill but the smell of blood lay flat and metallic in the air.

The man, Gerald Hoyt, had taken two behind the ear and the exit wounds had all but demolished half of his face. The woman, presumably his wife, Francine Hoyt, had taken hers a little lower. Her bird-like chest had caved in with the impact as though someone had taken a baseball bat to her. Shoulder length, silky black hair obscured her face and her short pink dress was torn, as though maybe she'd tried to run away and someone had grabbed her and stopped her. Stopped her forever.

What if Kyra's laying somewhere like that? Vince shook his head. No point thinking like that--his little sister was still alive somewhere. She *had* to be.

On the solid mahogany desk were more signs of the good life. The latest in Net jacks and a holo-phone that had to cost as much as Vince's house was thrown carelessly to one side. Vince picked it up carefully and checked the memory--it had been wiped. Not a robbery then. *This was personal.*

There was a small, framed 3-D photo in a solid platinum frame. It showed Gerald and Francine at some tropical location, probably not local because there was a

cruise ship in the background and the ships didn't stop at Tampa's port anymore.

The faces of Gerald and Francine were happy and relaxed in the picture and when he wiggled the frame back and forth they waved and grinned. A tiny voice chip located somewhere in the frame was activated and Gerald's small, tinny voice said, "I love you, Francie."

It struck Vince that there had to be a good twenty years age difference between them. Francine was nice looking if you liked the tall, skinny boyish type, which Vince didn't.

He started to put the photo back down but something about it caught his eye. Teasing the picture out of the slide-in frame he saw there was another behind it.

This one was an old-fashioned flat photo with no special effects. It showed a woman who was somewhere between Gerald and Francine's ages. She had luxuriant blond hair the color of dark honey and eyes that were an indefinable shade of twilight.

Vince shook his head. Why the double photos? Was the blond woman an old lover? A former mistress? She had a kind of vulnerable beauty that really drew the eye.

He tucked the flat photo into the inner pocket of his jacket. He'd see if he couldn't get some answers from the secretary, hopefully Rodriguez had calmed her down. He'd look over the scene again before he left but in the mean time, the crime scene techs would want to get in here and do some major mapping.

He walked out just as the techs were walking in. Vince saw the red-headed tech he remembered from the awful morning Kyra disappeared, just another number in the growing list of missing girls nobody seemed to give a shit about. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes tiredly. *Can't think like that right now.* Terrance--that was the guy's name. Hadn't seen him in a while.

"Hey, Vince. How they hangin'?"

“A little low and to the left. How 'bout you, man?” Vince stripped off the latex gloves to shake hands.

“I'm here, aren't I? Hey I haven't seen you since the morning your sis....” Terrance made a face and shut up quickly.

“Listen,” Vince said smoothly. “The Captain told me to make this case a priority and you got a sharp eye. So if you see anything you think I should know about....” He let the sentence trail off.

“Sure, man. No problem.”

“Great, see ya later then.” Vince clapped him on the shoulder and moved on.

* * * *

Outside the office he took a deep breath of the muggy air. The sun beat down on his head and he could feel sweat starting under the conservative gray suit jacket he wore. It was barely eight in the morning but the temperature was probably already in the nineties. Ah, Tampa in the summer.

A quick look at the Hoyts' secretary showed that she might be ready to talk. The woman's sobs had tapered off to sniffles and hiccups and she no longer had her head buried in Rodriguez's shoulder. Vince straightened his tie and walked over, trying to look pleasant and non-threatening despite the day-old stubble on his cheeks. *Just your friendly neighborhood homicide detective here, ma'am. No need to be alarmed.*

“Hello, I'm detective Roberts. I'll need to ask you a few questions.”

She looked up at him with red, mistrustful eyes. She was a petite, Latino woman, surprisingly ethnic for Davis Island, which had been rumored to be a hotbed of Separatist activity back in the bad old days. Turning to Rodriguez she said something in hasty Spanish and the officer reassured her and gave her a gentle

push towards Vince who tried to look both authoritative and charming at the same time.

“I see that little café over there is open. How about some coffee while we talk?” He gestured across the street from the office where a French restaurant with a sign in curving, cursive script that read, 'Le Madeline' had just opened its doors.

The secretary gave him another long, appraising glance and Vince knew what she was seeing. He was a big guy, six three and two twenty, all of it muscle. He didn't do it on purpose but he knew that when he was tense or concentrating hard on a case, he tended to frown. The joke down at the station was that Vince could play bad cop better than anybody else just by standing still and looking normal. Knowing this, he made a special effort to smile and look reassuring and then, acting on instinct, he offered her his arm.

“All right now Mrs....” Vince looked down at the petite woman still clutching his arm. Her head barely came up to his elbow.

“Ms. Lola Sanchez,” she said clearly, in accented English. “Come.” She led the way across the street, apparently having decided he was trustworthy. They sat on spindly café chairs in the shade under a large pink awning, their backs to the scene that continued to play out in front of the HLC office.

After ordering coffee, Vince got down to work.

“How long have you been working for the Hoyts?” he asked, taking out a light stylus and a note pad that was linked to his computer back at the station.

“I been with them, with Mister Gerald, a long time. Since he opened up in thirty five. Mister Gerald, he was the first one who realized the best way to talk to the Lepids.” The small woman nodded proudly.

Vince motioned for her to go on, noting that she used the more correct term rather than any of the slang. Lepids, not Butters or Flies or Bugs.

“He opened this business on his own, built it from the ground up and I been with him from day one. I was a friend of his mother,” she explained.

“So what happened? Tell me everything you can remember. Can you think of anyone who might have done this, who might have wanted Mister Hoyt out of the way?”

She shook her head sadly. “I don't know. I just came in this morning, seven fifteen like usual and I see them ... like this ... *Dios mio*....”

Vince was afraid she might start crying again but just then the coffee came. She took a sip and it seemed to steady her nerves. She looked up at Vince. “I don't know who could do this but the last several days Mister Gerald has been very jumpy--upset. He even shouted at me.” Her brown eyes widened.

“He didn't usually do that?”

“Oh no. Mister Gerald, he usually gets very quiet when he's mad. But these past few days....” She made a motion with both hands, indicating chaos. “Then last night, around seven o'clock before I left, I heard him yelling and shouting on the phone and Francine was crying.”

“Do you know who he was talking to?” Vince was scribbling furiously.

“No, the call came on his private line--the holo-phone he just bought. I didn't want to be rude or get him angry again so I just left. Now I think maybe I should have stayed.”

“Tell me about the business. How did it work? Did Mr. Hoyt handle all of the communication with the Lepids?” Vince asked quickly, trying to head off the tears. He made a note to himself to check the phone records.

“He did lately. Mrs. Hoyt did most of it before.”

“Francine?” Vince asked. “Was she a sensitive too?”

Ms. Sanchez looked disgusted, as though the name left a bad taste in her mouth. “That little puta? She couldn't *feel* an elephant if it landed on her.”

“Feel?” The word seemed to have special significance.

“Emotions ... they're sensitives, they sense emotions--call it *feeling*. That's how they talk to the Lepids. See, Lepids can speak to us but it tires them out, they have very low energy. It's easier for them to have somebody translate, somebody who speaks their language, understand?”

Vince nodded. Lola Sanchez became more animated as she warmed to her subject.

“So Francine wasn't a very *sensitive* sensitive?” he asked.

She snorted. “Huh-sensitive to Mister Gerald's bank account maybe. She came to be trained about a year and a half ago. She was a *little* sensitive to feelings, not much, but Mister Gerald thought he could make her more.” She snorted again. “He couldn't. That's how come he ended up doing everything himself once Mrs. Hoyt ... Miss Laura left him.”

Vince reached inside his jacket and pulled out the picture of the blond woman.

“This her? Found it in the office.”

“Oh, I didn't know Mister Gerald still kept this. Yes, this is her.” Lola Sanchez smiled. “A strong lady--a good woman.” She nodded to herself.

“And you said she was *is* a sensitive too?” Vince's pulse quickened. If there was another sensitive in town, another person connected to the Lepids, then his investigation might get a whole lot easier. Then again, if she was an ex-wife she was now a murder suspect. , which gave him an official reason to go see her even though Captain Wilcox had taken him off the Butterfly case. He held back a grin.

“Miss Laura--she's the *most* sensitive.” Lola Sanchez's accent got a little thicker as

she got excited. “*Mira*-Mister Gerald used to say if a dog got a thorn in his paw two miles away Miss Laura would feel it.” She tapped the glass topped table meaningfully.

“That's pretty sensitive,” Vince said cautiously, wondering how much of it could possibly be true. Probably the Butters were just more willing to communicate with some people than others, for whatever reason. He took a sip of his coffee. “So Francine came in and Mrs. Hoyt--Laura ... left?”

“Yes.” Lola Sanchez looked sad. “She knew Mister Gerald was cheating on her. She'd been with him from the beginning too, left her own career to help him build his business. Then when she found him and Francine she said enough, good-bye, see you later. Walked out, never came back.” She dusted her hands together in a motion of finality.

“That sounds pretty serious.” Vincent made a note on his pad. “So, do you think she was angry? Maybe angry enough to do this?” He nodded over his shoulder at the busy crime scene behind them.

The little secretary looked shocked. “What--to shoot Mister Gerald and Francine? Madre de Dios, no! Miss Laura, she's not like that at all. When she found out about Mister Gerald and Francine she didn't even yell or shout. Didn't take him to court and get all his money like most women would have.

Vince raised an eyebrow. “Mr. Hoyt was doing pretty well for himself. You're telling me she just let him keep everything and left?”

She nodded solemnly. “Yes, went back to doing what she did before she met Mister Gerald. Something about ... robots? With the University of Tampa. I'm not sure but something where she didn't have to work with people. She said people made her tired--almost as tired as the Lepids.”

“So what makes you think she wasn't capable of shooting Mr. and Mrs. Hoyt?” he probed.

The little secretary's brown eyes flashed angrily. "Didn't I just tell you she feels the pain of others? How could she stand to kill someone? It would be like killing herself!"

"Mmm-hmm." Vince nodded. *Tell me another.*

She stiffened and sat up straighter in the spindly café chair. "You don't believe me.

"No, no," Vince hastened to assure her. But he could see he'd lost the connection. "I don't suppose you know where Laura--Mrs. Hoyt is now?" he asked hopefully.

The brown eyes were like granite. "Sorry but I don't remember nothing else. Can I go now?"

"Just one more thing." Vince looked down at the notes he'd made, his stylus hesitating over the send button. "You said Mr. Hoyt was very upset lately. Did he pick up any new clients, see any new people that you know of?"

Lola. Sanchez frowned and shook her head. "No, just the usual people. Always big, important people want to talk to the Lepids, trade ideas, maybe technology. And the MacDill people."

"MacDill? The Air Force base?"

"Sure." She took another sip of her coffee, draining the cup. "Mister Gerald, he translated for government people all the time. Sometimes they brought in their own people--their own sensitives, you know? But lots of times they used Mister Gerald and Miss Laura if theirs were busy someplace else. Not many sensitive people around, very special," she said with obvious pride. "Plus that's where they met with the Lepids--they won't come down anyplace else around here. Only MacDill."

"Are you sure about that?" Vince looked at her closely. Supposedly the Lepids were limited to certain, restricted areas but he wondered how well they obeyed those self-imposed limitations.

She nodded. "Positive. The only time I ever saw them was when I went to the base once or twice with Mister Gerald and Miss Laura. That's where they stay. Too many people make them nervous. You can't get too close to them even. Only the sensitives can do that--to communicate."

"Yes, I see. Well, thank you, Ms. Sanchez." Vince got up carefully from the spindly chair and held out a hand. "I'll be in touch with you if I need more information and please call me if you think of anything else." He produced a card with his information on it and held it out to her.

She took the card with obvious reluctance. Vince wondered if it would end up balled in a napkin when he left.

"I don't suppose you have any more information on her?" He tapped the flat photo of Laura Hoyt one more time before slipping it back into his pocket.

Lola Sanchez shook her head firmly. "You leave Miss Laura alone. She's a good woman. She wouldn't do nothing like that." She jerked her chin across the street where the HLC office was still crawling with authorities.

"I see. Well, thank you, Ms. Sanchez, you've been a big help." He wanted to check in with Terrance one more time before he left and then he would just have to find out about Laura Hoyt on his own.

Chapter 3

"Well, well, my man, Vince. Have something to show you." Terrance had an appealingly puppy-like eagerness about him that made Vince want to grin.

"I'm lookin'. What you got?" He lifted the yellow crime scene tape that someone had finally gotten around to stringing and headed back into the office.

Terrance held up a baggie. Inside was a glittering, iridescent scale a little larger

than Vince's palm. It shimmered with gold specks of light even in the dim office. "Nother scale," the tech explained unnecessarily.

"Yeah, I can see that." Vince tried to be gentle about it. "But this guy, Hoyt, he was the main sensitive for this area. Communicating with the Lepids--it was his whole business--so a scale in his office might not mean too much."

Terrance's freckled face fell. "Oh yeah, guess you're right. I just thought you might be interested since this is a fresh one."

"A fresh one? What do you mean? How can you tell?" Something in the pit of his stomach jumped as he came closer to claim the bagged scale.

"Easy." Terrance pointed at the scale now cupped in Vince's broad brown palm. "See the little specks, the fairy dust?"

"Yeah, so?" Vince stared at the glimmering golden specks, which seemed to move over the surface of the scale.

"So? So it's still there. It fades, ya know. Only lasts about half a day. Didn't you notice?"

"No." Vince's tongue felt numb, his mind was racing. The only Lepid scales he had seen were the ones found at the sites of the abductions on the Butterfly case and those had all had the glittering golden dust on their rough, iridescent surfaces. But he had never gone back to the evidence room to see them afterwards, had just assumed they were the same. Hell, he still had the scale that had been found at the site of Kyra's disappearance tucked somewhere away in the trunk of his Eternity S-5 but he hadn't ever looked at it. Just knowing it was there had been enough to remind him of his loss.

"Let me understand this." He took a firmer grip on the scale, feeling its brittle strength against his palm through the slippery plastic. "The dust fades in how long?"

“Well,” Terrance shrugged. “I never really calculated it or anything. But say maybe twelve, fourteen hours? Give or take.”

“Give or take,” Vince muttered under his breath. “Stay here a minute, I want to check something.”

He raced out of the office and caught Ms. Sanchez just as she was climbing into a Mitsubishi minicab. “Excuse me, Ms. Sanchez I just need to ask you....”

“Yes?” She looked up from the tiny interior of the one-person vehicle, brown eyes still dark and mistrustful.

“You said that the Hoyts went to MacDill to do the communication? With the Lepids?”

She nodded. “That's right. That's the only place the Lepids will come down around here. So?”

“So had they been there recently? Like say in the last twelve hours? Could they have gone last night after you left?”

She shook her head. “Oh, I don't think so--they close the base after eight. And before that phone call Francine was saying how she was so tired and wanted to go to bed. They always came early to the office so getting to bed on time was important.” She frowned. “Matter of fact, they hadn't been to the base the whole past week.”

Vince picked up on the expression. “Is that strange at all?”

“Well, they usually went there every day. Always somebody wanted to see the Lepids.”

“All right, thank you.” Vince smiled at her, a smile that felt plastic and wandered back into the office. The scale he still gripped was fresh, it had to be. Whoever had killed the Hoyts had either brought a fresh scale with them or ... *or one of the*

Lepids came themselves. But would a Lepid shoot someone? It seemed like a more human way to commit a homicide but what did he know about the aliens anyway? Like most people, he'd never even seen one except rarely on the vids or in a magazine. Vince shook his head. *Nah-has to be someone connected with them.*

“Vincent? Hey, Earth to Vincent ... You okay, big guy?”

He looked down to see Terrance staring up at him, a frown on his freckled face.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “Listen, Terrance, what was the TOD on those two?”

“Estimated time of death between five and six in the morning, why?” Terrance scratched the back of his neck ruffling his hair like a bright red rooster's tail.

“No reason. Just gotta....” Vince shook his head. “I've gotta get out of here and check something out. I'm gonna take this with me for now; I'll be sure it gets back where it's supposed to go. All right?”

Terrance looked doubtful. “All right, just make sure it gets to the evidence room, man. But hey,” he gestured to the plastic bag squeezed tightly in Vince's fist. “Be careful with that, huh? Don't take it outta the bag.”

Vince had half turned to go but now he turned back. “Why not?” He looked at the glittering scale crawling with golden specks. They almost looked ... alive.

Terrance's face turned as red as his hair and he spoke in a low tone. “Okay, don't laugh 'cause it's kinda weird. Maybe it's just me but last time we found one of those I broke protocol and touched it, wanted to see what it felt like is all. They're too rough to get a print off of anyway, ya know?”

Vince nodded impatiently, wondering where this story was going.

“Well,” Terrance shifted from foot to foot, the soles of his rubber shoes squeaking against the polished hardwood floor. “So I must have rubbed my nose or eyes or maybe I just got a contact high, I dunno. But after I got home that night I got to

feeling really ... strange. I can't explain it. Weird.”

“Weird how?” Vince asked, looking from the scale to Terrance's red face.

“Just *weird*. Like ... I was out of the regular dog food so I had to give my dog this diet my wife buys him, ya know? So as I'm giving it to him I get this strange paranoid feeling that he's *mad* at me. My own dog, for Crissakes. How crazy is that?”

“Terrance,” Vince clapped him on the shoulder. “I agree with you. I think you need to get yourself checked.” He grinned.

“Yeah, yeah.” The tech's ears had gone nearly crimson with embarrassment. “Laugh it up, buddy. Just don't open the bag, Okay?”

“You got it and thanks. I appreciate what you're doing, man.” He gave the skinny shoulder a final squeeze.

Letting the car take him to what dispatch said was the latest address for Laura Hoyt, Vince compared the scales. The one Terrance had just handed him was glittery and alive with the golden specks of 'fairy dust'. The one he'd dug out of the trunk that had been found at Kyra's abduction three months before was dull and lifeless.

One thought wouldn't leave his head. Why the hell hadn't he noticed this before? It was right under his nose. If he even *once* had looked at the scale in his trunk he might have put two and two together. Fresh scales could only come from someone with a close connection to the Lepids or a Lepid itself. And he was currently tracking down the only known person in town that was able to communicate with the Butters. The same person who just happened to be the most likely suspect in a gruesome double homicide.

But I'll ask her about the scales first. See what she knows about the Goddamned Lepids, hell, see if she knows anything about Kyra. Just the thought of it made his heart pump faster in his chest. Nobody was going to stand between him and

getting his sister back.

The Eternity S-5 pulled up in front of a group of townhouses that looked like they might fall over if they didn't have each other to lean against. Vince looked up from the scales and read the nearby banner, hanging crookedly from the nearest house. 'Welcome to Colonial Village. If you lived here, you'd be home by now.'

He walked up the crumbling sidewalk and went to knock on the warped synthi-wood door.

“Hello? Anybody home?” He knocked and rang for about five minutes. The vis-surveillance was busted, its tiny electronic eye hanging limp and dark from its skinny stalk so he knew she would have to answer in person. But no matter how loudly he knocked, no one came to the door. Not even a dog barked inside. The townhouse had a deserted feel, a place closed up for the day and rarely lived in.

Laura Hoyt was not at home.

Chapter 4

Vote Elaine Brushard for President. The Right Choice for the Right Time.

Laura grinned slightly as she caught the holo-billboard's message from the corner of her eye. The candidate pictured was a serious looking African-American woman with graying hair and competent-looking hands folded neatly in her lap. She nodded gravely as the cars whizzed passed, almost too fast to register.

Her stomach rumbled, complaining about the missed waffles. Oh well, she had a box of synthi-apple nutria-bars at the lab. She'd change and get breakfast first thing.

The Z slowed and clattered along the abandoned streets, passing warehouses that weren't used to store anything but dust and memories now. Laura had been able to

rent part of one at a dirt-cheap price. It looked out onto the waterfront and the derelict chemical plant across the way.

The Z slowed to a halt in front of a grimy, metal building decorated with streaks of rust and algae. Laura's lab was in the front of it, in what had used to be a large office when the company that owned the warehouse was still a going concern. It had privacy, electricity and air conditioning, a must considering the delicate equipment she was working with. The front door, a wide, sliding metal plate that banged loudly when opened or shut was already standing ajar.

Laura frowned to herself. She would really have to talk to Artie about that--tighten up his programming. Artie was her experiment into the ramifications of giving an AI-an artificial intelligence-free will. He wasn't a robot per se, more just a personality that she constantly tinkered with that happened to live in a self propelled, solar powered shell. He was allowed to come out in the morning before the sun got too unbearable to re-charge himself but Laura had asked him not to leave the door open.

Laura's first field of study in college before she had gotten into Lepid /Human relations with Gerald had been communications. In a way, her choice of major was a strike against both her disability and the way she'd been raised. She could still hear her parents' voices as she dragged her boxed things down the curving spiral staircase of the palatial home her father owned in Heron's Point. The Point, as the locals called it, was a gated Separatist community located in Zephyr Hills that gave the word 'exclusive' new meaning. Only the very rich and the very white need apply to live there.

“You'll never make it, Laura. How do you expect to get along in the outside world with your disorder?” Her father, a tall, patrician man with iron gray hair had stood at the foot of the stairs and glared disapprovingly.

Then her step-mother, Gloria, a tiny woman with bleached blond hair and poison-green eyes had chimed in. “Sweetie-pie you're just too *delicate*. And it's not safe out in the world for a pretty girl like you. Just think about the kind of *people* you might run into ... you know what I mean.”

Laura had known well enough exactly what her step-mother with her fake sugar-and-spice Southern accent meant. But she also knew that she had to get out of

there, get away to the world outside Heron's Point where the air wasn't filled with hate and mistrust. She had moved out and gone to USF on a scholarship her friend and mentor Judy Candis had helped her get. It had covered her books and tuition and she had worked in the college bookstore to earn the money for rent and food.

It amazed her now when she thought back on it. How had she been able to endure all those horribly loud teenage and young adult emotions? It hadn't been easy. Sometimes she'd gone back to her dorm at night, taken a tranquilizer and put a pillow over her head, just trying to deaden the impact of the hundreds of living, breathing, angsty beings around her.

She couldn't do that now, Laura was sure. She sighed as she wiggled out of the Z, dragging her carry-all behind her. The hot sun hit her immediately like a blow from a golden hammer. The humidity made the wisps of hair that had escaped the severe bun at the nape of her neck curl into tiny corkscrews. Barely past nine o'clock and it was already scorching.

Laura thought about the ridiculous incident at the pancake house. She didn't know if contact with the Lepids for so many years had sharpened her senses and increased her disability somehow or if her tolerance was simply low from having isolated herself for the year since her divorce. But just the thought of going out in the world on a regular basis again, of so many bodies and emotions crowding around her gave her the same, shattering feeling of dread and nausea a claustrophobic looking into a tight, narrow closet might feel.

Back then, in her late teens and early twenties sheer willpower had carried her through. She had felt particularly triumphant when she declared her major in Communications. *Communicating, talking to other people, being with other people, all kinds of people, black, white, gay, straight--take that Dad and Gloria. Here's what I think of your prejudice. Here's what I think of your idea that it would be nice to lock me up and keep me safe, like some kind of mutated, freakishly sensitive pet that has to be contained for its own good.*

But she supposed her parents had gotten the last laugh in the end. She had been a Communications major but her minor was in Artificial Intelligence. Eventually, the two areas had merged. So who did she end up communicating with? AIs with

no real personality, no real emotions to bother her. Working out here in an abandoned warehouse on a grant she had been able to scratch out of the University of Tampa science department when her marriage went to hell.

And now that Judy was dead she had no one to talk to but her parents who seemed to be getting crazier and more rabidly Separatist by the day and Artie, the clunky little AI she had built herself. Gerald she hadn't spoken to since she'd left him and Francine to their own devices a year ago. She might be lonely but she wasn't *that* lonely.

“Artie?” Laura walked up the incline to her lab, unbuttoning her coffee-soaked blouse, not caring that she was outside in full view. There was no one to see her here but the little AI unit. Where was he anyway?

Laura shrugged off the stained blouse and draped it over her arm, taking a moment to enjoy the light on her bare shoulders and the tops of her breasts. Her white bra had some coffee stains as well but she would just have to live with that.

She pushed at the sliding metal door and was rewarded with a squealing, grating noise that made her wince. She needed to get some oil for that, it was a wonder Artie was able to open it by himself at all. The self-propelled casing he lived in wasn't endowed with that much strength.

“Artie?” she called again. The lab was dim and the air conditioner was on full blast, causing her bare to break out in a rash of chillbumps. Laura shut the door and walked further into the lab, dropping the stained shirt and the heavy carry-all on a convenient chair. Only a few of the overhead lights were on, she usually tried to only turn on the ones over her current project to save on the electric bill. The lab was very quiet. Artie should have greeted her by now. Laura looked around anxiously for the familiar dull silver gleam of the little AI's shell.

Suddenly, she stiffened. There was something ... someone ... A tendril of emotion caressed her nerves. Agitation, excitement, anger, interest ... *sexual* interest slid in a slow-motion current against her fear-tightened skin. *Someone here in the lab ... who ... how ... ?* Her eyes searched frantically, combing the pools of shadow in the

far corners of the dim room, seeing nothing but darkness.

“Artie?” Her voice was breaking now with tension, with terror. Laura backed slowly away to the chair where she'd left her carry-all. .

“Artie, where are you?” She listened for the clinking slide of his wheels against the scarred tile floor but heard only her own breathing, heavy and harsh in the gloom. Then a shadow detached itself from the pool of darkness at the far end of the room and came towards her. Immediately the red snarl of emotion grew stronger, rubbing against her like a rough hand on bare, sensitive skin.

“If you're looking for your little metal friend, I think he's out gettin' some sun.” The voice was deep, textured rough like a low, purring growl. A man's voice.

“Who ... why...?” Laura fumbled with numb fingertips through the contents of the bag trying to find her atomic pepper spray by touch, never taking her eyes from the huge man coming towards her from out of the shadows.

“I'm glad I caught you,” he said, his voice a rumble of pure menace. “I have some questions to ask you. Some questions only you can answer.”

Chapter 5

“Who are you and what do you want?” Finally her searching fingertips found the cool metal of the Atomic Pepper--spray and the feel of it in her hand boosted her confidence.

“I'll ask the questions for now.” He took another step forward and she was able to see his face. Hard brown eyes glared down at. They were set wide in a dark face with strong features and high cheekbones. A full, red mouth was compressed to an angry, narrow line and his emotions kept *pushing* at her relentlessly. But even the red snarl of angry thoughts crowding her like passengers in a teeming subway couldn't distract Laura from one thing.

Black, he's black ... Against her will, every single awful thing her father and Gloria had ever warned her would happen to her if she moved out of their house in Heron's Point came back in a rush. *Kidnapping, murder, rape ...*

“Stay away from me.” Laura gripped the metal canister in her palm more tightly, her forefinger tracing the trigger button with panicky care. Her rational mind knew it was stupid to think this way. She was no more likely to be raped by a black man than a white one. But in a moment when her body was in full fight or flight mode and she was half-naked with the strange man in her lab, her rational mind wasn't exactly in control.

“Listen, I'm not going to....” He took another step forward and Laura's instincts took over.

She pulled the metal canister out of her carry-all and depressed the trigger button in one fluid move, shooting him full in the face with a concentrated blast of....

“Ow! What the *fuck*?” His eyes were red but he was still coming. Laura stood frozen to the spot. The canister of Atomic Pepper Spray had boasted of peppers genetically engineered to be five hundred times hotter than food-class ones. Why wasn't her attacker dropping to the floor, puking and screaming and clawing his eyeballs out?

“My ... my spray must be defective.” It wasn't until he rolled his red but fully functional eyes at her that Laura realized she had spoken aloud.

“Oh no, it's workin' just *fine*.” He snatched the canister from her limp fingers in a move so fast it was just a blur. “I feel fresh and feminine all over right about now.” He turned the metal cylinder on its side and showed it to her.

“Oh my God.” She had squirted him with her lavender-scented feminine deodorant spray. Laura felt herself blushing from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes. Great, she was about to be raped by this huge man and all she could do in her own defense was to give him a face full of what her friend Judy used to call 'coochie perfume'. *Great going, Laura. Why don't you just shoot him with a tampon while*

you're at it? She bit her lip and tried to prepare herself for the inevitable but instead of grabbing her and ripping off the rest of her clothes, the man sat on a high-backed lab stool across the table and glared at her.

“Now that I'm over that not-so-fresh feeling can we please talk?” The deep rumbling voice was irritated and his invasive emotions were prickling against her like cactus needles against a sunburn.

“Not until you tell me who the hell you are and what you're doing in my lab.” Laura crossed her arms over her chest, trying to look imposing despite the fact that she was still halfway to being topless. Thank goodness she had decided not to remove her coffee-stained bra as well.

“Fine.” He sighed heavily and she felt his emotions calm a little. “I'm detective Vincent Roberts, Tampa PD.” He held out a large, brown hand.

“I don't shake hands.” Laura said shortly. “ID?”

The dark face grew darker and he withdrew the offending hand. Silently he reached into the inside pocket of his well-tailored gray sports coat and withdrew a real leather case, flipping it open to show a dull silver badge.

Laura, who wouldn't have known a real police badge from a forgery if it bit her on her unmentionables, nevertheless made a show of studying it carefully. At last she looked up, meeting the hard brown eyes as calmly as she could.

“All right. What do you want?”

“Your help,” he said. “In an official investigation. What do these mean to you?” From a side pocket he withdrew a couple of plastic bags and laid them on the lab table in front of her.

Laura studied the two Lepid scales closely, one gleaming with dust and the other dull and dry. Was this some kind of a trick question? Everybody knew that the wings of the Alien visitors were made up of the glittering, iridescent scales. It was

common knowledge. What was he trying to prove?

“They're Lepid scales,” she said at last, poking the fresher one with a forefinger.

“Look closer.” His voice was an authoritative growl that made the hair at the back of her neck bristle. “See any difference?”

“This one's fresh. This one's old.” Laura pointed from the glittering scale to the dull one. “What are you trying to prove, *detective*?”

“Just trying to establish that you know the difference.”

“Anybody who knows anything about Lepids could have told you that.”

“But not just anybody would have access to fresh scales like this one. You agree?”

Laura shrugged. “I suppose. Where did you get these?”

“Did you know there have been a rash of disappearances in the Bay Area lately?” he asked, not answering her question. “Girls taken. Mostly from around downtown and Ybor city. At each scene one or two of these scales--*fresh* scales were found.” He tapped the fresh scale and the glimmering sparks on its surface seemed to move in agitation at the touch behind the plastic.

“No, I didn't. What does it have to do with me, please?” Laura made her voice as cold as possible. It was clear he was accusing her of something although exactly what wasn't clear yet.

“Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. How hard would it be for you to get your hands on fresh Lepid scales, Mrs. Hoyt?”

The name stung like salt in a wound. “My name is Albright--Dr. Laura Albright--and I would *appreciate* being addressed correctly.”

“Mmm.” He looked at her appraisingly and she could feel a cold sort of interest

coming from him, an ice-cube down her spine. “My apologies, Dr. Albright. Now answer the question.”

Laura took a deep breath. She was really getting chilly in the heavily air-conditioned lab but she refused to let him see her shiver. She crossed her arms more tightly across her chest and his eyes followed the gesture, making her feel vulnerable, naked. Under the cold interest there was a darker emotion coming from the huge man. Desperation--it burned like acid on her tongue. Why?

She slid off her stool and went to the far wall where several white lab coats were hanging from a pegboard. Grabbing a coat, she slipped it on and turned to face him.

“It would be impossible for me to gain access to fresh scales. I haven't been to the base in over a year and since that's the only place the Lepids come to earth around here I haven't had any contact with them either. If you want to verify my statement please feel free to check the base logs.” Laura lifted her chin defiantly.

He looked dissatisfied and she had the feeling he would definitely be checking the records. “I need your help to interview one of the Lepids,” he said abruptly, his desperation stinging her again. “These abductions-- we're up to eleven girls missing now. Someone close enough to get fresh scales has to be involved. Maybe even the Lepids themselves.”

“That's impossible, the contact rooms are closely guarded. It's not like there are piles of fresh scales just lying around all over the place.” She thought of the scaly touch of those enfolding wings, the cold, alien desert of a Lepid's mind merging with her own and shuddered. “Besides, I don't do that anymore. I haven't for over a year.”

The detective's face hardened. Desperation turning to anger. “I suppose those missing girls don't mean much to you. Just wanna be left alone. Is that it?”

“As a matter of fact it is.” His anger prodded at her like a sharp stick.

“Ask my ex-husband, Gerald Hoyt. He specializes in Human/Lepid

communications,” she said. “Gerald was always civic-minded. I'm sure he'd love to help.”

“I'm sure he would.” The deep voice was rough, sarcastic. “Unfortunately he can't. Around five o'clock this morning someone put two bullets in his head. That tends to kinda fuck up your communication skills, wouldn't you agree?”

“*What?*” Her mind felt numb and she couldn't seem to get a deep enough breath. She came back to the table and had to hold onto it for a moment for support.

“I said he's dead. He and the current, or should I say the *late* Mrs. Hoyt.” He threw the information at her like a jagged brick. “Where were you around five o'clock this morning, Dr. Albright?” The dark brown eyes were almost black with the intensity of his focus. Laura felt the biting sting of his satisfaction.

“Surely you don't think that I...” She lifted a hand to her chest.

“I don't know what to think until you tell me where you were.”

“I ... I was at home, of course. I live in a townhouse in Colonial Village. It's a complex in Armenia Garden Estates.”

“Can anyone verify that?” he asked smoothly. “Roommate, friend, lover?”

Laura flushed. “I live alone. But....” Her numb mind seemed to be thawing. “But I was up at that time. I was talking to my father on the phone. He lives out in Zephyr Hills, at Heron's Point.” The minute the information was out of her mouth she wished she could call it back but it was too late. Detective Roberts' face hardened further and she could feel his disgust like biting ants marching along her skin.

“I see,” he said succinctly. “I can have the phone records checked, you know that.”

“I know.” Laura had begun to feel miserable. She sank back onto the lab stool. She wanted to shout that he didn't know her, didn't know anything about her. But a

look at those hard brown eyes told her any protests would be useless. It made her feel angry, guilty.

He stood up smoothly, a graceful move for such a big man and gathered the scales in their plastic bags from the sterile lab table. Reaching into his pocket again, he withdrew a plain white card and laid it in front of her.

“In case you think of anything else. We may need you to come down to the station and be printed.”

Laura looked at the card without touching it. It had his name in plain black script and a work and vid-cell number. “My prints are on file at MacDill.”

His anger suddenly flared again, a wash of hot rage that slapped over her like the boiling coffee had that morning. Striding around the table he leaned over her, one large hand on either side of the stool's high back. Crowding her, boxing her in. She could hear the wood creaking beneath his fingers.

“I’m not asking you, Doctor Albright, I’m telling you. Don’t leave town for a while.” His deep voice was harsh and he was so close she could smell his cologne, something spicy and hot, like his emotions. His fury would burn like a blowtorch if he touched her bare skin.

Laura flinched back. “*Don't touch me.*”

He withdrew at once, hot rage turned to icy distain in a heartbeat. “Don't worry, I won't.” He jerked his head at the card he had left for her. “You better hang on to that. Give me a call if you think of anyone else who might have access to fresh scales. By the way, this,” he held up the fresh scale so that the dust that coated it glittered in the dim light. “Came from the HLC office--from the scene of your ex-husband's murder.”

“Where did you get the other one then?” Laura challenged. She felt angry, assaulted, though he had never laid a hand on her.

A look of pain twisted his dark face and was gone. It happened so quickly she would have thought she imagined it if she hadn't felt the sharp, stabbing spasm

between her ribs that accompanied his expression.

“It was left at the site of one of the abductions,” he said shortly. “The fourth one.” He turned to go, his broad shoulders tense in the confines of the gray jacket and then turned back for a moment. “I'll be checking your story, Dr. Albright. I suggest you watch yourself.”

“Check all you want. I have nothing to hide,” Laura flung back at him.

“That's not what I meant.” He turned to go again, sliding the heavy, metal door aside with a creaking squeal one handed as though it weighed nothing. He looked back at her, brown eyes blazing with emotion so cold it burned her. “I meant that if your story checks out and somebody else is responsible for offing your ex and his wife, you might be next.”

He left, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 6

A Separatist. No wonder.

Vince slammed his hand against the padded dash of the unoffending Eternity in a spasm of fury and then forced himself to calm down. All right, so she was what she was, but Laura Albright still might be the key to his case. He would just have to deal with it. In the mean time he had some checking to do.

“Station,” he told the car and waited impatiently while the auto-drive hummed into life. First he would put in a call for the phone records of HLC and try to find out who had Gerald Hoyt so upset just hours before his death and then he would run down the phone number for Dr. Albright's father. Vince grimaced. That was certain to be an interesting conversation.

* * * *

“Albright residence, who may I ask is calling?” The man on the vid-phone was probably a well preserved sixty but he was starting to look his age. Dark circles were prominent beneath severe gray eyes and his hair was neat and short, the color of old iron.

“Detective Vincent Roberts of the Tampa PD. Need to ask you a few questions, sir.” Vince held up his badge so the ocular receptor could pick it up clearly. He had considered making this a blank call, not letting the man see his face--he might get more information that way. But the bass in his voice would have given him away anyway.

Albright leaned forward, peering at the screen in front of him and then pulled out a pair of old-fashioned glasses from the front pocket of his shirt and put them on. His eyes widened at once.

“Who are you and what do you want? I'll have you know this is a restricted line.”

“I know that, sir,” Vince said patiently. “I was able to access your line because I'm a *police officer*. I need to ask you some questions about your daughter.”

“My *daughter*? Is she all right? What have you done to her?” Albright's face had turned a dull puce color and he ran a stubby hand through his short hair in agitation.

“What's wrong, Sugar? What's goin' on?” The new voice belonged to a tiny blond woman with well-concealed wrinkles around unnaturally bright green eyes. She came into view and a look of terror crossed over her aristocratic features at the sight of Vince on the screen. “Who's that?”

“He says something's wrong with Laura.”

“Oh my God!” The woman put a tiny hand sparkling with diamond rings to her chest.

“If you've hurt her....” Albright started.

“Look sir, I just need to confirm a few facts and ask a few questions. I assure you your daughter is fine.” A quick check of the phone records had verified that there had indeed been a phone call placed between the Heron Point residence and Laura Albright's house around five AM but Vince had hoped to get a little more information. Perhaps learn if the senior Albrights knew anything about the murder of their ex-son-in-law.

What he learned, after a few more rounds of verbal sparring, was exactly where Laura Albright had gotten her fearful, touch-me-not attitude and not much else. The ivory princess had been raised in an ivory tower, that much was obvious.

He terminated the call and sat at his desk, looking at her picture, wondering at the vulnerable beauty that hid such an ugly attitude. Well, pretty is as pretty does, Nana Gertie was right as usual.

Vince stretched. The phone records for the HLC were on hold, something about the new holo-phone lines taking longer to access but he had been promised a call as soon as they became available. It was nearly five and he had been at work since six that morning. He sighed. *Long damn day.*

He'd done a shit load of paperwork already and he supposed he'd go through another shit load as soon as the forensics report came in but for now there was nothing else. He decided to knock off for the night. Go see Nana Gertie, she was all alone since Kyra had been taken. Then maybe grab a beer at *Mike's* and relax.

* * * *

“Nana, it's me.” Vince opened the door of the tiny, neat house on South Howard that he had called home since the age of fourteen. He had his own house now, a trim little bungalow in Old Seminole Heights built almost a century ago. Tandy had been helping him restore it before they broke it off and he kept meaning to finish it but now he spent nearly every other night back at the South Howard house, keeping Nana Gertie company.

“Nana?” he called again. She was getting a little deaf and refused to have the laser auditory canal surgery her doctor had recommended although he and Vince both had assured her repeatedly it was perfectly safe.

“Nana?”

“In here, baby.”

Vince wound his way through the comfortably furnished house filled with brightly patterned, overstuffed furniture and found his Grandmother sitting in the kitchen with a cup of coffee. She was wearing a bright purple muumuu and a yellow headscarf. Nana Gertie liked what she called 'cheerful' colors.

“Nana.” He leaned down and gave her wrinkled dark cinnamon cheek a quick, affectionate kiss, then went to pour himself some coffee. “You really oughta get that ear surgery. I like ta yell myself hoarse before you answered me.”

“I can hear when the Good Lord calls my name, that's good enough for me.” She sipped contentedly, then set down the china cup and asked the question he had come to dread. “Any news 'bout your sister?”

“No, Nana.” Vince looked down, adding synthi-creamers to his coffee and stirring it with a finger. “Sorry but there ain't nothin' new.”

“Well, well. You'll hear somethin' by 'n by, baby. Don't fret now.”

Her calm attitude about the whole situation had amazed him from the first. When Kyra had first disappeared he had dreaded telling his Grandmother. But she had taken it with remarkable composure and continued to act as though Kyra was just away at college or visiting a friend and might turn up again any day.

“Nana,” Vince sat down at the tiny table in the sunny breakfast nook and laid a hand over hers. “It's been almost three months. Things ain't lookin' too good. I'm still tryin' but well....” He let the sentence trail off, unable to say out loud that his sister was probably dead no matter how much he tried to deny it.

“Hey now, baby. Don't cry.” She put a wrinkled hand, worn smooth and soft as a baby's with age to his rough cheek and he was surprised to see it come away wet. “I know you're tryin' your best down to that police house, I have faith you're gonna find her.”

“What if I can't?” Vince burst out. “What if she's ... she's....”

“She ain't dead, Vincent, so you can put that thought right outta your fool head.” Her voice was still soft but the words had steel in them, the same steel he remembered as a boy when she caught him in a lie or messing in business he didn't have any business messing in.

“What makes you so sure, Nana?” He took a sip of the coffee to steady his nerves and looked anxiously at the beloved face worn with time and trials. Nana Gertie had been close to sixty when he and Kyra had come to live with her and though she was still active and independent the years were starting to catch up with her.

“I'd know it if she was. I'd feel it in here.” She tapped her chest lightly with a crooked finger and took another sip of coffee. “I ain't never told you this but I knew it the exact minute when your momma passed on. Felt it like somebody stickin' a knife in my heart. Lordy, I like ta died it hurt so bad. Your momma was my baby, you know that.”

Vince nodded. “I know.” His mother had been the youngest of six children and Nana Gertie's self avowed favorite. The baby, just as Kyra had been the baby in their house.

“I had the same feeling when your grandfather Horace passed on and my own folks too, so I knew what it was,” his Grandmother continued. “I ain't had that feelin' yet 'bout your sister and I don't think I'm gonna. Where ever she is, she's still alive, Vincent, and I know you're gonna find her by 'n by. So don't lose hope, hear?”

“Yes, Ma'am,” he murmured, giving her a half grin around the coffee mug.

She nodded approvingly and patted his hand. "You go on now. It's Friday night and I know you got better things to do than pass the time of day with an old lady like me. I got to go get ready for service." She heaved herself up from her chair and shook him off good-naturedly when he would have helped. "Go on." She made a shooing gesture.

"You want me to carry you over to the church?" he offered, rising as well and taking his coffee mug in the sink. "Got my car right outside."

"Lord, no." She clucked her tongue. "The day I can't get my own self to church'll be the day they take me there in a long black box. You go on now, boy. Don't you have some nice young friends to pass the time with? Maybe a new girlfriend? I liked that Tandy girl. Whatever happened to her?"

"Didn't work out, Nana. She didn't like bein' with a cop." Vince frowned and rinsed out the mug with great attention to detail.

"Well, that's her own foolishness then. But you should get out and meet somebody new, baby. You ain't old as me but you ain't getting' no younger neither. Got to start some babies of your own sometime."

Vince sighed. As if he had time for a social life with all that had been happening since Kyra disappeared. "I'll work on that, Nana. Love you." He bent down to kiss the wrinkled cheek again and give her a hug. "You need anything just call me, hear?"

"You know I will. Love you too, baby." She hugged him back, her frail arms surprisingly strong in their grip.

* * * *

Vince sat outside his house but didn't get out of the car. The wide front porch was dark with shadows and no lights were burning inside. He didn't want to go in. It was only six o'clock anyway, too early to turn in for the night. He reached in the

inside pocket of his coat and pulled out the scales in their plastic bags. The glittering scale that had been fresh that morning was almost as dull as Kyra's scale now, the bright golden specks fading as he watched.

Oughta bring these back to the station. Put 'em in the evidence room where they belong. But he didn't feel like going back downtown either although it was an easy ride from his house. He felt the rough texture of the fresher scale, sliding under his fingers through the plastic bag and remembered Terrance's crazy idea about a 'contact high.'

Felt like his dog was mad at him. Damn, that boy has problems. Vince grinned slightly to himself. He unsnapped the bag's seal and slid it out onto the palm of his hand.

Thin and brittle, yet surprisingly strong. He would have thought it was like a seashell of some kind but the texture was subtly wrong somehow. There was some difference he couldn't put into words but that his fingers recognized instinctively. Alien.

The scale put Vince in mind of the class trip he'd gone on in third grade to the planetarium in D.C.

* * * *

The same building that housed the planetarium had held a butterfly preserve, a huge glass dome filled with flowers and trees and thousands of butterflies and moths. His class had been allowed to go inside for a moment since the next "Our Beautiful Universe" show wasn't starting for another twenty minutes. Vince and his classmates had wandered around, delighted at the brightly colored scraps that floated among the trees and flowers in the high, sunlit dome. Everywhere there were signs detailing the different types of butterflies, their markings, migration patterns, favorite plants, mating habits.

Everything had been fine until a girl named Charlie-Ann had started screaming over and over. Thin, high-pitched shrieks, a sound that only young girls seem

capable of making. Vince had been reading a sign that explained how a butterfly's wings were actually made of many thousands of microscopic scales when the commotion started. He had left the sign and run down the isle to see Charlie-Ann with butterflies crawling all over the sleeves of her bright red sweater and screaming hysterically. "Butterflies are attracted to bright colors," a large sign at the entrance of the preserve had informed them. Charlie-Ann must have looked like a large rose or poppy in her bright sweater to the hungry insects. Vince who had been wearing a navy-blue sweatshirt was suddenly glad he wasn't wearing anything brighter.

It had taken a moment for the teacher to reach the hysterical Charlie-Ann and in that time Vince had been able to understand what she was screaming.

"Bugs! There's bugs on me! Bugs! *Bugs!*" She flailed her arms, trying to dislodge the crawling insects. It was then that Vince had noticed for the first time that it was true--that she was right. The butterflies had beautiful, brightly colored wings but their bodies were ugly things, long and black with too many legs and twitching feelers. Repulsive. Alien....

* * * *

Vince shook his head and slid the scale, still dotted with a few glittering sparks of 'fairy dust' back into its bag. He hadn't thought of that day in years. Charlie-Ann had gotten so upset she'd given herself a nosebleed and they had all been forced to go back to school with the planetarium unseen. Hadn't exactly made her the most popular kid in class that year.

A bit of the golden dust still clung to his fingertips. Vince rubbed them together and then sniffed curiously. A smell like flowers hung in a dim, arid room and left to dry came faintly to his nose. Nana Gertie had used to make her own pouperie that way a long time ago. She always said it was a shame to let the flowers' beauty go to waste just because they wilted so soon.

Well, some people would say it was a shame to let a fine Friday evening go to

waste. Maybe a beer down at *Mike's* would take the edge off, help him sleep. Lately he always seemed to be too much on edge to manage more than a few hours. It was getting harder to act like nothing was wrong at work.

Vince gave the Eternity directions and leaned back in the car's comfortable front seat. Take the way he'd yelled at that Albright woman today. That was just stupid. Didn't help anything but he just got so *frustrated*. The only woman who could help him in the city, possibly the key to finding Kyra and she didn't care enough to get involved. Would probably care even less if she knew that all the girls that had been abducted were ethnic. *Goddamn Separatists* ... The bar came into sight and Vince breathed deep, trying to forget about it for a little while.

Mike's was slow for a Friday afternoon. It wouldn't really start hopping until around eight or nine but Vince didn't intend to be there that long. One or two beers to lay down the dust in his throat and then he would go home and turn in early. Get some sleep for once.

“Hey Vince, whatcha have?” Mike, a big bald man with old-fashioned flat tats covering ninety percent of his body, was tending bar. He rubbed a damp cloth over the long sweep of dark polished wood that reflected the lights of the strobing holo-signs advertising the different brands of liquor the bar carried.

“Sam Adams if you got it.” Vince seated himself on the padded bar stool and sighed wearily. He liked Sam Adams because it was one of the few brews that still came in a real brown glass bottle instead of those plasti-squeeze containers. In front of him a twelve inch holo of a half-naked woman making love to a Bicardi Lite bottle as tall as she was winked lasciviously.

“Can't you turn off these damn holos?” Vince turned so he couldn't see the semi-obscene advertisement.

“Can't.” Mike swiped at the wooden surface with his damp rag although he hadn't spilled a drop. “What do ya think pays for this place? Adds like that. Think I make enough sellin' one or two beers a night to tight asses like you to keep my doors open?”

He handed Vince a bottle, their hands brushing briefly and grinned but Vince suddenly had an uneasy feeling that Mike really *was* worried. The emotion prickled along his spine like icy fingertips. But that was crazy, wasn't it? *Mike's* had been here on the corner of Hillsborough and Armenia as long as Vince was remember. It wasn't going anywhere. He dismissed the weird idea and took a long drink of the cool beer.

“Hola, Poppi, como estas?”

Vince turned to see Theresa, Mike's long time bar maid, purring in his ear. She leaned over and planted a cool kiss on his rough cheek that he knew from experience would leave a smear of bright red lip color. He and Tandy had gotten into a battle royal one night about a similar mark from the familiar waitress.

Vince was about to give his standard reply, 'I'm fine, baby, but I'd be better if you came over here and sat on my face,' when he felt a strange brush of *something* over his skin. Along with the warm press of her lips, he felt a sudden rush of darkness, of despair. It was like suddenly seeing the world from the bottom of a long black pit with slick glass sides and knowing you would never be able to climb out into the sunshine again.

Vince swiveled on his stool, , which made a high-pitched creaking noise, and grabbed Theresa's slender brown wrist. The emotion intensified and her almond-shaped eyes widened at the unusual contact.

“Vince?” she asked hesitantly, a tray with empty plasti-squeeze containers and real glass mugs still balanced in her other hand.

“Theresa, you all right? I mean, *really* all right?” He peered at her intently, trying to read the real feeling in her smooth oval face.

The glass mugs rattled together on her tray. “Vince ... I....”

“Because if you're upset, I mean, if there's anything I can do....” He let the

sentence trail off, suddenly realizing that he was making a fool of himself. Mike and two or three other patrons who were sitting at the bar were staring at him with varying levels of wariness and contempt. As abruptly as he had grabbed it, he released her slender brown wrist. The strange feeling of depression lessened but didn't entirely fade. What the hell was going on?

Theresa's face softened and she patted him on the cheek briefly. "You're sweet, Vince. Que lindo. I don't know how you knew but thanks ... it's nice to know somebody cares." The weird dark emotion lightened suddenly and he realized she was feeling a little better since he had expressed concern. But he shouldn't have known about her depression in the first place. Her manners and expressions today were the same as always so how had he ... ?

"Hey, buddy, 'sup?" Theresa turned away, giving him a last, hesitant smile and Anthony Berletti, a fellow detective from Vice that Vince had worked with before his transfer to Homicide, swung onto the stool beside him.

"Uh, nothin' much. How 'bout you?" Vince took a hasty gulp of beer and looked cautiously at the man beside him, waiting to see if he would 'feel' something from Berletti, wondering if he was going crazy or what.

"Oh, you know. Same old grind." Berlietti often went undercover and his carefully cultivated look was that of a bad-ass biker. He had long black hair slicked back in a rough pony tail and a forked black beard to match that was almost long enough to tuck into his worn leather belt. A silver belt buckle the size of a small dinner plate had a 3-D motion generator inside , which showed a confederate flag waving over a dark blue background and a voice chip proclaimed, 'The South Will Rise Again!' every minute or so with tinny fervency. Crude tattoos over the knuckles of each hand spelled out "WHITE POWER."

"Yeah, same here." Vince took another gulp of his beer, waiting. What kind of emotion would he feel or think he was feeling from the big man sitting beside him? Maybe Berletti really was a Separatist or even a White Supremacist. Maybe he actually hated Vince's guts. Maybe he wished Vince was dead....

When it came, it was wholly unexpected.

“You're almost done, lemme buy you another. Hey Mike!” Berlitti took the chilled bottle from the big bartender and pressed it into Vince's hand, fingers brushing lingeringly over Vince's as he did.

Lust ... There was no other name for it. A hot, unwanted wave of it pulsed over Vince's skin like an intimate kiss that was completely unwelcome. Berlettie's eyes, blue and intense lingered on his for just a moment as the bottle of Sam Adams changed hands.

“Ya know, I haven't seen much of you since you got outta Vice.” Berletti's voice was casual but his eyes lingered on Vince's and the warm rush of sexual desire still beat at his skin in slimy, invasive waves.

“I....” The slick bottle slid from his suddenly nerveless fingers and shattered on the bar's concrete floor. Cold beer splashed up to wet his pant legs and his shoes crunched on shards of brown glass as Vince slid from his stool and backed away.

“Whoa, buddy!” Berletti shook his head over the mess.

“Hey, Theresa, gotta spill here,” Mike called and then to Vince, “You oay, Vince? You don't mind me sayin' so, you're actin' kinda weird tonight.”

They were all staring at him with varying degrees of concern and then Theresa rushed over to clean up the mess. All Vince could think was that he didn't want any of them *touching* him, not ever again.

“I ... I'm sorry. Gotta go.” He stumbled out of the bar, the gravel crunching under his shoes, and managed to find the Eternity parked under the big shade tree in the parking lot just where he had left it. Despite the fact that the shadows were growing longer, it was still hotter than hell outside. He was glad for the car's perpetual AC that kept the interior a cool 68 degrees all the time. It was a feature he had paid extra for but also one he considered a necessity living in Tampa.

What the hell is wrong with me? He slumped into the cool interior and managed to give the car an order to go home. Had he been imagining things back there or what? Mike's worry, Theresa's depression, Berletti's ... lust? A cold shiver of revulsion ran down his spine. What the hell was that all about?

There were lots of openly gay people in the department. Even at the height of Separatism, a few years before the Lepids came, the gay community of Tampa had held strong. Had, in fact, begun having mini gay pride parades every month instead of once a year. Downtown had been a mess of posing drag queens and humping leather men from Franklin to Kennedy every third Saturday. But Berletti ... he was the last guy Vince would ever have suspected. Not that he had a problem with it he just didn't swing that way himself....

“Shit, listen to me,” he said and the sound of his own voice calmed him down a little. Maybe he was just tired. He'd go home, draw the shades, go to bed and tomorrow he'd get up early and start fresh. He'd make a run to the station to check for the forensics report, drop off these damn scales at the evidence room....

Vince stopped ticking things off in his head and held perfectly still, oblivious to the scenery of Old Seminole Heights. Rows of huge, ancient trees and early twentieth century homes with wide front porches and screaming kids running through sprinklers whizzed past the Eternity's windows. Vince didn't see any of it.

The scales ... the Goddamn Lepid scales. And the fairy dust ... ! He had done exactly what Terrance had warned him not to. Had taken the fresh scale from its bag, had felt it, smelled it--hell, he couldn't have done worse if he'd *licked* the damn thing. He'd laughed at the little crime scene tech but maybe there was something valid in the warning after all. How else could he explain the freaky shit he'd just experienced?

Vince shook his head as the Eternity pulled up at his house. Suddenly he felt completely emotionally exhausted. Utterly drained. *Gotta get inside. Sleep this off.* Wearily he stumbled up his front porch steps, listening to the creak of the old wood and reminding himself that he really needed to finish his renovations at

some point. He only had the guest bedroom and the second bathroom left to do. Just because Tandy wasn't there to help didn't mean he could live in a half-finished house forever....

He nearly tripped over a pile of tiles that he had been meaning to install in the second bath since before Kyra had disappeared. Cursing wearily, he kicked the pale lavender tiles, which Tandy had picked out before showing herself the door and made it into his bedroom. He barely had the strength to strip off his clothes and crash on the unmade bed before his eyes closed.

Vince's last thought before sleep rolled over him in a deep, drowning wave was that he didn't want to get up again for at least twenty-four hours.

But it was less than six hours later when the vid-phone beside his bed rang shrilly, waking him up.

Chapter 7

You might be next. The tall black detective's words wouldn't leave her mind. Laura shook her head. *It's stupid, don't even think about it. He was just trying to scare me.* But then why had someone shot Gerald and Francine? Could it be, as Detective Roberts seemed to think, something to do with the Lepids? Laura shook her head, dismissing the idea. It wasn't like she and Gerald had been transmitting state secrets or negotiating top secret weapons contracts with the aliens, after all.

Most people probably thought it was a wonderful, glamorous job, engendering communication between the graceful Lepids and the heads of state, CEOs, rock stars, religious leaders and other VIPs that felt the need to have a close encounter of the third kind but Laura knew differently.

In the beginning, when Gerald had singled her out as another 'sensitive' and invited her first to join the business and then his life, it had been all about the benefits they would bring to mankind. The technology they would exchange, the

wonderful cultural ideas that would pass through them, the sensitives, to the waiting world. But after the initial rush of wonder cures and mediation the benefits had slowed to a trickle.

Most of the technology the Lepids had to offer was biological in nature and non-compatible with the Earth's atmosphere, much like the 'fairy dust' that lived on the scales of their enormous, rustling wings. Their wonder machines died, some more slowly than others, when brought down in their semi-intelligent organic ships. Their hive-like culture was so fundamentally different from any Earth society that any exchange of philosophical ideas was an arduous and lengthy process.

But just because the communication with an alien race wasn't yielding everything the world leaders had hoped for didn't mean they wanted to stop communicating. If anything as the benefits decreased, the communication increased.

The Lepids became like an ultra-expensive tourist attraction. It was like the space race in the early part of the century when billionaires the world over were paying to join the Russian and American space programs and go to the moon. Everybody who was anybody and had a few million credits to burn could come meet the Lepids courtesy of HLC. 'Have your picture taken with a genuine ET, find out the secrets of the universe from those who know' ... Gerald had actually had that last crap printed on the latest batch of brochures she had seen before she left.

And it was always Laura who had to go. Laura who had to meet with the A-type assholes, many of whom were *projectors*, pushing their unwanted emotions all over her like slimy tentacles. They all wanted to make contact with beautiful visitors from beyond the stars (more of Gerald's bullshit.) Gerald himself couldn't be bothered with that end of the business because he was too busy with his research and handling the PR for HLC. As the bio-chemist who had first realized how to communicate, he had just enough sensitivity himself to do the job but not enough to really do it well. So Laura was elected.

Day in and day out and Gerald would almost never give her a break no matter how much she pleaded exhaustion and emotional fatigue. Someone important was always coming in to see the Lepids, someone who just couldn't be put off. It was always, 'Oh sweetheart, just keep your chin up for one more week and

then we'll go on that cruise to the Bahamas, I promise'. But Laura had kept her chin up for so long she was exhausted. After a while she felt like a lab animal in some sick experiment, tossed in a pool and observed to see how long she could keep paddling before the water sucked her under.

Laura remembered the day, over a year ago now, when it had all fallen apart. She had been riding in the decrepit Z because Gerald was too cheap to buy her a new car, trundling down South Dale Mabry with a line of angry, honking motorists behind her when she realized she couldn't go on.

She had been blathering all day between Tmm, a particularly arid Lepid and some minor official in the French government who was a self-important asshole and a *projector* to boot. The official had wanted to communicate a lot of cultural ideas that seemed ridiculous to Laura and even more foreign than some of the weird things the Lepids put into her brain. He had kept on touching her to make his point, in the annoying way of foreigners who have too little personal space. The HLC 'Guide to good Communication,' which was given to everyone who bought an 'Encounter Package' specifically stated that the sensitive should not make physical contact with anyone but the Lepid during the communication. Laura had insisted that Gerald put that into the brochure but she found a large number of HLC clients ignored it.

Every time the French official had touched her, he had infected Laura with a bizarre foreign blend of optimism and frustration until she felt dizzy and sick from the constant heavy push of his emotions. And Tmm had been in rare form, filling her mind like a black hole in space from , which even light or ideas couldn't escape. The heated push from one end and the frigid chill from the other had forced Laura to excuse herself halfway through the interview to puke in one of the bathrooms done in stainless steel, the Air Force's idea of decoration.

Riding home in the Z she had wondered exactly what she had accomplished that day. She had made the company a nice chunk of change, credit they never got to spend on anything except new and exciting electronic gadgets that caught Gerald's eye. She had hosted an Alien mind inside her own, an experience that had all the pleasure and intimacy of having an icicle shoved into her vagina. And she had communicated a great deal about the intricacy of French cinema and the wine making industry to a life form from another planet who couldn't have cared less.

In other words, she hadn't accomplished a hell of a lot.

Whatever happened to the benefits to humanity? The wonderful things we were

going to learn from each other? When had she gone from being an ambassador of peace and understanding to a tour guide on the world's most expensive amusement ride?

She had realized then that she couldn't do it anymore. Had decided that she was going to let Gerald have it, give him an ultimatum. He had been training Francine for six months. Laura herself had gone in to meet the Lepids cold with no training at all when Gerald first brought her into the business. She knew that Francine wasn't nearly as sensitive as she was, not even as sensitive as Gerald himself but that was too damn bad.

Digging in her carry-all, she pulled out the antiquated but still usable Message Buddy. Palm-sized and collapsible, it was hooked into the HCL mainframe. It tracked messages from Gerald and automatically updated her on any changes in her schedule. Laura flipped it open for a quick look. Fitzy J, the Godfather of Hyper-punk was coming for an interview with the Lepids tomorrow. Well Francine was going to have to handle it.

She had marched into HLC and thrown open the door to the main office, though Lola Sanchez, their secretary, had tried to stop her. She was ready to have her say but the words had died on her lips.

There, on the solid mahogany desk Gerald had claimed he needed to impress the world-class clients they were trying to attract was her husband and their 'trainee sensitive' going at it like two dogs in a park.

Laura had left and never gone back.

For months Gerald had left voice mails and vid-messages begging her to come back, begging her forgiveness. Francine had even called once and said that it was all a horrible mistake and what Laura had seen wasn't at all what it had looked like. But Laura wasn't stupid. *Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice ...*

No, she wasn't stupid, just incredibly hurt. She had known there was a mutual attraction between her husband and their 'trainee.' Francine was attracted to

Gerald's bank account and Gerald was attracted to Francine's leggy, coltish body-- attracted to what she could give that Laura couldn't. Laura had felt the flares of emotion from them both when all three of them were in the same room but she had chosen to ignore them, telling herself that just because there was an attraction didn't mean either of them was acting on it. She realized that day that she had been fooling herself from the start and it was time to get on with her life.

She had gone back to Artificial Intelligence, the field where she'd earned her degree in the first place. Gone back to the lonely but secure place in her life before the eminent professor of bio-chemistry had approached her after a lecture at USF one day and claimed to recognize her as 'one of the chosen few' who could communicate with the Lepids. Laura had turned her back on HLC and the whole damn mess.

And now someone had killed Gerald and Francine for no apparent reason. The question was why?

“Doctor Albright, would you like some coffee? I will brew a fresh pot.”

Laura sighed and got up from the lab table where she'd been studying the black scrip on Detective Roberts' card while her mind wandered. She patted Artie on his silver dome-like casing and shook her head.

“No thanks, Artie. I've had enough coffee for today,” she said, thinking of the half pot she'd had spilled on her chest. The skin there was still a little red.

“But you have not had any at all, Doctor.” The feeble metal claws waved appealingly in the air. She hadn't programmed him for it but Artie liked to please her for some reason. She would have to give him a task to do or he would drive her crazy with different suggestions making any kind of work impossible.

“All right, make me some coffee and, Artie....” She glanced at the digital chronometer hanging on the far wall; it was almost lunch time. “Warm up the pad Thai I had left over for lunch.” She wasn't very hungry but it would keep the little AI busy and that was the point anyway.

But Laura soon realized that whether Artie was bothering her or not she wasn't likely to get any significant work done that day. Her mind kept returning to Detective Roberts and his dire warning and to the eleven girls he'd said were missing. When she thought about it, she vaguely remembered seeing an article in the Tampa Tribune but it had been short and not very prominently placed. Why wasn't the media making more out of this? They usually jumped all over any kind of serial murderer case. Of course he had said the girls were abducted, not murdered but still....

She picked up her vid-phone a half dozen times to offer to help and even punched his number in but every time the sting of his fury came back to haunt her. And the memory of what he thought she was. Thinking back on the brief interview, Laura supposed that she had probably come across as cold and unfeeling but what business did he have snooping around in her lab in the first place? He had nearly frightened her to death. Artie had admitted to leaving the door open but Detective Roberts, (she saw by his card that his first name was Vincent) could have waited outside until she got there instead of just inviting himself in.

She kept trying to work but her thoughts ran in the same. Around five thirty that evening Laura admitted to herself she might as well go home and try to relax. She wrapped up the work she had been mostly staring at all day, patted Artie goodbye and promised to see him tomorrow. Tomorrow was Saturday but weekends didn't mean much to Laura. She might as well come in to the lab--she had nothing better to do than work anyway.

The ride home in the Z was long, aggravating, and hot. Her air conditioner seemed to be giving out and Laura knew there was no credit to fix it. When she got home, she saw all of the front parking spaces were filled. Cursing under her breath, she drove around back and parked in what the residents called 'the weeds' because the management of Colonial Village never bothered to mow the knee-high grass that served as the back lot or the small thicket of jungle-like vegetation that separated it from the main lawn. *Need a damn machete just to get through here*, she thought, pushing her way through the dense green growth.

While fighting with her door, , which was warped firmly shut, she saw Mrs. Berkowitz, the widow who lived in the townhouse next door, peer out her window and then disappear, obviously heading for her own front door. Laura groaned to herself as she struggled with warped synthi-wood. Back about a hundred years ago Tampa had been named one of the best places to retire and the fiction persisted despite all evidence to the contrary. The row of townhouses Laura lived in was largely taken up with retirees that had spent their pitiful life savings to live in the sun. They were all friendly and curious to varying degrees but Rose Berkowitz was the most persistent--and the nosiest.

“Laurie, sweetie, I'm so glad you're home! You'll never guess what happened while you were gone today!”

Laura sighed and stopped fighting with the door. Mrs. Berkowitz looked like a tiny, frizzy, bright-eyed bird.

“What happened, Mrs. Berkowitz?” she asked, resigned to the conversation. She let the heavy carry-all bag drop to the tattered front door mat and crossed her arms over her chest, which was barely covered by a white lab coat.

Mrs. Berkowitz eyed her state of half-dress disapprovingly, obviously wondering what had happened to her blouse, but Laura said nothing. Now she stood quietly and looked at Mrs. Berkowitz, a silent contest of wills, until her neighbor finally continued.

“Well, now, sweetie, don't be alarmed but there was a man--a big *black* man, you understand--sneaking around your house and looking in your windows this morning. Can you imagine? Geraldine and I were just about scared to death! I called the police but they wouldn't do anything about it. If I had your work number I could have called you but as it was there was just nothing I could do.” Mrs. Berkowitz patted her tightly frizzed gray hair nervously with one hand, the other arm clutching herself around the waist.

“Was he very tall and wearing a gray jacket?” Laura asked, pointedly ignoring the

broad hint. If she gave Rose Berkowitz the number to her lab she'd get even less work done. She imagined herself fielding chatty calls about the weather all day, along with invitations to have tea and rugala and offers to join their bridge club or make a fourth for Canasta.

Mrs. Berkowitz put a hand to her sunken bosom. "You *know* him?" she asked in the same low, shocked tone she might have used to ask if Laura knew a mass murderer she has seen on the nightly news vids.

"I met him today," Laura said, trying to control her irritation. "He's a detective for the police department. He was probably looking for me."

"Oh my stars, *why*?" The lust for gossip was strong in her voice, which ended in a high, nasal whine on the last word.

Laura sighed, and then decided that Mrs. Berkowitz would find out one way or the other. She and her friends read the obituaries the way some people read the best-sellers list and anyway, Gerald's death was more likely to be front page news. "There was an ah, an accident with my ex-husband this morning," she said shortly. "He and his wife are dead."

"Oh my goodness gracious sakes alive!" Mrs. Berkowitz's bird-bright eyes were eager for details and she leaned forward at the waist, one hand still clutched to her bosom. "How did it *happen*?" Her curiosity pecked at Laura like a bird in search of a juicy worm.

"Someone shot them is all I know." Laura seized the door handle and gave a viscous twist. With a high, protesting whine the door finally gave and let her in. "Good night, Mrs. Berkowitz, I really have to go." She pulled her much abused carry-all inside with her and slammed the door on her neighbor's inquisitive face.

"Laurie? Laurie?" she could hear Mrs. Berkowitz calling from the other side of the door. She imagined an elderly gray crow peck, peck, pecking at her door to be let in and locked it tight behind her.

Dead, Gerald's really dead. Laura slumped against the door.

She dragged into the bedroom and began stripping methodically. She had been thinking about it all day but somehow it hadn't really hit her until she was forced to tell her nosey neighbor.

Dead. He's dead. The man who had pulled her out of her self-imposed isolation, who had reached out to her and told her she was not alone in her strange, hyper-sensitive world. When he had asked her to marry him, Laura had believed it would be forever.

Well, forever lasted less than three years but I guess it's more than some people get. And don't forget, he's also the same man that cheated on you while you ran yourself ragged building his business. Yes, but he had his reasons ... Laura shook her head, it was an old argument she still had with herself and there was no way to resolve it.

A shower. She needed a shower and a very long rest. She would turn off the vid-phone so her father and Gloria couldn't call her with their latest craziness and sleep for twenty-four hours straight. When she woke up she would call Detective Roberts and offer to help any way she could--it was the only thing she could think to do about any of this.

The shower felt good, the hot water sluicing over her aching skull always seemed to clear her head. The laundry needed to be done, all her warm, fuzzy comfort pajamas were in the hamper. Laura searched but there was nothing left in her underwear drawer but an oversized t-shirt or a long black slinky negligee. Gerald had given her the negligee about a month before she left him, a consolation prize of sorts for putting off their vacation once again. Not that wearing it for him would've ever come to anything.

Laura opted for the t-shirt , which was pale blue with the words, 'Deal With It' scripted in cursive pink glitter script across the front. She clipped her hair on top of her head to keep it from tangling and was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

She dreamed about the cook-out in the woods.

* * * *

She is only five but there are grown-ups near by so that's okay. Mrs. Hanson and Mrs. Barrington are sitting over by the tents talking in low voices about grown-up things and even though she misses her mom, her mom is still at home to take care of her when she comes back so that's okay too.

Laura and the rest of the brownie troop are sitting around the tiny little camp fire with its ring of safe brown rocks to keep the orange flames from biting the girls. The fire inside is just big enough to roast marshmallows. Just big enough to make them feel brave but not big enough so they have to be really brave. So it's okay.

Outside the circle of the fire's soft, yellow glow is the growing night. The woods smell green and alive and the smoke gets in your eyes once in a while but not too much. The marshmallows on the pointy ends of their sticks keep getting black and crispy but when you pull that black skin off it's all gooey and warm underneath and that's nice.

Laura has just begun to realize that she is different somehow but she isn't sure how yet. She didn't want to go on the cook-out trip because of there being so many girls and the more people there are around the more different she feels but her Mom thought it might be good for her.

"She's delicate, Terri," she heard her Dad say when he and Mom were fight-talking about it in the kitchen when they thought she couldn't hear. Delicate means sensitive means fragile means different. Laura already knows that.

"She's too sensitive. Being around other girls will be good for her," Mom said and she won that talk so here Laura is and really, it's not too bad. So far everything has been okay.

Okay until Lindsey Barrington starts adding leaves and twigs and branches to make the fire bigger and not-so-safe. Laura is a little afraid of the fire now and so

are the other girls, she knows 'cause she can tell but nobody says anything. Lindsey is popular and that means she can do things and nobody can say anything about it.

Then Lindsey says why don't they tell ghost stories? Janine Pierpont who is sitting right beside Laura on the cold ground says there is a monster that comes into her bedroom some nights. A monster that does bad things. But she isn't very popular and Lindsey is. Lindsey says she knows a better story and she'll go first.

She says her story is called 'drip ... drip ... drip' and it's about the old lady and her dog. The old lady lived alone except for her dog. When she was scared at night she put her hand under the bed and the dog licked her hand so she knew everything was okay. (Just like everything's okay now, Laura tries to tell herself.) But then one night, (Lindsey leans forward so the yellow light flickers up under her chin and makes her eyes big scary shadows,) one night the old lady keeps on hearing this sound. It sounds like drip ... drip ... drip ... She's scared so she puts her hand under the bed and the dog licks her hand so everything's okay. But the sound keeps on coming, drip ... drip ... drip ... The dog licks her hand but the lady is scared. What if things are not okay after all? She gets up to check in the other room, the bathroom where the sound is coming from

By now Laura is hunched in on herself, feeling the tight knot of being different that hurts the pit of her stomach, not wanting to know the rest of the story. All around her the excitement is sparking higher and higher, like the flames licking up when Lindsey put extra leaves and branches in it like they aren't supposed to. Lindsey did that but Laura was afraid to tell her to stop because Lindsey is popular and she, like Janine Pierpont, is not. She wants to scream for Lindsey to stop telling the story but she can't do that either.

The old lady keeps hearing it, drip ... drip ... drip ... (Lindsey's face is one big shadow now.) She goes into the bathroom and turns on the light....

The other girls are squealing with delighted tension that Laura can feel multiplied times ten, times a hundred against her skin like a million little biting sparks....

The old lady turns on the light and she sees her dog! Yes! Hanging from the shower rod with its throat sliced wideopenbloodyred! The dog's blood is what made the sound, dripping in the bathtub. But who was under the bed licking the old lady's hand? (The girls both do and do not want to know.)

It was the crazy man who escaped from jail, the man who cut the dog's throat and hid under the bed to lick the old lady's hand so she would think everything was okay but it's not okay and he is behind her right ... NOW!

Lindsey screams the last word and the girls all clutch each other in an ecstasy of terror and Laura realizes they think being scared is fun, somehow. But what's not fun is how all of their sacredness gets inside her and bounces around like a rubber ball that won't slow down. How it grows like the fire did from a tiny safe flame to a bigger, scarier one when Lindsey added leaves and branches like the grownups said not to.

Then Laura is screaming and screaming and she can't stop and the other girls scream louder because it scares them and the grownups come over and say what's wrong and how did that fire get so big....

That fire....

The fire....

Fire....

* * * *

Laura woke up to the smell of smoke and the piercing shriek of the detector going off. At first she couldn't shake off the dream, it seemed so real. The wailing of the smoke alarm mirrored the screams of the little girl she had been at the long ago camping trip and the smell of smoke seemed so familiar.

Then she realized that the smell in her nose wasn't the warm, friendly aroma of a

camp fire at night but the hot, sooty stench of a much bigger, more threatening blaze.

Fire! The house is on fire! She stumbled out of bed, trying to remember everything they taught you in these situations but her mind was a blank. Stop, drop and roll? But wasn't that only if you *personally* were on fire? She patted herself frantically, still dazed with sleep and was relieved to find everything intact and nothing ablaze.

The room was beginning to fill up with bilious gray smoke that made the darkened room even blacker. Laura stumbled around in the gloom, choking and coughing, finally finding the bedroom door. She fumbled for the knob and yanked her hand back with a sharp cry when she found it. *Hot!* She stuck her fingertips in her mouth. It was like grabbing the handle of an iron skillet that has been over a high flame.

Cautiously, Laura felt the wood of the door, it was also blisteringly hot and she could hear a hungry roaring crackle coming from the other side of it. *Coming to get me!* For a moment she was back in the dream again, thinking of the bad monster that came into her friend Janine's room at night. *Wake up, Laura. This is no dream and you'd better figure out how to get out of here or you'll never have to worry about having another nightmare ever again.*

The door was out and her bedroom was on the second floor. Laura ran for the window and tried to push it open. It wouldn't budge. Panicking, Laura pushed harder; the townhouse had central AC and she'd never tried to open the windows before. *Maybe it's locked.* After fumbling with the window lock for a few panicky seconds she realized the lock wasn't the problem. She slid numb fingertips along the base of the frame and felt a hardened, lumpy crust where the crack between the window and the frame should have been. *Painted shut. Shit!*

The room was getting hotter by the second and she could barely breathe from all the smoke pouring in under the door. She seemed to remember reading somewhere that a lot more people died in fires of smoke inhalation than of actual burns. She

had to get out of here and get some fresh air; everything was beginning to look wavery and far away.

Think, Laura! She bit her tongue hard, tasting blood, willing the pain to drive back the panic and bring the world into sharper focus. The only way out was the window but she couldn't get it open. *Break it!* Of course. But with what?

Laura dropped to her knees, immediately aware that she should have done so earlier. The air was much clearer near the floor. She began fumbling around blindly, trying to keep the faint light from the window in view as she did so. If she lost her one point of reference she was screwed.

Her groping fingers felt nothing on the floor and Laura cursed herself for being a neat freak.

Nearing despair, her fingers finally encountered the handles of her bulky carry-all bag. Its boxy shape in the dark was comforting and Laura gripped it tightly. It wasn't a shoe or anything sharp but it was damn heavy--it ought to be with half her life in it. Would it do the job?

“Only one way to find out,” Laura muttered to herself. She dragged the carry all on hands and knees over to the window and then, taking a deep breath, she stood, gripping the handles. Putting as much of her weight into the motion as she could, she pulled back and slammed the heavy bag against the stubborn, smoke-smeared window.

The glass cracked with a satisfying snapping sound and the window bowed outwards. One more swing should do it. Laura hauled the bag back, coughing and choking as she forgot and sucked in a big lungful of smoke. Using strength born of desperation she flung the bag at the window so hard that she lost her grip on its handles. The window gave with a crunching tinkle, shattering outward and her carry-all disappeared into the darkness below.

Laura ran to the window and put her head out, taking in deep breaths of humid night air. Far in the distance she thought she could hear sirens but the roar of the fire behind her told her she couldn't wait for the fire department. *If I get out of this, I'm going to sue the cheap bastard who owns Colonial Village*, Laura vowed to

herself deliriously. There should have been some sort of automatic fire-dampening system that sprayed foam or at least water--it was a law in Florida. But the townhouses were old, probably built back before 2000, and there were obviously no such safeguards.

But she would have to save her legal aspirations for later, right now she had to get out. Laura looked down. Easier said than done. The ground looked far away and dark and she had never liked heights much. Still, it was jump or roast and she knew , which one she preferred.

The window frame was still a mess of jagged glass fragments sticking out from every angle. Some of them had already scraped her. Laura gathered a handful of the hem of the oversized blue t-shirt and did the best she could to push out the shards around the bottom so she wouldn't gut herself but she didn't have time to worry about the top. Behind her the door to her bedroom burst into sudden, roaring flames.

Here goes nothing! Turning, Laura wriggled feet first out of the broken window, trying not to inhale any more smoke as she went. She felt the horrible heat of the fire as it tore through the room pressing against her cheeks and eyelids, saw it eat the bed and start on the curtains with ravenous, insatiable hunger. She barely noticed as the jagged shards of glass still hanging like stalactites from the burst window frame scratched across her back, ripping her shirt and drawing blood in thin, red lines.

There was an instant of sheer terror when her feet dangled free and then a wall of fire was roaring to meet her and she was forced to let go and drop to the ground below.

Stop, drop and roll, Laura thought again. In fact, it was almost exactly what she did although she wasn't on fire. She wound up a little distance from the burning townhouse and watched in uneasy awe as the window she had just been hanging from belched a gout of flame that would have fried her if she had held onto the frame a moment longer.

The next few minutes were a blur. It was as if her conscious mind, overloaded with terror and stress, took a little break from the proceedings. The next time Laura looked up she was a considerable distance from the townhouse, which was now a solid wall of flame. The heat pulsed at her even from the distance she had managed to crawl and it occurred to her dazed mind that she needed to get to her car and get somewhere, *anywhere* else.

She was gripping something tightly in her hands and it turned out to be the handle of the carry-all. Good, the only things that had burned in the townhouse were clothes and a few papers.

Feeling shaky, Laura tried to stand and make her way to the parking lot but her legs didn't want to support her. She wondered if anyone else had made it out of the inferno the row of townhouses had become and shivered.

Laura's legs felt like rubber but she made herself stand and stagger a few steps before she fell to the ground, the lush, overgrown grass of the lawn rubbing against her bare legs and feet. The blue 'Deal With It' shirt was in shreds from her rough exodus from the townhouse and provided little protection. Laura cursed under her breath as she toted the massive carry-all through the weeds. She put the fire behind her and headed for the back lot where she'd parked the Z, never guessing that her home would be doing a pretty good imitation of the entrance to Hell the next time she saw it.

She had nearly made it through the overgrown thicket that separated the parking lot from the main lawn of Colonial Village when she tripped again and fell in the waist-high grass, skinning her knee against a half-buried rock. The carry all flew out of her hand, the contents scattering all over the ground. Laura crawled in a circle feeling for her things and stuffing them with handfuls of grass back into the bag. She felt achy, bruised and abused--it seemed like every part of her hurt and the sharp little pain of her skinned knee was the last straw. Suddenly tears were very close to the surface.

She huddled on the ground, clutching her knees to her chest and breathing hard, trying to hold back the tears. She didn't like to cry and she had to think. Everything left in the townhouse was a total loss and her credit until the end of the month when her grant check came in was pretty much nil. How was she going to survive until then?

There was no time for self pity--the first order of business was to get out of here. Laura dragged herself to her feet and struggled through the rest of the overgrowth to where she had parked the Z. But when she got to the decrepit vehicle, key-card in hand, she just stared.

Both of the car's doors were open and someone had trashed the inside of it thoroughly. Her papers were scattered on the gravel and the contents of her glove compartment had been dumped by the passenger's side door. The trunk had been popped and her spare tire was laying like an abandoned baby on the gravel that was cutting into her feet bare feet. Even the hood was ajar and Laura could see a tangle of wires trailing out from under it.

Great, just great. My apartment gets burned down and my car gets robbed and vandalized on the same night. Laura wondered if she ought to call the police. At least it looked like nothing had been taken, not that she left anything of value in the Z overnight anyway. That wasn't a smart move in Armenia Garden Estates. She stooped down to pick up a fuzzy stuffed mouse Judy had given her the week she moved out of her parents' house when she was nineteen. It squeaked mechanically when she stroked it and her friend's voice came softly from the voice chip inside.

“Keep on keepin' on, girl. You can do it.” Judy's rich, assertive tone picked up her spirits as it always had. Lifting her chin, Laura surveyed the damage and decided she'd better call somebody in authority although she wasn't sure who. At least the insurance on the Z was up to date. Maybe she could get a new car out of this and the evening wouldn't be a total loss. Far off in the distance, she heard the wail of fire engine. About time then got here.

She dug in the somewhat grassy contents of her carry-all for a full minute before realizing that her vid phone must still be somewhere back in the weeds where she'd taken her last fall. Sighing she hobbled away from the car, wincing as the gravel dug into the soles of her feet, and back to the overgrown lot.

She was lucky, she actually stubbed her big toe on the hard plastic casing. As she was bending down to pick it up, Laura heard a muffled crumpling sound behind her, like someone crushing an enormous old-fashioned aluminum can. She started to turn and see what had caused it but suddenly there was a much louder sound, a huge roaring explosion that made her ears ring and her eyes bulge in their sockets. What felt like a giant hand made of warm air pushed her flat on her stomach and a

twisted, jagged piece of metal buried itself in the ground not two inches from her head.

Gasping, Laura couldn't do anything but lay there for a moment staring at the metal. After a moment she realized what it was--the Z's rear viewer twisted into an almost unrecognizable shape. She flopped on her back and stared dully at her car, now just a burning shell like something you'd see at an ultra-violent vid fest.

Blew up my car, Laura thought, dazed. She'd hated the car a lot and had often fantasized about blowing it up herself, now someone had done the job for her. Slowly, it began to sink in. The apartment complex burning down, the Z blowing up ...

Laura sat up and clutched at the carry-all, her heart beating crazily in her chest. The fire hadn't been an accident. Someone had set in on purpose. And then they had blown up her car. Somebody wanted her dead. Possibly the same somebody who had killed Gerald and Francine. Suddenly she felt very alone and very vulnerable.

She crawled away from the smoldering hulk of the Z and hid herself in the middle of a tall tangle of weeds, hoping there were no snakes around and ignoring the scratch of dry vines and stickers against her bare legs. If she turned her head to either side she could see the remains of her home to her right and her only means of transportation to her left, both literally going up in smoke. Her t-shirt was torn to shreds by this time but that was the last of her worries.

How could she go back to her parents' house now? Her dad was kind of crazy but she still loved him. And no matter how she felt about Gloria she didn't want her to end up like the rest of the inhabitants of Colonial Village had. Even the most annoying step-mother didn't deserve to end up a human charcoal briquette. *Who would do this and why?* She remembered the way the contents of the Z had been scattered all over the ground. *Were they looking for something? But what?*

Laura wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered. She couldn't go to her father's house and Judy was dead. There was no one she could call and no way to

get anywhere. Behind her sirens wailed, a high, mournful sound growing closer. She had never felt so alone in her life. If only she'd listened to Detective Robert's warning. Maybe this could have been prevented somehow if only Laura's mind backtracked suddenly. Detective Roberts.

I shouldn't ... It's probably past midnight ... But who else had any idea of what was going on? Who else would believe her? The more she thought about it the more it seemed like her only option. After all, if she went to the police with a crazy story about somebody burning down her entire complex just to get to her what would they think? But if she came in with a detective who already believed her they would have to listen.

Fumbling in the darkness, Laura managed to locate her vid-phone by touch. She had lost the card he'd given her but his number was still in the memory from her abortive attempts to work up the nerve to call him at work.

Punching the numbers with trembling fingers and listening to the rings, Laura prayed he had his phone. At last a deep voice still heavy with sleep answered the phone.

“H'lo?” His face on the screen looked blank, still half asleep.

“Hello?” Laura said anxiously, trying to keep her voice low and steady. “Listen, I know it's late and I'm sorry but I didn't know who else to call....”

Chapter 8

She looked like a mess.

Even when he's seen her at the lab with her blouse off for whatever reason (he still hadn't figured that one out) Laura Albright had had a kind of calm self-possession, a coldness that seemed impenetrable. But the woman standing by the side of the road as Vince pulled the Eternity S-5 past the fire trucks and up to the crumbling

curb was an entirely different creature. She looked much more the uncertain girl in the picture he'd taken from Gerald Hoyt's office than the ice queen she had seemed at the interview in her lab.

She was dressed in a tattered blue t-shirt that had rips big enough to see her pale flesh though and the thick, honey-colored hair that had been in a tight, severe bun last time he saw her was a tangled knot filled with leaves and twigs. She had cuts and scrapes on her face, arms and legs and her cheeks and forehead were streaked with soot. The big, changeable eyes were wide with fright and she was clutching the straps of an enormous bag. *Looks like a refugee from some kinda war documentary*, Vince thought, feeling a sudden pang of sympathy for her. Clearly she wasn't having the best night.

Vince had been inclined to be grouchy when she called. He still felt incredibly drained after his weird experience at *Mike's* and he could've slept another eight hours easy. But one look at the ragged, frightened woman by the side of his car was enough to make him realize that something serious was happening.

“Get in,” he said, reaching across to open the passenger side door.

She hesitated, shifting from foot to foot nervously on the concrete. Backlit from behind by the glow of the fire that was just beginning to die, she looked like something from another world. Her wild hair was a glowing nimbus around her head and he could see a trickle of blood running down the side of her face.

“Well?” he said impatiently. “Are you coming or not? *You called me*, remember?”

“I know and I'm sorry. I just ... I didn't know who else to call.” Her voice was low and choked, possibly from smoke inhalation. Still she didn't get in. She had that same look in her eyes that had struck him when he first looked at her picture in Gerald Hoyt's office. That look of uncertain vulnerability. Like she thought he might hurt her.

Vince was shirtless, having barely taken the time to throw on a pair of old sweatpants when she called and he had two days worth of stubble on his cheeks.

He knew he looked rough, but did she have to look at him like that? He was beginning to feel like a pervert trying to entice a little girl into his car with candy. What did she want from him, anyway?

Trying to control his irritation, he put the car in park and got out, walking around to where she was shifting nervously, still clutching the huge bag.

“Look,” he said, taking the bag from her and placing it on the floorboard of the car. “It's gonna be okay. Just get in.”

“I'm sorry I had to call you. I know ... know you don't like me much and I don't blame you. The way I acted ... But you scared me and I ... I....”

Her voice shook and the soft, twilight-colored eyes were wide and wounded. On the phone she had sounded almost normal, considering what she had just been through. Her voice had been dry and businesslike as she explained about the fire and what had happened to her car afterwards. *Must've been in shock*, Vince thought. But now the cold barrier of frost that had been blanketing her emotions, allowing her to get out of the burning building in time and deal with watching her car blow up in front of her was melting. Laura Albright was breaking down right in front of him.

“Look, Dr. Albright ... Laura....” He searched for the right words. “It's not that I don't like you. I was just angry and I thought....”

“I know what you thought. What you still think about me but I'm not ... I don't....” Her face twisted as though she was making a desperate effort not to cry. “I can't explain right now but I'm not like that.” The last words were little more than a whisper and then she lost the battle with the tears and sobbed.

Vince wasn't sure what to do. With any other woman he would've held her or at least put an arm around her shoulders but he remembered her saying '*Don't touch me!*' and flinching away in fear during the lab interview. Those words and the memory of her white, frightened face kept him from doing what seemed right or natural. *Course you were yellin' in her face at the time, Vince.*

Awkwardly, he put out a hand to pat her shoulder. His palm touched bare skin and she flinched away. He pulled back immediately, respecting her obvious wish not to be touched. It hurt to hear those low, broken sounds coming out of her and not be able to do anything about it.

She hid her face in her hands like a child or someone that can't bear to see the ugliness of the world one more minute. Her tangled hair hung in her face and the light of the fire that still engulfed her former home played over it with a surreal beauty, turning the honey blond to orange and scarlet and black as the shadows flickered across it.

At last the sobs tapered off to sniffles and the occasional soft moan as Laura Albright came back to herself little by little.

She took her hands away from her face and straightened up, wiping her wet, red eyes with quick, jerky motions.

“Better?” Vince asked. He was leaning back against the side of the Eternity watching her, wishing he could help in some way.

“I'm so sorry.” Her speech was formal, almost brittle. The vulnerable girl in the picture was gone and the ice queen was back. “I don't know what came over me.”

“I do. You nearly got fried in your bed and then you somebody blew up your car. That'd upset anybody.” He remained leaning against the side of the car, arms at his sides, non-threatening, and tried to keep his voice light.

Her face softened and lost some of its rigidity. There was a long moment of silence between them. “Thanks for understanding,” she said at last.

Vince shrugged. “No problem.”

Laura took a deep breath and ran both hands through her hair, trying to smooth it down into some kind of order and failing miserably. “Okay, I'm ready now. Are

we going to go to the Police Station?”

Vince eyed the ragged tatters of her blue t-shirt. It might have been nice at the start of the night but now it covered less than most of the outfits he saw the working girls wearing when the Vice crew ran them in downtown. Besides, if someone wanted to kill her for whatever reason, the best defense she could have was for them to think she was already dead. It went against every rule in the handbook and he could probably get in a hell of a lot of trouble for what he was about to suggest, but she might be in real danger.

“Listen,” he said carefully, “don't take this the wrong way but maybe you should come home with me.”

Laura stiffened again immediately. “I beg your pardon?” The ice was back in her voice.

Vince sighed. *Here we go again.* “Look, somebody wants you dead bad enough to set fire to your house and blow up your car. The only thing you got goin' for you right now is that they probably think they succeeded. If they search for you at all they'll look in area hotels or at your friends and family. They won't think to look at the house of somebody totally unrelated.”

She got that worried, uncertain look in her eyes again. “My parents, my dad--will they be okay?”

Vince remembered his one-sided conversation with her parents and struggled to keep his expression neutral. “They should be fine as long as you're not with them. Best thing you can do to keep them safe is stay away.”

“But why ... I mean, I appreciate the offer, but why would you offer to let me stay with you?” She had her arms crossed tightly across her breasts and her full pink lips looked pinched.

“If you're askin' if I want to get you back to my place and take advantage of you, the answer is no,” Vince said dryly, giving her a hard stare.

Laura dropped her eyes. “I didn't mean....”

“Maybe not but that's what you were thinkin', at least in part. But I'm not about that. If I offer you the hospitality of my house you can be sure you'll be safe there, from me or anybody else. Okay?”

She looked up at him. “Give me your hand.”

“Thought you didn't want me to touch you.” He tried to keep his voice neutral but some animosity crept in all the same.

Laura stared at him for a long moment, meeting his eyes. At last she said, “Look, the ... touching thing ... that isn't about you. It's about me. Now would you please give me your hand? I promise not to bite.”

Vince realized she was trying to make a joke and ease the mood between them and felt a little ashamed of himself. *C'mon, Vince, give her a break. Girl's had a rough night.*

Silently he held out his hand. She grasped it firmly, entwining their fingers and looked him directly in the eyes. He was aware of the softness of her palm and the smallness of her hand; it felt like a child's in his. Laura flinched slightly at the first contact but didn't pull away. She held his hand and looked at him earnestly, making Vince feel like he was attached to some kind of psychic lie detector. At last she released his hand and nodded.

“All right, I believe you.”

“What was that all about?” He squeezed the hand she had held into a fist and flexed it, trying to feel if she'd done something to him. Put a hoo-doo on him, Nana Gertie would've said.

Laura blushed but didn't drop her eyes. “It's just easier to feel someone when you touch them.” Her voice dropped so that he had to strain to hear her last words. “Sometimes ... it's too easy.”

Vince shook his head, there was that word again, *feel*. He supposed she meant it

was easier to feel his emotions when she touched him. “I don't believe in that....” Then he remembered his own experience at *Mike's* that afternoon, the weird way he had seemed to feel Mike's and Theresa's and worst of all, Berletti's emotions. “I guess we're ready to go then,” he finished instead.

She looked at him curiously but only nodded.

Vince walked around and got in the driver's side door and looked at her. She was just standing there.

“Well, get in,” he said, feeling like they were back to square one.

“Umm,” She shifted uncomfortably. “Look, you've got a really nice car and I'm a mess. Do you maybe have a towel I could sit on?” She reached up to rub her shoulder and winced in pain. “I think maybe I'm bleeding and I'd hate to ruin your upholstery.”

“Don't worry about the car,” he said, immediately concerned. He beckoned urgently for her to sit down. “How bad do you think you're cut?”

“I don't know.” She didn't so much sit in the seat as collapse into it. “I had to break a window to get out and I didn't have time to knock out all the glass. My back stings and I just feel kind of ... dizzy....” The last word trailed off in a way that made him twice as concerned.

“You sure you're okay?”

She waved a hand in a weak, shooing motion. “I'm fine. Just tired and scared, I think. I'll feel a whole lot better once I get a shower.” She leaned her head back against the car seat wearily, eyes closed. The light of the dying fire coming into the window bathed her face in flame and shadows.

He frowned at her for a moment. “Well, if you're sure--I should probably have a look at your back when we get to the house.

“Fine.”

He had a feeling she would've agreed to almost anything just then. He gave the Eternity the order for home.

He thought he was going to have to carry her in but at the last moment her fear or dislike of being touched won out over her obvious weakness and exhaustion. She stumbled tiredly into the house and managed to make it to the couch before collapsing.

Vince would have just put her to bed and let her sleep it off but he was worried about her. What if there was something seriously wrong with her under the ragged t-shirt? She'd said she thought she was bleeding and there were streaks of bright red on the soft light blue material, mostly around her back, that confirmed her statement.

He left her lying on the couch and went into the master bathroom to run a warm bath in the old-fashioned claw foot tub. He had wanted to get rid of it in favor of something more modern when he bought the place but Tandy had vetoed it, saying the old tub , which was both wide and deep, was romantic and historical. So the tub had remained while his girlfriend had left, go figure.

When the tub was halfway full, he went back for Laura who was lying very still with her tangled hair spread out across the dove gray couch cushions. Her face was so pale it frightened him and he had to look hard to see her chest rise and fall.

“Laura? Dr. Albright?” *Shit, what am I supposed to call her?* “Laura?” he said again, almost in her ear.

“Mmm?” She opened her eyes at last and he was relieved to see that she just looked exhausted, not really ill in any way.

“I ran you a bath.” He showed her through his bedroom to the master bath , which was getting steamy and got her to sit on the edge of the tub. “Uh, you need some help?” He was aware of how the question sounded but he didn't feel entirely comfortable leaving her alone in her weakened condition.

Laura sat up a little straighter and shook her head. “No I'm ... I'll be fine. Thank you though, Detective Roberts.”

Vince grinned at her formality , which mirrored his own confusion of a minute before. “While you stay here how 'bout if I call you Laura and you call me Vince? Okay?”

“All right,” she agreed, returning a hesitant smile of her own.

“All right then. Call me if you need anything. Shampoo's on the edge there,” he nodded at the far end of the tub. “Soap and everything else too. I'll leave some towels out for you here.” He went for some towels from the laundry basket, thankful he'd remembered to do a load the day before yesterday and folded them neatly on the back of the toilet seat.

“Thanks ... Vince. I really appreciate this. Everything I mean, not just the towels.” She shrugged, running out of words and then winced, obviously in pain.

He frowned. “Just get yourself cleaned up and let me check that back,” he ordered. “I'll be right in the living room if you need me.”

“Thanks,” he heard her say again as he closed the door.

He sat heavily on the couch and leaned his head back, letting his eyes drift close for just a moment. *What a night.* It was possibly the only time he'd ever had mixed feelings about having a naked woman in his house. He could hear her splashing around in the tub from time to time , which was good because he would have worried otherwise.

Breakin' every rule in the book here. Why had he invited her to come back to his place instead of putting her into police custody as he knew he should have? *The scales-- the murders and disappearances have to be connected somehow. Besides, she's safer here--with me.* And there was something about Laura Albright herself. She was stubborn and irritating but underneath that ice queen exterior he kept catching glimpses of the vulnerable girl in the photograph. A mystery.

“Vince?” She spoke his name as though it was a word from a foreign language.

He was half dozing and her voice startled him. He sat up quickly, blinking his eyes.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you.” She stood just at the edge of his living room as though she was uncertain of her reception. She was wrapped in the large, navy blue towel he had left her and the deep shade of blue made her changeable eyes look almost cobalt. Her hair hung damp and shining down her back.

“I, uh, wasn't awake, I mean, asleep. C'mere.” He rubbed his eyes and then patted the cushions beside him, trying to wake up. “Let's check that back.”

She came forward hesitantly and perched carefully on the edge of the couch beside him, not too close, Vince noticed.

“Come on, girl. I'm not gonna bite you.” He tried to keep his voice light. “Turn around.”

She gave him one last, unreadable look and then turned her back and let the towel, which was wrapped tightly above her breasts, drop slightly.

“Here.” Vince sat forward, his shoes scuffing gently on the worn carpet, and pulled at the towel until it dropped to the small of her back. “Get your hair out of the way.”

She reached back to do as he said and gave a little hiss of pain before dropping her arms. Vince wondered how she'd managed to wash her hair, he was guessing it must have hurt like hell.

“Could you...?” Her voice was hesitant.

“I'll do it,” he said. He took a handful of the damp shining mass and pushed it gently over one shoulder so he could look at her bare back, being careful not to

touch her skin. He gave a long, low whistle of dismay.

“Is it bad?” she asked anxiously, trying to turn her head and wincing at the motion.

“How does it feel?” Vine asked, looking at the long, jagged, shallow cuts that marred the creamy pale perfection of her skin.

“Hurts,” she admitted in a low, worried voice. “Do you think I need stitches?”

“Well,” he looked at her back critically. “I'm not a doctor or anything but they look pretty shallow. Nasty but shallow. And they mostly stopped bleeding. Should definitely put some Safe-t-Skin on it though. Hang on, think I got some in the medicine cabinet.”

He went to the bathroom, trying not to notice how the drooping towel showed the creamy curves of the tops of her breasts and returned with the tube of ointment.

“Look, I'm sorry but I'm gonna have to touch you to do this.” He felt awkward saying it but she seemed to have such a weird aversion to touching or being touched that he felt he had to at least warn her.

“That's okay.” Her voice was muffled and she leaned forward submissively, baring her pale neck and back for him. Vince noticed she was trembling, ever so slightly in the exposed position. It was almost as though she expected him to hit her instead of just rubbing the Safe-t-Skin over her cuts.

Shaking his head, Vince dabbed the antibiotic skin substitute onto one finger and smoothed it as gently as possible over one long, red, ragged line. It would form a protective healing film over the cuts and fall off on its own when the healing was complete. Laura shivered like a nervous animal under his touch but didn't move otherwise.

As he applied the cream, Vince marveled at her pale skin's silky texture. He didn't think he'd ever felt anything softer unless it was her long hair. *Cool it, Vince, this isn't the time or the place.*

To take his mind off the situation he said, “So you think somebody was looking for something? Something you have?”

“That was the impression I got but I don't have any idea what it could be. The car was ransacked--everything just spread all over the ground....” She shivered again and he had the feeling she was one step away from more tears.

“Hey,” he almost put a soothing hand on her shoulder but remembered and drew back just in time. “We'll get to the bottom of this. I promise you that,” he said instead.

“Thank you.” Her head dropped a little lower and she made a soft noise of pure exhaustion, somewhere between a sigh and a moan. “You're very kind. Especially after the way I treated you today at the lab.”

“Well, I wasn't exactly bein' Mr. Personality myself. I'm sorry I came off so angry it's just that, well, I kinda got a personal stake in this. See, one of the girls that was taken, the fourth one, she was my sister. My baby sister, Kyra.”

“Oh,” She turned to face him, biting her lip. “I'm so sorry. No wonder you were upset. But you said eleven girls had gone missing? I don't understand why I haven't seen more about it in the newspaper or the news.”

“They're all ethnic-minorities. And aside from my sister and the last girl that was taken about two days ago they've all been throwaways.”

“Throwaways?” She raised an eyebrow, questioning.

Vince sighed, wiped the rest of the Safe-t-Skin on his pants, and ran a hand over his unshaven cheeks. “People nobody misses or cares about. Homeless, drop-outs, working girls--prostitutes,” he clarified, seeing her puzzled expression.

She blushed and dropped her eyes. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” He sighed again. “There might be more we don't know about--unreported disappearances where

nobody was nearby or cared enough about the victims to report it. I keep thinkin' there must be some correlation between them. Some reason who or whatever's takin' 'em is picking them out. But aside from the fresh scales and the fact that they're all minorities there's no tie."

"Maybe you need a new pair of eyes," she said quietly.

Vince shifted on the couch, making it squeak. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm already breakin' all kinds of protocol bringing you here instead of down to the station. I want to find my sister but letting you help with the case might be taking things a little too far."

"I know it's a long shot." She sighed. "And I don't want to interfere in your investigation but if we could go just to the sites of the disappearances, talk to the families or the last people to see them. I can ... feel things maybe you can't. I don't know if it would help any but..." She let the sentence trail off.

Vince looked at her closely. She had made the offer casually enough but her face was pale and pinched and her breathing had quickened. Her hands were clenched into fists in her lap. A quick flash of memory slid through the back of his mind, the strange, disorienting sensation of knowing what the other people in *Mike's* had been feeling.

"Hey, what gives?" he said softly. "I appreciate the offer but is it hard on you? Using your...." He fumbled for a word. "Gift," he said at last at the same time she said,

"Disability."

She looked up at him and the big, changeable eyes were naked and fearful. Her towel was sagging, revealing the rounded tops of her breasts.

"I'm just out of practice," she said at last. "My ... tolerance is low, that's all. I've been avoiding people since my divorce about a year ago. But I can do what I have to do." She sat up stiffly, clutching the towel to her chest.

Vince suddenly wanted to touch her, wanted to caress her cheek or shoulder, feel

the silky slide of her damp hair over his fingers but he knew she wouldn't welcome such advances. She reminded him of a story his mom had read him as a kid, about a princess locked inside a clear glass coffin. So beautiful to look at but nobody could touch her. Sad.

“Do you know what time it is?” Laura looked down at her fingers, still clenched in the towel.

Vince looked at his wrist and then remembered he had forgotten his watch. The old fashioned clock ticking softly to itself on the wall, a present from Nana Gertie, said three AM. “Three,” he said. “Long night, time for bed.”

She looked up quickly, a little flash of fear in those big eyes, and then looked down again just as quickly. This time, instead of making him mad, it twisted his heart a little. They barely knew each other, he reminded himself. Still, she had shown a great deal of trust and he wasn't about to betray that.

“You take the bed. Sorry my spare room is still, uh, under construction. I keep promising myself I'm gonna finish it but until then....” He shrugged. “I'm gonna sack out on the couch.”

“Oh no, I couldn't kick you out of your own bed,” she protested, eyeing his tall frame. “Besides, you're ... too long for the couch. I'll sleep here, no problem.”

Vince shook his head. “No way, with your back the way it is you need to be able to stretch out and lay on your stomach. Give that Safe-t-Skin time to work. It won't kill me to sleep on the couch. Believe me, I spent plenty of nights out here, especially right near the end with my last girl. She kinda had a temper.” He grinned.

“Oh.” She looked uncomfortable, twisting her fingers in the towel. “Okay.”

“We'll talk more tomorrow. Try to find out what's goin' on. We'll both think better after a good night's sleep.”

“You were getting a good night's sleep before I woke you up,” she pointed out, a sad little half-smile twitching the corners of her mouth.

“Hey, that's okay. I'm glad you called me.” He wanted to squeeze her hand but didn't dare. It was frustrating. To his surprise, Laura reached for him. She took his hand in her own, entwining their fingers as she had earlier when she was trying to *feel* his true intentions.

“Thank you,” she said simply, looking into his eyes. “I don't know why you're doing what you're doing but thank you anyway.”

“Don't thank me,” he said roughly, feeling his cheeks get unaccountably hot. “I think the cases are connected, that's all. We find whoever did your ex and burned down your apartment, we'll find the person behind the disappearances. I want my sister back.”

“And I swear to you I'll do everything I can to help you find her.” Her voice was quiet but he had the feeling that she didn't give her word lightly. She squeezed his hand briefly, her small pale fingers swallowed up in his own longer, darker ones and then let go.

“Go on to bed.” Vince nodded towards the bedroom.

She got up, clutching the towel close. “Good night.” She walked down the hall, with a last glance over her shoulder for him.

“Night.” Vince dimmed the lights and settled down, trying to get comfortable on the couch. She was right, he *was* too long for it but that wasn't what was keeping him awake. His mind kept bouncing around the possibilities and ideas. Getting Kyra back somehow. The scales, the disappearances, the murders and now the attempts on Laura Albright's life.

And if that wasn't enough to think about, there was Laura herself. If anyone would have told him she would be sleeping in his bed (although he was currently occupying the less than comfortable couch) less than twelve hours after their explosive meeting in the lab he would have said they were crazy.

After the phone interview with her father and step-mother, he had pegged her firmly in his mind as a Separatist, maybe even a Supremacist but now he wasn't so sure. She was frustrating and mysterious and vulnerable all at once.

He fell asleep with the image of the firelight playing over her long, honey-colored hair.

Chapter 9

Where am I? Laura opened her eyes to a dim, unfamiliar room, bathed in the watery, pale blue light of a rainy morning in Tampa. It was the kind of day when you just wanted to snuggle back down under the covers and sleep for a few more hours before getting up and fixing yourself a cup of hot cocoa and getting a favorite book. A typical lazy Saturday afternoon. Typical, that was, if it was your own covers you wanted to snuggle back under.

Laura lay curled in warmth, her mind still foggy with sleep, and tried to remember where she was. The pillow she was laying on had a dark blue case, which matched the navy blue comforter checked with a dark green design--nothing like the pastel patterned sheets she had at her townhouse.

Gerald ... townhouse ... fire....

She suddenly sat straight up in the strange bed, feeling a sharp twinge of pain in her lacerated back, as everything came back to her in a huge, overwhelming wash of sensation and memory. Gerald and Francine dead, the terrible heat of the townhouse going up in flames, the panic of being stuck inside and the horror of watching the twisted remains of the Z smoke and flame in the night. And earlier, the strange man in her lab who turned out not to be an attacker but a police detective. A police detective whose bed she was currently occupying. Naked.

She became suddenly aware that the sound of rushing water wasn't only coming from the rain outside the double windows that admitted the pale blue light. It was coming from behind the bathroom door as well along with a low, tuneful rumble

she supposed passed for a hum for Detective Roberts ... for Vince.

Oh my God, he's in there taking a shower and I'm sitting here stark naked in his bed! The thought send Laura diving back under the covers in blind panic, wincing as the sudden motions pulled at her injured back. She buried her head in the pillow and breathed deeply, trying to calm herself as she remembered the violent events of the night before.

At first he'd been very annoyed with her for waking him up in the middle of the night, so annoyed she'd been afraid to get into the car with him. After all, how well did she really know him? After that, when she'd broken down and cried in front of him he had wanted badly to help her, to hold her and comfort her. Laura had felt the longing coming from him, deep blue and gentle, like waves in the ocean swelling against her skin. That emotion, as well as the genuine feelings of honest sincerity coming from him when he had promised no harm would come to her under his roof had helped her decide to go home with him. That and the pain and weakness she had been feeling.

Laura reached back to touch the jagged cuts from the window glass now covered with the healing layer of Safe-t-Skin. The way he had touched her had been so gentle, almost tender as though she were made out of crystal and might break if he wasn't careful. Gerald had never touched her like that. Well, to be honest, Gerald had hardly touched her at all. It was too difficult between sensitives, although he had managed well enough with Francine. Now they were both dead....

Laura put that thought out of her head and took some deep, calming breaths instead. The pillow case and sheets had a clean, spicy fragrance with a faint hint of musk that she supposed must be the scent of his skin. It was warm and very masculine.

The sound of the rain outside and the shower inside and Vince's low rumbling hum was soothing. Laura felt her eyes drift closed, lulled by the soft sounds, the dim light and the warm scent of the sheets. Safe here, she was safe. She was almost asleep again when the buzzing hum of her vid-phone intruded onto her

consciousness.

Sighing, she sat up, pulling the sheet securely up around her breasts, and reached down to dig in the beat-up carry-all for the phone. The digital timepiece beside the bed said six AM. Who would be calling her this early except ... Laura sighed when she read her father's number on the caller ID. Great, just what she needed.

“Hi, Dad,” she said, flipping open the phone and making sure it was only recording her from the neck up.

“Laura? Laura is that you?” he asked, even though she knew he could see her as well as she could see him.

“Of course it's me, Dad,” she said patiently. “How are you and Gloria?”

“Worried sick about you, that's how we are, young lady.” No matter how old she got he always spoke to her as though she was an irresponsible teenager that had been caught sneaking out of the house to engage in some life threatening activity or other.

Laura sighed deeply. “Look, Dad, now really isn't the best time, Okay?”

“We heard that Gerald and that woman of his had been shot and then ... Do you know that a man called asking about you yesterday?”

“Who?” Laura's heart was beating in her throat all of a sudden. Could it have anything to do with the fire and her exploded car? “What did he look like?” she asked. The hand that wasn't clutching the vid-phone balled into a fist at her chest.

Her father frowned, the expression making the wrinkles in his face into furrows. “He was racially impure, Laura. He claimed to be a police person but I saw right through that. He....”

“Dad!” Laura's breath left her in a deep, exasperated sigh. “That was just Vince ... Detective Roberts. He's investigating the deaths of Gerald and Francine, didn't he

tell you?"

"I don't care who he is or what he's doing, Laura. You know better than to be associating with people like that. We leave them alone and they *should* leave us alone. The races must not mix. That's the way your mother and I raised you."

"Gloria is not my mother! My mother never raised me to hate anybody just because they looked different from me." She was nearly shouting but didn't seem to be able to lower her voice.

Her father's frown deepened. "You will apologize for that remark, young lady, this instant."

Laura sighed again. Why was it that he could always reduce her to a rebellious teenager in seconds? It was as though a part of her had never gotten out of the house in Heron's Point. A part that was perpetually a child fighting against the influence of her father and step-mother. But there was no point in fighting with him-- it was an argument she could never win.

"Dad," she said as calmly as she could. "I don't have time to do this with you right now. I've had a rough twenty four hours between someone murdering my ex-husband and his wife, my apartment complex burning down, and my car blowing up. I'm going to be working with Vince for a while to try and figure some of this out and I think it's better we don't talk for a while."

"Young lady, I'll..." But her father suddenly seemed to run out of words and his face, which had been growing a dull, brick red as they argued, suddenly went positively purple. He looked like he was choking.

"Dad?" Laura was concerned. He got himself so worked up and the doctor had warned he was just begging for a stroke the way he let his temper get the best of him.

"I ... you he...."

“He?” Laura had been holding the vid-phone up to make sure it only caught her face and now she realized that her father was no longer looking at her. He was staring over her shoulder at something behind her.

Laura turned quickly, vid-phone still in hand to see Vince standing in the bathroom doorway wearing only a towel draped around his lean hips. Droplets of water beaded on the smooth, brown skin of his muscular chest and broad shoulders. She tried to remember if she had heard the shower cut off but she had gotten so caught up in the same old conversation with her father that it hadn't registered. How much had Vince heard?

“Laura, I demand an explanation! I will *not* tolerate this kind of behavior. And what are you wearing?”

Oops, in her shock she allowed the vid-phone to sag, transmitting a picture of her sheet wrapped chest. And the sheet was sagging as well. She couldn't have scripted a better scene for giving her father a false impression if she had tried.

“Look, Dad, I was hurt getting out of the townhouse when it caught on fire and I didn't have anywhere else to stay and Vince offered to....”

But her father was past hearing any kind of reasonable explanation. “Young lady if you think your mother and I will put up with this kind of disgrace you're sadly mistaken. We'll disown you and make no mistake about it. Don't bother bringing your little mixed breed puppies to my door because I will turn you away. I....”

“Good bye, Dad.” Laura closed the phone hastily, cutting her father off in mid-rant. Vince was still standing there in the bathroom doorway, completely silent and she felt her cheeks burn in shame.

Laura opened her mouth to speak but there didn't seem to be anything to say. In her hand the vid-phone buzzed angrily, her father calling back to rant some more. Laura flipped it off and turned to let it slide from her nerveless fingers into the carry-all. She turned back to say something, although what she had no idea, only to see that the bathroom door was shut again. This time there was no humming

coming from behind it.

* * * *

When Vince came out he was dressed, at least from the waist down, in a pair of tight-fitting blue jeans and black running shoes. “Forgot my shirt,” he said shortly, going to a dresser across from the room to dig through a drawer that creaked protestingly when he yanked it out.

“Vince....” Laura looked at him helplessly, wanting to say the right thing and not knowing how. She was horribly embarrassed and the icy anger she felt coming from his direction like a cold wind blowing over her shivering skin didn't make the situation any easier. “Vince, I....”

He held up a hand to stop her. “Don't. I spoke to your folks yesterday. You don't have to explain.” He sat down on the bed beside her, a black synthi-cotton t-shirt dangling limply from his hands. “Lights,” he said and the dim, pale blue of the rainy morning was replaced by the soft glow of recessed lighting from the ceiling. “Lemme get a look at your back. How does it feel?” His voice was toneless and low but his heavy emotions made her flinch away helplessly from his hand. “Look,” He took a deep breath and released it as a sigh. “I'm not gonna hurt you just because I didn't like what your dad had to say, Okay?”

They locked eyes and held for a long moment. He was telling the truth.

Wordlessly, Laura turned. She leaned forward revealing the pale curve of her back. He leaned close, pushing her hair out of the way over one shoulder. She could feel his nearness, the heat of his skin and a little puff of warm breath against her bare back as he examined the healing cuts. He passed a gentle finger lightly along one curving line, like an artist beginning a sketch on a new canvas.

“How does it feel?” he asked. His anger had softened, mutated into a kind of tired sadness. It was a gentler emotion but still hard to bear.

Laura opened her mouth, uncertain of what was going to come out. For a long

time nothing did. “I was ten,” she said at last. “Ten years old when I was diagnosed with hyper-empathy. That's what they called it, my disability. All I knew was that it made me sick--literally physically ill to be around too many people, too many emotions. And when people touched me it got a lot worse.

“The doctors thought it was possible that a drug or some combination of drugs that had been prescribed to my mother while she was pregnant with me was the cause. But she died when I was seven so there was no way of knowing for sure.”

She looked down at her fingers, plucking at the dark blue and green bedspread. Vince didn't say anything but the silence between them was a waiting one, a listening one. She could feel his curiosity like ticklish fingers at the base of her neck.

“Soon after I was diagnosed my dad met Gloria, my stepmother. She had a lot of ideas--she'd been raised by people who believe in racial purity....”

“Separatists.” His voice was flat.

Laura nodded but couldn't bring herself to turn around and look at him. “She convinced my father to take me out of school, got him to move to a gated Separatist community. That was back when they were just beginning to become more accepted. When the Radical Right was no longer being viewed as the lunatic fringe.” She swallowed, hard, concentrating on her fingers moving in the bedspread. She could still feel his breath on her bare back and his interest at the nape of her neck.

“I knew it wasn't right, even back then, I knew. My mother--my real mother--had never ... she never would have had anything to do with it. But Gloria, she has a way of saying something over and over in different ways until it seems like the truth. She got my dad into it but now ... now I think he's worse than she is.” She dropped her head and a small sob escaped her.

“Hey, now....” Laura could feel him wanting to touch her, to comfort her but she wasn't sure she could take it. She struggled to control herself. After a moment she

sat up and turned around to face him, clutching the sheet close to her chest and swiped angrily at her eyes.

“I might never have gotten out of there if it wasn't for Judy Candis. She was one of my on-line tutors and she was African American.”

“She was black?” His surprise was obvious. “I wouldn't have thought your dad....”

“Oh, he didn't know.” Laura explained quickly. “I blanked out the screen whenever I heard him anywhere near during her lessons. She understood after I told her where I was living, what was going on. She's the one who told me I could change my life, get out of my father's house and go to college-have a life and career of my own. She helped me get scholarships, she cheered me on....”

“She sounds like a good friend, a great lady,” Vince said softly, seriously.

“She was the best.” Laura dropped her eyes. “She died a few years ago, right before the Lepids came, actually. Cancer, the same kind that got my Mom.”

“I'm sorry. I shouldn'ta thought that just because your dad....”

“No,” Laura looked up at him. “No, what else were you supposed to think? I don't blame you. You know the worst thing?”

He raised an eyebrow and she noticed for the first time what a clear, dark brown his eyes were. Like melted chocolate.

“The worst thing is that you're partially right. I mean, when I saw you in my lab yesterday, do you know what I thought?”

“I had a pretty good idea after you squirted me,” he said dryly.

Laura blushed. “Yeah, I'm sorry about that. But what registered with me wasn't your manners or your tone of voice or your style of dress. It was the color of your skin, Vince.” She leaned forward, biting her bottom lip hard, having a hard time

making herself say the words.

“When I saw you there in my lab every horrible thing I'd ever been taught to believe came back to me in a flash. And it's stupid--when I worked with Gerald at HLC I had contact with people of every different race, every foreign nation--we handled clients from all over the world. But standing there with you in that dark lab all I could think of was that you were a black man and you were going to ... going to....”

“Rape you,” he finished for her.

Laura nodded. “I'm so sorry,” she whispered. “I feel so ignorant. So ... so *wrong*.”

“Hey, hey. C'mon now, don't beat yourself up.” His voice was gentle. The muted light coming in from the window made water-drop patterns on his smooth brown skin. “You probably woulda been scared of anybody who suddenly turned up in your lab like that. I found the door open and just went in--I'm nosey like that. Shoulda waited for you to get there, not just gone on and made myself at home.”

“I guess that's the detective in you, huh?” She gave him a sad little smile, which he returned. “I saw you there and I felt you so *strongly*. Your emotions--they scared me.”

“Yeah, well, I was thinkin' that maybe you knew more than you did. I was hoping to find some information that might lead me to Kyra.” Vince shrugged.

“It ... it wasn't just that. There was a certain quality to your feelings ... a ... a *heat*.” She looked down, biting her lip. *Why am I bringing this up?* She didn't know.

Vince shifted so that the bed shook a little. “Hmm, I think I know where you're goin' with this.” There was amusement in his deep voice. “But you gotta remember, Laura, that first time I saw you, you weren't wearin' a shirt. I mean, black or white any red-blooded guy is gonna react to a pretty topless woman who's not wearin' anything but a bra.”

“A waitress splashed a pot of coffee all over me,” Laura mumbled. “I ... didn't expect anyone to be there. I didn't know....”

“I know.”

Laura looked up to meet those dark chocolate eyes again. He was close, close enough to smell the same, spicy, warm scent that pervaded the sheets and she could feel the body heat radiating from his bare chest.

“I....” She felt confused, unsure of herself or of him.

She drew back a little, clutching the sheet tighter around her breasts.

Vince sat still, watching her for a moment, and then stood up, pulling the black shirt over his head. He began shrugging into a shoulder holster that held a large bluish-black gun.

“I gotta run down to the station and check on a few things. I'll be back in an hour or so. Make yourself at home, Okay?”

“Okay.” Laura shifted on the bed, more aware than ever that she was naked beneath the sheet. *Wouldn't blame him for getting the wrong idea about me. I've got fewer clothes on every time I see him.*

“You really meant what you said about helping out? On these cases, the disappearances, the murders...?”

“Oh,” She looked up at him, standing so tall at the foot of the bed. His bed. “Oh, yes, absolutely. Anything I can do.”

“All right then. I may bring home some notes. See what we can see.”

“Great.”

But he was already gone.

Chapter 10

It was a good thing he had the auto-drive engaged on the ride to the station because there was no way he could've kept his mind on traffic. He kept seeing her, blond and creamy-smooth, tangled in the dark blue of his sheets with that frightened, vulnerable look in her twilight-colored eyes. She had pulled the covers high, shielding her breasts from his view but her curvy shape was evident beneath the thin sheets. Naked in his bed--he couldn't get the sight out of his mind. If he had been a different kind of man ... But he wasn't.

Vince sighed as the Eternity S-5 pulled onto Franklin street and found a spot in the parking garage across from the PD. There was a lot more standing between him and Laura Albright than those thin sheets. Her upbringing for one.

Separatism had become a recognized and accepted concept back when he was a kid and Caucasians began to find themselves being outnumbered by people of color. Then, with the election and subsequent assassination of the first African American president when he was a teenager it gained even more popularity, not as Laura had pointed out, just with the radical Right Wing Extremists either.

The assassination of President Williams had sparked riots that raged out of control in many urban areas prompting more whites than ever to move into gated and guarded communities and adopt Separatist ideas. Then that asshole Harris had been elected on the 'Separate but Equal' ticket , which was little more than a return to the segregation of the last century, as Vince saw it.

Never mind that it was unconstitutional, half of white America seemed to be more than willing to throw everything the country had been founded on right out the window to solve the problem and the other half wanted to ignore it and pretend that everything was just fine. So while race wars that put the Watts riot of the twentieth century to shame roared in urban areas, it was business as usual everywhere else. Vince could still sense the tension between himself and many of the white officers on the force, especially the acknowledged Separatists but there was nothing to do but keep going.

Before the Lepids had come along, it looked like the country was going to be divided straight down the middle. The tall, delicate aliens had brought peace and healing in their glittering wings but at what price?

Vince got out and gave the voice command to lock the car and walked briskly down to the cross point at Franklin and Twiggs. He jogged across, dodging traffic with practiced ease despite the high rate of speed the cars were traveling at, his mind still preoccupied with the woman he had left behind in his bed.

Even if Laura didn't have the stiff Separatist background to contend with, there was still the matter of what she called her disability. Call it empathy or hyper-empathy or whatever you wanted, what it amounted to was a definite aversion to being touched as far as Vince could see. And he was a touchy guy--it was just the way he had been raised. He hadn't realized how frustrating it would be not to be able to touch someone until last night with Laura when she'd been hurting so bad and he couldn't give her comfort.

Vince shook his head. *Twenty-four hours, that's all it's been since you met her and already you thinkin' about startin' something with this woman. Will you listen to yourself, Vince? Don't be stupid. You been without too long-- it's just your hormones talking.* But was that all there was to it?

Sure she was beautiful, with that thick blond hair and those big eyes, not to mention those curves--he'd always loved a woman with curves. But was that all he was interested in when it came to Laura Albright? How many women would have admitted what she'd admitted to him today? How many would have had the guts to offer to do something that was obviously painful, to use her gift to help unravel the case he was working on despite the hurt it might cause her? And she was resourceful too. Woman had gotten herself out of a fire that was meant to kill her. She was sharp--Vince liked that. He knew some guys that just wanted a pretty face and an empty head but that had never done it for him.

“Welcome, Vincent Roberts, Homicide.” The voice intruded onto his thoughts and Vince looked up, acknowledging the Tampa PD artificial intelligence that ran the

dispatch and the mainframe operating systems of the station.

“Hi, TAMI,” he greeted the 3-D image being projected several feet above his head. TAMI, , which stood for Tampa Artificial Mainframe Intelligence, was modeled after the daughter of the programmer who had built and installed her. She looked to be about twelve years old and had red hair the style of , which changed daily, a snub nose, freckles and a mischievous personality. If TAMI didn't like you she could make your life difficult and it was hard to predict who she would or wouldn't like. Numerous complaints by various officers and clerical staff had fallen on deaf ears. As far as the brass was concerned, they had shelled out top dollar for an expensive AI and there was no more money in the budget for a personality overhaul. Luckily for Vince, he was one of TAMI's favorite people.

Today TAMI's carrotty red hair was arranged in a complicated patterns of braids and curls with each braid having a corresponding ringlet to twist around it. Her eyes were a deep lavender purple that clashed horribly with the hair color but Vince wasn't stupid enough to mention that. Instead, he adopted the easy, teasing tone of an affectionate older brother when addressing the PD's AI.

“Hey, how's my girl?” he asked, giving her a wink as he walked to the people-mover closest to his office. “You been behavin'? Got any news for me?”

TAMI's image followed him easily as there were projectors every few feet so that she could hold numerous simultaneous conversations. “I'm fine, Vince. The phone records you requested are in and so is the forensics report. , which do you want first?”

He entered his tiny cubical-like office on the second floor and took care to shut the door behind him. It was better to keep the details of a high-profile case like the Hoyt murders to himself for as long as possible. The last thing he needed was for the media to come snooping around, trying to get an inside scoop before he had a decent lead on the damn thing. TAMI, of course, followed him.

“Gimme the phone records for the HLC office first. I want to know everybody Gerald Hoyt talked to last week in order of frequency, TAMI,” he instructed,

sitting at his desk and propping his feet on the blotter.

TAMI's 3-D image blurred and flickered for a moment and then she said in a high, childish voice, "From the date of August third, 2038 to August tenth, 2038, Gerald Hoyt spoke with a person or persons at 813-555-6738 approximately thirty-seven times. He spoke with a Francine Hoyt at 813-555-7896, the number of a Hyde Park residence, approximately fifteen times. He spoke with Geraldine and Daniel Hoyt at 813-555-2354, a residence in Sulfur Springs approximately...."

"Hold on, TAMI--back up." Vince lowered his feet to the tiled floor and leaned forward, frowning. "What was the first number again?"

"813-555-6738," she replied instantly.

"And who does that number belong to? Where is it traced to?"

TAMI's image flickered again in an eye-watering flare of carrot red and vivid lavender. "Apologies, Vince. That information is not available. There appears to be some corruption of the data, possibly to do with the holo-phone Gerald Hoyt was using to place most of his calls."

"Oh, man...." Vince ran a hand over his smooth chin--at least he'd remembered to shave that morning. "TAMI," he said coaxingly, giving the AI the sweetest smile he could muster. "I know it's rough, sweetheart, but could you try to gimme just a little more on that first number? Run an extra diagnostic on it or something. It's *really* important."

The 3-D image in front of him giggled and batted her lashes coquettishly. "I'll try, Vince, but only for you."

"That's my girl. Go to it."

She flickered again, this time for so long that he had to look away. *Enough to give you a Goddamn epileptic seizure.* At last she was back, frowning and chewing the end of one of her braids. She looked like a girl who'd been thinking hard about a

difficult math problem.

“Okay, Vince. I traced the number back to MacDill Air force base. It didn't want to be traced though, somebody had put a worm in the system to eat up the data. Lucky for me I step on worms all the time.” She gave him a wide, freckle-faced grin and then her face fell. “I couldn't see who Gerald Hoyt was calling though, only that they were at MacDill. I even talked to MAC, the base's AI, but he didn't know either. No transcripts of the conversations are available.”

“That's Okay, TAMI, you did a good job. I appreciate all your hard work.” Vince gave her the thumbs up , which she returned with enthusiasm. “Now one more thing about the phone records, can you tell me if that was the same number Gerald Hoyt was talking to at around seven o'clock the night of August tenth?”

She flickered briefly. “Sure was, Vince.”

“Good. Oh, and one more thing--can you tell me if he tried to call his ex-wife, Laura Albright-Hoyt on the night of the tenth?” He was sure Laura would have mentioned such a call but there was no harm in checking.

TAMI flickered and then disappeared altogether, a very unusual occurrence that worried Vince. He occupied himself by scrolling through the notes he'd made on the case in his computer. Suddenly the lights in the building dimmed momentarily and his screen flashed blank.

Cursing, Vince rebooted and looked up to see TAMI reappear in front of him, panting and flushed. Vince knew that the AI was just a computer simulation of a girl but he couldn't stop himself from being concerned just the same. She looked like someone had worked her over but good.

“TAMI, honey, you okay?” There was a smudge of computer-simulated dirt on one freckled cheek and her neatly braided and curled hair was beginning to frizz around the edges.

“I'm all right, Vince. I was fighting a nasty bug--it took all my operating systems

for a moment. Sorry if you lost data.”

“No, it's all backed up. What did you find out?”

“Not too much I'm afraid, Vince. Somebody who really knows what they're doing put this bug in the way of data acquisition on the information you asked me to access. Gerald Hoyt may have tried to call his ex-wife--the probability is about fifty/fifty as far as I can ascertain. But if he called it's almost certain he couldn't get through, not with this bug blocking the way. However,” she grinned again and tossed her frizzy orange-red hair in delight. “I had a few tricks up my sleeve. I managed to plant a probe before he caught me and guess what I found out?”

Vince was on the edge of his uncomfortable plasti-form seat. “Tell me, TAMI.”

She lowered her voice and leaned in as though telling him a secret. “There *was* a transmission of data from the mainframe of the HLC office to Laura Albright-Hoyt around midnight on August the tenth. It was brief and interrupted almost immediately but it did take place. There.” She smiled and nodded, a very human gesture of satisfaction for a difficult task well done.

“TAMI, if I could I'd kiss you.” Vince pretended to blow the AI a kiss, , which made her blush and giggle. “Do you think the same person who planted the worm planted the bug too?”

“Almost certainly. They had the same nasty taste.” She wrinkled her snub nose and stuck out her tongue.

Vince laughed.

“Okay, TAMI, I get you. Well is there anything very exciting about the forensics report?”

“Not too much, Vince.” She flickered briefly. “No latent fingerprints were found that couldn't be matched to Mr. or Mrs. Hoyt, their secretary, Lola Sanchez, or various clients HLC had done business with in the preceding months. Blood

spatter analysis indicates that Gerald Hoyt was shot from behind twice with a small caliber Army issue carbine weapon and Francine was shot with the same weapon from....”

“Hold it.” Vince held up a hand and TAMI stopped obligingly.

“Yes, Vince?”

“You say the weapon was Army issue?”

“Yes, Vince, although this particular weapon is distributed to other branches of the United States military as well.”

“What's the probability of somebody not in some branch of the service owing a weapon like the one that was used to kill Gerald and Francine Hoyt?”

TAMI flickered briefly. “Only twenty-two point eight five probability, Vince.”

“So not too much then. Hmmm.” Vince mused to himself, stroking his chin.

“Okay, TAMI. Good work. Just do me a favor and upload all the personal case files of the abducted girls in the Butterfly case to my portable note-pad and we'll call it a day for now.”

“Apologies, Vince, but Captain Wilcox informed me that the Butterfly case is no longer assigned to you.”

Vince sighed and ran a hand over his tight cap of black hair. “Yeah, well ... See, TAMI, the thing is that I think the murders of the Hoyts and the abductions may be related somehow. So I'm sort of workin' both cases at once. Got me?”

The freckled face cleared at once. “Oh, well in that case....” She flickered briefly and there as a hum from the note-pad he usually kept in his desk drawer when not out on assignment. “There you go, Vince. All the files have been uploaded to your pad. Will that be all?”

“Yup.” Vince grabbed the pad and headed for the door. “Let's just keep everything we talked about today between you and me, Okay, TAMI?” he gave the AI a broad wink. “A secret, got me?”

“Sure, Vince. I love secrets.” She giggled and mimed zipping her lips, locking them and throwing away the key. “Confidentiality command confirmed.”

“That's great, TAMI, thanks.”

“Anytime, Vince.” She blew him a kiss and flickered out, laughing.

* * * *

He dropped the two bagged Lepid scales, both of , which had gone dull and lifeless off at the evidence room and was almost out of the PD when he heard his name being called.

“Hey, Roberts.”

Vince turned to see the round, smiling face of Martin Blanco. Blanco was short and round, the exact opposite of his tall, thin partner, Jesus Martinez. Blanco was also very laid back and easy going whereas Martinez always acted like he had a stick up his ass. But despite their very different appearances and temperaments, the two detectives worked well together and got the job done. Vince had often wished he could find a partner that fit with him the way Blanco and Martinez fit together, but he was too much of a loner.

Their partnership and excellent arrest record were the reasons Vince hadn't been more upset when Captain Wilcox took the Butterfly case away from him and gave it to Blanco and Martinez. If he couldn't work on it himself, at least he could be sure someone competent was doing the job.

Now he grabbed Blanco by one pudgy hand and slapped him on the back.

“Hey, man, what's up? Where's your other half?”

Blanco shrugged, rounded shoulders rolling under a too-tight white sports jacket.

“Eh, you know Jesus, always out checking leads, even on a Saturday. He even made me come in here for some paperwork he forgot. I'll be lucky if he lets us stop for lunch.” He patted his round belly mournfully and Vince laughed.

“Yeah, that's a real tragedy. Hey, I need to talk to you, man.” He lowered his voice and guided Blanco outside to the front steps of the PD where they were less likely to be overheard.

Blanco gave him a questioning look. “What is it?”

“Well,” Vince looked around. “I know it's not technically mine anymore but since Wilcox assigned it to you and Martinez I'd appreciate it if you'd keep me updated on the Butterfly case. I mean, just if you turn up any new leads or....” He trailed off because Blanco was giving him a puzzled look.

“Hey, I'm sorry, Vince, but I don't know what you mean. Last I heard the Butterfly case was all yours. Captain Wilcox never said anything to me or Martinez about it. We're still working the Morales and Sloan bank thing. That's what has Jesus' panties all in a knot--he thinks he remembers something on the paperwork that can tie Sloan to the latest hit for sure. Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure, I'm ... fine.” Vince frowned. “You know, I coulda sworn the Captain told me he was assigning that case to you guys. He took me off it yesterday and put me on the Hoyt homicides. Think he gave it to somebody else?”

Blanco frowned, his pudgy face wrinkling like a worried marshmallow. “I don't think so. Think I would've heard about it if he did. No offense, Vince, but it's a real shit case. No leads, no witnesses. Most of the guys in the department just assumed you didn't mind taking it 'cause of your sister being involved. I think I would've heard some pissing and moaning if it was reassigned elsewhere and Jesus and I were at the station all afternoon yesterday.”

“Okay, maybe it's a misunderstanding then.” Vince sighed and rubbed his jaw. “Look, I gotta run. Take it easy and tell Martinez I told him not to work you too hard, hear?”

Blanco grimaced. “Yeah, yeah. What I ever did to be partnered with a slave driver like that....”

“Cry me a river.” Vince slapped him on the back and jogged back across Franklin to the parking garage, his mind filled with troubling questions. Why would Captain Wilcox take the case from him and give it to ... well, to nobody? It didn't make any sense. The last disappearance had happened only two days ago so the case was hardly ready to go to the cold case files. What was going on?

He supposed there was no way to find out until Monday since it didn't pay to bother the Captain at home except in a life and death emergency situation. *Just gonna have to work both cases until I find out what's up.* Well, he had intended to anyway. There was no way he could completely leave the well being of his baby sister to somebody else no matter how competent they were or what Captain Wilcox said.

* * * *

As the Eternity drove for home Vince's stomach growled and he remembered he hadn't had anything to eat since lunch the previous day. The weird episode at *Mike's* had exhausted him too much to even think of getting any supper and, when he picked Laura up from the scene of the fire, food had been the last thing on his mind. He was fairly certain she must be hungry too and he wasn't sure what he had in the fridge.

One of the nice things about living in Tampa was the proliferation of tiny eateries on almost every corner. Vince stopped by La Pelota, a little Cuban bakery on the way back to Old Seminole Heights and got a couple of guava pastries and some Café con Leche to go. It was better than nothing and he sure as hell didn't feel like cooking.

* * * *

He wasn't sure what to expect when he got back to his small white bungalow but it wasn't what he saw. Someone had cleaned and done a pretty thorough job of it. He knew he'd left the place kind of messy, not that he was a slob, just that he'd had other things besides spring cleaning on his mind lately. But now the clothes that had been on the floor were gone, probably to the laundry hamper, and the couch cushions were plumped up and arranged just so. The black and white prints on the wall had been straightened and there were vacuum tracks in the worn dark gray carpeting that matched the dove gray couch.

Vince whistled low under his breath. It was nice. The kind of thing his Nana Gertie had been after him to let her do for months. Vince didn't like her exerting herself though and he always put her off.

There was a good smell in the air, something warm and breakfasty. He walked through the small but comfortable living room and into the tiny kitchen with its postage stamp-sized dining room, leaving the paper bag with the pastries and coffee on the table as he went.

Laura was standing with her back to him in front of the old fashioned gas range that Tandy had complained about ceaselessly. Vince didn't cook much so having to make everything from scratch instead of having a food generator didn't bother him. Apparently it didn't bother Laura either.

She was stirring something in the black cast iron skillet Nana Gertie had given him as a housewarming gift when he first bought the bungalow. Whatever was in the skillet was obviously the source of the mouthwatering smell but it wasn't the food that was making Vince's mouth water at the moment.

Laura was wearing one of his button-down, long-sleeve synthi-cotton dress shirts. It was a dark green one and her river of hair fell down the back of it like a golden waterfall. The tails of the shirt hung down to her mid-thighs and creamy pale bare legs were clearly visible beneath it. He wondered what she had on under the shirt.

He had a sudden urge to come up behind her, grab her around the waist and plant a warm kiss on her pale cheek but he resisted it. Just because she was standing there looking like she belonged in his shirt, in his kitchen, in his life didn't make it so.

“Honey, I'm home,” he said, instead, trying to keep the tone light.

“Hi, Vince,” she said, obviously unsurprised. “I hope you don't mind--I thought maybe you'd like some breakfast.” She gestured to the cast iron skillet and he came up behind her to see its contents. “Hope you like scrambled eggs.”

“Love 'em.” He gave her a quick grin,

The shirt turned her changeable eyes a bottomless, forest green. Mindful of her 'gift', he stepped back and tried to keep his emotions in check. It was better not to look.

Laura gave him a side-long glance that made him wonder if she had *felt* something after all and gestured to the shirt. “I hope you don't mind. My t-shirt was a complete loss and I promise I didn't go digging through your things. I just grabbed the top shirt in the drawer.”

He cleared his throat and shook his head. “Uh, no, I don't mind. Looks a hell of a lot better on you than it does on me.” He grinned at her.

“Um, thanks, I guess.”

“I, uh, better get these eggs on a plate before they burn. I was hoping you'd show up soon. Nothing worse than cold eggs.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, shrugging out of his vest and shoulder holster and grabbing a couple of plates from the cupboard. “Thanks for cleaning the place up.”

She shrugged, paying careful attention to the eggs she was scooping onto the plates. “I was just trying to help out a little since you let me stay the night. It wasn't really messy--just needed to be organized.”

“Organized--right.” Vince laughed as they settled across from each other at the small round table. “Oh, I almost forgot--I brought coffee. Café con Leche from La Pelota. You want some?”

“Love some.”

He handed her the coffee and they kept their mouths busy with the food for a while , which was a good thing in Vince's opinion.

“Eggs are great,” he said, keeping his eyes on his plate while he spoke. “Where's you learn to cook like this?”

“Just one of the many benefits of having the last true southern belle as a step-mother. A food generator was never proper enough for Gloria. Besides, it's pretty hard to screw up eggs.” She took another sip of coffee. “Did you find anything out? At the station?” Her voice was hesitant. “Or, I don't know ... Am I allowed to ask that? I mean, you did say you wanted me to help.” She lifted her chin defiantly.

“No, sure. Of course you're allowed.” Vince smiled at her in what he hoped was a reassuring way and after a moment, she smiled back and seemed to relax a little. He took a sip of coffee, making sure he kept his eyes on her face. The day continued to be rainy outside and even the overhead lighting couldn't completely dispel the gloom in the small room.

“In fact, I did find out that your ex-husband tried to send some sort of information transmission to you the night before he was killed. TAMI, the station AI said the transmission was brief and interrupted but definitely took place. So whoever's trying to get to you may be trying to intercept whatever message he was trying to send. That could be why they tossed your car before blowing it up.”

“But what did he send it on?” She looked perplexed and a little frustrated. “I thought about that--even checked the messages on my vid-phone twice and nothing. Gerald hadn't tried to contact me in months because he knew I wouldn't return his calls. What could he possibly have had to say to me?”

Vince frowned, tapping his fork against the plate, concentrating. "I don't know but whatever it was somebody out there is willing to do just about anything to get their hands on the information. That or make sure it doesn't leak." He took another sip of coffee. "Look, when I interviewed your former secretary, Lola Sanchez, she told me you and Gerald sometimes translated for the government, not just private parties. He and Francine were shot with a standard issue Army weapon and the number he called most often last week was located at MacDill. Is there any possibility that your ex had some delicate information, something top secret that people in high places wanted to keep secret?"

Laura made an incredulous noise and put down her fork. "Please, Gerald *wished* he had anything that important to say. He made contact first, you know, and he helped with some of the mediation between the Lepids and various government officials. He always missed that part, I think--the glamorous, important part. But by the time he brought me on board the Lepids were nothing more than an ultra-expensive tourist attraction. Something you did if you had credit to burn and you wanted to brag to your friends."

"Hmm. That's surprising." Vince took another drink of his coffee, admiring the way the overhead light glinted off her long hair. "I guess I thought it was more exciting than that. Introducing celebrities and hot shots to the aliens all day long...."

Laura shuttered, a swift look of revulsion passing over her face. "Exciting? I guess so if you like meeting pushy, self-important people all day long. And introducing them to the Lepids ... I can't even explain to you what it's like hosting one of them in your mind for communication. It's so dry and barren and ... and *cold*." She shivered and the flesh on her arms actually broke out in a rash of goosebumps.

"Hey...." Vince reached across the table and remembered just in time not to put his hand over hers. Feeling stupid, he drew back. "I had no idea it was so hard. No wonder you weren't too anxious to get involved when I asked you the first time."

Laura looked up at him, rubbing her arms briskly like somebody coming in out of

the cold. “No, but I can do it, Vince. I promised I do anything I could to help find your sister and I don't break my word. In fact, I'm ready to start right away. What's first on the agenda?”

She looked like someone who had volunteered to eat a bowl of raw worms and Vince felt genuinely sorry for her but Kyra's life and the lives of the other girls might hang in the balance. If Laura was willing to offer her help then he had to be willing to take it, no matter how unpleasant she found it.

“Well, I thought we'd run up to Royal Thai--that's the restaurant owned by the family of the last girl that was taken-Ploi Nygen. I spoke to them when she first went missing but I'd like to go over a few things again.” He shrugged. “It's as good a place to start as any.”

“Can we stop by my lab afterwards? There are a few things I'd like to get.”

Vince pushed back from the table. “Sure, not a problem. Well.” He stood up, taking his plate to the sink. “I'm ready when you are.”

“There's just one thing.” Laura stood up and brought her plate to the sink as well, keeping what he supposed was a safe distance between them. “I ... uh, can't really go out in public like this.” She gestured at herself, indicating the dark green shirt, which was all she was wearing.

Vince allowed himself one quick look up and down her luscious body before forcing his eyes to settle on her face again. “Well, as a matter of fact I might be able to help you out....”

Chapter 11

He's got to be kidding! Laura looked at herself once more in the bathroom mirror, taking in the stranger who was currently wearing her face. Blue jeans that looked as though they had been painted on hugged her hips and thighs. They were so tight

Laura couldn't even get her hands in the pockets. Not that she would put anything in them for fear of never retrieving it again.

A pale pink blouse with a scooped neck and quarter-length sleeves that went with the jeans would have been nice if it hadn't also been skin-tight across her full, D-cup breasts. Also, the material was a silky stretch kind that was entirely too thin in Laura's estimation. But then, a wool cable-knit sweater would have been too thin to go out in without a bra. Ever since she had sprouted breasts at the age of twelve Gloria had stressed the importance of the all-important undergarment to Laura. Being properly dressed for any occasion was like a religion to Gloria.

Why couldn't Vince's ex have left just one bra? If I get cold at all, everybody's going to know, Laura thought, staring at her reflection unhappily. Everybody, presumably being Vince. She blushed scarlet when she remembered those dark eyes raking over her body and the hot feeling of need coming from him as clearly as heat from an open flame. She had never gotten that feeling from Gerald, not that she could have done anything about it. It was all her ex-husband could do to manage a mild wanting in her direction although he had certainly gotten the hots for Francine quick enough.

Stop it, Laura, it's over now, anyway. He's dead. They're both dead. She kept tripping over that idea in her mind, the idea of Gerald and Francine being gone for good, like a box she'd forgotten to put away. It was unsettling and sad, even sadder because she couldn't make herself care the way she felt she ought to.

Trying to take her mind off her ex-husband, Laura looked herself up and down in the mirror one more time. Vince's ex girlfriend must have been smaller than her. The skin-tight clothing was a far cry from her usual sedate skirt and blouse combo. She looked ridiculous, (*slutty*, whispered Gloria's voice in her head,) but there wasn't much she could do about it. The ex had left a few other pieces of clothing when she moved out but all of them were even more revealing than what Laura currently had on.

The only good thing, as far as Laura could see, was the fact that she and the departed girlfriend wore the same shoe size. But Tandy, as Vince had called her, didn't seem to have had any idea of what constituted a sensible heel. Of the several pairs of shoes Laura had tried on, none of them had less than a two inch heel. The

rose pink mules that she was wearing to match the top, had two and a half inch spikes that were going to kill her arches by the end of the day, she was sure.

“Hey, you okay in there?” It was Vince, knocking on the bathroom door and she didn't blame him. She'd been in the bathroom no less than thirty minutes trying to get up the nerve to walk out and face him in this getup.

Laura took a deep breath and smoothed the silky pink blouse down over her sides nervously. “I'm coming,” she called. She took a last glance in the mirror at herself. *Get over it, Laura, what do you care what he thinks anyway? You've barely known him twenty-four hours.* So why did those dark eyes on her body make her heart beat harder and her breath come short? She shook her head--she was just being silly. These were the only clothes available to her and she was going to make the most of them.

Here we go. She opened the door, chin up defiantly.

Vince took a look at her and gave a long, low whistle.

Laura put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow. “You have something to say?”

Vince shook his head. “*Damn*, girl. Nothin' except if Tandy could see the way you're fillin' out her clothes she'd be jealous.”

Laura looked down at herself self-consciously, smoothing the pink top with nervous hands. She had been prepared for laughter because she felt ridiculous. His honest admiration, tart-sweet as orange candy on the tip of her tongue was completely unexpected.

“I ... uh, think I probably wear a larger size than your ex-girlfriend,” she said. And then, in a rush before she could lose her nerve she asked, “Are you sure she didn't leave at least one bra here?”

His dark eyes traveled immediately to her chest and Laura fought the urge to cross

her arms across her breasts protectively. The feeling of admiration she got from him was changing, turning into heat that pulsed against her skin in waves. It was funny because Gerald had never cared much for her full breasts, being more of a leg man. But they seemed to hold a special appeal for Vince.

“I could check again but I'm pretty sure she didn't. I, uh, don't think it would do you too much good even if I could find one though. Tandy wasn't as....” He gestured with one hand at her chest. “You got a little bit more up there than she did. More than a little, actually.”

“Oh.” Laura felt a hot wave of blushes spreading over her face. “All right then, I guess I'll just have to make do.” Her voice felt choked. She tried to keep her head high but her eyes kept wanting to study the pointed toes of the pink mules.

The emotion coming from Vince softened into concern, warm and fuzzy like a security blanket around her shoulders.

“Hey, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. You look really nice, *beautiful*.” He stepped forward, ducking down to meet her eyes. “Hey, Laura, you okay?”

“It's just I'm not this isn't the way I usually dress, all right?” Laura looked up at him miserably. “Not to say anything about your ex-girlfriend's taste. The clothes are nice and I'm grateful to have them but I'm not used to wearing anything quite this revealing,” she finished in a low voice.

Vince took a step back and looked her up and down. “You don't think you look good, do you?” His deep voice was incredulous.

Laura lifted her chin, why did he have to put her on the defensive? “Of *course* not, I look ridiculous! Everybody knows you can't dress like this unless you wear a size six or less. In case you haven't noticed, I'm a little bit larger than that.” She placed hands balled into fists on her hips, feeling the jeans creak with the movement and glared at him.

“Oh, I noticed you all right, from the first minute I saw you.” Dark eyes raked

over her body again. The heat was back in his gaze and in his emotions, sweeping over her body like a raging fire making Laura blush but she refused to drop her gaze or try to cover herself with her arms--that only made things worse. Their eyes locked for a moment, neither one willing to look away.

“Look,” she said at last. “Shouldn't we get going?”

* * * *

The ride down to Royal Thai was quiet for the most part. Vince was busy looking over some notes on his portable notepad and Laura stared as the dreary scenery of rainy, downtown Tampa flashed by. People who always wanted to move to Florida for the sun had no idea of the monsoon-like weather that blew in off the gulf in late summer turning the air into a foggy soup and pushing the humidity three notches past bearable. Being a native Floridian, Laura was used to it but that didn't mean she liked it.

The gray light filtered in through the Eternity's windows as the car steered itself down the half-flooded one-way streets. Laura had always thought that whoever planned this part of the city could have done a better job in the drainage department. She never would have dared to drive the decrepit Mercedes Z into the easily flooded downtown in weather like this but Vince's car handled the water with ease.

Laura gave him a little side glance. She knew some men bought expensive cars and kept them almost like girlfriends. Gerald, for instance, had been particularly protective of his Arctic Raker, even going so far as to insist that she remove her shoes and put them in a plastic bag when she rode in the car in rainy weather. Vince, though, didn't strike her like that at all. The Eternity was a nice car, probably not quite as pricey as her ex-husband's Raker, but then, not many vehicles were. Gerald had believed in buying the top of the line whenever he purchased anything.

But as nice as it was, Vince had showed more concern for her than the upholstery the night before when she felt faint and ill and he hadn't said anything about muddy shoes on the floor mats either. It was a refreshing change of pace.

He must have felt her looking at him because those dark eyes were suddenly fixed on her face. .

Vince raised an eyebrow, a silent question.

Laura fumbled for something to say. "I, um, was wondering what we're supposed to be getting out of this interview. Since you said you already talked to them once," she said at last.

"Oh, sorry." He put down the notebook and turned to face her. "Forgot you're not really in the loop on this case. Well, the main reason I want to go back over this one is that it doesn't really *fit* with the rest of the abductions."

Laura raised an eyebrow. "Fit?"

"Yeah. See, remember I told you that all the girls taken were ethnic and most of them were 'throwaways'?"

Laura nodded. "So this last girl...."

"Ploi. Ploi Nygen was her name," Vince finished for her. "Yeah, she came from a good family. Close knit, too, from what I gathered. So she doesn't really fit the profile. And the only other girl like that who was taken...."

"Was your sister."

Vince nodded silently and she could feel the deep well of sadness in him, and love like a troubled ocean, choppy and restless. *Worried for his sister*, she thought, sympathetically.

"So you're hoping to find some kind of parallel between Ploi Nygen and Kyra?"

Vince nodded again. "Yeah. With this kind of thing there's always the chance of a copy-cat. Some sick bastard who isn't original enough to think up the crime himself but doesn't mind playing follow the leader, you know?"

Laura nodded for him to continue. His dark eyes were hard as brown ice and she could feel the stabbing pain of his loss once more. Then he took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, obviously concentrating on the details of the case and trying to

distance himself from the painful emotions.

“I, uh, wasn't able to get a very good feel for these people the other night when I was here. Of course their daughter had just been taken and they were kinda in shock. I'd just like to be sure I'm getting the real story from them. I thought maybe if you sort of listened in....” He looked at her. “Can you tell when somebody's telling the truth?”

“Well,” Laura considered carefully, playing with a loop of her hair that was loose around her shoulders, the better to hide her bra-less state. “It doesn't quite work like that. I'm not really a human lie detector or anything. I mean, there's a certain feeling I get from someone when they *believe* they're telling the truth. Call it sincerity or honesty or whatever you want.” She shrugged. “Whether that's always accurate I can't say.”

As she spoke, the Eternity rolled smoothly into the parking lot of a small wooden building. Old-fashioned strings of white twinkle lights hung from the rafters of the extended porch.

Vince nodded. “Good enough. I'm not askin' you to play good cop/ bad cop with me. Just do your best and we'll compare notes afterwards in the car. Okay?”

“Got it.” Laura started to open her door but he stopped her.

“Hang on, let me go around for you with the umbrella so you don't get wet.”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” Laura waited while he walked around the car and opened her door when he gestured, grateful for his thoughtfulness. The last thing she needed in the thin pink blouse was to get damp and cold. A wet t-shirt contest was definitely not on her list of things to do that day.

* * * *

The entrance hall of the Royal Thai restaurant was decorated with two enormous sparkling clean fish tanks that showcased sleek koi as long as Laura's forearm. The

fish swam in stately slow-motion flashes of white and black and orangish-gold over beds of pure white gravel and artfully placed clumps of coral. Overhead, a plaintive female voice was singing what she assumed was Taiwanese to the accompaniment of twanging, minor-keyed music.

They walked out into the restaurant , which was deserted, probably because it was only ten in the morning. Tiny tables with equally tiny chairs were scattered on several different levels, all decorated with fresh flowers in china vases. The richly paneled wooden walls gleamed in the muted overhead light and were lined with traditional teak carvings and brightly painted figurines.

“Hello?” Vince raised his voice. “Anybody here?”

“Yes?” The voice was polite with no trace of an accent and a girl of about thirteen suddenly appeared from behind a rich brocade curtain in the back. She had short, dark hair and almond shaped eyes and she was wearing a gold lace gown with short sleeves and a narrow skirt that fell straight down to rather dirty running shoes peeking out from beneath it.

“Hi, I'm Detective Vincent Roberts and this is Laura Albright.” Vince gestured to her and she nodded at the girl who watched them quietly. “I was here the other day speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Nygen about their daughter Ploi.”

“Did you hear anything? I'm her sister, Amy.” The girl leaned forward and her hope twanged along Laura's nerves like plucked strings. Laura sighed inwardly. More teenaged emotions. Great.

“I'm afraid we don't have anything yet,” Vince said gently. “We're just here to ask a few more questions. Are your parents here?”

The girl's face fell, the hope melting away abruptly into sharp-edged disappointment. “My dad is. I can get him for you but you'll need me to translate. He doesn't speak English as well as Mom.”

“Okay, that's fine. I think it was your Mom I spoke to last time.” Vince nodded at

her.

“Sit down anywhere,” Amy made an expansive gesture. “You want some tea?”

“Tea would be nice.” Laura tried to smile at her and the girl nodded and scampered back behind the heavy brocade curtain.

They had barely seated themselves at one of the larger round tables when the girl came back with a steaming pot of tea and several cups on a tray. An older Asian man with graying hair followed her. He looked more like her grandfather than her father, Laura thought as he seated himself slowly at the table across from them.

Amy began pouring and the fragrance of hot jasmine tea wafted gently through the air. Vince pulled out his notepad and consulted it. Laura sipped her tea, trying to brace herself for the intense emotions she felt brewing across the table.

“Now, according to the notes I have, your daughter Ploi, was last seen here at around nine o'clock on the evening of the eighth. She left the building, your restaurant here, and wasn't seen again. But you,” he nodded Amy who was listening with round-eyed attention, “found her scarf and two fresh Lepid scales around the corner some thirty minutes later. Is that correct?”

He waited a moment for the girl to translate , which she did in a high, tense voice. Her father crossed his arms and glared at Vince and then spat something in rapid, polysyllabic language that sounded like a handful of pebbles hitting the sidewalk. Laura felt a flash of anger from him like a splatter of hot grease from a pan, it almost made her spill her tea.

Amy looked back at her father and said something in a pleading tone but he only crossed his arms and shook his head, glaring.

They watched the exchange like a tennis match. Finally Amy looked back at them and shrugged.

“He doesn't want to talk about it. He just keeps on saying that he has no older

daughter so why should he care what happens to her?”

“What?” Vince was plainly confused but Laura felt the complex mixture of anger and sorrow coming from the old man, pouring down her throat like bitter medicine. It made her feel like gagging but she took a deep breath and mastered the impulse. She took another sip of her tea and looked at the girl in front of her.

“What did your sister do?” she asked Amy quietly. “To make your father disown her?”

The girl's face twisted as though she was trying not to cry but the almond-shaped eyes filled up anyway. Laura tasted the tears in her own throat and swallowed hard.

“She ... the night she disappeared she told my parents....” Amy glanced at her father furtively but he still sat with his arms crossed and his chin raised, his face like chiseled granite.

“What did she tell them?” Laura leaned forward although it intensified the emotional charge and looked at the girl seriously.

“Ploi, she was an honors student. Had a scholarship to University of Tampa.” Amy looked down at her own tea cup, speaking rapidly. “My parents were so proud of her. She was going to be a doctor. Then ... then she met this boy. A foreign exchange student from Germany or somewhere. She thought he was so great. More important than her future--that's what my Mom said.”

“Was she going to quit school, move in with this boy? What?” Vince asked, making a note with his light stylus on the pad in front of him.

Amy shook her head. “No. She couldn't move in with him 'cause he already went back to Germany. But, after he was gone my sister found out....” She bit her lip and glanced again at her father as the almond-shaped eyes filled with fresh tears. “She found out she was pregnant. She was going to try to keep going to school but she wanted my parents' support. I think my Mom might have listened but my Dad

started yelling that she was a disgrace-- that she disgraced us all and he never wanted to see her again.” The tears spilled over, down her pale cheeks.

Laura lifted a hand to her own cheek and found she was crying as well.

“What happened then? Your sister ran out?” Vince's deep voice was gentle.

Amy nodded, tears streaming down her face unchecked. “I was busy serving or I would've gone to her sooner. I should've gone no matter what.” She gulped and wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm. “By the time I got around the corner to where she parked her car she was gone. Just ... gone. Nothing but those big scales and then I knew ... knew I'd never see her again.”

She broke down and sobbed, burying her face in her arms, her thin, bird-like shoulders shaking with uncontrollable grief. Laura wanted to wail in sympathy. The girl's pain was so fresh, so new....

“Excuse me.” She rose on unsteady legs, hoping Vince would understand, and barely made it into the small, charmingly decorated ladies room in time.

After she finished she rinsed her mouth and ran some cool water over a paper towel to press against the back of her neck.

There was a light rapping at the door. “Laura, you okay?”

Poor Vince, he's spent most of his day so far dragging me out of bathrooms. He's going to think I'm crazy.

“Coming,” she said aloud. Tossing the damp towel she gave herself one last look in the mirror. *Red eyes ... check. Messy hair ... check. No bra ... double check.* She was officially ready to begin her new career as poor white trash. Gloria would be so proud.

Laura stuck her tongue out at her reflection and then composed herself and opened the door.

“Sorry, Vince. I didn't mean to leave you.”

“Hey, it's okay.” The look in his dark brown eyes was one of concern, not anger or frustration. The emotions felt like cool, soothing hand on the back of her neck. “This stuff is really hard on you, huh?” he said softly.

Laura shrugged and did her best to look nonchalant. “My tolerance is just low right now. It's been a while since I exposed myself to other people's emotions. And teenagers are always the worst somehow. Their feelings are so *loud*.” She grimaced and Vince laughed, a low chuckle that warmed her from the inside out.

“I got you. I'm nearly done, though. You wanna wait in the car while I finish up?” He reached for his keycard.

There was nothing Laura wanted more but she shook her head.

“I'm fine. Just let me sit across from the father and you sit across from the girl this time. Okay?”

“Sure.” She could feel his concern for her strongly and he looked like he wanted to pat her back or rub her arm. Not wanting to flinch away and upset him, Laura walked quickly ahead of him, pink mules tapping staccato notes on the polished wooden floor.

“So....” Vince sat across from Amy, who had gotten some control of herself and was sitting white-faced and quiet with her hands folded in her lap. Laura sat across from the old man. His bitter anger was hard to bear but not nearly as much as his daughter's piercing grief.

“We're nearly done here.” Vince made a few notations on the notepad and then looked up at the quiet girl. “Tell your father if he thinks of anything else, any detail that might be of use in the investigation to give us a call.”

“You're wasting your time.” Amy looked up from her neatly folded hands, her eyes dull. “Ploi is dead to him now. Even if you find her my father will never speak to her again.” She cut her eyes to the side but her father remained stubbornly

silent. “She ... Ploi was a good sister. I mean, sometimes she teased me and we fought but most of the time she was cool for a big sister. And she shouldn't have done what she did but that doesn't mean she deserves to be kidnapped and taken away by whoever it was,” she said in a rush, staring hard at her hands , which were now busily folding the golden material of her skirt. “I don't care if it's disrespectful to say it. I ... I loved her.”

“Of course you did.” Vince looked at the miserable girl and Laura could feel his sympathy rise strongly between them. “Hey,” he said.

The girl looked up, meeting his eyes.

“I know how you feel, Amy. I lost a sister too. But I haven't given up hope on finding her. Her or your sister or any of them, okay?”

Amy looked at him and Laura could feel the hope rekindle in the girl's soul, a thin, weak flame but there nonetheless.

“Okay,” she said hesitantly. “Thank you officer....”

“Roberts.” Vince drew out a card and handed it across the table. “You think of anything that might help you call me, Amy. Okay?”

Amy stole another furtive glance at her stone-faced father who was still brooding silently across the table from Laura.

“Okay,” she said, snatching the card in one quick move, as though hoping to perform a magic trick her father couldn't see. “Thank you.” She dipped her head politely.

“Welcome.” Vince rose and nodded at Laura. “C'mon.”

“Maybe she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Maybe.”

Laura watched him stare moodily out the window as the Eternity sluiced through the watery downtown streets on a course for Channelside and her lab. She sighed.

“I'm sorry, Vince. I know you were hoping to find something that would lead to your sister.” She touched his elbow lightly, drawing away before the touch could spark along her nerves too intensely. “You were really good with that little girl back there.”

He turned to her, a half smile lighting his dark face. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You seem to have a way with emotional females.” Laura smiled, glad to feel his mood lighten. It was like riding beside a rain cloud when he was upset. “Hey,” she shifted to face him. “I don't know if it'll help but why don't you tell me some of the details of the cases?”

Vince shrugged. “Not much to tell, really. Only two things they all have in common: a missing girl and fresh scales.”

“You're *sure* they were all fresh? I mean, all of them at every scene?”

Vince nodded. “Every single one. Still had the fairy dust on 'em and everything.”

Laura shook her head. “Fairy dust ... God.”

“What?” He turned to her as the car made a sudden right. “You know something about it?” His face was carefully blank but Laura could feel his intense interest needling the back of her skull.

“Well, I mean, nothing that would probably help the case unfortunately. I'm sure you know Gerald is a....” She swallowed. “*was* a biochemist. His research had a lot to do with how different smells make people react--he was trying to unlock the genetic code responsible for human pheromones , which was how he got into Human/Lepid communication in the first place. See,” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “That fairy dust on the Lepid scales isn't really dust at all--it's

actually alive. It's a symbiotic organism that lives on their wings and helps them communicate.”

Vince frowned. “I don't understand. *How* does it help?”

Laura bit her lip, thinking how Gerald had always explained it. “Well, the Lepids communicate using emotions. But it's not some magical ability-- being able to sense what another person--another *being* is feeling. When you feel a certain way your body produces a certain chemical.”

“Oh, like with a fight or flight response. Your body starts pumping adrenaline?”

“Exactly.” She smiled at him. “And the chemical produces a certain scent although most people don't consciously smell it. But the Lepids have lost the ability to 'smell' for themselves. In effect, the 'fairy dust' lives on their wings, where they have their organs of scent, and helps convey the pheromones to them. That's how they talk to each other. And to us--sensitives, I mean.” She looked down at her hands. Outside the Eternity's windows the rain continued to fall in a gray haze.

“So is that how it works for you too? You, uh, *smell* other people's emotions?” Vince looked at her curiously.

Laura shifted in her seat, uncomfortable as always when talking about her disability. “That's sort of an oversimplification but in a way, yes. That's part of it, anyway.” She concentrated on looking out the window. The rain was slowing everything down and the trip was taking forever.

“So tell me about it.”

She looked up to see Vince looking at her intently. His interest still prickled at the back of her neck.

“Hey, I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable, honestly. It's just that ... well, I had kinda a strange experience with that fairy dust, or whatever you want to call it yesterday. Ever since I've been wondering if I imagined it or what.”

“Really? What happened?”

Now it was his turn to look uncomfortable. “Well, I got some of it on my hands and then I smelled my fingers....”

Laura listened as he explained the strange experience at his neighborhood bar, nodding for him to go on when he seemed hesitant. When he related the strange feelings he had gotten from his fellow detective she had to cover her mouth to hide a small smile. She couldn't imagine Vince ever being interested in another man although she could well believe that another man would come on to him. He was, after all, very attractive.

“So that's the way it went down. Hey--you're laughing at me,” Vince accused.

“No I'm not, really. Okay, maybe I am, just a little.” Laura grinned at him. “It's just the way you described the other detective--with the long hair and beard and the 'white power' tattoos and everything....”

“Yeah.” Vince shook his head and made an exaggerated shiver, making her laugh more. “Really freaked me out, gotta tell you.”

“I can imagine. Bet you don't get hit on by a lot of guys.”

“Not since before I made detective and I was assigned to work the Pride Parade route downtown. Some guys just can't resist a man in uniform, I guess.” He shivered again and Laura laughed out loud.

“So,” Vince turned serious quickly. “It was that, uh, fairy dust that did that to me? Made me able to feel what everybody in *Mike's* was feeling?”

Laura nodded, pushing her hair out of her face again. The car hummed around another corner. They were almost to her lab. “You inhaled the dust, , which crosses the blood/brain barrier immediately, and it gave you an instance of generative empathy.”

“Huh? Dr. Albright, be so kind as to remember that your audience here doesn't hold a PhD in any of the hard sciences.” Vince affected a fake British accent, his tone lightly mocking.

Laura grinned. “Fine--so what the dust did to you was make your brain like mine for just a few minutes.”

Vince nodded at her, eyebrows raised. “And your brain is different from us lowly mortals how?”

“Cut it out, Vince.” She elbowed him and he rubbed his biceps, pretending to be hurt. Laura sighed, trying to think how to explain. “Okay, so in a normal person's brain....”

“In my brain?”

“I didn't say that.” She elbowed him again and he grinned. “In a normal person's brain, well, in anybody's really, the sense of smell is controlled by a little organ in the forebrain called the amygdala. And the emotional center of the brain is the limbic system. They're not mutually exclusive, of course. For instance, maybe you smell an apple pie and it reminds you of a pie your Grandma used to make when you were little and that makes you happy ... see? Stimulus, reaction. Smell, emotion.”

“Yeah,” Vince made a twirling motion with one finger. “Go on.”

Laura sighed and rubbed her cheek against the soft upholstery of the Eternity's head rest. “Well, that's how it goes in a normal brain. In an abnormal brain--in someone diagnosed with hyper-empathy, for instance, it's almost like we have an extra pathway between the amygdala and the limbic system. It makes us ... me, hypersensitive to the pheromones the people around me give off.”

“So we're back to you smellin' other people's emotions. So if that's a problem why not wear nose plugs or something like that?”

Laura sighed. The Eternity was pulling into Channelside , which was all but obscured by the driving rain. “It's not that easy-- I wish it was. What I told you was a very simple explanation of why my brain works the way it does but it's by no means complete. It's like....” She gestured, looking for words. “like the tip of the iceberg. No one knows, for instance, why touching someone--skin contact--makes the emotional transfer so much more intense, but it does. Gerald is ... *was*, sorry, working on it the entire time I knew him, mainly because he was moderately hypersensitive himself. Before the Lepids came he was looking for a way to cure it. After they showed up and dropped such a lucrative business in his lap, I believe he was looking for a way to enhance it.”

“What, he wanted to make regular people into hyper-sensitives? So they could communicate with the Butters too?” Vince frowned.

Laura shook her head, pushing her loose hair out of the way again. She hoped she had a spare hair clip in the lab. “No--there's no way you could make a normal brain abnormal. The fairy dust can simulate the experience of being hyper-sensitive for a very short period of time but with a normal brain it only works between humans. You couldn't, say, snort a lot of it and be able to communicate with the Lepids because you don't really have that pathway in your brain. They can talk, you know, just not very well and it exhausts them. No, what Gerald was trying to do was to find a way to make sensitives more sensitive--to make it easier to host a Lepid's mind inside their own.” The Eternity gave a jolt and she looked out the foggy window. “Oh, here we are.”

Vince was still focused on the conversation. “So when you communicate with them, with the Lepids, you actually let them *inside* your mind? That doesn't sound too comfortable.”

“It's not,” Laura answered. The Eternity rolled up the slight incline towards the old warehouse that housed her lab. “It's actually really....” She broke off, staring. The entrance of the lab was standing wide open. In the doorway, beside the heavy, rolling metal door, something gleamed a dull silver in the diffuse light. The object was obscured by the heavy rain still pouring down but it looked like....

“Oh, no....” Laura fumbled clumsily for the Eternity's handle, pushing the door up and out of her way. Behind her she heard Vince yell something about being careful but nothing mattered but the broken pile of silver lying in the pouring rain in front of her lab.

Chapter 12

“Laura! Laura! It might not be safe!”

But she was out of the car and running through the heavy rain before he could stop her. Vince followed, cursing under his breath as the cold downpour immediately soaked him to the skin.

She was kneeling in front of the sliding metal door to her lab, cradling what looked like a pile of junk in her arms. The interior of the lab was dark and seemingly empty but he was taking no chances.

“Stay here and I'll check out the inside,” he yelled over the rain, drawing his gun and edging around the metal door. Laura didn't even look up at him, all her attention was consumed by the broken object on the ground.

Vince shook his head and entered the lab with caution, leading with his gun. A quick perimeter check revealed that the lab was unoccupied but someone had definitely been there. All of the delicate equipment that had been humming quietly in the background on his first trip to the lab was quiet now, smashed beyond repair. Loose papers and data strips littered the tables and floor and several of the lab stools had been overturned. It was obvious the place had been thoroughly searched and then completely trashed.

He hated to let her see the mess that someone had made of her work. It was so senseless, so brutal.

“They really did a thorough job, didn't they?”

Her voice behind him startled him. “Hey, I told you to wait outside until I gave the all clear.” But the sight of her when he turned drained away all his anger.

She stood shivering in the doorway to the lab, thick blond hair plastered to her skull in long, dripping tendrils. Her arms were wrapped around herself protectively and the big, changeable eyes were dull with grief.

“Laura?” He re-holstered his gun and took a step towards her but she moved away.

“They killed Artie. But still ... I don't think I'll be able to repair him.” She looked up at Vince and he realized that the moisture on her pale cheeks wasn't just rain water.

“Laura, baby, I'm so sorry.” He watched her helplessly, aching to close the distance between them and hold her but he knew she wouldn't allow it.

“It's just....” She rubbed angrily at the tears with one hand, the other arm still wrapped tightly around her waist. “I guess whoever did my home and my car did it, I should've thought they might. What's the point in such senseless destruction, Vince? I don't understand. What were they looking for?” She bowed her head, shivering in her wet clothes, shoulders shaking.

Vince couldn't help himself anymore, he went to her. “Laura, please....” He reached for her and his hand landed on the bare skin of her wrist. She flinched away.

“Please don't ... I appreciate it Vince, that you want to help me, but I can't stand the touching. And please don't feel frustrated--that only makes it worse.”

“I'm sorry.” He stood back from her, arms crossed on his chest, feeling foolish. She didn't want his help, didn't need his comfort.

Laura looked up at him with dark, wet eyes. “You must think I spend half my life having emotional breakdowns, huh?”

“No. You went through some serious shit these last coupla days. This,” he gestured curtly to the ruined lab. “Would make anybody upset.”

“I actually hate to cry, you know? I think I've cried more in the past twenty-four hours than I have since my divorce came through. And the worst thing is....” She trailed off, looking at him sidelong. Her changeable eyes were the color of the sea during a storm.

“What's the worst thing?” he asked gently, daring to take a step towards her. She stood huddled in a miserable package just inside the doorway to the dark, ruined lab.

“The worst thing is I can feel you wanting to comfort me, wanting to hold me ... And I *want* that comfort--want it so badly, Vince. But I just can't stand the contact. It's my damn disability, I can't get around it.”

“What if I didn't touch your skin?” He ducked his head to look directly into her eyes. With any other woman he would have tilted her chin up but this was the best he could do without touching.

Laura looked at him, wet, shivering, and obviously in need of comfort but still uncertain.

“C'mon.” Vince held out his arms and with a little moan of pure sorrow, she came to him. “It's okay, baby. It's all right,” he whispered.

He held her carefully at first, feeling her hot face pressed against his chest through the damp black t-shirt he wore. Her wet blond hair was ticklish where it trailed over his forearms and she felt soft and yielding in his arms as she leaned weakly against him, trembling all over, and let the tears come down.

She smelled like rain and wet hair and damp skin and under all that a rich, feminine musk that must be her natural scent. Vince breathed it in.

It had been a while since he'd held a woman in his arms. There hadn't been

anybody since Tandy had left about six months before Kyra had disappeared. But some things you don't forget. He held her close and let her cry, smoothing one large hand over her dripping, tangled hair and whispering soothing nonsense words as she leaned against him.

He could feel the soft fullness of her breasts pressing against him through their wet shirts but her distress was so acute he couldn't react to anything but her pain. Aware that she could *feel* him, he concentrated on having protective, comforting emotions hoping it might calm her down.

At last the sobs tapered off to sniffles and a little moan now and then.

“Better?” Vince rubbed her shoulders, being careful not to touch the exposed skin of her neck where the scoop-necked shirt ended.

“Yeah.” Laura looked up at him, not pulling away just yet although he could tell by the tension in her body that she was about to. “Lots better. Thanks, Vince.” She offered him a watery smile.

“Hey, anytime.” He smiled at her and was glad to see a small, crooked grin in return. “Look, whoever did this,” he jerked his chin in the direction of the smashed equipment, “probably wanted to make it look like a robbery or just an act of vandalism. In fact, if I didn't know better, I'd just think it was a bunch of bored kids, lookin' to make trouble.”

Laura sighed. “Yeah. I guess you're right.” She stepped away from him and Vince let her go reluctantly.

“All this ... Is there any way--I mean, did you lose everything?” he asked, fumbling to find the least hurtful way to phrase the question.

Laura bit her lip, arms crossed over her chest, as she surveyed the damage. “Well, I'm afraid most of it is a total loss. This equipment isn't made to withstand the slightest variation in temperature, let alone a baseball bat or whatever they used. Luckily I have most of the research notes on what I was trying to do backed up on my Message Buddy so I should be able to recreate...” Her voice trailed off and she put a hand to her mouth, eyes going suddenly wide.

“What? What is it?” Vince thought maybe she had seen something, some other irreparable damage she had previously missed. “Laura?”

She turned to him, the hand dropping away from her mouth, her eyes still wide and shocked. “Vince, I know ... know what they had to be looking for. How Gerald sent me a message. God, I feel so *stupid* for not thinking of it before!”

“How? *How?*” Vince leaned close to her, his wet shoes squelching on the worn tile floor and grabbed her arms excitedly. She flinched but didn't try to pull free.

“My Message Buddy! It' still tied into the HLC mainframe. I bet he tried to send me a message through that. It's been so long since I used it for anything but work notes I didn't even think....”

“You didn't lose it in the fire?” Vince demanded, feeling his blood surge with hope. Finally, a lead! A lead that might point the way to Kyra!

“I ... no. No, I'm pretty sure it's still in my carry-all bag. That was the only thing I managed to get out besides myself.”

“C'mon!” Still holding her arm he pulled her out of the dark ruins of her lab towards the Eternity.

* * * *

On the way back to Old Seminole Heights, the Eternity wasn't making very good time. Vince cursed himself for taking south Dale Mabry , which always flooded. Beside him, Laura sat huddled in the seat, dripping miserably as he was himself. Suddenly she sneezed lightly, three times in succession. Vince looked at her, concerned.

“Bless you.” It was an archaic expression that he had picked up from Nana Gertie growing up.

“Thanks, I ah ... ah....” She sneezed again and sniffled miserably. “Sorry.”

“You sound like you're gettin' a cold.”

“Nobody gets colds anymore. Not since the Lepids.” She sneezed again.

“Well maybe you're gonna be the first. Look, I have an idea. We'll stop by my Grandma's house and dry off. It's on the way and I need to check on her anyway.”

“What about the Message Buddy? I thought you were so excited....”

“I am.” Vince sighed. “But it'll keep another thirty minutes. And I wanna let Nana Gertie know what's goin' on--that things might be shaking loose.” He grinned.

“And I thought you might like to meet her.”

“Will ... will she want to meet me?” Laura looked at him hesitantly, shivering in the cool air of the Eternity's AC unit.

Vince snapped off the AC and gave her a level stare. “Just because your dad wasn't exactly overjoyed about seein' me on your vid-phone doesn't mean Nana Gertie won't want to meet you. She's real open minded that way.”

“Vince, please.” She looked at him pleadingly. “I'm not defending their ideas but they're still my parents. And if you knew my dad you'd know he'd be upset to see me in the same room with a half-naked man no matter *what* color his skin was. He's just old fashioned that way.”

Vince held up his hands. “All right, all right--I'm sorry. I didn't have any right to say that.”

She sighed. “It's okay. How far away is your, um, Nana's house?”

Vince looked out the window. “We're here now.”

The Eternity pulled up into the front drive of Nana Gertie's little house on South Howard, tires crunching on the gravel. He frowned; Nana's little red Kia Scout

wasn't parked out front.

“Well, I don't see her car so you might not get to meet her after all. Too bad. Might as well go in and get dried off though.”

“Maybe it's just as well.” Laura shifted and reached for the Eternity's handle. “I'm not exactly presentable.” She looked down at the pale pink shirt , which was nearly transparent now that it was wet. Vince had been trying not to notice this but he couldn't help glancing at her full, firm breasts pressing against the taut material. Her nipples were erect with cold.

“Mmm,” he said. “Could be you're right. She might get the same impression your dad did if she saw you lookin' like that.”

Laura blushed and looked down, fumbling with the door latch. He cursed inwardly. *Real smooth, Vince.* What had possessed him to make such an asinine remark? Was it just that he hadn't been with a woman in a while or that Laura Albright drew him in some way? Maybe it was a little of both.

She stumbled out into the rain and he followed her quickly, running to the front door and keying them inside. They were both dripping on the brightly patterned entry rug and he knew his Nana wouldn't like that.

“C'mon.” He kicked off his shoes and led the way to the spare bathroom, , which used to be Kyra's, walking quickly to keep the mess to a minimum. She followed him, leaving the pink shoes that were now a dirty pinkish-brown with mud, beside his own.

“Towels in here,” Vince explained. He stripped off his vest, shoulder holster and shirt in rapid succession and grabbed a towel from the linen cupboard on the left side of the tub. He moved out of the way, nodding for Laura to do the same but she didn't move.

“Um....” She looked at his bare brown torso, beaded with water and seemed to lose her train of thought.

“Hey,” Vince snapped his fingers under her nose and she looked up. “You okay? You kinda zoned out on me there for a minute.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” She blushed and headed for the towel cupboard. “I was just ... thinking. I, um I should probably take off ... I mean, this shirt is soaked....”

“Oh.” Vince turned his back. “Go ahead, I won't look. I'd leave the room but Nana Gertie will have a fit if I drip all over her rug.”

He continued to towel himself, listening to the wet slap of the soaked pink shirt as it landed in the tub and then the soft rustling of her rummaging in the cupboard. Then for a long moment there was complete silence.

“Laura?” he asked at last, trying not to imagine her wet and completely topless behind him although it was the only picture his brain seemed to want to send. “You done?”

“Vince....” Her voice sounded odd, distant.

He almost turned around but caught himself in time. She hadn't answered his question.

“Yeah?” he said instead, concentrating on getting his back completely dry.

“Was this, um, your sister's bathroom?”

“Yeah, it was. Why do you ask?” He rubbed the soft terrycloth vigorously over the back of his neck.

“Because, well ... Vince, did you know your sister was pregnant?”

“She *what*?” He whirled around to face her.

“Look at what I found behind the towels.” Laura was wrapped in a bright orange

towel and her hair was covered by a blue one. She held her hand out insistently and lying cupped in her palm was a home pregnancy test stick. There was a faint green positive indicator light still flashing in the unit and when she pushed a small button on the side a tinny pre-recorded voice spoke.

“Kyra Roberts, May fifth, two thousand thirty eight. There is a ninety-nine point seven percent chance that you are pregnant. If you would like to take this test again simply reset the SureTrue stick using the round pink knob on the side. Repeat, there is a ninety-nine point seven percent chance that you are preg....” The voice halted abruptly when Laura pressed the button again.

“See? Did you have any idea?”

“No. No, I didn't.” Irrationally, his first thought was that he was going to kill that little punk, Jamal. Kyra was supposed to be starting at Florida State this fall and how was she supposed to do that with a baby on the way? Then the reality of the situation reasserted itself and he took the stick from Kyra with fingers that felt numb.

“I'm sorry. I was feeling for a smaller towel for my hair and then....” Laura's voice trailed off for a moment. “Vince, Ploi Nygen was pregnant and so was your sister. Were any of the other girls that were abducted pregnant?”

He frowned, trying to think. “I'd have to check my notepad. Only one that I can think of off the top of my head.”

“And how old were they, generally speaking?”

“The girls? Um....” Vince laid the SureTrue stick on the side of the sink.

“Youngest was fourteen and the oldest was twenty. Most were between sixteen and nineteen, though.” He shut his eyes and swallowed hard before continuing.

“Kyra--she was just nineteen. Took this test just two days before ... before she was taken. God.”

“I'm so sorry.” He felt her fingertips brush lightly over his bare shoulder and then

withdraw quickly. Had she gotten a flash of his emotions? They weren't very pleasant just then.

“No.” Vince shook his head and opened his eyes. “S Okay. It's just ... she was so young.”

“They all were. And at least three of them were pregnant. Do you think it could be some kind of pattern?”

“Possibly. We look for patterns in this kind of case--try to profile the abductor.” He didn't want to say killer. He didn't want that to be true. “You think it could be important?”

Laura nibbled her lush lower lip in a way that made him have to look away. “Maybe. It's just a hunch though.” She shrugged.

“Hell, always play a good hunch, girl. You know how many cases I solved based on educated guesswork? The facts don't always say it all. That's what's been drivin' me crazy about this case--on the surface it looks like a straight forward case of a serial abductor but not all the pieces seem to fit. It just feels ... wrong to me.”

“Me too but I don't know why.”

“Well let's throw these wet clothes in my Nana's auto-press and then get back to my place. I have a feeling that whatever's in your Message Buddy might help us fit some of this together.”

He moved to pat her on her bare shoulder, a gesture of camaraderie, no more, but she flinched away as though he'd burned her. Vince dropped his hand.

“Sorry, I forgot. Guess I'm just a touchy guy.” It was a lame apology but she took it in stride.

“That's okay. I don't mind, really--it's just habit. Your emotions are really strong. Forceful. I'll get used to it eventually. In fact, it'll probably be good for me. Help

raise my tolerance.”

Vince grimaced and threw down the towel he'd picked up to finish drying his back. “Hmph. Glad I could help. It's not every day I get to raise a woman's *tolerance* for me.”

“Vince, please don't deliberately misunderstand me.” She sighed, wrapping her arms around herself. The vibrant blue towel that covered her hair made her eyes an arresting shade of cerulean. “You must know I don't find your touch unpleasant. It's just ... *intense*. That's all.”

“Intense, huh?” He eyes her speculatively and after a moment she looked away, her cheeks glowing pink.

Vince sighed. “C'mon. We better get goin'.”

Chapter 13

The ride back to Vince's house was a silent one. Once or twice Laura opened her mouth to say something and then shut it again. She knew she ought to be thinking about the Message Buddy and what Gerald's last words to her had been on speculating about the abducted girls but really her mind was filled with only one thing, one person--Vince Roberts. She glanced out the window at the suburban streets scrolling by. The rain had let up a little and now only a gentle sprinkle came from the iron gray sky.

I've only known him a day and a half. So why did it seem like so much longer? Why was she letting him get to her this way? Possibly it was the stress she'd been under lately or maybe just the fact that he was an attractive man who showed definite interest in her. More interest than Gerald had ever showed, anyway. But attractive or not she needed to stop acting like a silly school girl with a crush. There was no point in starting something that couldn't possibly lead anywhere, right? *Right*, she told herself firmly. *So stop acting so stupid and concentrate on*

doing what you promised--helping him find his sister.

As soon as she had formed her resolution, Laura glanced over to the man in question and saw those dark chocolate eyes were trained on her. Vince was giving her that look again--the one that made her feel naked.

“Hey, what you thinkin'?” His voice was soft and deep, his gentle curiosity like a velvet finger down the groove of her spine.

Laura shook her head. “Nothing. Well, just wondering about what Gerald could possibly have sent me. He'd given up trying to call me or get hold of me in any way months ago, so I'm a little surprised he sent his last message to me.”

“Maybe it had something to do with the Butters,” Vince offered thoughtfully. “Whatever it was I hope your ex was short and to the point. TAMI, the department AI, said it was an interrupted transmission. Might not get much of anything at all.” He sighed and rubbed his jaw.

Laura knew he was trying to talk himself out of hoping too hard. He'd been searching so long for his sister, for any link to her at all. Now they might have something but Vince was afraid to let himself get too excited in case it turned out to be another blind alley. In a way, she agreed with him. There was no point getting your heart set on something that you couldn't have.

“We're here.”

His words jolted her out of her reflection and Laura looked up to see that he was already out of the car and bounding up the front steps of his broad front porch. He beckoned for her impatiently. She grinned to herself and she hurried up the steps after him. Clearly Vince wasn't able to master his hope as much as he wanted to.

* * * *

“Well?”

“Give me a minute--it's old and it takes a while to warm up.” The Message Buddy hummed quietly in her hands, the small screen flickering to life reluctantly. At last it flashed *ready* and the menu appeared. Laura flipped from *notes* to *message* mode and picked *new messages*, an option she hadn't used for over a year.

“Well?” Vince asked again. He was sitting on the couch beside her, closer than was absolutely comfortable. Laura could feel his excitement like a barrage of electric sparks prickling up and down the sensitive skin of her back.

“Hang on. Okay, it says I have one new message. Sent August tenth around twelve-fifteen PM.”

“That's it!” Vince was suddenly tense and quiet. “That's around the time TAMI said the interrupted transmission was sent. What does it say?”

She tapped gently at the old screen with her stylus and it filled with a chaotic jumble of numbers and letters. Laura cursed under her breath.

“What?” Vince looked at her anxiously. His eager anxiety was like a cheering crowd at a football game inside her head.

“It's encoded.”

“Well can you....”

“Give me a second.” Laura sighed and rubbed her temples with the fingertips of her free hand. “Look, your emotions are really *loud* right now, Vince. Could you just I just need a little space to breath.”

“Sorry.” He stood abruptly and moved across the room. “Better?” he asked from his place by the window.

“Yeah.” She tapped through a few more screen prompts, trying to break the encryption but getting nowhere fast. If only she had access to the AI model she'd been working on in her lab, but everything there was trashed ... But wasn't there a

smaller prototype of it in her work notes? It was non-functional at the moment but if she activated it maybe....

“Got it,” Laura muttered to herself.

“What?” His body was rigid with tension, practically trembling with the desire to come over and look at the screen. The look on his face was a mixture of hope and anticipation.

“I can't break the encryption but I think there's a way to work around it. Look.” Laura motioned for him to come closer , which he did immediately. “I'm using a smaller model of the AI that I was building in my lab,” she said, indicating the screen , which was a blur of rapidly scrolling digits. “It'll take a few hours, but it should get the job done. Then I'll rout it through the audio and we can hear it.”

“Smart lady.”

“Well, there's nothing to do now but let the AI work. Would you mind if I took a bubble bath? It's been kind of a stressful day and I'm still cold from the rain. A bath raises your core temperature.”

“Mmm.” The look he gave her through half-lidded eyes expressed admiration of a whole different type. “Raises your temperature, huh?”

Laura felt herself blushing despite her resolution not to. “I'm cold,” she repeated.

“Of course you can take a bath. Make yourself at home, Laura.” The melted chocolate eyes regarded her quietly.

“Thanks.” She laid the Message Buddy on the coffee table in front of her and escaped to the bathroom.

There wasn't much to use in the way of bubble bath so shampoo had to suffice. Fortunately it foamed up nicely and Laura sighed with relief as she lowered herself into the hot, steamy depths.

A hot bubble bath was more than a luxury, it was a necessity after a stressful day. Gerald had complained in the beginning of their marriage that she spent more time in the bathtub than in their bed. Not that it did either one of them much good for her to come to bed, Laura thought. She scooped up a handful of foam and puffed on it, watching the bubbles disperse. How interested would Vince be in her if he knew about that?

Forget it. Don't think about it. She leaned back and let the water that was just this side of too hot lap against her naked skin. Though it was barely late afternoon she'd had an incredibly draining day. Her eyes drifted shut.

* * * *

“Laura, you okay in there?”

His voice and light rapping on the bathroom door awakened her.

“Hmm?” For a disorienting moment she wasn't sure where she was. The water had grown cold around her and the bathroom was nearly dark, lit only by the pale gray light coming in through the single frosted window high on the far wall. She liked to take baths in the dark; it was more soothing, easier to shut out everything around you that way.

“Laura?” She could feel his worry seeping under the door like a dark fog that trembled along her nerve endings. She sat up, sloshing water over the side of the tub with the sudden movement.

“I'm fine.” She shivered as the chilly water slapped against her bare skin. “I just lost track of time, that's all.”

“Oh, well. It's just been a couple hours and I was gettin' worried. Do you like Chinese?”

For a moment her sleep blurred brain wouldn't process this and then she realized

he was talking about dinner. Her stomach rumbled at the thought--breakfast has been a long time ago and she had lost most of it at The Royal Thai after being barraged by the girl, Amy's, teenaged emotions.

“Uh, sure. Chinese is good,” she answered, fumbling to pull the plug and drain the ice cold water away. “I'll be out in a minute.”

“Take your time. Always takes them at least twenty minutes to deliver. Anything you want?”

“No, whatever you order is fine.” She stood up, feeling the chilly water sluice down her skin and reached for a towel. There was silence outside the door now but she could tell he was still there. “Hey, do you mind if I wear your shirt again?” Tandy hadn't left anything resembling clothes around the house and she didn't relish the thought of wriggling back into the skin-tight jeans and see-through shirt. At least his green button-down she'd been wearing earlier was roomy and covered everything.

There was more silence from the other side of the door and a feeling of restraint, an emotion he was trying to hold in check perhaps. Laura was beginning to wonder if she'd offended him. Maybe he didn't like her wearing his clothes? He hadn't seemed angry that morning when he'd found her wearing the shirt.

“Sure, no problem,” he said at last, just when she was about to take back the request. “Uh, how's your back? Is that Safe-t-Skin comin' off yet?”

“Oh.” So much has happened she'd nearly forgotten about the healing film that was clinging to the nasty cuts on her back. Laura reached behind herself and realized that it didn't hurt at all anymore and she could feel some of the protective barrier over her cuts loosening. It would fall off on its own when her cuts were fully healed. “Actually, it feels pretty good. I'd better let it dry a little and then we'll see.”

“Okay. I'll just ... go order then.” There was a shuffling sound outside the door and this time she could tell he'd really left.

* * * *

When she got out to the living room she felt more relaxed but not much warmer. The Message Buddy was still humming quietly to itself and she heard Vince rustling around in the vicinity of the kitchen. He came out a moment later, wiping his hands on a towel and saw her. For a moment he didn't speak at all and she could feel his eyes flickering over her body briefly.

“Hey, I hope Kung Pow chicken is all right with you. Got everything set up and the food's already here,” he said at last, looking back down at the towel and concentrating on drying his hands.

“Sounds great. I'm starved.” She tried to say it as lightly as possible but she couldn't help looking him over. He had changed clothes and was wearing a pair of sweat pants and a dark green t-shirt that hugged his broad shoulders and muscular chest.

“Hey, we're twins.” Laura indicated the green shirts they both wore as she ducked around him to get to the dining room , which adjoined his kitchen. She wished there didn't have to be this tension between them. It made her nervous and stirred emotions she'd worked hard all her adult life to keep in check.

“Yeah, help yourself.” He turned and indicated the familiar take-out boxes and several pairs of chopsticks.

“So what do you think we'll get out of Gerald's message?” Laura seated herself and broke apart a pair of chopsticks. “You have anything to drink?”

“White wine, water, or strawberry protein nutri-drink?” He went to the refrigerator, his fingers hovering over the order buttons.

“Wine is good.” She probably shouldn't be drinking but all things considered, Laura felt like she deserved a drink after the taxing couple of days she'd had.

“Okay.” Long brown fingers flew over the controls and a slot slid open, producing a perfectly chilled bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. “Here we go.” He uncorked the bottle and poured for them both.

“Thanks.” She took the glass he was offering and sipped appreciatively. “Mmm, delicious.”

Vince took a sip as well. “Yeah, not bad.” He settled himself at the table. “So what do I think we'll get outta the message? I don't know--maybe nothin'. Maybe something that'll break the whole thing wide open. That's what I'm hoping anyway.” He took a bite of chicken.

“Do you have a hunch about it?” Laura took another sip of wine and realized her glass was empty. Vince refilled it and poured himself some more as well.

“You could say that. Or maybe I'm just lookin' for anything at all, any little scrap of hope to help me believe it's not too late. That she's still alive somewhere.” He sighed and put down his chopsticks.

“Tell me about her,” Laura said quietly. “What's she like, your sister?”

“She's....” He looked up but not at her. The dark copper eyes had an inward-turning look. “I guess if I had to pick one word I'd say fearless. Never been afraid of anything, that girl.” He gave a soft laugh. “You know, one time when she was around seven I took her to the Y--was gonna teach her how to swim. Nana Gertie always says anybody who lives as close to the ocean as we do oughta be able to take care of themselves in case they fall overboard or something. 'Course, she can't swim a lick herself.” He laughed again, his dark eyes still distant. “Anyway, I took Kyra with me and I was showin' her some dives. Well, really, I was showin' off for the pretty life guard, you know?” He winked at her.

Laura smiled and nodded, enjoying the animation on his dark face as he remembered.

Vince sighed and took a sip of wine. “So, here I am doin' all these fancy moves

and I told Kyra to just stay put and watch 'cause she couldn't swim. I had just done a double gainer from the high board and was coming up when I heard a splash beside me.” He grinned, the expression lighting his whole face. “You know, that girl had jumped right in the deep end? I drug her out half-drowned and gave her hell for it but she wouldn't back down. Said she figured if I could do it, she could do it too. Always been like that--just fearless.”

“She sounds like quite a girl--quite a woman,” Laura said softly.

Vince nodded. “She is. Kyra's tough. Growing up I never wanted to admit it. There's twelve years between us, you know, so I was more like an uncle or a father to her than a brother, I guess. She was always gettin' onto me for treating her like a kid. God...” He squeezed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

“Hey, we'll find her, Vince.” The weary sorrow Laura felt coming from him was like a dull ache in her lower back. She wished she could comfort him somehow. Her hand rose and hovered over his before withdrawing. “I'm sure we'll find her,” she repeated instead, taking another drink of wine.

He smiled tiredly. “Hey, now you sound like my Nana Gertie. She said the same thi....”

A muted beeping from the living room interrupted him and very faintly Laura could hear the automated voice of the Message Buddy saying, “Program complete.”

“Come on.” She was out of her chair and back on the couch in a heartbeat and Vince was right beside her.

“Well?”

She could feel his excitement churning the inside of her stomach--the same feeling you get at the top of the first really high hill on a roller coaster. It made her glad she hadn't eaten too much.

“Hang on.” She tapped with the stylus, turning on the audio mode and hit *play*. Suddenly Gerald's dry, slightly nasal tone, sounding eerily close and alive, filled the silence.

“Laura, if you're reading or hearing this message, please don't shut it off until you hear me out. I'm in a fairly desperate situation and whether you like it or not it may involve you as well.

“Briefly, I was at MacDill about a week ago and I learned some things I wasn't supposed to know about. Classified information, I guess.” There was a dry, barking laugh she knew so well before he continued. “Unfortunately, someone, and I'm not going to mention names here for fear of endangering you further, but someone found out what I'd heard.

“Laura, you're not going to believe this but it seems a deal had been made that's just ... Well, it's unbelievable. I'm not even sure how or why but they've been taking girls for....”

With a small click, the audio stopped.

“What? *What?*” Vince's dark face was tense, his emotions roiled between them in gut-churning turmoil. “Was that it? Who was taking the girls? Where were they taking them? Who made the deal and who did they make it with?”

“I don't know--hang on.” Laura started the audio again and they listened intently but there was nothing more to be gained from the message.

Vince slammed a fist against his thigh in frustration. “Dammit! I can't believe this.”

Laura fiddled with the Buddy but couldn't get anything else. “Sorry, I guess that's it.”

He sighed deeply, broad shoulders slumping. “Well, TAMI did say the transmission was interrupted. At least we know for sure that the two cases are

connected.”

“Yeah.” Laura sat silently nibbling her bottom lip for a moment. “I guess we'll have to go to MacDill tomorrow and see if we can turn anything up.”

“Can you get us in? I thought nobody without clearance....” Vince trailed off and she became aware that he was watching her intently. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. It's just ... MacDill is so ... It's a lot of people in a small space. I'm pretty sure I can get us in though.” She tried to make her face stiff and unexpressive but from the way Vince was watching her she wasn't succeeding too well.

“Hey, is it because of your gift? Your hyper-empathy? It's gonna be hard on you, isn't it?”

“Vince, honestly. Please don't worry about me--I'll be fine. I told you, it's just that my tolerance is low.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” His voice was low and concerned and she looked up to see those dark eyes watching her. Laura shifted uncomfortably on the couch.

“Well....” There was no way she ought to suggest what she was thinking. Not with the tension that already existed between them.

“What? Tell me.” He leaned forward as though willing her to talk.

Laura sighed and ran a hand through her hair, feeling the silky strands slide against her fingers. Touch was the key--Gerald had always said so although he hadn't quite figured that aspect of hyper-empathy out yet. Now he never would.

“What?” Vince asked again and she knew she'd have to tell him.

“There's an an exercise Gerald taught me when we first met. It helps build tolerance quickly but I just don't know ... You'd have to help me.” She looked up

at him, feeling terribly vulnerable.

Vince shook his head. “Look, anything I can do. Anything at all....”

“It ... It's a touching exercise.” Laura sat up and turned to face him, trying to keep her face calm. She curled her legs under her, making sure the green shirt covered everything. “I mean, non-sexual touching, of course.” Her cheeks were burning despite her best efforts to show nothing.

“Mmm-hmm?” He raised an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to continue and Laura was grateful he didn't say anything.

She took a deep breath and forced herself to sit up straight and look him in the eyes. *Might as well be professional about this.* “Basically I touch you for as long as I can stand it and then you touch me until I ask you to stop. It kind of goes in turns and the object is to last a little longer every time. Ideally I'd have weeks to work on building up my tolerance again but since we don't have weeks....” She trailed off.

“Sounds pretty straight-forward.” Vince looked at her seriously and once again she was grateful that he didn't seem inclined to make fun. “Who starts?”

“Oh,” Laura swallowed. “You mean ... do it now?”

“Sure. Unless you're still hungry?” He nodded back in the direction of the kitchen.

She shook her head. “No, I ... I'm not really hungry any more. A little more wine might help though.”

Wordlessly he retrieved the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and their glasses and placed them on the coffee table. Laura took a long swallow of the wine, willing the mellow warmth of the alcohol to enter her bloodstream and loosen her up.

“Better?” he asked when she sat the glass down.

“Much. Thanks, Vince.”

“Hey, no problem.” He shifted to face her. “So, do you want to start? Should I just sit here?”

“Sure, that's fine. Just try to feel calm. Okay?”

He nodded. His emotions quieted until she could barely *feel* him at all.

Laura took a deep breath and reached for his hand. She had touched him like this before but this time it was different--more deliberate. Hesitantly, she entwined his long brown fingers with her slender pale ones. Then she opened herself as wide as she could.

Instantly the muted emotions that had been almost silent before she touched him burst across her mind like fireworks. There was attraction, a low, warm buzz she could feel brushing like silk against her skin and intrigue, probably at the idea of playing the 'touching game' with her, like hot cinnamon in the air.

As she touched him, another emotion built quickly, like a banked fire doused with gasoline suddenly blazing to life. His sexual arousal flowed powerfully through the physical link between their hands and licked along the sensitive skin of her thighs and the soft slopes of her breasts with disarming intimacy. Laura gasped and jerked her hand away.

Vince looked at her, not moving. “Didn't like what you felt?” he inquired, the deep voice soft but with a hint of steel underneath.

“I ... I'm sorry.” She rubbed her palm against the side of her shirt before she could stop herself. “You ... I....”

“Can't help what I feel, Laura.” His eyes refused to leave her face.

“Maybe this isn't such a good idea right now.” She rose to leave but he grabbed the sleeve of her shirt and tugged her back down.

“Is it because I'm black?” he asked directly. “Because of the way you were raised?”

“No!” The question shocked her--hurt her. “I told you I'm not that way, Vince.”

“Yeah. I know you're not a Separatist, but I bet you never imagined being with someone like me, did you?” His voice was soft and low, his desire rubbing against her like a physical thing--the brush of soft fur along her spine.

Laura blushed from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes but refused to drop her eyes. She skirted the question carefully. “Actually, it's because I'm not used to getting that kind of ... emotion directed at me. That's all.”

Vince sat back and looked at her, the dark eyes filled with skepticism. “You were married to Gerald Hoyt what ... two and a half years?”

“Almost three,” Laura corrected him softly.

“So, didn't he ever feel want...?”

“Some. In the beginning.” She looked away, wrapping her arms around herself protectively. “Look, I'd rather not talk about this right now. If you're offended we don't have to continue this exercise.”

“Listen to you.” He ducked his head to look into her eyes, in that way he had. “You don't have to get all formal on me, girl. I'm not offended.”

Laura looked at him gratefully. The emotion coming from him had lightened somewhat to amusement, like a gentle hand ruffling through her hair.

“Really? Because we don't have to....”

“My turn.” He reached out and caught her hand gently, pulling her close and rubbing one large, warm hand up and down the sensitive underside of her forearm. “How's that?”

Laura closed her eyes and tried to relax as his emotions hummed through her body. The desire was still there but it was muted, as though he was deliberately trying to control it for her benefit. Instead, she concentrated on the feel of his hands on her arm. Warm, slightly callused, probably from where he gripped his gun. His touch was gentle but firm. She wondered what those hands would feel like on other parts of her body and quickly pushed the thought out of her mind.

“Is it too much?” Vince's concern for her brushed her lightly, like butterfly wings.

“No. No, it's all right.” Laura opened her eyes. “Would you mind if I...?”

“Sure.” He released her arm and sat back on the couch, eyes closed. “Go ahead. I'm not gonna watch you, that makes it harder.”

Laura swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. She didn't need to ask what he meant. Taking a breath to steady herself, she leaned forward, her fingers hovering over his. Then, as though it had a mind of its own, she saw her hand rise to his face instead. Lightly, she cupped the rough cheek, feeling the scrape of his five o'clock shadow against her open palm.

Vince's eyes flew open and his surprise raced through her like a comet blazing across the sky. Gently, he nuzzled against her palm and then turned his face to plant a soft kiss in the center.

Laura gasped and pulled away but not before his desire brushed something deep inside her--something she'd been trying to keep hidden, even from herself, for years.

“Too much?” The deep voice was nearly a growl.

Aware that she was playing a dangerous game but unable to stop herself, Laura shook her head. “Your ... your turn.” She nearly stuttered the words, unable to conceal her nervousness. She closed her eyes and waited, trembling.

She expected to feel the large, warm palm on her cheek, or maybe the side of her neck. His mouth, hot and wet and terrifyingly delicious was an unexpected shock. He kissed the side of her throat, licking gently over the sensitive skin under her ear and Laura wondered if he could feel her rapid pulse against his exploring tongue.

He went slowly at first, as though he expected her to stop him but Laura felt frozen in place by the gentle assault on her senses. She could feel her heart beating in every part of her body at once and she was aware that the tender v between her legs was pleurably irritated--almost swollen with heat. His intense desire spread through her in a warm, liquid rush, mixing with her own, making her feel lightheaded and a little dizzy.

Forbidden. This was what she had been warned about again and again growing up in her Father's house. *The races must not mix ...* And yet the illicit pleasure was that much more because of it.

Vince drew back for a moment and looked at her wordlessly. There was a silent question in the depths of those melted chocolate eyes. Laura knew her answer to that question ought to be No but before she could open her mouth to say it, he had captured her lips with his and she was melting into the kiss.

He drew her close against his big body, his desire pulsing through her like a second heartbeat. She could smell his skin, spicy and warm with a dark, masculine hint of musk. His broad chest was hard under her seeking palms and Laura became aware that she was sitting between his legs, the rigid length of his arousal pressing against her thigh. Large, warm hands stroked through her hair and over her shoulders and sides as he coaxed her mouth open, exploring her thoroughly with his tongue. He tasted faintly of wine and warm, aroused male.

The flood of his emotions was nearly crushing, the burning, consuming need licking over her body in heated flames and pouring down her throat in a flood like honey and wine. Her nipples were sharp, painful points at the tips of her breasts and between her thighs her sex was swollen and wet. Someone was moaning, a soft, broken sound like a wounded animal-like an animal in heat-- and it was her.

Laura began to feel overwhelmed. Every nerve in her body was singing like a plucked string and soon the vibrations would tear her apart--would drive her over the edge of reason.

Can't take much more Then Vince pulled her closer and suddenly the dark green shirt she wore was being unbuttoned. He reached inside, palming the heavy fullness of her breasts, tweaking her ripe nipples with just enough force to shoot jagged shards of pleasure/pain to the heat building between her legs.

She looked down and watched him touch her, awed by the contrast of his strong brown hands against the pale skin of her full breasts. *His skin on my skin, his hands on my body, all over me, touching me, pushing me ...* Waves of emotion lapped higher and higher, cresting over her head. His need for her tugged at her consciousness like a dangerous undertow. She was getting out too deep and she couldn't swim. It was too much--she couldn't breath--she was *drowning*.

With a gasp that was almost a cry, Laura pushed away suddenly. Panting, she scooted to the opposite end of the couch and crouched there, feeling like she couldn't get a deep enough breath. Her head throbbed with the miserable ache of sensation overload.

“What? Did I hurt you? Scare you?” Vince was breathing heavily too and she could feel the sexual frustration in his big body, a throbbing ache that wouldn't go away. But his voice was filled with concern, not anger as he leaned towards her.

“I ... I'm sorry. I can't--I just can't.” Realizing that the green shirt was still open, exposing her breasts, Laura jerked it closed and tried to work the buttons with trembling fingers but couldn't quite manage.

“You can't or you won't?” He leaned closer and Laura scrambled further back, feeling the arm of the couch gouge the small of her back. “Hey, settle down--it's okay. I'm not gonna hurt you or make you do anything you don't want to do. I already told you, I'm not about that.” Vince held up his hands, palm up. “I just wanna understand what's going on here.”

“I ... I just don't want to.” Laura looked away, unable to meet his eyes. She massaged her temples with her fingertips, willing the painful thudding ache to go away.

“Okay.” Vince took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. “I don't mind backing off if you feel uncomfortable 'cause I know we haven't known each other all that long. But don't sit there and tell me you don't want to all of a sudden when you were panting and moaning in my lap a minute ago. Just tell me the truth.” He was beginning to be angry now, a bright needle of pain behind her eyes.

“I can't, all right? And no, it doesn't have anything to do with your skin being brown and mine being white. It has to do with my hyper-empathy. You ... you were overloading my system. I got scared.” Laura drew herself into a tight bundle, shivering, her senses still reeling and her head still pounding from the terrifyingly pleasurable assault.

Vince looked at her perplexed. “I don't get it. Does this have more to do with your 'tolerance' or what? How did you manage when you were married?”

“I didn't--okay? Is that what you wanted to hear? Why my husband really left me? What Francine could give him that I couldn't?” Her breath hitched in her throat and her head ached.

“Whoa--Hey, ease down now, baby.” He put out a hand and then drew it back abruptly. “I didn't mean to get all up in your business, Laura. But are you telling me that you never...?”

“No. I'm a virgin and likely to remain one.” She lifted her chin and gave him the most icy look she could muster under the circumstances. “Gerald and I found out fairly early on in our relationship that when we tried to ... have relations that it wasn't going to work. The skin-on-skin contact created a closed loop between us that became unbearably intense very rapidly.”

“Was that because you were both hyper-sensitive?” The deep voice was quiet, soothing. He really wanted to know.

Laura shrugged. "In part, yes. I'm sure you've heard the phrase, 'There's a fine line between pleasure and pain.' That was the case when Gerald and I tried to have sex. His emotions fed mine and pushed them higher and mine fed his until neither of us could stand it." She sighed. "He told me ... he said it didn't matter, you know? That it was something he could do without. I realized after I found him with Francine that I never should have believed him about that. She, Francine, was only minimally hyper-sensitive. Sex was apparently no problem for her." She said it dryly, willing herself not to cry. It was an old pain but it still hurt.

Vince reached out and caught the loose sleeve of the green shirt. Gently, he tugged her closer, being careful not to touch her skin. "Hey, I'm sorry. Didn't mean for you to have to go through all that mess."

Laura shrugged, turning her face to rub her cheek against the soft material of the shirt. *Touch is the key.* But how? And why?

"But you know I still don't understand." Vince's deep voice was thoughtful. "You explained why you can't have sex with another hyper-sensitive and I can see that...." He made a circular motion with one hand. "The whole loop thing. But I still don't understand why you couldn't have a normal sex life with somebody else. Somebody who didn't have your gift."

"It's not a gift. It's a disability--a curse." Laura took a deep breath and blew it out, displacing the curtain of silky hair that had covered half her face. At last the headache was beginning to subside. "I'm sorry. Most of the time I try not to think about it. About ... sex. Because it's just not possible for me--I feel like I'm drowning in sensation--almost...." She groped for the right words. "Almost like I'm going to burn out a part of my brain. The more we touch, as more of my skin comes in contact with yours...." She blushed. "The more intense the emotions and sensations get until it's almost unbearable. Like being hooked up to an electrical current that gets progressively stronger and stronger until you're electrocuted." She looked at him hopefully. "Does any of this make any sense?"

Vince nodded, looking thoughtful. “Yeah, I can see what you're sayin'. During sex everybody's emotions get stronger and you're touching each other all over and it's hard to take. But if you can build up your tolerance to casual touching and regular emotions, why can't you build up to that too? I mean, if you were with somebody that didn't cause your brain to loop it?”

Laura remembered the overwhelming rush of sensations she'd gotten from Vince during their simple kiss and shook her head. “I wish I could say that's it's possible but I don't think so. It's too ... I can't even explain it to you, Vince. When you were touching me just now--kissing me, I felt like I was burning and drowning at the same time. It's just ... too much.”

He nodded thoughtfully, the dark eyes introspective. “I understand, baby.”

“I need....” She looked away from him, biting her lip. “I think I ought to go to bed now. I'm sorry for ... for starting something I couldn't finish.” She could still feel the distant throb of sexual frustration pulsing through his big body, could see the need in those melted chocolate eyes if only she looked. She didn't look.

Vince sighed. “Don't worry about it. This isn't exactly the right time to be thinking about....” He let the sentence trail off and Laura could feel his heat and frustrated longing like a heartbeat between her teeth.

“Good night,” she said. Trying to keep her dignity, she walked slowly towards the bedroom, feeling his eyes on her back every step of the way ... Sleep was a long time in coming.

Chapter 14

“Okay, now just stay in the car until I tell you to come meet MAC.”

“Fine,” Vince grumbled. It felt weird to be riding in the back of his own car dressed in his best suit but Laura assured him that he would look more like a VIP that way.

“It's a good thing you've got such a nice car,” she'd said thoughtfully, when explaining her plan to get them undetected onto MacDill Air force base. “It's just the kind of thing a foreign dignitary from a minor nation would have.”

Vince had snorted. “Glad to know I'm in good company when it comes to my taste in cars.”

Laura had an 'in' with MAC, short for Military Artificial Control, the AI that ran all of MacDill's operating systems and mainframe. The plan was to go in the little-used Bay Shore gate to the base, often called the 'VIP gate' because it was the entrance officials who wanted to enter the base quietly used. Laura was supposed to 'sweet-talk' MAC into granting them entrance and drive the Eternity into the base with Vince sitting in the back, posing as a dignitary from Zaire.

So here he was, sitting in the back of his own car and trying to look foreign and important while she crunched over the gravel in another pair of Tandy's high heels to 'sweet-talk' the base's AI.

Vince had to admit she looked sharp. She was wearing an outfit Tandy had bought for an interview with a law firm downtown. His ex hadn't gotten the job and had declared the expensive clothing 'unlucky', relegating it to the back of the closet where it stayed until Laura came along. It was a black pin-striped power suit that clung to her curvaceous figure like it was painted on.

The jacket was meant to be worn without a blouse but Laura wore a light white silk shell under it anyway. The skirt that matched the jacket was short enough to show plenty of silky thigh and the black spike heels that went with the outfit accentuated her long legs.

Damn. He shifted uncomfortably in the seat, watching her ass sway as she walked. Their little 'touching exercise' of the night before had caused him to see Laura in a whole new way. Before he'd thought he wanted her--now he knew it. The fact that they had been unable to complete what they had started on the couch only made him want her more. But would she ever be capable of a normal sex life?

Vince remembered the soft little noises she'd been making when he kissed her and the feel of her full breasts cupped in his palms. When she'd finally pushed away from him she'd had a frightened look in her wide eyes, like a trapped animal, and she was actually panting ... How could she possibly stand a more intense experience when such mild activities affected her so strongly?

“Vince ... Vince?”

He became aware that she was standing by the back door of the Eternity and hissing his name and she'd been doing it for quite some time. He had been so caught up in his speculation that he didn't even hear her. *Quit foolin' around and get your mind right*, he advised himself. Still, with Laura looking the way she did, the advice was easier to give than to follow.

“Sorry,” he said, opening the door and stepping out into the blistering August heat.

Laura jerked her head at the gate where a 3-D figure was being projected. “You're up. MAC doesn't know about Gerald being ... you know and apparently nobody ever told him about our divorce either so we're in good shape. Remember to leave most of the talking to me. I think he's Okay with letting us in, he just likes to meet everybody that comes through the gate. It's the drill sergeant in him.”

“Drill sergeant?” But she shushed him with a shake of her head and walked back to the figure at the gate. Vince had little choice but to follow. He shook out his black suit jacket out of habit to hide the shoulder holster he habitually wore and then remembered again, with a surge of annoyance, that he'd had to leave his gun at home.

It didn't sit well with him to go into a dangerous situation unarmed but Laura had assured him that no matter how well she got along with the MacDill AI there was no way MAC would agree to wave a weapons check. So there was no way Vince could get his gun past the gate.

A ram-rod straight figure with a buzz cut greeted him with a stiff salute. The AI

looked, Vince thought uncomfortably, more than a little like Laura's father. Unlike TAMI, MAC had obviously been built by a programmer with no sense of humor.

“MAC, this is Minister Bandu.” Laura nodded at him and Vince nodded his head somewhat stiffly.

“Minister, *sir*. Always a pleasure to meet anyone accompanying Mrs. Hoyt, *sir*,” MAC barked.

He saw Laura wince at the incorrect name but she didn't correct the AI.

“A pleasure,” Vince murmured.

“The Minister is anxious to meet the Lepids, MAC. He just flew in today unexpectedly and we were able to add him to the schedule. We're so pleased to have him.”

Laura beamed in his direction so convincingly that for a moment Vince almost believed it himself.

“...you don't mind, MAC, the Minister would like to keep a low profile. So we'll just slip in for a quick peek at the Lepids and be gone before you know it,” Laura was saying briskly.

“Certainly, Mrs. Hoyt. I've scanned Minister Bandu for weapons and I will refrain from adding his information to the main database in deference to his wish for privacy. I'll just need a brief verification of your security pass before I open the gate.”

Vince thought she got a little paler but to Laura's credit, her facial expression didn't change a bit.

“Oh, MAC, that old pass is all the way at the bottom of my bag and our appointment is in ten minutes. Can't we just let it slide for now?”

“I'd like to help you out, ma'am, I surely would, but I can't breach protocol. It's been one point seven years since I've seen you and your visual clearance is up. I'm sorry.” The iron gray head nodded apologetically.

“No, that's Okay,” Laura chirped sweetly. “It's not really a problem. I'll just go dig it out--I sure hope Gerald remembered to keep it up to date.”

Laura tackled the task of digging in the massive carry-all bag she had stowed in the back seat of the Eternity.

“Ah--here it is.” Triumphantlly she pulled a scarred leather flip-book from the bottom of the bag and walked back to the gate with it. “Here you go,” she said brightly, flipping open the cover to reveal a dull platinum badge with her name and ID number on it.

MAC scanned the proffered badge and flickered briefly, obviously registering the data and then nodded. “All right, Mrs. Hoyt. You're clear. Have a good visit.” He nodded at her and then saluted Vincent smartly once more. “Minister, it's been a pleasure, *sir*.”

Vince nodded silently and they turned and crunched back to the Eternity through the loose gravel. He almost forgot and got into the driver's seat but a nudge from Laura reminded him to climb into the back and look as aloof as possible.

The gate swung open soundlessly and MAC gave them a final salute as the Eternity rolled slowly through it.

“Now what?” he asked in a low voice, leaning forward to meet her eyes , which were a blue so dark they were almost black in the rear viewer.

“Now we have about fifteen minutes to get in and get out before MAC updates the base logs and somebody notices I'm not six feet under,” she said, directing the Eternity to make a left.

“Fifteen minutes? Is that even possible?”

“Nope.” She looked out the window, pretending to be interested in the activity around them. They were passing a long chain of interconnected buildings made of tan bricks. The parking lot around the complex was full and people in and out of uniform scurried back and forth, pushing full shopping carts. “We're in luck--they must be having a sale at the Commissary. Less people near the com. site.”

“Hey, Laura.” He leaned forward and reached over the seat to place a hand on her shoulder. “I didn't mean to put you in any danger. I didn't want this to be....”

“Forget about it.” She shook her head, meeting his eyes briefly in the viewer and looking away. “I knew the risks, Vince. I told you I'd help you find your sister and I will if it's at all possible, okay?”

“Well I don't like it,” he grumbled, sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest. “Don't like you riskin' yourself like this. If it wasn't for Kyra and the other girls we're tryin' to find...” He broke off, shaking his head.

“Why?” She looked amused, the corners of her full pink mouth quirking up as she glanced back at him. “Because I'm a woman? Is playing the hero supposed to be the man's job?”

Vince muttered under his breath and pretended to stare out the window himself. She had him dead to rights but he'd be damned if he admitted it. They were passing a row of apartment buildings with a large green park-like expanse in the middle. The base was like a whole little city contained within the walls and gates.

“Okay,” Laura's voice jolted him out of his reflections. “We're coming up to the communications site now. There'll probably be one or more guards to get past so just sit tight and look important while I flash my badge.”

Privately Vince thought that all she needed to flash was a glimpse of those full, luscious breasts he'd held so briefly in his hands the night before. Wide, twilight-colored eyes caught his in the viewer and he knew she'd caught the gist of his thought, or at least the emotion that went with it. *Damn*. It was easy enough to control your face and even your body language. But how was he supposed to control his emotions?

He cleared his throat. “Look, I didn't mean....”

Just then the Eternity rolled to a stop in front of a large concrete bunker with a small booth , which he supposed must be a guard post out front. The booth was empty and the parking lot to one side of the bunker was deserted.

“This isn't right,” Laura mumbled, sounding worried. She directed the Eternity to roll down her window and then stuck out her head. “Hello?” she called. “Anybody here?”

“What's wrong?” Vince leaned forward, concerned.

Laura shook her head. “Somebody's always here. They never leave the com. site unguarded even if the Lepids aren't scheduled to be on the grounds. I've never seen it so quiet.”

“Well, maybe this could work to our advantage. Let's go on in, see what we can see.”

Laura shrugged. “All right, why not? But I doubt we'll find anything if there's nobody here. Actually, I was hoping to talk to one of the guards, maybe find out if anybody has been taking fresh scales as the Lepids shed them in the com. chambers. They're supposed to be kept in isolation for twenty-four hours until the dust dies but I thought maybe....”

“You still think it's a person--some sick bastard grabbing the scales and committing the abductions and your ex's murder,” Vince said. The Eternity was rolling past the deserted guard post and into the wide expanse of blacktop that served as the parking lot.

Laura looked at him. “You don't?”

He shook his head. “Don't know. I have this gut feeling that the Butters have to be involved somehow.”

“Look, Vince, no offense but you don't know the Lepids. They're cold and utterly logical. I just don't see why--“

“What about that last message Gerald sent you?” he interrupted. “What kind of deal went down out here and who do you think made it?”

She shook her head. “I I just don't know.”

“Well, let's see if we can find out. Come on.” Vince got out of the car and headed for the concrete bunker. After a moment he heard the swift clicking of high heels that told him she was following.

* * * *

The heavy door was unlocked, another no-no according to Laura who had been prepared to use her pass to get in. Inside the bunker was startlingly bare and dimly lit. There were no hallways or rooms, just a large, open space that faded to black at the far end.

Vince blinked. “Why is it so dark in here?”

Laura shrugged. “That's the way the Lepids like it. They see a different spectrum of colors than we do.”

At the far side near the rear entrance were three smoked glass booths, nearly opaque from the outside. Dimly, through the dark glass, Vince saw that each booth had two chairs in it, facing each other. Laura nodded at them.

“Communication booths,” she said. “The glass helps focus emotions by keeping the pheromones in a confined place.” Vince thought her face looked pale in the dim light. They walked towards one of the booths, her heels tapping loudly in the echoing silence.

“How does it work?” Vince examined the two uncomfortable looking plasti-mold seats that faced each other in the first booth.

Laura shivered and crossed her arms over her breasts protectively. “The VIP sits here.” She pointed to the first chair. “The sensitive sits there.” She pointed to the far chair. “And the Lepid stands behind the sensitive. The ... their wings come around and surround ... surround the sensitive and....” She shook her head.

“Hey.” Vince touched her arm and she flinched slightly. “It was hard for you, wasn't it?”

She shrugged. “It's ... invasive ... draining. Hard to explain. I got used to it after a while.”

He peered into the other two booths. “No free scales anywhere. Could they be anyplace else?”

Laura looked troubled. “No. They land here, just outside behind the building-- there's a field for it out there-- come in for the communications, and leave. They never go anywhere else.”

“Least that's what they want us to think.” Just as he said the words there was a low click and the door behind them started to open.

“Quick!” Laura grabbed his arm and they ducked into one of the smoked glass booths, the middle one, and crouched between the plasti-mold seats.

“...not my fault you botched the job,” a southern voice with a nasal twang was saying. “You were told to make it look like a burglary and you did a piss-poor job of it, McMurtry. Damn idiotic military shit heads.” The last was said with a deep contempt rather than any real anger.

“The man assigned has been reprimanded and busted down several ranks, Sir, I can assure you of that. And you must admit that girl was well handled.” The other voice was deeper and carried a note of resentment. Two pairs of footsteps tapped on the cold tile floor.

A short barking laugh sounded in the echoing dimness of the large room. “Yeah, I understand your man had to barbecue about fifty senior citizens to make it look good.”

Vince saw Laura stiffen at the words and heard her breath come a little faster. Could they be talking about the fire that had consumed her apartment complex? He knew a lot of older people had lived there. What kind of a heartless bastard killed senior citizens just for window dressing? He wanted to squeeze her hand but he was afraid to add his own anxiety to her own.

The two pairs of footsteps stopped and Vince was able to see two men dimly through the smoked glass. One was dressed in an expensive looking conservative dark suit. He was tall and thin to the point of emaciation. The other man was thicker with a beefy red face. He was wearing a uniform with enough braid and metals on it to sink a ship.

“So Goddamn dark in here,” muttered the tall man in the suit.

“Sir, the Lepids....” began the man in uniform.

“Yeah, I know. It's the way they like it. You think I'm stupid, McMurtry?” The suit made an impatient gesture with his narrow, sharp chin. “Where is Tmm anyway?”

“Due to arrive shortly,” the uniform responded quickly.

“He'd better, McMurtry. I don't have all day.

“Sir, I assure you....”

Vince wondered briefly why the man in uniform, who was obviously top brass, was taking a tongue-lashing without complaint and hoped that the two men wouldn't decide to examine the inside of the communications booths as they spoke. The smoked glass made it harder to see in than to see out from the inside but he and Laura were still in a very ticklish position. Beside him he could hear her breathing light and shallow, almost panting. A quick glance at her white face made him wonder if she knew something about the two men he didn't.

“Look, I don't have time for this,” the suit with the Southern twang continued. “You're damn lucky I haven't told Harris anything about your little leak down here at MacDill. Hoyt was going to go to the press--do you have any idea what that would have done to the re-election campaign?”

“Yes Sir, but it's all taken care of now....”

“It had damn well better be. And you'd better see that there aren't any more fuck-ups like this last one or *you'll* be the one busted down ranks, McMurtry, and more than a few.”

The uniform was looking more than a little pissed off from what Vince could see through the dark glass but he was much more concerned with Laura at the moment. Her face had gone so pale it almost seemed to glow in the shadowed booth and her bottom lip was clenched between her white, even teeth.

“Laura,” he breathed in her ear but she shook her head violently, not taking her eyes from the two figures now standing not ten feet from their booth.

There was a tinkling sound, the first few bars of Beethoven's Fifth rendered into vid-phone-ese tones and the man in uniform clutched guiltily at his breast pocket.

“Go on, take it.” The suit made a shooin' gesture with his hand.

The uniform moved stiffly away and snapped open his phone. “What? I thought I told you not to interrupt me while I ... What? Sergeant you assured me this matter was taken care of. Well you'd better or it's your ass!” He turned back to the man in the suit. “Sir, there's a matter of some urgency I need to take care of personally.”

The suit shook his head. “Go to it then, McMurtry, I'll expect a full report later.”

“But,” the man in uniform hesitated. “They ought to be here any minute. You don't mind....”

“You really are a stupid fuck, aren't you?” the suit asked conversationally. “Think

I'm afraid of our pretty space friends because I don't have a Goddamn sensitive with me to use as a shield? Get out of here, McMurtry. I'll handle my end and you handle yours.”

“Sir.” The uniformed man made a brief salute, and went out the way they had come in.

The man in the suit wandered closer to the booth they were hiding in, hands clasped behind his back, whistling aimlessly. Vince was just thinking that maybe they should try to slip out of the booth and through the rear entrance and make a run for it when the door he had been eyeing opened, admitting a bright slice of daylight and a large dark form that was utterly inhuman.

Silhouetted in the open doorway the Lepid was simply a huge black shadow, wings spread wide to flex for a moment with a dry whisper of scales. Vince estimated that the wingspan was well over twelve feet if not more like fourteen. A slender elongated head and backwards--bending knees showed between the two enormous wings briefly before they folded down into a kind of cape at the Lepid's back and the door closed.

Blinking his eyes to get rid of the afterimage from the sudden daylight in the dim space, Vince tried to get a better look at the alien. Like everyone else in the world, he had seen numerous Media clips of the space visitors but this was his first chance to see one live and in person. The first thing he noticed was that, without the softening lenses of the camera between him and the reality of the Lepid, it was a much more alien-looking thing. All the vids he had seen seemed to focus on the Lepids' huge beautiful wings and he supposed he was seeing the reason for that right now.

Without the vast colorful wings to distract attention, the Lepid had a stick-like insectile body, black and segmented into three sections, a head, thorax and a slightly thicker abdomen that ended in a wicked-looking point. It shambled closer with an oddly graceful gait, swaying forward as though it was walking against a strong wind. Vince heard an indescribable hissing sound as the bottom scales of its wings dragged dryly across the tile floor.

It was hard to be sure in the dim light but it seemed to Vince that the Lepid's eyes glowed a soft orangish-red. The rest of its features were shadowed and indistinct. Four long thin arms, jointed at strange angles like the backwards-bending knees,

were crossed over its black thorax and abdomen. He couldn't see its hands at all. Vince shivered, remembering again the field trip to the butterfly preserve when he was a kid.

The tall cadaverous suit stood taller as the alien came close but the Lepid still towered over him by a good head and a half. Vince could feel Laura tensed against him, her body strung tight as a wire along his left side.

Then the Lepid turned and he got a better look at its face. There was no nose or mouth beneath the huge glowing eyes, just a long, curling snout-like appendage that seemed to serve for both. As he watched, the snout-thing quivered and uncurled, extending like an obscene black antenna. At the end was a set of disturbingly human-looking lips.

“Sssanderss.” The Lepid's voice was like nothing Vince had ever heard before. It seemed to invade his mind and echo in his skull, rubbing his psyche the wrong way like a rough hand in fur. Beside him Laura shivered and crouched into an even smaller ball. Vince longed to touch her in some way, to put his arm around her even, but he didn't.

“Tmm,” the suit's voice was lower, more assertive than it had been when he was reading the top brass guy the riot act. Vince had a feeling he was uncomfortable and trying not to show it.

“Why have you called, Sssanderss?” The Lepid took another bobbing step forward, wings dragging with that dry, hideous sound as it spoke. With a sudden noise like a sail snapping in a stiff breeze the wings reopened, expanding to their full span as it advanced on the stiff, uncomfortable-looking man in the suit. “Why have you brought uss here? Where iss the ssensitive we were promissed?”

The man in the suit took a quick, involuntary step back and then seemed to force himself to hold his ground despite the advancing alien.

“You and I both know you don't need a Goddamn sensitive to communicate, Tmm, and I'm damned if I'll let you feed on me so you can close those fuckin' wings right now.”

With an angry hiss, the Lepid advanced another step, wings still extended. Vince could feel Laura trembling beside him. This scene had to be bringing up bad memories for her. And what did the suit mean about the Lepid 'feeding' on him?

“We were prosmissed. It takes much energy to endure your fetid atmosphere, Ssanderss. We have not fed ssince the termination of Hoyt and hisss dry little wife. Now we musst harvesst another young female to make thiss trip worthwhile.”

“No!” The suit's voice was sharp and anxious. “No, damn it, that's what this meeting is all about. No more harvesting, Goddamn you. People are starting to notice--I had to personally see to it that the investigation was shelved but I won't be able to keep it under wraps much longer if you don't stop.”

It was Vince's turn to grow tense and angry. The investigation shelved? Was that why the Captain had taken the Butterfly case away from him without giving it to anyone else?

The Lepid hissed again, wings beating the air in slow, rattling strokes. One of the scales near the top of its left wing loosened and fell to the floor with an almost plastic-sounding clatter to the tile floor. The pointed tip of its elongated abdomen quivered and a glistening spike six inches long appeared suddenly, with a wet, sliding sound that made Vince feel vaguely nauseous. A glittering drop of venom quivered on the end of the barb like some viscous, unnatural reproductive fluid.

“We have kept out end of the agreement, Sssanderss. Our curess and vaccinationss have ssaved many of your people and we continue to endorss the presidency of Harrisss. Harvesting iss our right.”

“Why can't you go harvest some girls from some place else? Even in a city the size of Tampa people are starting to notice. You need to spread it around some and besides, you're getting sloppy about who you take.”

The Lepid took another step towards the suit, leaning forward so that the thick lips at the end of its curling snout nearly brushed the man's face in an obscene kiss.

“Our sship is locked in orbit over thiss city. We take what is necessary, no more or lesss. The girlss we have are not productive enough. We need only a few more to

complete our cycle. It hangs in a delicate balance.”

“I don't give a damn about your Goddamn mating cycle,” the suit protested but Vince had heard enough. He knew where Kyra was and he was going to get her.

Chapter 15

“Laura.” Vince's voice in her ear was so low it was more like a thought than a sound. She turned towards him, feeling her face still drawn into a rigid mask and he jerked his chin at the back door where the Lepid had entered. *Time to get out of here.*

She could see his point. Tmm's back was to the rear entrance, his wings were still spread, blocking Sanders' view of the back door. They might not get a better chance to get away.

She took a last look through the smoked glass to be sure that Tmm and Sanders were engrossed in their argument and then nodded. Reaching down, she slipped the ridiculously high heels off her feet and clutched them in one hand. As quietly as possible, she edged out of the booth, leading the way to the back door.

The trip from the smoked glass communication booth to the metal door seemed to take an age and she was worried the entire time that Tmm would drop his rustling wings and give Sanders a clear view of where they were heading. But the wings stayed up and they managed to get out so quietly she was quite certain they hadn't attracted any attention.

“Come on,” she said in a low voice and started around the back side of the building, heading for the parking lot. It took a few steps to realize that Vince wasn't following. She turned back in irritation, it wasn't like they had any time to waste, and saw his eyes, gone a cold dark brown, staring at the landing field.

It wasn't much, as fields went. About the size of a helicopter landing pad, it was

just a perfectly circular bare spot in the grass.

In the center of the bald spot sat a large ovoid pod, swirled gray and green like the most unappetizing ice-cream flavor imaginable. It rested on three long, slender legs with splayed three-fingered feet that were folded beneath it. When looking at the Lepid's landing crafts, Laura was always reminded of a fairy tale about a witch who lived in a shack that had chicken legs she had read when she was a kid. The skin was rough and bumpy and if you looked at it long enough, it actually seemed to pulse with a slow, steady beat. Laura had always avoided looking too closely. The organically grown ships of the Lepids had always looked like enormous eggs to her.

“Vince,” she said sharply, trying to direct his attention back to the matter at hand. “We've got to get out of here.”

“You go.” He made a shooing motion with one hand, his eyes never leaving the slowly pulsing ship. “I've gotta get Kyra.” He stared out across the field and Laura grabbed his arm, heedless of the jolt of emotion.

“What are you talking about? She's not in there.”

“Maybe not.” Vince turned to her at last, brown eyes lighting with angry determination like a shout inside her head. “But she's up there somewhere. I'm gonna find her.”

Laura's mouth went dry as she realized what he was talking about. It was suicide. “What do you think you're going to do? Stow away and then jump out as soon as it reaches the mother ship?”

He looked at her impassively. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“But ... but, Vince, how do you expect to get back? How do you expect to find her?”

He shrugged, broad shoulders rolling beneath the well-tailored black suit. “Don't

know. Just know I have to try. Look, you don't have to come with me. You more than did your part. Want you to know I appreciate that.” He stepped away from her restraining hand and walked towards the field.

“Vince, no. Vince, *wait!*” Laura hurried after him, the heels of her shoes sinking into the soft sandy ground.

“You can take my car if you want and stay at my house as long as you need to.” He was almost to the pulsing ovoid now. It was half again as big as Gerald's Arctic Raker had been although considerably uglier.

As they neared, she saw something that made her stomach churn. A long narrow slit that hadn't been visible from the back of the building, appeared in the rough skin of the ship and widened like a watching eye or a hungry mouth. Sensing them. Waiting to take them in. Laura licked her lips nervously, tasting blood. Vaguely she remembered biting her lip too hard when she'd heard the advisor, Sanders, talking to Colonel McMurtry about taking care of 'the girl' and realized they had to mean her.

“Vince, please.” It was barely a whisper but it got his attention at last. He turned towards her and cupped her cheek in one palm. Laura had to concentrate hard not to flinch away from the fierce mixture of determination and tenderness that was bubbling under the surface of his mind.

“Try to understand. I *have* to at least try. She's my baby sister, Laura.”

The sun was pounding against the back of her neck making her feel like she couldn't breathe and his emotions were bright, sharply defined shapes between them in the hazy August sunshine. Laura almost felt she could pluck them out of the air like building blocks and grip them between her palms. The vertical slit yawned in the side of the Lepid ship, showing only blackness, exhaling a faint stench like dried flowers. The smell of the Lepids.

Vince stepped forward. He was going to do this, Laura realized. He was really going to go. And she realized something else.

She was going to go with him.

“All right.” She turned away from him and put one palm on the side of the ship, feeling the pulse under its cool, bumpy skin. It was like touching a huge sleeping lizard. Laura shivered with sudden revulsion, then forced herself to master the emotion. *If I go, if I do this, I'm not coming back. This is it.* The knowledge was like a concrete block in her mind. Laura pushed it away, there was no time for hesitation.

“Wait, you don't have to--”

Vince protested, but she was already climbing inside.

Chapter 16

The interior of the Lepid ship was like a cool, dim cave. There was no apparent light source but the lumpy ceiling glowed very softly with pale orange light that made everything into Halloween shadows. Vince looked around for any kind of control panel or seats but saw nothing but an arrangement of large bumps that didn't seem to make any sense. There wasn't even a viewshield to look out of and he wondered how the Lepids flew their ships without seeing.

“Come on.” Laura was tugging at his elbow, trying to steer him in the direction of one of the larger lumps at the far end of the oval space. “Tmm will be out here any minute. If you want to do this we need to hide and try to calm down. If you keep feeling like you are right now he's going to sense us immediately.”

Vince allowed himself to be led and positioned behind the gray-green protrusion , which seemed to pulse faster when they wedged themselves between it and the curving wall. *Like hiding in the guts of some huge animal.* The thought filled him with revulsion. “Tmm?” he asked, her words at last sinking in. “You know that....” Words failed him. “That one?” he finished at last.

Laura nodded, her face still pale. “Yes. He ... he's one of the worst. Whenever I hosted him....” She broke off and shivered.

“You mean when you interpreted between him and a client?” Vince asked.

She nodded wordlessly.

“Then what was the stiff guy in the suit talkin' about? When he said he didn't need a sensitive?”

“I don't know.” Laura wrapped her arms around herself, looking miserable. “I didn't understand that part either. All I know is that the man, Sanders, is only around MacDill whenever President Harris is visiting the base. I don't know what he does--some kind of an advisor, maybe.”

“Maybe.” Vince was silent for a moment, brooding.

“Well, I guess now we know what the 'deal' Gerald was talking about is,” Laura said.

Vince grunted. “Yeah. Unbelievable. No wonder your ex was gonna blow the lid off the whole scam.”

Laura wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on one knee. “One *good* thing you could say for Gerald was that he wasn't prejudiced. I always kind of thought it was a business decision for him, though. HLC dealt with a lot of international clients. All races.”

“Yeah, but--” He didn't get to finish the thought because at that moment the slit in the side of the ship, which had widened to admit them began to grow again, letting in a thin shaft of sunlight. Vince saw a long black insectile head followed by the segmented body and the wings that were folded cloak-fashion at Tmm's back. The Lepid entered the craft easily, with its weird, alien grace and Vince hoped like hell that he and Laura weren't hidden right where the controls of the craft were. It was impossible to say since everything looked pretty much the same in the orangish gloom.

After the Lepid was fully inside, the slit narrowed to nothingness until the bumpy gray-green side of the ship had healed the bloodless wound completely. There was no way, Vince thought, to even tell there had ever been an opening. He watched as the last glimpse of the outside, of Earth, disappeared from view and wondered uneasily for the first time if he was doing the right thing. After all, Laura had a point--even if he did find Kyra alive and well how the hell was he going to get her back home? *When, not if*, he told himself fiercely.

The Lepid, Tmm, stood with its back to them and raised its wings again, unfurling them slowly this time. They glinted with muted brilliance in the dim glow from the ship's ceiling and the strange scent inside the ship began to grow. He found himself staring at the scales that made up the Lepid's wings, almost mesmerized by their iridescent blue-green glitter. They were alive with the tiny gold specs, the fairy dust, crawling in hypnotic patterns over each shining scale.

Dimly Vince was aware of Laura whispering in his ear but he wasn't sure what she was saying. Then the ship began to move, a slight rocking sensation like a balloon drifting upwards. *Here we go*, Vince thought.

It was the last conscious thought he had for hours.

Chapter 17

She woke up on a cool, bumpy surface that was moving very slowly in a rhythmic manner. It was like lying on the chest of some creature so huge you could barely feel it breath. Laura opened her eyes to a dim room she didn't recognize, aware that her head ached dully and her clothes were all twisted and uncomfortable.

Where was Vince? She sat up abruptly and was relieved to see him lying to one side of her, taking deep, even breaths. The brown eyes were shut tight and his black suit was rumpled but he looked remarkably peaceful just the same. Laura reached out a hand to caress one high cheekbone. A sharp, almost electrical jolt of emotion jumped between them as her fingers grazed his smooth brown skin. Laura drew back with a little cry, feeling like she had touched a hot stove. She put her wounded fingers in her mouth, feeling obscurely betrayed somehow. She had

thought her tolerance to Vince had grown significantly and now this. Why?

Vince groaned in his sleep and rolled over, so that his broad back was to her. The jolt she'd received from him, like a supercharged shock of static electricity, had woken Laura up completely. She huddled on the breathing, bumpy floor with her knees drawn up to her chin and tried to think.

The last thing she remembered was the smell inside the cabin of the ship intensifying alarmingly. *Gassed, we're being gassed somehow*, she'd thought. She had tried to warn Vince but he had, what? Passed out, she thought, but the memory was very fuzzy.

She rubbed her aching temples and looked around. The space she found herself in was much like the interior of Tmm's ship but half again as large. The indirect glow from the high ceiling showed the same gray-green swirls on the curving walls and the slowly heaving floor. There were no doors or windows anywhere, not even a slit in the wall to get in or out. There was a long, bulging runnel running the length of the ceiling, which ended in a small dark opening. Maybe they could get out that way? But the ceiling was a good fifteen feet above her head--it would be too far to reach.

Laura rose unsteadily to her feet.

Vince groaned and rolled over again but still didn't show any signs of waking. Laura wanted to shake him and talk about the situation they were in but she didn't want another shock. Moving quietly, she stepped around his prone form and made her way to the nearest curving bumpy wall. Hesitantly, she stroked the mottled surface, brushing her fingertips along its rough texture.

A cool lassitude seemed to run from her point of contact with the wall all the way up her hand an arm. Laura drew back, biting her lip, disliking the sensation--it reminded her a little of being in mental contact with one of the Lepids. Touching the wall felt like slipping her arm to the shoulder into a rubber glove filled with chilly slime. But where her fingertips had brushed, a small vertical slit in the wall's surface, like a tiny, lipless mouth, began to grow. *Did I do that?* Laura

reached out again, ignoring the strange cool draining sensation that ran the length of her arm. She stroked the wall's surface, watching the slit grow until it was large enough to step through.

Cautiously, she poked her head through the opening, wondering what she would see. A long, twisting corridor lit by the same eerie orangish glow as the inside of the Lepid's ship greeted her eyes. The walls and floor were the same mottled grayish-green and the ceiling disappeared into gloom above her. The floor of the tunnel was undulating slowly, just like the floor of the room she was standing in. Laura thought it was like looking down a monstrous length of intestine. *In the belly of the beast*, she thought, and shivered.

Just then a cool, fleshy hand brushed her throat, making her shriek and jump back in surprise. She looked around wildly, looking for whatever had touched her and then realized it was only the wall, closing up again. *Okay, so it closes after a while*. Experimentally, Laura reached forward to stroke the wall again. At the brush of her hand, the slit began to widen once more as she felt the cool draining sensation run the length of her arm.

“Wha...?”

She turned to the sound of the voice to see Vince sitting up and looking groggy. Apparently her little scream had woken him up.

“Where are we?” He asked at last, getting unsteadily to his feet and clutching his head. “And why do I have the mother of all headaches?”

Laura walked over to him, careful not to touch. “In the mother ship as far as I can tell. As for the headache, I don't know. Maybe an aftereffect of the gas on your system? I feel okay though.”

“Good for you,” Vince grumbled. He took a few steps and grimaced at the undulating floor. “What is this stuff? Reminds me of the 'moonwalker' we rented for Kyra's ninth birthday one year.

So, we're stuck in here?"

"Not quite," Laura gestured at the wall where the slit had now healed itself into oblivion. She hoped she could create another one. "Here, I'll show you." She turned to lead the way and was unprepared for the sudden jolt of emotion that ran up her arm. Vince had taken her hand.

Worry, trepidation, excitement and fierce hope poured over her. Laura gasped and yanked her hand free, feeling an immediate throbbing pain in her temples.

"Laura?" He looked at her worriedly. "Sorry, I didn't mean to...."

"No...." She sank to the floor for a moment, feeling dazed and put her forehead on her knees, trying to catch her breath. "Not ... not you," she panted, shaking her head.

"I thought your tolerance was higher, at least for me." Vince crouched down beside her, brown eyes warm with worry. "Or I never woulda touched you. Didn't mean to hurt you."

"Don't worry about it." Laura forced herself to stand up, swaying slightly on the undulating floor. "I think it's something to do with the ship, with being on the Lepids' home turf. But anyway, look." She walked to the far wall and stroked it, barely noticing the cool, slimy draining sensation this time. A vertical slit appeared, widening as she continued to stroke the bumpy surface until it was large enough for the two of them to get through.

"That's great." Vince leaned over her shoulder, carefully not touching her in any way. "You think I could do it too?"

Laura shrugged. "I really don't know. Give it a try."

Experimentally, he chose another section of wall, a few feet from the slit she had opened and stroked the wall. Nothing happened.

Vince looked disappointed but not very surprised. “Well, guess not. Must have something to do with you bein' a sensitive.”

“Probably. Look, Vince, I'm pretty sure Tmm knew we were aboard his ship and gassed us deliberately. He left us in this room for who knows what purpose but I'm guessing he has no idea I can make a way through the walls or he would have guarded us somehow. We could do a lot worse than to take this opportunity to try and find your sister and a way home, before he comes to look in on us and realizes we're gone.”

Vince nodded. “Yeah, I was thinkin' the same thing. You, uh, have any idea of how to work one of their ships? Make it take us back?”

“Sorry.” Laura raised her hands, palms up. “I guess I *might* be able to get it to respond in some way but I really don't have any idea of how to begin.”

Vince looked grim. “All right then, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. First let's see if we can fine Kyra.”

Laura nodded. “You got it.”

While they had been speaking in low tones, the slit she had made in the wall had gradually closed until it was almost nonexistent, a tiny fissure in the flesh wall. She turned back to the wall and stroked it again, widening their doorway into the convoluted gray/green corridor.

Laura climbed out first and scanned to be sure it was empty, then nodded for Vince to follow. She almost offered him a hand down, since it was about a two foot drop from the room they were leaving to the undulating floor, but she remembered just in time that it was no longer safe to touch him and drew back.

“Whew.” Vince wiped his forehead, the walls and floor might be cool but the air in the passageway was warm and distinctly humid. “, which way?”

“I don't know.” Laura looked up at the rapidly closing slit they had emerged from,

feeling troubled. “Vince, this whole place might be one big maze. I'd feel better if we could find our way back to the starting point, you know?”

He nodded. “Sounds like a good idea but how? You got somethin' in mind?”

“We need something to mark our place....” Laura looked around, her gaze coming to rest on the black suit jacket, now very rumpled and worse for the wear, , which he still wore. “What if you left your jacket inside the room with just the edge of one sleeve hanging out?”

“Well.” Vince looked at the slit, now half as big as it had been only moments before. “I guess it couldn't hurt. Like leavin' ourselves a trail of breadcrumbs, right?”

“Exactly.” Laura watched as he shucked off the jacket and positioned it carefully inside the room they had just left so that only two or three inches of the cuff stuck out into the corridor. As she had hoped, the fleshy wall closed around the cuff of the jacket, marking their place. “Great.” She nodded approvingly. “Let's go.”

Chapter 18

Vince looked left then right. To either direction the convoluted corridor stretched out, winding into the dim orange glow that made his eyes ache if he tried to look at anything too hard. It was easy to say 'let's go' but in , which direction? Making a decision, he turned to the left. “C'mon.”

Laura followed him without hesitation and he hoped he wasn't leading them into a trap. The corridor twisted on and on, with no discernable doorways or openings but he supposed that the Butters could make doorways wherever they wanted, so what was the point of having permanent ones? Just as he was thinking that they should stop so she could make a doorway in one of the walls they were passing to see if it led anywhere, he heard a dim sound up ahead.

He looked back to ask Laura if she had heard it too, but she had stiffed abruptly, her eyes widening to midnight pools in the dim orange light.

“What? What is it?” Vince restrained the urge to take her by the shoulders, reminding himself that they were now back to square one touch-wise.

“Oh, Vince the emotions. The pain ... the fear....” She shook her head, almost unable to go on. “I can feel them so clearly, even from here.”

“Pain? Fear?” Vince felt his hands clench into fists. Only one thought circled his brain. *Kyra* “Laura, are they human? Human emotions?”

Mutely, she nodded.

It was all Vince needed. Looking to make sure the way was still clear, he rushed forward into the darkness, looking for his sister. His frustration was almost unendurable when the only thing that met his eyes was more blank, bumpy walls. Pressing his ear frantically to the cool surface, he thought he could hear the sound more clearly. A sound like wailing or crying that tore at his heart. Was *Kyra* in there, behind the gray/green wall being tortured or hurt somehow? *If a single one of those butterfly-looking bastards has hurt her....*

Laura came up beside him, looking as though she wanted to lay a hand on his shoulder or back to comfort him and not quite daring. Vince could see by the tight, drawn look on her face that the emotions must be very 'loud' here. He nodded at the wall he'd been listening to and she nodded, no words needed between them. Leaning forward, she began to stroke the wall.

As the vertical slit widened, Vince tried to ready himself for what they might see. His mind kept trying to show him pictures of *Kyra* hurt or in terrible pain but he pushed them back as well as he could.

“Oh!” Laura's exclamation was low and awed. The slit was still only half wide enough but Vince couldn't wait any longer. Ducking around her arm, he stuck his head into the opening, his sister's name trembling on his lips.

“Vince, no! She's not....” Laura's warning faded into insignificance at the sight that greeted his eyes. The room she had opened a door into was an immense space, larger, he estimated, than several football fields put together. Strange, fungus-like plants grew over the lumpy floor, thick, fleshy stems that ended in flower-like protrusions.

The flowers had petals that were a foot thick in places and they glowed in strangely liquid, unearthly colors that hurt his eyes to stare at too long. It reminded him of some of the parties he'd been too as a kid, where the host had replaced all the regular glow-bulbs with black light bulbs.

“Vince, please, we need to get out of here....” Laura was beside him now but Vince couldn't tear his eyes away. The liquid, pulsating colors swam before his eyes, which he raised to the high, vaulted ceiling. There, he saw what appeared to be the source of the strange light.

Clinging to the roof of the huge chamber, so high that it would have been lost to view if it hadn't made its own light was the biggest Lepid Vince had ever seen. *God! Thing's gotta be seventy feet long!* The monstrous wings extended, a shimmering black cloth across the cavernous ceiling, speckled with the tiny, glimmering specks that had to be fairy dust.

But it wasn't the wings that drew and held his eyes-- it was the creature's swollen, pulsating belly. Even high above them as it was, he could see the vastness of it. If the creature was seventy feet long, at least sixty of those feet were the bloated abdomen attached to the insectile head and thorax, curled in on itself as though in some sort of sleep.

Vince realized that this was the source of the strange, liquid light that flowed over the entire room. The distended belly glowed a deep and brilliant blue, shedding its radiance over the immense room, bathing everything in its shimmering glow. And inside that radiance, inside the softly glowing belly, Vince could see what looked like millions of small, dark shapes roiling in a slow-motion boil, turning over lazily inside their protective shelter. *Eggs!* he realized in a moment of utter clarity.

My God--it's full of eggs! Leading away from the narrowed end of the bulging sack were thick runnels, visible as faint black ridges in the fabric of the ceiling. *Some kind of a transport system?* He shook his head.

“Vince, we have to go!” It wasn't Laura's low, worried hiss that got his attention and forced him to tear his eyes away from the strangely lurid sight--it was the fact that he could not only hear the worry in her voice, but *feel* it as well. For the first time, Vince became aware that the air of this huge chamber was filled with the golden dust that frosted the huge black wings like glittering stars. It dusted the petals of the gigantic fleshy flowers and hung in the air as well, suspended like the odor of fresh, bloody meat that pervaded the room. And he, like a fool, had been breathing it in for a good two or three minutes, while he stared at the bloated Lepid hanging from the ceiling.

“Laura?” He looked behind him and realized that he had actually stepped through the slit and walked several feet into the alien chamber. One of the huge, fleshy flower stems was within reach, close enough to touch if he wanted to. He'd been so preoccupied with the hideous sight that he hadn't even noticed his forward motion.

He started back towards the slit in the wall but Laura's face had gone from a strained white to being flushed with fear. She too stepped through the slit into the alien chamber. She stood well back from the slit, as though willing it to close.

“What?”

“Shh! Someone's coming!” She crouched beside the wall of the chamber where the slit was closing rapidly, arms wrapped tightly around herself, and Vince came to join her.

Then all thought was wiped from his mind as he heard two voices floating through the narrowing crack. One of them was hissing and syllabant, much like Tmm's had been. And the other ... the other was Kyra's!

Chapter 19

“What mussst we do to you? It iss mosst distressing, thiss continued reluctance to cooperate.” Through the narrow slit, Laura could just make out the wide, fanning wings of a Lepid, one she had never seen before. Almost hidden behind the wings, obviously extended in agitation, was a young, rebellious face.

“I'm not afraid of you so back on off me, Lzz.” The voice that belonged to that face was high and trembling but still defiant. A woman's voice. Laura felt Vince stiffen beside her, felt his elation rise in a choking tide between them and knew the young woman had to be Kyra, his sister. At the same time the strange light in the room strobed briefly from the electric blue to a pale, trembling shade of violet.

“Laura!” He motioned for her to open the slit wider, obviously eager to get to Kyra but she shook her head adamantly.

“No, Vince! Not yet. We have a much better chance of rescuing her and all the girls if they don't know we're out of our cell!” Reluctantly, she felt him subside, his elation giving way to a bitter frustration. The light returned to blue, although it was a more vivid shade than the former color.

“All right but at least keep it open enough to see out of. We gotta see where he takes her.”

She touched the wall briefly, keeping the slit wide enough to see out of but hopefully not wide enough for the preoccupied Lepid to notice them. Lzz and his prisoner had stopped talking and were standing diagonally across from the chamber she and Vince were in. She saw the Lepid, Lzz, Kyra had called him, stroking the wall with one spindly, black-haired arm, much as she had stroked it herself. The wall responded to the Lepid's touch much more rapidly than it did to hers. Almost immediately, a long vertical slit opened, widening automatically, as though to make enough room for the Lepid's extended wings.

Laura looked through the slit in the other wall and almost forgot to be afraid. For as it widened, such an intense blast of emotion came though that she felt for a moment that she might black out.

As the force of the man-made winds had increased, past one hundred miles an hour, all the way up to one sixty, the equivalent of a class five hurricane, Laura's long blond hair had stood straight up from her head.

The force of the emotion she felt coming from the other room Lzz had opened up was like buffeting hurricane-force winds. She could feel Vince flinch beside her and knew he was receiving the harsh wave of horror and grief that was flowing into the room like a storm surge as well.

Then the light above them began flickered wildly, pulsating from blue to violet to green to orange to a bright, alarming red. Laura became aware that a high-pitched keening sound, more felt than heard, was filling her head. Looking up, she saw the long black arms of the immense Lepid above them whipping in agitation. The huge blank eyes were open, glinting in the red glow from its swollen belly. The huge head, was rolling wildly on the stick-like neck.

The enormous dusky wings flapped, stirring the dust that hung suspended in the air into a hundred tiny glittering tornadoes and a shining scale as big as Laura's torso fell with a clatter to the floor of the chamber far below.

That it was a 'she' and not a he or an it seemed perfectly obvious to Laura. Like Vince, she understood that the round black structures boiling in a gelatinous mass within the glowing belly were eggs.

Seeing the female-Lepid's agitation, she knew at once that they had to get out of this huge chamber before some sort of alarm was raised. Looking out the slit in their wall, she saw Lzz's wide-spread wings disappearing into the opposite room.

“Come on.” Rapidly, she stroked the slit, ignoring the cool draining sensation, urging it to grow. It responded more quickly this time, perhaps fueled by her urgency and she was able to climb out of the cavernous room with its huge fleshy flowers and the horrible, high-pitched psychic distress signal that was making it difficult to hear herself think. She jumped out and looked over her shoulder to be sure Vince was following. He was, one hand clutched to the side of his head and

his eyes narrowed to painful slits.

“This way.” She nodded back in the direction they had come. Or she *thought* it was the right direction. Between the huge she-Lepid's keening, still filling her brain though the rapidly narrowing slit and the rush of strong emotions still flooding out of the wide doorway Lzz had opened in the opposite wall, she was feeling more than a little disoriented.

“No-- Kyra!” He indicated the wide wings of the Lepid, disappearing into the wall across from them, blocking the view of the other room.

“Later!” Laura insisted in a low, urgent voice. “We can't help her if they catch us and I'm pretty sure that,” she jerked her chin at the chamber they had just left, “is going to set off some kind of alarm.” In fact she was frankly amazed that Lzz, who was still standing just inside the doorway to the other room, had not responded to the call.

Grudgingly, Vince began to follow her, when around the curve of the corridor, she heard the unmistakable hiss of another Lepid voice. Turning, she beckoned frantically for him to go the opposite direction.

They raced, hugging the bumpy, gray wall but they had only taken a few steps when a second hissing voice came floating through the muggy air, directly in their path. Trapped!

Laura looked around, knowing the owner of the voice would round the corner at any second and see them. There was no time to make another doorway into one of the walls, capture seemed inevitable. She felt her hands go numb and her heart pounding in her throat, knowing the emotions were doubled and trebled in this horrible place.

“Laura!” She felt a tugging at her sleeve and saw Vince gesturing to a type of fissure in the surface of the wall nearest them, almost like a wall of a cave. He pushed himself into the narrow space, waving for her to follow. Laura squeezed herself in beside him and stood panting and feeling like her heart would beat out

of her chest. The lumpy wall of the fissure rose high enough to cover them--just barely.

The fright she and Vince were both feeling combined like a poison gas in the small area, until Laura had to pinch herself to have something else to concentrate on. She waited until she heard the dragging hiss of the Lepid's wings as it passed and then dared to put just her face to one side of the wall, drawing in a whiff of fresh air.

She had meant to grab a quick lungful of air and then duck back into the protected space but what Laura saw kept her eyes glued to the opposite wall, much as Vince had been unable to look away in the other huge chamber they had just left.

Lzz had exited the room and was standing with two other Lepids in the twisting hallway, all speaking in angry, hissing voices. All three had their wings spread wide in agitation but between the bobbing black shadows, Laura could make out glimpses into the room he had opened when he was talking to Kyra.

Inside the room were perhaps fifteen or twenty young women, all obviously pregnant. Some were naked and others still had on the tattered remnants of the clothes they had been wearing while taken. They were strapped tight against the wall with some substance that looked organic rather than manufactured. It looked to Laura as though the walls of the room itself had somehow grown long, thin gray/green arms, which were holding the women immobile, their huge bellies jutting out before them like fruit waiting to be plucked.

Strapped to each woman's face was another extrusion, this one resembling the fleshy petals of the strange flower-like things they had seen in the she-Lepid's chamber. They were the same vivid colors too, pulsing deep blue and pale violet as they quivered over the captive faces. *Sucking*, Laura suddenly realized with horror so great it made her feel faint and weak all over again. *Those things are sucking something out of them. But what?*

Another blast of grief and horror rolled down the corridor. "Foolss!" she heard one

of the Lepid's say, a huge specimen more than eight feet tall whose wings had a greenish tint. "Ass we argue, you continue to waste emotion. Lzz, close the door at once!"

Lzz turned to the other Lepid, wings flapping in agitation until several scales rattled free. Laura saw the lumpy ground close around the palm-sized fragments and engulf them immediately. "How dare you sspeak to me in the language of the humans?" he demanded in a high, outraged voice. "It iss an inssult I am not prepared to sstand."

"I will sspeak in any manner I choose." The first Lepid also flapped its wings, scales rattling dryly. "I speak to a fool in the language of fools, it iss fitting."

"Be fair, Bnn," the third Lepid objected. "Lzz had no way of knowing about the Queen'ss agitation. The emotionss of the harvesst room are too loud to hear around and he was dealing with the sstubborn human."

"He wass standing in the harvesst room, ssipping at the nectar that iss meant only for the Queen, never noticing that he wass upssetting the balance of her chamber," Bnn, the first Lepid, buzzed angrily.

"Thiss acussation makess no sensse!" protested Lzz, his voice so thick with hissing that Laura could barely understand it. "Everyone knowss that it iss the function of the harvesst room to filter the emotionss of the fertile humans, not amplify them. And how if I wass feeding a little as I put the female back in her place? How could my action have caused the dissparity in the balance of emotionss in the Queen'ss chamber?"

"I don't know how it came about but you were the only one nearby when it happened." Bnn's voice had lost none of its buzzing stridency. "Deny all you like, Lzz, but you know as well as any that the cycle liess in a delicate balance. Only after fertilization will the eggss be more vulnerable. If you wissh to take part in the mating sswarm, I ssugesst you admit your actionss before I am forced to report you to Tmm."

Both sets of wings were extended to full width now and Laura could see the angry Lepids squaring off for some kind of conflict.

“Brotherss, hive matess it need not come to thiss.” He pushed between them, large wings fanning anxiously. “Let us sspeak as equalss.” The voice was soft and cajoling as he continued to reason but Laura could no longer understand anything he said for he had switched from English to the hissing tongue of the Lepids. It sounded like a pit of angry snakes but it seemed to calm Lzz and Bnn down for gradually their stiffly extended wings lowered. Soon Lzz turned and stroked the wall briefly, shutting away the distressing site and emotions of the pregnant girls strapped to the wall.

Laura drew her head back, realizing that now the conflict was over, the Lepids had a much greater chance of noticing her. Without the pregnant girls’ emotions seeping out into the corridor, her own and Vince’s feelings were more likely to be detected. The soft hissing continued for another five minutes and then swept past them and on down the twisting corridor, out of hearing.

Chapter 20

Staring out of the corner of his eye at Laura's face, Vince knew she'd seen something truly awful and he could feel the horror pulsing between them in the crowded space like a living thing. It occurred to him that they might be forming some kind of an emotional loop since he still had the dust in his system--her emotions feeding his and his feeding hers--sort of the way she'd described it to him when she and her ex-husband tried to make love. But he couldn't risk asking anything while the Lepids were still right outside the corridor, having their fight.

He waited, holding his breath while they ranted and hissed and gradually he realized that he wasn't feeling anybody's fear or horror but his own anymore. He felt weak and tired almost to death but he was relieved that the strange effects of the dust seemed to be passing out of his system.

At last the Lepids moved on and it was safe to come out of the tiny narrow space they'd squeezed themselves into. Vince had intended to come charging out, to insist that Laura open the door across the hall so he could grab Kyra and find a

way out of this God forsaken place. But as he left the support of the wall, a sudden wave of weakness hit him, bringing him to his knees.

“Vince?” He could hear the concern in her voice and was vaguely aware that he was glad that he couldn't feel it as well, but the world was wavering in and out alarmingly and he couldn't answer.

“Vince, come on, we've got to move!”

Give me a minute, he wanted to say, but all that came out was, “...minute....” He staggered upright, fighting the insidious weakness that was robbing his strength but the lassitude that pulled at him was not to be denied. Dimly he remembered the way he'd felt after his experience with the dust in Mike's, but this was a hundred times worse. His legs felt like they had after two-a-days at football practice when he was in high-school and the coach had made them run the bleachers a hundred times in the hot sun.

Jelly, he thought hazily, hearing Laura dimly with one part of his brain while the rest of him swam towards darkness. *Turnnin' into a big jelly fish. Gonna melt right here on the floor....*

“Vince, you're too heavy to move. They're coming! Vince, *come on!*”

Dimly he was aware that Laura was tugging at his arm and it shamed him when he realized the effort it must be costing her to touch him in this place where all the emotions seemed magnified times ten. But despite the effort she was making, he simply couldn't move.

“No! Leave him alone!” Who was she talking to? Vince tried to look around but suddenly he was enveloped in a pair of large, rustling wings, like being wrapped in a quilt made of clattering, ice-cold sea-shells. He felt a frigid fist open inside his belly--they had him!

The sudden adrenaline dump was enough to throw off the weakness from the fairy dust hangover and he lashed out, kicking and punching at the enfolding curtain of

scales that blocked his view of Laura and the corridor.

“Struggle is useless.” The voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere--from inside his own skull. Vince felt a sharp pain in his left calf, a cold burning as though someone had jabbed him with a sixteen gage needle dipped in liquid nitrogen.

“No!” He meant for it to be a shout but the word came out as a whisper. Then a fatigue like nothing he had ever felt was drowning him, sucking him under. He closed his eyes, only for a moment, and then everything was blackness.

Chapter 21

“Well, my sweet Laura. Such a surprise to see you out and about. And yet, such a pleasure as well.” Tmm stepped back and Vince slid to the floor in front of the Lepid in a horribly loose jumble of arms and legs.

“What did you do to him?” Laura stood over his prone body protectively, wanting to check Vince out but afraid to take her eyes off the Lepid looming over them both.

“He is merely stunned, my dear.”

Laura knew a lot of people thought the Lepids all looked alike but she had learned to recognize the subtle markings and shadings of their wings and of course, she could never forget Tmm's voice. It was so cold. She wasn't sure where he had learned human endearments, possibly from her own mind, but it made her skin crawl when he used them.

“Your paramour will be taken to a safe place.” The Lepid made a high-pitched hissing noise and the walls on either side opened, revealing two gray skinned creatures like nothing she had ever seen before. They were half as tall as Tmm , which put them at the level of her own shoulder. They had the same general body

make-up as the tall Lepid, the elongated insectile head, the wasp-waist and long, narrow abdomen but there was no stinging point at the end and the wings were smaller and a dull brownish-gray. Vestigial, Laura thought, there was no way the creatures she was seeing could use those wings to get off the ground.

“Who ... what?” The two creatures had come to stand on either side of her and now they waited patiently for another signal from Tmm. Seeing her look at the gray-skinned creatures, the Lepid answered her unspoken question.

“Slmmdzz-- workersss. Mute and nearly mindless but quite useful all the same. It iss a pity we haven't more of them but the cycle is at a low ebb. They will take your lover to a ssafe place where he can ssleep off the effectss of my venom.

She refused to move, standing guard over Vince's prone body.

Tmm made an impatient gesture with three of his arms. “Come, Laura--let the workersss go about their businesss. You have our word that thiss human will not be injured--at leasst, not yet.”

“Give me your word I'll be able to join him. That we'll be together.” She hoped her voice wasn't trembling too much.

“Oh, we can promisse you that with certainty. You will be together much ssooner than you think.”

She stepped away from Vince who was breathing deeply in a heap on the floor and the two workers extended multiple limbs and lifted him, taking him around the bend in the corridor and out of sight. She didn't like letting him go like that, didn't like it one bit, but she didn't see that she had any choice. If she put up a fight, Tmm would simple stun her as well and she felt instinctively that it was vitally important that she remain conscious.

It was strangely ironic how often she'd been enfolded in those huge, cold wings and yet she'd never felt frightened of the wicked pointed tip at the end of a Lepid's abdomen before. But then, they were always so careful to keep the dagger-like

stinger retracted anytime they were on Earth soil. This was only the second time she'd ever seen that murderously sharp point extended, the first being when Tmm was threatening Sanders at the base. As she watched a clear drop of venom dripped from the naked barb and fell to the bumpy floor , which soaked it up greedily.

“Well, Ssweet Laura, sshall we talk?” Tmm extended his wings, as he had so many times in the past, beckoning her into his cold, alien embrace but this time Laura held back. She thought of the pregnant girls locked behind the walls, of the fleshy, sucking devices fastened to their faces and began to understand. The girls were a power source of some kind, she was almost sure.

“No--not like that. I don't believe you need to be inside my mind to talk to me. I don't believe any of it anymore. You weren't using me to translate all those times at the base--you were feeding on me--sucking out my emotions. That was why I always felt so cold and drained afterwards. You were using me the way you're using those girls--those pregnant girls you kidnapped from Earth.”

“Mosst perceptive, my ssweet--so you've seen our little harvesst room. But we are not ssurprised--we told the otherss you were more intelligent than the average human. And we are not ssurprised to find you wandering our hallss either--it is obviouss that our hive recognized your nutritional value jusst as we did.”

Suddenly the cool draining sensation she'd gotten whenever she stroked a wall to make an opening made sense as well. Laura shivered. Was there nothing on the Lepids' ship that wasn't in some way carnivorous? She just looked at Tmm, not moving.

“Very well.” The glittering wings raised in a sort of alien shrug. “Sshall we walk and talk then? You musst have many questionss you wish to assk.”

“Why should you answer my questions? Why should you care what I think?” Laura fell into step beside him, keeping stride with the sliding, bobbing gate with some difficulty. Tmm's wings rustled at his back as they continued down the corridor, in the direction Vince had been taken.

Tmm made the odd, almost shrugging gesture that raised his wings again. “Call it

an interest if you will, my dear. A wish to communicate without the subterfuge, which has been a regrettable but necessary part of all our interactions up until now.”

“But surely you know that when Vince and I leave--get out of here--“

“Ah,” He held up one spindly arm, covered in wiry black hair to stop her. “But any knowledge you might acquire is of no significance whatsoever, for you and your lover are to be our permanent guests.”

“Vince is not my lover.” Laura tried to keep her voice steady, choosing to deliberately ignore Tmm's last statement. The Lepid didn't seem to care.

“Your human relationships have no significance here. Imagine our gratification on finding you and your paramour already inside our ship when we arrived from the conference with that fool, Sanders. You've saved us no end of trouble, showing up the way you did.”

“I ... heard you telling Sanders that you needed another human girl. I ... I don't know what you have in mind for me, Tmm, but I'm not pregnant.” It was out of her mouth before she could stop it but Tmm only threw back his head and made the dry, chittering sound that passed for laughter among the Lepids.

“It matters not at all, my sweet. We have other uses for you and the other human. The emotions flowing from the harvest room are for our Queen's consumption--to ripen her eggs. You and your lover will be utilized in an entirely different manner--to help fuel our mating swarm.”

“Mating swarm?” Laura didn't like the sound of it at all. What did Tmm have in mind--a more direct form of cannibalism? Horrible, bloody images of death and dismemberment tried to push their way into her mind and she fought to keep them out. Now more than ever she needed to remain calm.

“Your fear is so delicious, my dear. Even from here I can taste it.” Tmm's voice held the same appreciation a wine connoisseur's might after tasting a rare vintage.

Laura gave the striding Lepid a side-ling glance and stepped closer to the wall, trying to put some distance between them.

Tmm made the chittering laughter again. "We do not require access to your mind or close proximity to you physically to feed while within the hive, sweet Laura. Have you not noticed the lovely magnification of emotion aboard our craft?"

Laura nodded, a short, jerky motion. "I noticed it when I tried to touch Vince."

Tmm eyed her speculatively. "With painful results, we expect. How very illuminating. You are such a delight, my dear, such a refreshing species. It seems almost a pity to harvest your planet but the cycle must continue."

"Harvest?" She looked at him sharply, nearly coming to a halt in the dim, twisting corridor. There was that word again--ominous and alien in Tmm's hissing voice.

"Why, yes." The amusement in his tone was impossible to miss. "Just a moment ago, my sweet, you were feeling anxious that we might chop you up and eat you--much like a monster from one of your so amusing children's stories--are we not correct?"

Laura looked at him, troubled that he had been able to get such a clear impression of her thoughts without even touching her. She shook her head but her refusal to answer didn't phase Tmm in the least.

"We, that you called Lepids, are the adult form of our species. More specifically, we are the Zmmittclass, the dominant males. But there are many of us you have not seen. Many that as yet, remain unborn, mere eggs in the belly of our beautiful Queen." He raised four slender, black-haired arms above his head, spreading his wings with a clattering rustle.

"Years beyond counting we have searched for a species like your own--one that could feed both our Ds, our adults, and our Sll, our children--the immature Lepids that will hatch from our Queen's fertilized eggs."

“You ssee, my ssweet Laura,” Tmm stopped and turned towards her, rattling his wings, forcing her back to the gray/green lumpy wall. “We the Dss, feed only on emotion but the Sll lack the necesssary maturity to gather nourishment from feelingss alone.

“The Sll require *flesh*.” He pressed forward, intruding into her mind in a way that shouldn't have been possible without physical contact. Like a cold blade in her frontal lobe, she saw the images he shoved at her, the terrible black grubs with mouths full of butcher-knife teeth and an insatiable hunger. They would eat and eat and eat....

Chapter 22

“Where the hell...?” Vince staggered to his feet. His head was throbbing and his eyeballs felt like they were rolling in beds of broken glass. What had happened to him? *Stung the motherfucker stung me!* Whatever was in the Lepid venom, it resulted in a worse hangover than any he'd ever had. It was even worse than the headache he'd had from the gas they'd used the last time. As his eyes got used to the gloom, he saw the now-familiar gray/green swirled walls and felt the repulsive breathing motion beneath his feet--his question was answered. He was still aboard the Lepid's mother ship--their hive.

He went to the nearest wall and placed his hands on it, feeling the cool, bumpy texture, hoping against hope to find some sort of an opening.

“Don't bother. I already tried.” Laura was sitting across from him, knees drawn up to her chin, looking very young and frightened.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Tmm did something to this room so it won't respond to my touch ... I think. Anyway, I can't make an opening.” Her voice was low and she was biting

her lower lip.

Vince went to her, wanting to hold her and wipe that hopeless look off her face. It was only when she put out a hand to stop him that he remembered that small comfort was denied them here. Settling beside her on the floor instead he turned to face her, his back to the slowly breathing wall.

“Kyra?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I'm sorry Vince--she's still in the room with the others.”

“The others?” He felt impatient and then tried to back the emotion down when he saw her wince. She didn't need him adding to her emotional distress with his own 'loud' feelings.

“I'm sorry, I forgot you didn't see them. They ... the Lepids call it....” She looked away and swallowed, obviously having a hard time getting the words out. “They call it the 'harvest room'. She's in there with what looked like about fifteen or twenty other girls and, Vince, they're *all* pregnant.”

He sucked in a breath, trying to understand. “But why....”

“I don't know.” Laura shook her head again and ran a hand through the silky blond hair , which had become snarled in places. “I think they're stimulating them somehow and using the emotions to feed their queen. That huge room we were in, the Lepid on the ceiling....”

He nodded, remembering the swollen, pulsating abdomen. “Yeah. And that belly....”

“Full of eggs,” Laura finished for him. “After you passed out--after Tmm stung you--he told me about them.”

Vince glanced at her sharply. “What? What did he say?”

“Oh he was quite willing to answer any questions, eager, even.” Her voice was bitter and hopeless. “It’s all been a big scam--the cures they gave us for our diseases, their willingness to mediate all the Earth’s conflicts ... They wanted us healthy and peaceful so they could harvest us.”

“What?” He couldn’t believe what she was telling him.

Laura nodded. “It’s true. Once the eggs are fertilized it's like the ship itself--the hive--takes over. The whole damn process is automatic. They'll be transported into pods and sent to Earth. On the way to Earth they're going to hatch and when they get there, they're going to eat and eat until there's nothing left. Nothing, Vince, nothing at all.” She turned away, her beautiful face tortured.

“Laura....”he began but the words of comfort died on his lips when the wall in front of them opened suddenly and the tall figure of a Lepid stepped into the room.

Chapter 23

“Take them.” Tmm's cold, buzzing voice filled the small room, sending a shiver down her spine. He nodded to the two drab gray workers that had stepped through the opening after him, directing them to Laura and Vince.

No, not again! Laura shrank against the wall, trying to shield herself somehow from the horrible images she was afraid the Lepid would send. Tmm stepped forward, wings extended, huge eyes glowing a bloody red-orange as he bent over her.

“Get the fuck away from her!” Vince put himself between them, the brilliant wash of his protective anger burning down her throat like strong whiskey.

Tmm laughed, that sound like a hundred mutant crickets chirping in the blackest part of the night. “You need not fear, little human, we do not intend to hurt ssweet Laura. That honor is resservd for you.” He gestured again at the workers who

came menacingly forward. These were bigger than the two that had carried the unconscious Vince down the hallway earlier, almost as tall as Tmm himself. They hovered over the two humans huddled on the floor, their compound eyes flickering between Tmm and their prize.

“Allow me to introduce you to yet another of our sspeciess.” Tmm made a flowing motion with two of his wire-haired arms. “Thesse fine sspecimens are called Rzz-- they are our warrior classs.”

Looking at the two massive Rzz, Laura saw that, unlike the other workers, these two had long, pointed barbs descending from their abdomens, just like Tmm. She felt despair settle over her, heavy as a lead blanket. There was no point in fighting-- no point in trying to run away.

“Vince,” she said, trying to get his attention, , which was wholly focused on the two warrior Lepids looming over them. “Vince, we'd better go with them. They'll only sting us and take us where they want to anyway if we don't.”

He turned his head, giving her a glance over one shoulder as he continued to shield her as well as he could with his arms. “What?”

“You heard me.” Gently, she pushed at his tense shoulder, trying to ignore the burning shock of his protective anger at the contact. He looked at her again and she nodded. Slowly, he lowered his arms.

“Rise,” Tmm commanded and she scrambled up from the floor as Vince did the same. Flanked by the menacing Rzz, they left the room with Tmm following after, noiseless except for the dry hiss of his scales over the bumpy, breathing ground.

The corridor wound endlessly into the gloom, a gray/green blur in Laura's tired eyes. She knew she was weakening, was giving up, but there was something in the atmosphere of the Lepid's hive that was tiring her, draining her. She could feel Vince's worry for her like a cool hand on the back of her neck, giving her some of his strength, and it was the only thing that kept her going.

At last they passed the fissure in the wall where she and Vince had been hidden during the fight between Bnn and Lzz. *Oh*, she thought dully. *Now I know where we are, the chamber of the Queen.*

They stopped and one of the Rzz stepped in front of them and stroked the wall. Immediately a slit opened wide and the vast chamber was revealed. The strong odor of fresh meat covered her face like a clammy hand, making her feel faint and nauseous and they were bathed in a pulse of deep blue light. There was a sudden commotion behind them.

“No! Foolsss!” Tmm came up behind them and made an angry swipe over the slit in the wall, which closed as rapidly as though he had zipped it shut somehow. He turned to the two Rzz, buzzing and hissing angrily in the Lepid language. Laura couldn't understand the words but suddenly she found that she was receiving images, a barrage of thought patterns like a cold, colorful blur almost too quick to decipher. Try as she might, she couldn't seem to shut them out.

Mercifully, Tmm ended his rant and gestured with all four of his arms for the Rzz to continue down the hall, bringing the prisoners between them. Laura shook her head, trying to get rid of the lingering effects of Tmm's lecture to the Rzz, which drowned out even Vince's continued anger.

They stopped again, much further down the winding corridor and this time it was Tmm who stroked the bumpy wall to make it open. As the slit formed and widened, Laura saw that it was a chamber almost as large as the one that housed the Lepid queen.

“In.” Tmm's cold voice was terse and he nudged them both roughly into the vaguely circular room. Inside, the sight that greeted them made Laura feel like her blood had turned to slow-moving ice in her veins.

Standing in a large circle, perhaps fifty feet in diameter were more than thirty Lepids like Tmm, what he himself had called the Zmmltt class--the dominant males. Their wings were folded sedately at their backs, cape-like and non-threatening but Laura could feel their eyes on her. Blank eyes, glowing with the

same bloody-orange fire that burned in Tmm's. They seemed to caress her shivering skin with wiry black hands and Laura could feel their hunger reaching out for her, longing to engulf her whole. She shuttered and tried to back away but Tmm was there at her back, shoving her and Vince both forward, the barb from his abdomen naked and dripping, a constant threat of what would happen if they didn't cooperate.

Against her will, Laura found herself shoved into the center of the circle , which Tmm completed by taking the one empty space, the gap they had walked through. Then, as though from some silent signal, every set of wings snapped open, with the noise of a hundred hands clapping together at once. The wings brushed against each other, tip to tip, making a cold, scaly cage that enclosed them completely.

Laura shivered, aware of Vince at her back, but even the strong aura of protectiveness he was sending her way couldn't dispel her anxiety. There was hunger in every alien face that surrounded them, a voracious appetite that could never be sated and yet the Lepids made no move to advance on them. What were they waiting for?

“What do you want?” Vince's voice was a low, angry growl and Laura could feel him tensed like a threatened animal behind her. She knew if the Lepids did make a sudden move on them, Vince would do his best to take as many down with him as he could. His indomitable spirit was like an iron rod in her spine and she stood up straighter, determined to help him, to not go down without a fight.

“What do you think we want?” It was Tmm's voice and yet not ... Laura realized with something like horror that the voice had issued from all points of the scaly circle they were trapped inside. Every mouth had spoken, every set of pitch-back, obscenely fleshy lips had uttered the words.

“Who, what ?” She turned in a complete circle, trying to understand.

“Thiss iss not for you to know, ssweet Laura. We are Trzzlnn now, One Mind.” This time the whisper wasn't only in her ears but in her brain as well.

“Please!” She put her hands over her ears, knowing it was a useless gesture, not wanting the thing that the Lepids had formed together to invade her mind. “Just tell us what you want!” she implored.

Instead of words, she got images, rushing into her brain so fast they rendered her blind to anything but the drama playing out on the screen of her mental theater. It was the One Mind, as they called themselves, sending their demands in images so real so could actually see them not with her eyes but with her mind. She saw the Lepids, the Zmmltt, feeding somehow, growing stronger on a wealth of feelings generated between Vince and herself. She saw Vince touching her ... taking her, creating enough emotion to feed the swarm.

Then, there was a clattering of scales as the wide wings flapped, iridescent in the eerie orange glow of the wide chamber, bearing their owners aloft as they were meant to do only once in a Lepid's long, dry lifetime. There was a slit rising open high in the wall, an opening into the Queen's chamber. Floating high in her mind's eye, beautiful and obscene, the Lepids rose, circling the swollen abdomen, the naked barbs extended and dripping from their pointed abdomens.

She cried out with the Queen's agony and pleasure as she saw those dripping barbs pierce the glowing belly, injecting life into the mute, gelatinous eggs , which were ripe for fertilization. Straining, giving everything they had to feed the new life bulging inside the monstrous belly, the Zmmltt were sucked dry. Their wings folding like desiccated leaves, they withdrew from the Queen's body and drifted to the floor of the chamber, lifeless husks.

Why? she thought, trying to understand. *Why are you doing this? You'll die, all of you!*

“Only once do we fly, only once do we swarm in the dance that is our pleasure and our doom.” The multiple voice of the One Mind echoed unbearably in her head, but even worse was the image that they sent in answer to her question.

Once more she saw the swollen belly of the Queen but now it was busy with

activity. The fertilized eggs began to grow and change, developing rapidly inside their shining sacks. Within the gelatinous membranes she could see shadows moving, fat black grubs that would eat every man, woman, child and animal on Earth before spinning themselves into tight silk cocoons and emerging as the next generation of Lepids. The next generation to seek out a new world to feed on and destroy.

“No! *No!* I won't help you! I won't help you do it!”

“Laura? Laura, what--?” Vince was looking at her anxiously but the voice of the Trzzlnn, the One Mind, drowned him out.

“You musst--you will. If not you then otherssss.” She was given a picture of two other hapless humans, a man a woman, being forced to perform, forced to generate the necessary emotions.

NO! she thought at them fiercely, hands clenched at her sides. *I know more than you think--the eggs are ripe now. You don't have time to get anyone else!*

“Foolish girl! Do you really think we have no one to take your place?” Her mind was plunged into darkness again and then the cold, unbearable image of another girl, this one with milk-chocolate skin and frightened brown eyes swam in front of her. The girl was pregnant, heavy with her burden and yet she was being shoved into the center of the Zmmltt circle, just as Laura herself had been shoved, and there was a man there, hurting her ... forcing her while the Lepids drank from the violent fountain of pain ... absorbed the ruthless pleasure to make their flight.

Laura recognized the face of the frightened girl, would have recognized her even if she'd never seen her before because she bore such a striking resemblance to the man at her back. It was Kyra, Vince's sister. His baby sister they were threatening.

“You or her,” the One Mind whispered and Laura bowed her head, covering her face with her hands and felt the slow drip of tears, knowing she was defeated.

Me, she whispered, knowing the Trzzlnn would hear her. *Let it be me, then.*

Chapter 24

“What the hell is goin' on?” Vince's patience was almost at an end. He was worried almost to death about Laura, after the damn Lepids had made their circle she seemed on the point of loosing it. Then that weird, garbled whispering had begun, a sound so strange he couldn't make out more than one word in three, and she had gone absolutely rigid.

Her hands had clenched at her sides and her eyes had glazed over in a frightening way, making him wonder if she was having some kind of a seizure. Then she was shouting, something like, 'No, I won't help you!' but soon after she bowed her head and started to cry again. It was obvious the Lepids were doing something to her without even touching her and Vince didn't know what to do or how to stop it.

It occurred to him that he could go barreling down between them and break their circle, like a kid playing 'Red Rover,' possibly disrupting the strange communication that seemed to be holding Laura in thrall. The Lepids would sting him again but that was just too damn bad, he'd take as many down as he could before they did. But just as he was tensing his body, picking his spot to hurtle through like a quarterback making a mad dash for the goal line, Laura turned to him and shook her head.

“No, Vince.” The wide twilight eyes he was growing to love were soft with tears and full of regret and some other emotion that was hard to name. A hopeless determination, perhaps.

“Laura, what...?”

“Vince.” She put her hand on his arm and shivered, obviously making herself stand the strong emotions blaring through his body like high decibel hyper-punk music.

Vince pulled gently away from her touch, recognizing how painful it must be for her and took a deep breath. Deliberately, he counted to ten, trying to dampen his feelings, to make them more bearable.

“Laura,” he tried hard to make his voice soft and low. “What is it? What are they trying to do to you, to us?”

“They want....” Her voice was choked but she shook her head and stood up straight, fighting for control. “They want us to generate energy for them--they need our emotions for their swarm.”

“Swarm? Emotions? I don't understand. If feelings were electricity you and me could be lightin' up all of downtown right now as pissed of and scared as we are. What the hell else do they need?” Vince demanded, feeling his fists clench at his sides.

“No.” Laura shook her head. “That's ... those aren't the kind of emotions they need.”

There was the low, buzzing hum again, and this time he understood it. It was eerie and horribly alien in his ears and he realized at last that it was one voice created from all of those hissing black throats speaking in unison.

“Your fear and pain are not enough, human. We require erotic energy.”

The words left a bitter after taste on the back of his tongue, dry and acrid as dust from a thousand year old tomb. He looked at Laura, not wanting to understand, not wanting to believe but she only nodded.

“You can't be serious.” He shook his head. “Huh-uh. There's no way we're gonna help them do this.”

“Vince we *have* to. If we don't they'll get someone else, someone more ... vulnerable. You have to believe me, *please*.”

He couldn't believe her soft changeable eyes were actually pleading with him to do this. Not here, not now, not knowing what it might do to her in this place where even the slightest touch was painful. He backed away. "I can't ... can't hurt you that way."

"You will." It was the monstrous multiple voice again, ringing in his ears and, in a weird way, inside his head. "Or would you prefer we find another human male to take your place?" The pressure of the alien minds surrounding them seemed to press down, a heavy weight on his brain until somehow he was seeing a dim vision, like someone showing old home movies inside his head. Dim but horrible. It was Laura, still inside the circle of Lepids but there was another man with her and he was pulling at her long blond hair, ripping open the jacket she still wore, pushing up the tight skirt, forcing his way inside her....

"No!" Vince shook his head, trying to block out the stuttering footage that played inside his brain. "Stop it, Goddamn you!"

He turned to Laura and saw the she had received the images as well, and probably much more vividly than he had. Her face was white as a sheet and the twilight colored eyes were absolutely huge.

"Vince..." Her lips trembled so she could hardly form the words. "Vince, please. If ... if it has to happen, I'd rather it was you. Please...."

"I don't want to hurt you," he said, helplessly. He reached out to caress a strand of her long hair and it broke his heart to watch her force herself to accept that caress, to not flinch back from his touch.

"I'll be fine." She stood up straight and tried to look brave. With trembling fingers she unbuttoned the black jacket, spreading it wide to show her full breasts pressed against the transparent white silk of the shell top she wore beneath it. Vince recognized it for what it was-- a gesture of resignation rather than desire.

"Laura--"

She shook her head. "I'll be okay." Her voice shook and the nipples that showed clearly through the white shell top were hard with fear, not need. "But ... but you'll have to take me, Vince. I ... I'm too scared to come to you. Do you understand?"

"I understand you're inviting me to rape you," he said bluntly. "And I'm not gonna do that."

"But if you don't...." Her face crumbled and she couldn't go on.

"Look," He pulled her to him roughly, careful not to touch bare skin. "They want their erotic energy? Fine, we'll give it to them. But not like that."

"But then how...?" Her eyes were wide and hopeful, afraid to believe.

"Trust me," he said, looking into those eyes, hoping he knew what the hell he was doing. "Just trust me."

Chapter 25

Laura took a deep breath and let it out, wondering what he had in mind, how he was going to fulfill the Lepids' demands without doing ... that. Then she felt angry with herself for being such a coward she couldn't even think it. Vince was a resourceful man, if he said he had an idea to get around having sex right here in the middle of a circle full of aliens waiting to feed on their emotions, then she should trust him.

She felt the dull press of the One Mind bearing down against her own--the Lepids were eager, hungry, impatient.

"Ssoon. It musst be ssoon." Images began to flood her head.

"No!" she gasped. "Stay out of my mind!"

“Laura!” His hands on her arms were warm, radiating his concern for her, even though the sleeves of the black jacket she still wore and the chocolate brown eyes were calm and commanding. “Look at me,” he demanded. “I want you to focus in on me and shut out everything else.”

She forced herself to do as he said, to concentrate on him, make him the center of her focus, of her world. “What ... what are you going to do?”

“I want to try something but you have to help me.”

She nodded, showing her willingness to cooperate. “Just tell me what.”

“Give me your hand.” He held out one of his, waiting for her to do as he asked. Reluctantly, steeling herself for the shock of his emotions, she did. As their palms touched, a little gasp was torn out of her. He was trying to hold his feelings in check for her sake, trying to hold himself down, Laura could tell. But still, his emotions were so *strong*, so overwhelming here in the Lepids' hive where everything was magnified.

“Relax,” he whispered. “Let yourself get used to it. I'm not going to touch anything but your hand. It's the more intense touching that makes it worse, right?”

She felt her face heating as she remembered the last night she'd spent at his house. His mouth on hers and those big, warm hands on her breasts. “Yes, that's correct,” she mumbled. She was almost used to the feel of his palm on hers now. Feeling his emotions flow through her was like slipping into a bath that was just this side of too hot--bearable but only just.

“So hand-holding oughta be pretty safe,” Vince continued, still looking at her seriously. At least compared to what they wanted us to do.” He jerked his chin to indicate the circle of Lepids surrounding them, rustling their wings impatiently.

She nodded, wondering what he had in mind.

Vince entwined their fingers, connecting them, and stared intently into her eyes.

“What....” she had to swallow, her mouth was suddenly dry. “What are you going to do?”

“Just talk,” he said mildly. “Tell you how I feel. Tell you what I want to do to you.”

He's going to talk dirty to me? “I...” Laura swallowed again, hearing a small dry click in her throat. “What will that accomplish?”

He shook his head. “Just listen. Try to relax and just let it wash over you--loosen up some. Will you try?”

Wordlessly, Laura nodded, giving his fingers a little squeeze. She could already feel the heat coming from him, lapping against her skin in gentle waves. It wasn't too intense ... yet.

He took a breath and looked her up and down, not saying anything and Laura suddenly realized that the front of her black jacket was gaping open again, framing her breasts perfectly behind the translucent white silk top. She moved to pull it closed with her free hand but Vince shook his head.

“Leave it for now. I want to look at you, even if I can't touch. You're beautiful, you know that?”

Laura blushed crimson and looked down at the ground. She could feel his sincerity coming through their linked hands but it was still hard to believe.

“All that soft blond hair and those big eyes ... I still haven't figured out what color they are, ya know?” He grinned at her gently. “And your breasts are so big and luscious--they fit in my hands perfectly. I loved the way your nipples got so hard when I was touchin' you the other night ... loved those soft little noises you made when you were gettin' hot. You were gettin' hot, weren't you, baby? C'mon now, answer me.”

She nodded, unable to speak. Between their linked hands the heat was beginning to build.

“That's right, I knew you were. I could tell by the way you moved against me. Do you know what I wanted to do to you, Laura? What I still want to do to you?”

It seemed like her tongue had turned to lead but she forced herself to answer him. “You wanted to to make love with me?”

Vince shook his head, the dark eyes searching her own. “No, baby--least, not right away. You gotta work up to the main event. No, first I want to taste you.” His broad thumb rubbed lazy circles in her palm and Laura felt her pulse jump in her throat. Behind them the Lepids rustled their wings impatiently. She looked over her shoulder, biting her lip, but Vince called her eyes back to his.

“Not them, Laura. Just look at me. I want you to think about what I'm sayin'. I want to *taste* you.” His voice was low and full of want and she could feel his need for her pulsing over her skin in waves of flame.

“T ... taste me?” she stuttered, feeling flushed all over. “But, last night, we ... you already kissed me.” She raised her free hand to her lips reflexively, remembering the burning heat of his mouth covering hers.

Vince smiled and she could feel his amusement, swirling through the eddies of desire that caressed her skin. “No, baby. Not your mouth--I wanna taste that soft, hot place between your legs. Your sweet, wet pussy.”

“I ... I...” Laura felt at a loss for words. She had spent most of her life trying not to think of sexual possibilities and scenarios, especially after it became apparent that sex with Gerald was never going to happen. But she had a feeling that even if it had been a possibility this was something Gerald never would have suggested. “I don't understand,” she managed to get out at last.

“Then let me explain it to you.” His dark eyes were half-lidded and drowning deep with the desire she could feel pulsing between their entwined fingers. “First I'd

spread open that jacket and pull up your shirt. I want to cup your big, luscious tits in my hands again. Your skin is so pale and so soft, like silk beneath my fingers.” He leaned forward, his words warm puffs of air against her neck, his emotions igniting her own almost unbearably.

“I'd feel your nipples get hard when I pinched them--like two ripe, red berries just beggin' to be sucked.” His thumb continued to caress the soft inside of her palm and she felt the need flow out of them both, feeding the hunger of the One Mind and yet she couldn't stop--didn't want to stop.

She closed her eyes briefly, trying not to imagine that dark head bent over her, the feeling of his hot, wet mouth on the sensitive tips of her breasts , which still felt terribly exposed by the open jacket. Her nipples, , which had been hardened points of fear earlier, now throbbed for a different reason.

“Would you like to feel me sucking your nipples, Laura?”

“I guess so,” she murmured in a low, shaking voice, knowing he needed her to participate.

Vince nodded approvingly. “That's good, baby. I'd wanna suck those red, ripe nipples for a long time, roll them in my mouth, flick them with my tongue. I'd do it until I heard you makin' those soft little noises again, until I knew you were ready.”

“Ready?” The word came out in a rush of breath that she hadn't known she was holding. The ache of his desire pushed at her, throbbing in the tips of her breasts and the damp heat between her legs. Dimly she heard the rustle of scales behind her but the sound was distant ... unimportant.

“Ready,” Vince whispered. “Ready for you to lay back and raise up that tight little skirt. Ready for you to spread your legs for me. Could you do that for me, baby? Could you spread those soft, creamy thighs and let me in?”

Laura closed her eyes, dizzy with need, his or her own, she was no longer sure.

The image of him kneeling between her spread thighs, the large, dark hands on her such a contrast to her own pale skin wouldn't leave her. *Forbidden*. Yes, but all the more deliciously erotic because of that.

“Answer me, Laura.” His voice was low and commanding.

Laura's eyes flew open to find him watching her intently. He was demanding her involvement in this scenario. “I ... yes, I could do that,” she whispered, feeling her pulse pound in her throat, feeling the waves of desire lap higher and higher. Vince was holding her hand with both of his now, stroking her wrist as he had the night before. She wondered vaguely if he could feel her pulse racing under his fingertips.

“You could do what?” he insisted, petting her gently but firmly.

“I ... I could spread my legs for you,” she said softly, forcing herself to look into the smoldering depths of his eyes. “I would, Vince. I would if I could.” The admission brought a blush to her cheeks and a surge of pure arousal from his side of the connection. It flowed over her, through her, out of her, to the waiting Lepids. Laura didn't care.

“That's good, baby,” he said softly. “That's what I wanted to hear. Now,” He raised her hand and pressed her palm against the side of his face. The connection intensified immediately, becoming almost overwhelming. Laura gasped and Vince looked at her, one eyebrow raised in a silent question. She swallowed hard and nodded for him to continue.

“Once I had you spread out for me I could look at you. See how wet you were.” He nuzzled against her palm, his eyes never leaving hers.

“W ... why?” Laura pressed her legs tightly together, trying not to think of how hot and damp she was right now.

Vince kissed the inside of her palm gently, making her jump with the sudden spike of desire and sensation. “Cause, baby. The wetter you are, the better it is. If I did a

good job sucking your ripe nipples and makin' you hot, by the time you spread your legs for me, you'd be so wet I could see it. Your soft little pussy would be all hot and swollen because you needed me to touch you so bad.” He paused to kiss her palm again and this time Laura though she felt the brief flick of his tongue. Somewhere in the distance the sound of a hundred wings stirring fell on her ears but she couldn't look around because his eyes wouldn't let her go.

“I'd be able to tell you were ready because the sweet, tender lips of your pussy would be opening up--spread apart like the petals of a flower--and I'd be able to see the sweet, slippery pink inside. You ever been that hot before, baby?”

Laura nodded and looked down, feeling the scratch of his whiskers against her palm and the rising heat though their shared connection. She was afraid to admit she was that hot now, that she could feel herself opening up just as he had said. She became aware that he was waiting for a verbal answer. “Yes,” she said softly, feeling her breathing quicken and her heart rate speed to match his.

“God, your soft little voice makes me so damn hard,” he said roughly. “Once I had you on your back with your legs spread and I knew you were ready I'd open you up with my fingers and kiss you there. I'd feel that hot, slippery wetness on my lips, kiss you the same way I'd kiss your mouth.”

Laura looked up and dark eyes fastened on hers, conveying the heat he was feeling. The bulge of his arousal in his dark suit pants was apparent even in the dim orange glow of the room. The need between her own thighs was undeniable as was the emotion cresting around them in a swirling storm of heat.

“I'd kiss you that way for a long time, baby,” Vince said softly. “I'd wanna take my time and feel you buck and moan under my mouth. Take my time tasting your sweet, salty wetness. Then I'd spend awhile sucking your clit, licking it real slow to make you crazy. But you know the best thing--what I really want to do?”

“Tell me,” she whispered, not making him ask her again. By now the wet heat between her legs was building to a fever pitch. She could almost feel the sensations he was describing to her as his desire washed over her in waves,

spiraling up and up into the stratosphere.

“I want to spread you wide open and put my tongue as deep in that hot little pussy as I can. I'd feel your thighs against the sides of my face, squeezing me, urging me on. Your hands on my shoulders while you moaned and gasped and rode my face. You'd be so close, baby, so damn close.”

He paused and brought his lips to her palm again, sucking gently, his warm, wet tongue swiping against her skin suggestively. Laura felt her breath catch in her throat. She *was* close--close to being overloaded but close to a different kind of edge as well. She fought the impulse to pull her hand away from him and tried to let the tide of sensation carry her out without drowning her.

“Tell me....” She licked her lips. “Tell me more, Vince.”

“Mmm.” Dark chocolate eyes looked deeply into hers. “I'd use my tongue on you a good long time, baby, but it's not always easy for a woman to come like that. You'd need something more--penetration.”

Laura felt the breath fall out of her in a long, hot sigh. She squeezed her legs together tightly, feeling the deep, pleasurable ache between them and the burning heat of Vince's emotions licking over her skin like tongues of flame. Around them a low, humming buzz was building as the sexual energy flowed between them like some molten, unbearably sweet liquid, nourishing the One Mind that waited in the darkness. The Lepids were feeding. Laura knew it but somehow she didn't give a damn.

“Tell me,” she whispered again.

“When you're like that, baby, all wet and hot and ready to come--that's when I know you're ready for me.” Vince took her hand and wrapped it around two of his long, strong brown fingers. “Ready to feel me inside you.”

Laura gasped, feeling the emotion jump up another notch, like hot waves in the ocean lapping just over the top of her head. *So close ...* So close to drowning. So

close to coming. She squeezed his fingers tightly, fighting to control the panic, to ride the emotion instead of letting it ride her.

Vince seemed to realize she was teetering on the edge of the precipice. "I can see you right now, baby," he whispered in a low, intense voice. "I can see you all spread out, wanting me inside you--wantin' me as bad as I'm wantin' you. And I can almost feel that sweet, slippery heat around the head of my cock while I press it deep inside you."

The last words were slow and measured. He spoke them low as he looked into her eyes and moved the two fingers she clutched suggestively in the tightness of her fist. Laura gasped again, feeling the tension peak inside her as she squeezed her thighs together.

There was a sudden rushing of air around them as Tmm and all the rest of the Zmmltt took flight. Once more, Laura felt like she was in the hurricane machine, felt her hair waving away from her face like a flag in the force of the Lepids' wind. As the black, winged shapes rose all around them, flying for the first and only time, she felt the orgasm hit her just before she would have been forced to break contact.

The waves were breaking over her head, drowning her, burning her, throbbing in her temples as the sensory overload demanded her attention, spiking like lightening behind her eyes. And still the pleasure drove her.

She grasped his fingers tightly, wishing desperately for a deeper, more fulfilling connection although she knew it would have fatally overloaded her system. Soft, panting moans were coming out of her and she couldn't seem to stop them, couldn't seem to stop the emotions that were slapping against her like rough currents in a choppy sea.

"Laura ... *Laura*?" Vince's voice was frightened, urgent. But he suddenly seemed as distant as the faint rustle of beating wings as the Lepids dove through the slit that had opened high in the wall, connecting their chamber to the chamber of the

Queen.

I'm all right, she wanted to say, but the words wouldn't leave her lips. Inside her head she could see them flying, floating, diving to meet the Queen, to connect with that swollen belly. She felt the agony, the unbearable need cresting as they pierced deep, thrusting barbed instruments of pleasure and pain into the gravid flesh.

Bright images blazed behind her eyes, raced through her consciousness as she watched the massive Queen writhe in the throes of her mating, lost in the frenzy of the swarm. She saw the eggs begin to squirm and change as life was injected into them. No longer blank, no longer waiting, turning now, into the ravenous monsters they must become. The Queen's belly pulsed violent rainbow colors, staining her chamber in dyes of electric blue and pale violet as the tender eggs grew.

The Queen--the eggs--to ripen they have to have energy! The images in her head filled her head like water or blood, squeezing out everything else. As the crushing, searing agony of sensory overload took her, Laura suddenly knew what had to be done, how to stop the whole hideous process.

“Laura ... Laura you're bleeding!” She felt his hands on her shoulders, squeezing frantically tight, and a warm trickle of liquid heat on her upper lip. There was a taste like hot copper in her mouth and then nothing at all.

Chapter 26

Vince held her, the limp body cradled close in his arms. Beneath the fragile, bruised-looking eyelids he could see rapid movement and her chest rose and fell shallowly.

Somewhere in the next chamber the Lepids were breeding, their eggs ripening into monstrous things he couldn't even imagine, and the Earth was turning in blissful ignorance, oblivious and unprepared for what was coming like a rain of fire from the sky. None of it mattered.

Vince held her, unaware that he was speaking under his breath. “Come on, Laura. Come back to me, baby.” He did the best he could to wipe the blood from her face

and wondered if she'd ever wake up.

Chapter 27

“Laura....” She became aware that someone was calling her name in a low, hoarse voice, that she was being held in warm, strong arms. She didn't want to answer, didn't want to come back but there was a note of pleading in his tone and the voice was so familiar.

Feeling like her eyelids had been dipped in lead, Laura forced herself to open her eyes and look up at the face bending over hers.

“Laura?” His joy at seeing her awake was sharp and bright, like a mouthful of fresh orange juice on a sleepy morning.

“Mmm....” Her tongue felt heavy with fatigue. “Vince?” She struggled to sit up and he helped her, handling her like she was made of glass. “Where...?” She looked around at the familiar gray/green swirls on the walls and felt the motion of the floor beneath her. *Still here. Oh, God, I thought it might be a nightmare. Hoped it was ...* She shook her head, feeling heavy and dull. There was a sour, coppery taste lining her mouth.

“You okay?” Vince's voice was anxious and his emotions vacillated between worry and relief.

“Yeah.” She rubbed at her temples , which ached with a low, dangerous throb, a warning against further sensory excesses. “What happened?”

“You don't remember?” He eyed her incredulously. “The way they wanted us to....”

“Oh!” Everything came back at once in a rush of sensation, the way Vince had talked to her, the way he had touched her, the clatter of wings in the background as

the Lepids fed *The Lepids, feeding ... swarming!* Laura struggled to her feet, feeling dizzy and sick. Vince tried to give her a hand but his worry was too intense and she pulled away.

“Hey, I don't think you ought to be up just yet.” Warning flashed in the dark eyes but Laura had more important things to worry about.

“How long?” she snapped, running her hands through her long, snarled hair, trying to order it somehow.

“How long what?” He rose from the floor as well, arms crossed over his chest angrily.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Asleep? You weren't asleep.” Vince's voice was rough and he scrubbed a hand over his cheeks , which were beginning to show heavy stubble. Laura wondered how long they'd been aboard the Lepids' hive, it felt like days.

“I just woke up, of course I was asleep,” she protested uneasily, denying his words as much as the dull throbbing ache in her brain.

“You passed out,” he said flatly. “I was holding you when it happened. Your eyes rolled up and you started spurtin' blood all over the place.” He gestured to her nose. “Then you went limp and collapsed. I thought....” His voice got harsh and he looked away. “thought I'd killed you,” he finished finally.

“Vince....” She wanted to touch his arm, wanted to make him understand it wasn't his fault somehow.

“Maybe half an hour or a little more.”

“What?” It took a minute to sink in--he was answering her question. Suddenly, the urgency returned. She'd been out for going on a whole hour. Laura closed her eyes and opened her mind, trying to *feel*, but the presence of the Trzzlnn, the One

Mind, was nowhere to be found. So the mating swarm was over. How long before the newly fertilized eggs left the Queen's bloated abdomen and started their journey to the waiting pods? How long until they were ready to hatch and land on Earth?

Laura had a sudden flash, a thought from another mind, alien like Tmm's had been, but less complex, more single-minded and infinitely more powerful. It was almost as though she saw with the eyes of the ship itself. The hive.

Waiting ... waiting for the perfect time, when the eggs are ripe, when they leave the Queen, carried within the bowels of the ship through tunnels not made, but grown for this exact purpose. Pushed by the internal workings of the hive, an automatic peristalsis that moves the eggs to where they need to be--the pods. Waiting to feel the eggs leave and then it's time ... time to separate ... time to break apart into many tiny pieces so that only the core is left in space. The pods will come to ground on new soil, a new world to eat, to despoil, to savor until there is nothing of value left.

Then the hive will come together again, to be reborn, a new hive, a new Queen, a new colony, billions strong. The high tide in a cycle older than life itself. To rise and fly away, back into the coldest reaches of space bearing a new cargo of death and destruction for the next suitable planet where everything will start again....

It went through her head in a split second, almost too fast to catch, leaving her with a feeling of cold terror in the pit of her stomach. Even now the eggs were ripening--if they waited until the gelatinous, fertile sacs left the Queen's body they would be too late. *How long will it take? How much time do we have?* The Lepids' 'cycle' was an ancient one that took years to reach its peak. And yet, she felt in her bones that when the apex of the cycle was reached, things moved very quickly. How much time did they have? *Not a hell of a lot!*

She turned to Vince, feeling cold all over. "We have to hurry! We have to get out of here, *now!*"

"What? You mind tellin' me what the hell is goin' on?" He sounded exasperated

and the dark brows were drawn low on his forehead but he followed her when she ran for the wall and began stroking it frantically.

“Come on ... *come on*,” Laura muttered urgently. She had a very bad moment when she was sure that Tmm had fixed the walls of the chamber not to respond to her touch and then the weird draining sensation ran up her arm like cool slime and the wall began to open sluggishly.

“What...?” Vince began again but she only shook her head.

“No time! If we don't do it before the eggs leave the Queen's chamber...” She scrambled through the slit , which was barely big enough and reached back to hold it open for Vince. The hive was moving sluggishly now, concentrating all its efforts on the Queen and her ripening eggs. Vince barely squeezed out of the opening she'd made before it closed again and the wall solidified.

Laura took a moment to get her bearings and then ran down the hall in what she hoped was the right direction. The lighting in the hall had gotten noticeably dimmer and the winding corridor had narrowed in places as the hive prepared to break apart into smaller pods that would carry the Earth's destruction as their cargo.

“Laura, where the hell are we going?” Vince was clearly exasperated now but Laura couldn't spare any energy to talk. Even as the adrenaline raced through her body, the pounding in her temples continued and a dragging lethargy pulled at her mind. It was the Lepids' ship, the hive, she knew. Somehow it was sucking the energy out of her, using her up little by little. To the alien organism that fed on emotional force she was just another resource.

She was tired but she had to keep going. *Miles to go before I sleep*, she thought grimly, and nodded for Vince to follow.

At last they stopped in front of what she was sure was the Queen's chamber and across from it *Across from it should be the harvest room*. Nerving herself for

the intense flood of emotion, Laura pressed her hand against the bumpy wall, feeling the chilly drain and waiting for it to open.

After what seemed like a very long time, a slit began to grow in the wall. Laura squeezed her eyes shut, awaiting the blast of emotion but it never came.

“Kyra!” Vince wriggled thorough the opening in the wall and Laura followed him, keeping one hand on the wall to keep the slit open. The sight that greeted her was terrible, made ten times worse by the fact that she had just seen this room only hours before.

Along the long, narrow, oval-shaped room the abducted girls in various stages of pregnancy hung, fixed in place by the fleshy arms that seemed to grow from the substance of the wall itself.

Maybe three of the girls still had the sucking growths that Laura had seen earlier strapped to their faces but the other fifteen or eighteen had bare faces, fixed in expressions of agony or grief. Laura felt her heart ache for them. Beside them, no longer needed, were the flower-shaped devices hanging withered and limp, as black as rotten banana peels on their stalks, their purpose fulfilled. As she watched, another sucker dropped away, leaving the face of the girl whose energy it had been sucking frozen in a mask of horror.

My God, she thought wearily, staring down the narrow walls. *Dead! They're dead everything sucked out of them in only a few hours ...* Sorrow for the wasted lives, for the girls that had been taken from their home planet to die in this alien waste threatened to overwhelm her and she had to push it back down. It was true, they were dead. Everywhere she looked heads lolled on stick-thin necks, their swollen bellies the only fleshy thing on bodies that looked more like concentration camp survivors than healthy teenagers.

Too late. She felt utterly hopeless. *We're too late. The Queen has almost all their energy ... more than enough to complete her cycle. The eggs are going to keep growing.*

“Kyra! Let her go of her you sonofabitch!”

Laura turned her head to see Vince struggling to free one of the girls on the wall. His little sister was wearing tattered denim rags, no doubt the remains of the outfit she'd been clubbing in when the Lepids took her. The gray arms growing out of the wall still held her fast and the fleshy suction device, now a bright orange was clamped firmly against her face. To her right, the only other girl remaining alive stiffened and then relaxed suddenly in the gray/green restraints and the pulsing sucker dropped limply from her still face. Its dull red color faded to dark gray and then dead black.

Vince redoubled his efforts to pry Kyra from the wall, tugging and yanking at the fleshy arms. But it was the sucking flower-like device still fastened to his sister's face that worried Laura. Its color was changing from orange to a deep ox-blood color and behind its gripping petals, she could see the girl's eyes beginning to glaze. *Going fast*, she thought grimly.

“Vince, get that thing off her face! Now!” Leaving the slit in the wall, which began to close immediately, she ran to where his sister was suspended. She gripped the flower-like thing, trying to work her fingertips under its fleshy red petals and saw that Vince was doing the same. Kyra's eyes widened momentarily.

They were both working on the device, tugging and prying and Laura was beginning to think it wouldn't come loose when, with a high, alien hissing noise it finally popped off. For a moment it hung from her hand, writhing on its stalk. Then she felt the horrible draining, a hundred times worse than when she opened one of the Lepids' walls and realized that the thing was still active. If she let it, it would latch on to her and suck until she was as dry and dead as the pitiful girls hanging from the narrow walls.

Hastily Laura dropped the dark red flower thing, watching it writhe at the end of its fleshy stalk. Slowly its motions ceased and it withered and blackened before her eyes until it was dead and limp. They had saved Vince's sister but what good was it? What good was any of it when the eggs were ripening even now?

She stared at the withered thing and something, some memory or thought niggled at the edges of her mind, trying to get her attention. It was something to do with the eggs and the colors pulsing from the sucking flower thing. The colors were important somehow, the unearthly spectrum of liquid light coming from that bloated abdomen where the mass of gelatinous eggs ripened ... Laura closed her eyes, shutting everything else out.

The eggs ... the colors ... She remembered the way the powerful, unfiltered emotions flowing from the harvest room to the Queen's chamber had caused the wild fluctuations, how worried the Lepids had been.

The colors even fluctuated when Vince and I were upset ... just the two of us before the harvest room was even open ... And why was Tmm so angry when the Rzz opened the Queen's chamber by mistake? Was he afraid we'd disturb the balance with our emotions? It's still energy, right? But what kind of energy ... ?

Laura's eyes flew open. From somewhere in her memory she heard a low, hissing voice saying, *Only after fertilization will the eggss be more vulnerable.* Maybe it wasn't too late!

“Vince?” The soft voice got her attention and Laura turned from the dead sucking device to see Vince enfolding his little sister carefully close to his chest, having at last pried her loose from the wall's arms.

“Oh, baby girl, I'm so glad to see you again! I knew you were out here somewhere. Knew you were still alive. I could *feel* it.” There were tears in Vince's eyes and Laura could feel his joy and relief like a ray of sunshine on her face.

“Still alive if you don't squeeze me ta death.” The indignant mutter was belied by how tightly Kyra wrapped her stick-thin arms around her big brother.

“Little squirt,” he responded affectionately, tweaking her nose and giving her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Laura hated to break up such a touching reunion but ... “Vince, we don't have time

for this.”

Kyra pulled out of her brother's embrace reluctantly and looked at Laura with a curious expression. “Who's she?”

Vince opened his mouth, no doubt to make introductions, but Laura cut him off.

“Come on. If you want to save her instead of die with her, we have to leave. *Now.*”

He nodded briefly and took his sister by the hand, pulling her to where Laura was already stroking the wall open, feeling the chilly draining sensation drag at her as she did. She climbed out of the narrow opening and watched as Vince did the same, helping his sister through gently.

“Now where?” He looked at her, waiting.

Laura looked around the corridor , which had now become more of a tunnel. It was narrow and dim but she knew where the Queen's chamber was and she had one other landmark to help her. She just hoped it was still there....

Chapter 28

“Come on,” Laura said and Vince followed her, dragging Kyra behind him. It was clear she had a plan.

“Vince!” Kyra stumbled over the rough floor and almost fell. He turned and scooped her up in his arms, the same way he used to do when she was a little girl.

“Thanks, big brother.” She leaned her head against his shoulder, paper-thin eyelids fluttering closed. Even weaving his way through the narrowing, dimly lit halls of the Lepids' hive, Vince couldn't help noticing how terribly light she was.

Kyra had never been a very large girl and now she was wasted away almost to nothing. Only her belly was big. Hard and swollen, it pushed against his chest.

They seemed to go a long way and then Laura stopped with a little cry that sounded like relief.

“Here it is, just where we left it!”

“What?” Vince ducked his head to look and saw she was pointing at a dark object protruded from the swirled wall.

He looked at Laura, still not quite sure why she was so excited. “So we're back where we started. So?”

“So?” Laura gestured impatiently. “This is one of the pods I told you about, I'm sure it is. The hive is going to be breaking up and the only way to be sure you and Kyra get back to Earth is to be inside one of them.”

“Come on, it's big enough now.” Laura was urging him forward but Vince wasn't buying it.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked, heading for the opening she had coaxed the wall to make.

“Stopping the eggs before they get into the pods. Stopping them before they leave the Queen if we can. It's the only chance we've got. We may already be too late! Put your sister in the pod and take off your shirt.” She was taking off the suit jacket she wore, leaving only the white silk shell top to cover her full breasts. Despite everything, Vince felt himself harden at the sight. *Not the time*, he reminded himself sternly.

He deposited his sleeping sister on her side just inside the entrance. Laura was holding it open with one hand while she balled up her jacket with the other.

“Grab your jacket and hand it to me and take off your shirt,” she directed.

“Shrugging it off, he handed it to her along with his suite jacket.

“Good.” Laura balled the clothing up with her own jacket, making as big a bundle as she could and positioned it inside the slit to keep it open. “Have to make sure you can get back in,” she explained, seeing his puzzled glance. “After.”

“After what?”

“After we do what we have to do.” She wouldn't meet his eyes. “There.” Apparently satisfied that the bundle of clothes was holding the slit open sufficiently, she nodded to herself and then turned to him again. “Okay, let's go.”

“Where to now? Back to the Queen?” he guessed, following her back along the narrow, winding tunnel.

“Here.” She was panting when she reached the chamber. He stood silently while she forced another opening from the reluctant hive wall.

“Okay, so now wha--?”

“Pants,” she demanded, holding out her hand for them. She herself was wiggling out of her skirt, holding the opening one handed as she struggled with the slippery black material.

“Why?” Vince wasn't moving. She was naked from the waist down now, the soft nest of blond fuzz between her legs glimmering faintly in the dim light. Bizarre though the circumstances were, he still felt his body responding to the sight. It made him reluctant to do as she asked.

“Now, Vince! I'll explain when we're inside.” She nodded at the chamber, bathed in a pulsing deep blue light that spilled out into the dim hallway. The scent of fresh meat and dried flowers wafting out was very strong and not very appealing.

Spurred by her urgency, he toed off his shoes and slipped out of his pants, handing them in a bundle to her. He was down to his shorts and socks and Laura was rapidly stripping off the white shell top, leaving herself completely naked. Her heavy breasts swayed as she bent over the bundle of clothes, her nipples hard little

exclamation marks punctuating her curving silhouette in the humid semi-darkness. Was she going crazy? Normally it was the type of insanity Vince would have supported whole-heartedly but the circumstances weren't exactly favorable right at the moment.

“Okay.” She nodded at the opening in the wall. “Go in and I'll follow and use these,” she motioned with the hand full of clothing and shoes, “to hold it open.”

“I don't--“

“*I know* you don't understand,” she said tiredly. “I'll explain when we're inside. *Please.*”

Once more the urgency in her tone moved him and he stepped through the slit and into the Queen's chamber, feeling the humid air currents, full of their strange, alien scents, caress his nearly naked body. The chamber was full of the glowing dust he'd sworn to himself never to breathe in again. He hoped she had a damn good plan, one that would make the debilitating lethargy that was sure to follow prolonged exposure to the alien bacteria worth it.

She followed him quickly, plugging the hole with the bundle of clothes as she had for the pod where Kyra was sleeping. Vince waited for her, looking up at the pulsing blue glow from the ceiling. The massive Lepid Queen was still there but if her abdomen had looked big before it was absolutely enormous now. Swollen, massive, *Ready to blow*, he thought, swallowing nervously.

The dim shapes inside the glowing, translucent belly were no longer the perfectly round egg-shaped shadows he remembered from just a few hours before. Now they were growing, elongating and writhing within the confines of the Queen's bloated womb. *Gettin' ready to be born or laid or hatched or whatever the hell it is they do*, he thought, uneasily. *Gettin' ready to be moved to the pods*. He hoped Kyra was all right.

“Vince ... *Vince.*” She led him further into the chamber until they were almost directly underneath the pulsing belly hanging from the ceiling more than fifty feet

above them.

Along the way they passed what Vince at first thought were enormous dry leaves. He looked closer and saw that the 'leaves' were the shriveled and desiccated bodies of the male Lepids, the Zmmlltt, as Tmm had called them. Their wings were curled into crisp cylinders, denuded of their rustling scales and their oddly jointed limbs were drawn up to their long, alien bodies. Vince thought they looked like mummies in a bizarre museum exhibit. He realized the mating swarm must have killed them.

“Come here.” Laura had stopped and put her back to one of the broad, fleshy grayish stems of the huge cabin-flowers. Vince started towards her and then stopped, arrested by the sight of her in this forsaken place.

The liquid blue glow, shining down from the Queen above, gilded her pale, nude body and the alien air currents, laden with glittering dust, stirred her long blond hair.

“Come here,” she said again, holding out her arms to him. The dust was already working on him, sharpening his senses, opening a part of his brain that was never meant to be opened, the same part of Laura's that was open all the time.

“What do you want?” He could feel fear coming from her, like a cool blade being drawn down the groove of his spine point first. But the fear was spiced with anticipation--the flavor of hot cinnamon on the tip of his tongue.

“I want you.” Her words were low, enticing.

He looked at her uncertainly. Surely she didn't mean it the way it sounded--did she? “Laura, I don't--“

“I want you,” she said again. “I need you, Vince. Need you to make love to me.”

Chapter 29

Still he held back. “Here? Now? This really isn't the place for it, baby, even if you could stand it and I damn well know you can't.” He crossed his arms over his broad, bare chest, a skeptical look in his dark chocolate eyes.

Laura felt her heart sink. “Vince, please, I know it sounds crazy but this is part of the plan. Can't you just trust me? The way I trusted you?”

Vince shook his head. “I'm sorry but you're gonna have to explain this plan of yours.” He stepped closer to her, still carefully not touching, and she could feel his confusion swarming around her head like a cloud of gnats but also the warmth of his protectiveness. He was being careful of her-- he didn't want to hurt her.

“I....” She shook her head, knowing that he wouldn't be moved by her urgency any more, she would have to explain. “The eggs,” she said, gesturing up, over their heads. “They're still in the Queen, still inside her body, so we still have time. But I don't know how much so I need you to do this with me *now*. Now while there's still time.”

“Time for what? For a quickie?” He looked at her, incredulous.

Laura winced, and he put out a hand as though to touch her, to apologize and then dropped it abruptly. “Look, I'm sorry but I don't understand what you're tryin' to do here.”

“Vince, please. Can't you just trust me?” Just being in the huge chamber of the Queen was draining and she knew she'd never have enough energy left to open any more doorways to get out again. It was why she'd insisted they wedge them open, so Vince could get out after they did what was necessary. She didn't expect to leave herself.

“Fine,” he muttered, beginning to remove his pants and shoes as she had demanded. “But I'd appreciate bein' filled in on the little details eventually--like why we have to strip all of a sudden.”

“Look,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm and measured. “I think if we can raise enough of what Tmm called 'erotic energy' we can kill those eggs before they

leave this chamber--before they leave the Queen.”

Still he looked skeptical. “What are you talkin' about? Those things *feed* on energy--we'd just be makin' 'em stronger.”

“No,” she shook her head. “Think about it, why was Tmm so upset when the Rzz opened the Queen's chamber by mistake before the swarm? Why not just have us raise their erotic energy right here in this room?” She gestured, indicating the huge chamber around them. “It's big enough, hell, more than big enough. Why bother to go to a separate chamber at all?”

“Why?” He raised an eyebrow, really listening now.

“I'll tell you why.” Laura leaned forward, emphasizing her point, almost shaking with the need to make him understand. “Because it's the *wrong kind of energy!* Too powerful, too intense--the same way the energy from the pregnant girls was too intense to be given to the Queen directly. It had to be, I don't know filtered first.”

Vince frowned. “That's what those masks on their faces were? Filters?”

Laura nodded. “I think so, yes. Remember what a commotion there was when both rooms were open at once and the unfiltered emotions from the girls was getting through? What we need is to raise some powerful emotional energy right here near the Queen. The kind of energy she can't stand.” She nodded up. “Do you remember what that one Lepid said when we were watching them fight in the hallway? *After fertilization the eggs are most vulnerable.*”

He frowned thoughtfully. “Yeah, I guess so.”

She took a deep, shaking breath. “Vince, we have to do this *now* while the eggs are still inside the Queen, before they leave the birth canal and the hive starts channeling them into the pods! This is the last chance, the only chance we'll have to stop all this. Now do you understand?”

He nodded slowly. "You think if we can raise the same kind of emotional charge that we did for the swarm, we can fry these eggs before they hatch." He nodded upwards, indicating the gravid Queen.

"Yes!" Laura felt weak with relief. He saw her point--he would help her do this. But his next words plunged her into despair again.

"I can't. I'm sorry, but no. No way." He shook his head, taking a step back from her.

"Why not?" Laura felt her hands ball into fists at her sides. "Think of your sister. Hell, think of the whole Earth, everybody going about their business, with no idea that these these carnivorous *eating machines* are about to land and wipe them all out." The blue light flickered briefly violet with the force of her emotions but it wasn't enough, she thought despairingly. Only one thing would be enough and he wouldn't help her do it.

"So you want to sacrifice yourself to save the planet? Is that it?" he flung at her.

"Yes!" she yelled back. "There are people down there that I care about--my parents, even though they're crazy, I still love them. And ... and...." She looked down at her hands, trying to think how to say it. "There are people I care about right here. Please, Vince, this is the only chance you have of getting out of here alive. You're strong but look at those things." She indicated the writhing worm-like shadows twitching in the translucent blue belly of the Queen above them. "You can't fight all of them--there are thousands, maybe millions. We've got to try this before it's too late."

He took a step towards her, looming over her almost threateningly, and his anger washed over her skin in a scalding flood. Above them the light flickered briefly. "Don't forget, I *saw* the way it affected you last time and then I was only touchin' your *hand*. You're askin' me to kill you, the same as if I put my gun to your head and pulled the trigger!"

Laura looked up at him, struggling not to cry. "I know." She crossed her arms over

her chest, shielding herself from him, feeling suddenly ashamed of her nudity. “With you breathing the dust while you touch me it will cause a sensory loop. It it's probably going to overload the chemical pathways in my brain and cause permanent damage ... or death.”

Vince shook his head, looking away. “No 'probably' about it. This is why you wanted to keep the doorways open--for me, 'cause you weren't plannin' on getting out alive yourself.

“I want you to help me save yourself and your sister and all the other people we both care about. Vince, look at me.” Steeling herself for the intense emotion, she took his hand in both of hers, fighting the urge to pull back. Reluctantly, the dark eyes returned to hers.

“I knew,” Laura told him. “I knew when I got on Tmm's ship that I wasn't coming back. Being inside this place--this *hive*, has drained me. I'm so tired, Vince.” She shook her head, willing him to understand, to believe, trying to ignore the blazing flashes of emotion shooting through her system like an electric current. “I think even if we got in a ship right now and went straight back to Earth, well I don't think I'd make it.”

“Are you saying you're No!” He shook his head, refusing to believe what she was trying to tell him.

Laura looked up at him, feeling the wetness on her cheeks, the tears that wouldn't be denied any longer. “You've got the dust in your system now. You can feel what I feel--you know I'm telling the truth.”

He stepped closer, putting a hand on her shoulder and looking down into her eyes. “I can feel your fear, too. Feel how scared it makes you to ask me this.”

His emotions and her own churned inside her but Laura tried to open herself, tried to make him believe what she knew to be true. “If you can feel my fear then you can feel how much I want this. How much I want *you*. Please, Vince, if my first time is going to be my last, then let's make it worth it.” She tried to smile through

her tears. "I want to go out with a bang, what do you say?"

"Oh, baby...." It was almost a groan. He pulled her close to his chest and buried his face in her hair, holding her tightly, breathing her in. Laura closed her eyes and forced herself to be open to the emotions crashing around her in deafening waves, ignoring the painful throb in her temples.

He pulled back for a moment, searching her eyes. "I want you-you know that. But not like this. Never like this."

"This is all we have," she whispered, drawing him close again, feeling his need and fear and confusion and pain like a rain of stinging sparks on her upturned face. It was like looking into a blazing furnace without flinching. "Please, Vince, make love to me."

Chapter 30

He pulled her close, crushing her to him, feeling her fear and pain and need as though it was his own. God, how could he do what she was asking? And yet, when he considered the consequences of refusing her, how could he not? Laura was right, this could be their only chance.

But it wasn't the thought of the billions of innocent, unsuspecting people down below that got to him. Or even the thought of his Nana Gertie back in Tampa or his sleeping sister alone in a pod that would soon be full of death if he and Laura didn't stop it that gave him the strength. It was Laura's own emotions, her soul and mind open to him in a way that he'd never believed possible.

Despite her fear, the desire he felt coming from her was undeniable. *Want you, need you ...* Like a soft sigh in his mind, like her cool fingers wrapped around his heart. This was something she'd never expected to be able to do with anyone ever and yet she was offering it to him. Vince was determined to make it good for her.

“Laura,” he whispered in her ear, breathing in her sweet scent, loving her faint salty taste on his lips when he kissed her neck. “Remember what I told you I wanted to do to you awhile back?”

She pulled back from him a little, her breath coming fast. “You said you wanted to ... to taste me?” Above them the light strobed briefly violet with her emotion.

Vince nodded, looking into the depths of her beautiful eyes, wanting to feel her heat in his mouth, to roll her desire over his tongue like fine wine. “Can you lay down, baby? Lay down and spread your legs for me?”

She nodded, wordlessly, and he helped her to the ground. It was warm in the Queen's chamber, warm and humid and the ultra-slow motion of the breathing floor they lay on was almost soothing. Vince made sure she was comfortable and then spread her pale, smooth thighs, relishing the sight of that soft patch of blond between them already glistening with dew.

“Laura?” he asked, moving closer to her, pressing his cheek, rough with stubble, against her tender thigh.

She understood his question and nodded, still too breathless to speak. Above them the light flickered violet again and held for a minute before going back to blue.

“Good.” Vince nuzzled her again, enjoying her sharp intake of breath and the ache of building arousal he could feel coming from her. He was hot too, just the thought of doing this to her had him achingly hard and he knew Laura could feel his desire for her, racing over her skin the way he could feel hers for him. It was the intense loop of sensation that she'd spoken of earlier--the deep throb of need joining them like an electric current that was building steadily towards what would be a shattering conclusion. *God--haven't even kissed her yet.*

He ran both hands over her thighs, feeling the muscles tense under her silky skin, breathing in the sweet scent of her sex. He planted a soft, open-mouthed kiss on the inside of one creamy inner thigh, drawing lazy circles with his tongue, getting closer to her center of desire.

“Oh!”

He looked up briefly to see Laura's eye closed tight, a look of almost painful concentration on her beautiful face. “No, baby.” He nipped her thigh gently, drawing another gasp and causing her to open her eyes.

“Vince? What...?” He felt her confusion, mixed with the growing anticipation and arousal.

“I want you to watch.” He pitched his voice low, deliberately commanding. “Watch while I taste you--watch while I eat your sweet pussy, Laura. You understand?”

She nodded, eyes wide and the light above them pulsed a pure shade of violet-purple and this time it didn't go back. *It's working*, Vince thought and then turned his mind back to the woman spread out in front of him. Right now this wasn't about anything but her pleasure.

“Watch me,” he commanded again, and then ducked his head to kiss her soft, wet opening the same way he would kiss her mouth. She gasped again and out of the corner of his eye, Vince could see her small hands fisted against her thighs as she tried to make herself open for him, tried to ride the waves of emotion and sensation that were pressing against her so strongly. Above them the light was flickering from purple to green.

Vince spread her gently with his thumbs, exposing the vulnerable pink inside of her sex, and bent towards her again. He kissed her hot, open cunt, loving the way she trembled under him, loving the way her desire for this, her need for him, rushed through and over and around him like currents in a tidal pool. It pushed his own arousal higher, making him want her, making him need her. He could feel her eyes on him, watching as he sucked her clit gently into his mouth and drew teasing figure eight's around the sensitive little bundle of nerves.

“Vince ... *Oh!*” Laura gasped and bucked suddenly under him, her soft hands

flying to his shoulders to squeeze and stroke. Vince felt her desperate need, her fear and pain and pleasure beating around his head like frantic wings. He knew how she was feeling--couldn't help knowing--it was like breathing the sweetest air, air that you knew was laced with deadly gas. And yet how could you stop breathing? It was impossible, as impossible as stopping the inevitable loop of intense desire that was growing between them with every touch.

Above them the light was holding a steady, poison green and he was dimly aware of noises of alien distress. But Laura's soft pants and moans filled his ears and drowned them out. *Killing her*, he thought, but even as he thought it, he knew she didn't want him to stop.

Vince looked up at her for a moment, wanting to make sure she was still watching. "You taste so good, baby. Taste so sweet. Wanna put my tongue all the way in you now, deep inside you." Not waiting for a reply, he held her open, feeling the trembling of her thighs beneath the palms of his hands and pressed his tongue deep into her tight, quivering sex.

"Vince! Oh, *God*...." She bucked up again, clutching his shoulders desperately tight. Her need and pain rolled through him, echoing in his head like thunder, pushing his own need higher as he probed her sweet depths as though reaching for her soul. The air around them was fading from green to an ominous dark orange now and the glittering specks floating in it were being driven into tiny dust-devils by the beating of the Queen's massive wings high above them. Dimly, Vince could hear the psychic shriek of the giant Lepid but Laura's emotions were so intense that they nearly drowned it out.

"Please ... Vince, please...." Her soft voice managed to break though his intense concentration and he looked up, mesmerized by the way her soft pink lips formed his name.

"Yeah, baby? What do you need?" he asked, already knowing the answer. She was so close, he could feel her trembling on the edge and he needed to be inside her when she came. With the intense sensation looping between them there was no

way her orgasm couldn't trigger his own at this point.

“In ... inside me, please, Vince. I need you.”

It would be more than she could take, more than her brain could stand, and Vince knew it and knew that she knew it as well. And yet, she wanted it-more than wanted it, needed it as badly as he needed it himself. Her dark eyes, the in the eerie orange glow from above, pleaded with him more eloquently than any words ever could.

“All right,” he whispered. “All right, I need you too.”

Chapter 31

High above her head Laura could see the massive Queen beating her wings frantically, could hear the piercing shriek of pain and anger as her belly glowed not the safe deep blue, but an ominous burnt umber that pulsed in an increasingly frantic rhythm. The shapes in her swollen belly were writhing too--they were forming too quickly, were too rapidly outgrowing their protective eggs. Now they seemed to be glowing as well, like huge burning embers lit up from within.

We're doing it--it's working, Laura thought and then Vince covered her, his body warm and heavy and welcome on hers and every other thought but him was driven away.

He kissed her, plunging both hands into her hair to hold her still, the same way he'd held her legs apart to taste her. He fed her the taste of herself, warm and wet and salty-sweet on his tongue, fed her heat and love and desire, pouring it down her throat like a sweet, deadly liquor she couldn't get enough of. Laura drank it all in and asked for more, moaning into his mouth, feeling his need painting her body with flame as the loop between them intensified.

Like burning, like drowning, like falling apart ... There was no way to describe it,

even to herself, so she stopped trying and let the sensations wash over her. Somewhere in the back of her brain was a gathering knot of tension, a dire warning that she knew she was ignoring at her own peril. Her temples were throbbing, a precursor to the end, the fatal brain damage that would have to happen very soon, and yet she didn't care.

All of her life she'd been living carefully, avoiding contact, trying not to feel too much. It felt so good to let go of the fear, so wonderful to let the tide of emotion take her where it wanted and caution be damned. She was naked and open and ready in a way she'd never been before and would never be again. She thought she'd rather die here and now like this than live another fifty years and never know this urgent need, this deep desire.

“Laura? You ready?” Vince's voice in her ear, breathless and low, sent a helpless shiver down her spine. Her entire body throbbed with his emotion, she could feel his need for her, the ageless need to penetrate, to consume, to possess, and she welcomed him without reservation.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, *now*.”

She felt the head of his shaft pressing against her wetness, rubbing gently over her sensitized clit as he prepared to enter her. The sweet, intimate contact was almost too much, waves of intense sensation and emotion rolled over her and for a moment her vision went gray and wavery. Then she heard him again.

“Stay with me, baby. Need you to stay with me 'till the end.” There was a depth of emotion in his voice, a sorrow that pierced her heart as surely as he was about to pierce her below. In the gloom of the Queen's chamber his eyes were drowning deep, filled with need and regret, shining with unshed tears.

Laura reached up to caress his cheek, feeling the rough scratch of his whiskers over the palm of her hand, reveling in the tingle of sparks it sent through her body. “Don't,” she whispered. “I want this, Vince. More than I've ever wanted anything before. Please, don't stop now. We're so close--so *close*. I can feel it, can't you?” She raised her hips up to meet him, wanting him inside her, wanting to give in and

let the current carry her out completely.

“Yeah.” His voice was choked with emotion, his muscles beneath her hands knotted with tension. “I feel it,” he whispered and then she felt the head of his shaft breach her entrance and begin its slow, inevitable slide deep inside her open, willing body. “Can you feel it too?” he asked, pressing deeper, reaching for her heart.

“I ... oh, yes ... *yes....*” She gasped, fighting to accept him inside her body and mind both. She felt his pleasure filling her, of feeling her sweet slippery heat as he pressed inside, his need to go deep and his desire to hold back enough to make it good, to make it right for her. He was big and so thick, but he had prepared her well. There was a brief, exquisite pain that had nothing to do with the intense emotional loop building between them and then he was all the way inside her, buried to the hilt in her warm, willing body.

Laura closed her eyes tightly, savoring the sensation of his body sheathed within her own, feeling the intimate contact like a lightning strike to her nervous system.

“No, baby.” Vince's voice was urgent. “Stay with me--keep your eyes open. I wanna look in those beautiful eyes while I'm in you, while I make love to you.”

She opened her eyes, focusing on his face, filled with need and worry. He was holding utterly still within her, frozen with tension. Laura felt it all, washing over her like a river of molten flame and saw it too, dyed a deep blood red pulsing from the ceiling above them. Somewhere, in a small, unimportant corner of her mind, the Lepid Queen was screaming anger and pain and hate but none of it mattered. Nothing mattered but Vince inside her, inside her body and mind and heart.

“Please,” she managed to whisper. She gripped his shoulders tightly and thrust up to meet him, moving her hips, wanting to feel the delicious friction of him sliding within her.

“God, baby....” Vince leaned back, urging her to spread her thighs wider,

searching for the perfect angle.

She gasped as he pulled out and thrust back home, moaning out loud as the loop between them tightened like a deadly, pleasurable noose. She wanted more--needed it and she knew Vince understood. He began to pound into her body, feeding her need to make this a rough, thorough ride. There was nothing gentle in his actions and yet she felt his tenderness, like the softest of kisses, all over her skin. Her temples throbbed, pushed far past sensory overload by their relentless rhythm.

Over his shoulder she could see the belly of the Queen Lepid glowing a bright, red-white, like the heart of a burning coal. The shapes inside her were writhing madly. The wind from her wings was making a small hurricane in the vast chamber but Vince was shielding her with his body, holding her close, and Laura couldn't focus on anything that was going on outside the two of them just then.

“God, baby Laura ... so tight, so sweet. Love to be inside you, love to feel you wrapped so tight around me....”

His voice in her ear, the delicious pull and thrust of his shaft inside her and the aching pulse of his desire and pleasure over her skin was too much. With a final sharp throb, she felt something give inside her brain, felt a searing lance of pleasure so brilliant it was blinding, a wall of white-hot lightening behind her eyes.

Her intoxicating pleasure rushed over Vince, taking him with her. With a gasp, he buried his face in her neck and she felt the warm salt of his tears on her skin as the current of sensation swept her finally and fatally out to sea. Laura turned up her face, eyes wide and nearly blind with the intensity of emotion, to see the brilliant white light shining down from above, picking out every detail in the alien room with a strange, surreal clarity.

Above them, with a piercing shriek more felt than heard, the Lepid Queen lost her battle and the writhing inside her reached a fever pitch. There was a rushing sound, the sound of a thousand forest fires devouring the world in flame and then

it was raining. Raining fire from the strange and savage sky above, flames that burned so brightly they were consumed in mid-air as they fell and turned to colored flakes and ashes by the time they reached the ground.

Beautiful, Laura had time to think. *So beautiful....*

“Laura ... *Laura!*” Vince's voice in her ear was distant and unimportant as were the warm trickles of blood she felt leaking down the sides of her face. Everything was on fire, burning irrevocably. Burning to ashes, white-hot and beautiful as they fell from the sky, to land like butterflies on her skin, before melting away to nothing.

Chapter 32

“Laura? Oh, God, no....” Vince held her tight, oblivious to the rain of destruction around them.

The Lepids were beautiful in their death, the Queen's eggs reduced to so much colored ash that coated their bodies briefly before dissipating into dust. Above them, the hulking frame of the Lepid Queen hung limp and hollow, burned out by the cleansing fire of emotion that had taken Laura's life.

He buried his face in her neck, filled with a remorse and pain he'd never known before. A pain made worse because it was his alone. Though he was still breathing the dust, he could no longer feel Laura's emotions inside his head, washing over his skin. She lay in his arms like a broken thing, eyes open but unseeing as the unearthly ash continued to fall.

Vince wanted to quit. Wanted to forget everything and give up. He'd known the woman in his arms less than a week but she had made an impression on his heart that would never fade.

Killed her, I killed her ... The guilt looped in his brain, unanswerable,

unassuagable. He'd only done what was necessary, had only done what she had asked him to do-- and he would never forgive himself for it.

“Oh, God,” he whispered brokenly. He smoothed her tangled blond hair and closed the sightless eyes, certain he would never learn their true color now. *Oughta go. Oughta get out of here.* But the thought held no urgency. He knew that as soon as he left the Queen's chamber and stopped breathing the dust, the deadly lethargy, that was the legacy of the alien bacteria, would overtake him. Why put himself through it? Why die struggling through the narrowing corridors of the hive instead of staying here with her? With Laura?

Kyra, that's why. She's the whole reason you came in the first place. But his sister was safe in a pod bound for somewhere on Earth. *Yes but she's pregnant and weak. Gonna need her big brother to take care of her, just like when we were kids.* It was true. He hadn't come all this way to quit now when his sister needed him. Even if it felt like his heart was torn out he had to go on.

All around him he could hear the sounds of the Lepids' hive beginning to break apart, beginning to separate. Apparently Laura had been right--after the Queen mated successfully the whole thing was automatic. Like a machine built for only one function that cannot comprehend when it's purpose is gone, it continued to run. All the hive knew was that the eggs were no longer within the body of the Queen and no longer in the Queen's chamber--therefore it must be time to ready the pods for flight. Just because all the eggs had been destroyed was no reason to stop preparations.

“Oh, baby,” he murmured. There was no way to say goodbye. He wiped the blood tenderly from her face and folded her hands at her sides. Then he stood on legs that felt like old wooden sticks that might crack at any minute. The encounter had taken a lot out of him although his situation was negligible at the moment.

He looked down at her, lying so peacefully on the floor of the Queen's chamber. Now, with her changeable eyes closed, and her hair smoothed back from her face, she looked like she was only sleeping. Like she might wake up at any moment and

give him a soft, uncertain smile or lift her chin with that defiant little gesture that had squeezed his heart. He didn't want to leave her there, in the black void of the decomposing hive but he wasn't sure if he would be able to get her to the pod once the dust left his system and the lethargy struck him.

All around him the hive was making ominous noises and growing darker by the minute--shutting down, breaking apart. Already the previously warm and humid room was chill and dank. Time was definitely running short and he wanted to get to Kyra he'd have to hurry.

Vince turned to go and then turned back, unable to leave so abruptly. He knelt beside her and stroked her hair, then laid his head against her breast once more. Trying to let her go.

thump

His head froze in position, then pressed harder, knowing he had to be wrong but hoping like hell anyway.

thump--thump

Again! There was no way, was there? *Just foolin' myself ...* Could he be hallucinating because he wanted it so badly?

thump--thump thump--thump....

It was weak and thready but definitely there. A heartbeat--a pulse, so slow it was almost undetectable, but Vince found it anyway. *God, to think how close I came to leaving....*

“Laura?” He bent over her, calling her name softly but she didn't respond. Well, she hadn't responded the last time either, after the swarm, but at least then he'd been able to see she was breathing. He held a careful hand in front of her face and felt a faint wisp of warm air. No need for any kind of mouth to mouth then.

Vince stood again, lifting her limp form in his arms. He felt charged with energy and new purpose. "Time to get outta here." It wasn't until he heard his own voice, echoing back to him in the cavernous and silent room, that he realized he'd spoken aloud. But the sound of it made him feel better, stronger, somehow. *See how strong you feel once the damn dust--shit gets outta your system.* Well, he would just have to go fast, then, wouldn't he?

He headed for the opening in the wall of the chamber, still stuffed with their discarded clothes. Time to get the hell out.

* * * *

Later Vince wasn't sure how he managed it. First there was the problem of getting Laura's limp form and then himself out of the small hole that had their clothes shoved in it before the damn thing closed. Then, trying to navigate the tiny, weird passage, which was all that remained of the high, wide corridor of the hive was like a weird, slow-motion nightmare. Laura was dead weight and a couple of times he wasn't sure how he was going to get her through a particularly tight passage.

It seemed to go on forever. The hive was almost dark and he was mortally certain that he'd missed the first bundle of clothes, which marked Kyra's pod and was wandering aimlessly. He nearly turned back several times but he could feel the dust leaving his system and he knew that when the after-effects hit him, he'd never have the strength to go on if he was wrong.

At last, after what seemed like hours but was probably closer to fifteen minutes, he found the wad of clothing, more by touch than by sight. With the last of his strength, he pulled them out, pushed Laura through and then wiggled through himself, barely making it into the pod as the narrow opening sealed itself behind him.

As Vince collapsed on the floor beside the two women, one sleeping and one unconscious, he felt the strange up-in-a-balloon floating sensation he remembered from his trip to the hive in Tmm's ship. How long ago had that been? Hours? Days? He had no way of knowing and he really didn't care as long as they made it

safely back to Earth.

Here we go, he thought again, as he had the first time. He leaned back against one of the gray/green slowly pulsing walls, utterly exhausted. Kyra was asleep to one side and on his other side, Laura was lying, her pale face unnaturally still. *That's Okay, she'll come back around. She did last time*, he thought uneasily.

With the last ounce of strength he possessed, he reached over and dragged her closer, cradling her head in his lap.

“It’s okay, baby. It's gonna be all right.” His voice was hoarse and he felt the last of the dust leaving his system. Then the bone-deep weariness hit him like a physical blow and he leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. *Feel like I been hit by a Mac truck ...* Sleep took him.

* * * *

When he woke again, it was to darkness with a pale glowing overhead. He felt the bumpy, familiar floor of the Lepids' hive beneath his bare skin and thought *Oh, no ... thought we were out. No I gotta got through all of it all over again.*

But when the sleep cleared from his brain, he saw that the darkness was because it was night and the light he saw was the full moon shining down overhead, not the orange, jack-o-lantern glow of the interior of the Lepids' ship. There was a crack in the ceiling above him that was widening even as he watched, letting in the pale and wonderfully welcome moonlight.

There was a stirring beside him and then Kyra began to wake up, yawning and stretching, looking for all the world like the nappy-headed little girl he remembered from when she was small. *Not a little girl anymore*, he reminded himself, as a stray moonbeam came to rest on her full belly.

Vince looked down at his lap, hoping somehow that Laura would be awake as well but the pale, beautifully molded features were still. In the spill of moonlight that came from above, she looked like an angel carved out of marble. Fearing the worst, he passed a hand over her face, and was relieved to feel a

faint warm puff of air in his palm.

“Vince? Where we at?” Kyra's voice was tired and confused. She clutched at her rounded belly. “Don't feel so good.”

Vince looked at her worriedly. “Take it easy, baby girl,” he said, automatically reverting to her childhood nickname. “Don't know where we are but I'm gonna find out.” He moved Laura's head carefully and stood, feeling the play of a warm wind along his spine. Abruptly realizing he was naked except for his shorts, he fumbled around for bundle of clothes and pulled on his shirt , which was something at least. He laid the black jacket over Laura, wishing it covered more.

“Vince?” Kyra's voice was small and tight with pain. He leaned down and pressed a hand against her cheek, concerned. Her skin was cool and damp from perspiration.

“Hang in there, gonna get us outta here,” he promised.

The crack in the pod was widening visibly and Vince could see more like it coming to earth, landing lightly for such large structures. They, too, were opening but instead of a swarm of hungry Lepid larvae, only a few, twitching deformed shapes emerged to die almost immediately on the sandy ground. By the time he got dressed, (as dressed as he was going to get, anyway) the hole in the pod was big enough to stick his head and hands out and push. With a low, ragged ripping noise, the sides came apart under the force. It seemed to be in an advanced state of decomposition already and, as its flesh parted, the sickly smell of rotting flowers, left in a jar of water until it became stagnant slime nearly made him gag.

Vince looked around, trying to figure out where they had landed. There was sand everywhere, gleaming in the moonlight, and a warm, dry wind caressed his cheeks. Were they in the desert?

“There! That one's opening up!”

“Somethin' inside that one!”

“Over here!”

Suddenly a light much brighter than the moon was shining in his face and several

people was shoving vid-mikes in his face, asking questions.

“Who are you/Where did you/How did you...?”

Vince shoved the mikes away angrily. “My name is Vincent Roberts and I'm with the Tampa PD,” he growled. “Now turn off that damn camera and get me an ambulance--I have two seriously injured women here in need of medical attention.”

* * * *

He made them let him ride in the back of the ambulance with Laura and Kyra. It wasn't easy asserting authority when you didn't have pants on but he thought he didn't do a half-bad job. Kyra's eyes had been wide with pain but after the paramedic gave her a sedative she sank back into an exhausted sleep, lying quietly in the hover-stretcher, covered by a crisp white sheet.

Vince wanted to go back to sleep himself but the news vans were following and he knew from experience that those jackals wouldn't rest until they'd picked his bones clean for their precious nightly news-vids.

In the other stretcher, Laura lay, as still and pale as ever. It seemed to him that she had been out a very long time--too long. Hadn't she regained consciousness much sooner before? Vince kept looking over at her, hoping to hear her voice, expecting her to wake up.

Only she didn't.

Chapter 33

She was in a long, echoing marble hall, filled with shadows. She sat in the shadows and waited, for what she didn't know. After a while she noticed that sometimes the shadows receded, and there were regular periods of light and dark.

She got tired of sitting so she walked up and down the hall, pacing it from one end to the other, listening to the echoes of her footsteps, still waiting.

After what seemed like a long time, there was something different. During a period of brightness when the shadows had all receded into the corners, she found a door at one end of the hall. She was not surprised to find it locked.

More periods of dark and light passed and she began to hear voices, ghostly whisperings that muttered in the corners of the hallway.

The voices began to come more and more frequently until sometimes she sat in the corner filled with shadows with her hands over her ears, trying to keep them out. Until she heard a new voice, stronger than the echoing whispers in the hall.

It was a deep voice, a man's voice, and when he spoke, he banished all the others. Laura listened intently, feeling she ought to know it somehow, ought to know him--the owner of that voice, but she couldn't remember. Sometimes when he spoke she went to the door and tried the knob again, certain that if she could just get it open she could see who was talking, just on the other side. But it was always locked.

There was nothing to do but sit on her side of the door and wait and listen through the periods of light and dark.

* * * *

“...not much use in you coming here day after day, Detective Roberts. One of the nurses will call you if there's any change although I'm afraid that's not likely.” A new voice, or one she hadn't noticed before. But it, too, was on the other side of the door, not just echoing inside the long marble hall. Laura listened hard.

“I'm stayin'.” There was that voice again--*his* voice. The one she felt she ought to know.

“I've tried to explain to you that the chances of the patient ever regaining consciousness are very slim and, even if she did, the possibility of her coming

back as herself are next to none. When compared with her previous films from Tampa all the brain scans we've done have shown a marked discrepancy , which in all probability indicates--”

“*I said*, I'm stayin'. And the 'patient' has a name. It's Laura. Laura Albright.”

Her ears pricked up--they were talking about her.

“Well,” the other voice got a little huffy. “As long as you know you're probably wasting your time.” Footsteps receded into the distance.

“Not a waste of time,” he said. “Fool doctors don't know what they're talkin' about. You're gonna come back to me, baby, just like you did before. I know it.”

Laura wondered who he was talking to--she wanted to ask but, as usual, the door was locked. After a while, it grew dark in the long marble hallway. Laura wrapped her arms around her knees and shivered, leaning against the door.

“...doing here? I don't think Laura would want--” This voice was familiar. Her father, what was he doing here?

“Bullshit. You don't know what Laura would want.” *His* voice ... flat and dangerous.

“She's my daughter and I know the way I raised her. She wouldn't--”

“Yeah, she told me all about how you raised her. Don't put the salt and the pepper in the same shaker, right?” He was angry but controlled.

“There's absolutely no need to--“

“Oh, there's a need all right.”

There was a scraping sound, like someone rising quickly from a chair and a hasty shuffle of footsteps, as of someone backing away. Laura wished she could get the door to open and see what was happening but the knob wouldn't turn.

“Oh, Frank, maybe we shouldn't make such a fuss. Just think, this way Laura's got police protection.” This was a high, feminine voice and the words were followed by a nervous giggle. Gloria.

“I don't give a damn if he *is* a police officer, Gloria, he has no right--” Her father's voice broke off then and all she could hear on the other side of the door was urgent whispering. Then her father's voice again. “Fine, but if he so much as lays a finger on her--“

“What do I have to say to get it through your head that I'm not gonna hurt your daughter? I love her, Goddamnit!” He sounded angry and anguished at the same time.

Her father seemed to have no threat dire enough for the situation. There was a consultation of angry whispers, her father cursing and Gloria cajoling, then the sound of footsteps and a door slamming.

* * * *

On the other side of Laura's door, it began to grow dark once more.

“Well, how is she? Any change?” An older voice this time and a crackle of static. Over the phone somehow?

“No, Nana. No change.” His voice again, sounding weary this time and sorrowful. “How's Kyra?”

“Oh, she'd makin' out okay, considerin'. It's been awful hard on her, losin' the baby but truth to tell, she wasn't ready to be no Mama and I'm too old to be startin' all over again. It did break my heart, though, losin' my grandbaby like that.”

“I know, Nana Gertie, I'm sorry. I shoulda found her sooner.”

A noise of disapproval, someone clicking their tongue. “Now, Vincent, I don't wanna hear that mess and you know it. Why, you're a *hero*, and if you ever get

your butt back to Tampa they're gonna throw a parade in your honor. Lands sakes, I don't know anybody else coulda did what you done.”

A rustling sound, a big body shifting in a seat. “Wasn't all me, Nana. Laura nearly died up there. Guess she's payin' the price for all of us.”

“Aw, baby, I know you're hurtin'. And I know what all them doctors have been tellin' you too.”

“They say it's hopeless. That the brain scans prove she isn't ... she can't....” His voice broke down, crumbled under the weight of tears barely held in check. Laura pressed against the door, wishing desperately that it might open. She wiggled the knob but the lock remained firm.

“Don't you give up hope, Vincent.” The older voice was strong now, fierce. “If you feel in your heart she's in there somewhere you just don't give up. You hear?”

“I hear you, Nana but it's been so long. What if they're right?”

“Give it a little more time, baby. Kyra and I miss you but we're doin' fine on our own. The school says she can wait and start next semester, the circumstances bein' what they are an' all.”

A rough, broken laugh. “Yeah, if bein' abducted by aliens isn't a good enough excuse to cut class then I sure as hell don't know what is.”

“Vincent, watch your mouth.” Said sharply but with affection.

A sigh. “Yes, ma'am.”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Yes, Nana. Love you too.”

“All right then. I'll call you later.”

“Bye, Nana.”

“Bye, baby.” A clicking beep, someone switching off a vid-phone.

Laura huddled next to the door, trying to remember as the darkness came again. He was someone she should know, someone who cared about her. Who was he and why wouldn't the damn door open?

* * * *

Several periods of light and dark passed. Sometimes she heard his voice, once raised in anger, sometimes cold, often weary. Each time she went to the door, thinking this time the knob would turn and it would open. But it was always, always locked.

“Laura ... Laura, baby, please come back to me.” It was during a period of darkness, when the shadows had eaten the hall, that his voice came again.

Laura got up and walked to the solid wooden door. She leaned against it, trying to remember.

“They say you can't hear me but I don't believe it,” he continued. “So listen to me now and come back. I used up all my sick leave and even the compassionate leave they granted me. I have to get on a plane and go home tomorrow or I'll lose my job.” The sound of a deep breath being drawn.

“I wanna stay with you, baby, but I have to help out my family. I got other people dependin' on me.” Another sigh.

His voice was so familiar ... she *almost* knew him. Almost remembered. Laura put her hand on the knob, twisting firmly but it wouldn't give.

“They say you can't be moved and I know once I go, your family's gonna find a way to keep me from comin' back to see you again. Laura, *please*.” His voice was rougher now, desperate.

He ... him ... he said my name. He knows my name and I know his. Vince ... his name is Vince. Laura twisted the knob and pounded on the door. So close, why couldn't she get through? Why couldn't she remember who he was?

“All the things we been through together. Sometimes it seems like a crazy dream. Goin' up in that ship, the Queen, all those damn eggs ... I know it isn't right but sometimes I wish we woulda just let 'em do whatever it was they wanted to do. Eat the whole damn world, I guess. Least that way maybe you and me woulda had a little more time together.” His voice was heavy with tears.

Laura rattled the door in its frame, pounding, pushing, pulling. *I'm here!* she wanted to shout. *In here, locked behind this damn door. I can hear you and I almost know who you are....*

There was a low, broken sound. Sobbing? Laura stopped twisting the knob for a moment, listening. Then she felt it. A warm drop landed on her shoulder. And another, and another.

“I know I'm not s'posed to touch you--don't wanna hurt you any more than I already have.” His voice was very close now. More warm droplets on her face and hands. “But, God, baby--if I could just....”

Laura looked up, letting go of the knob. Inside the long, echoing marble hallway, where the sun never shone and the wind never blew, it was raining. Warm and salty, the water came down from the unknowable shadows overhead and she thought of another rain, a rain of fire and ash. A man who'd held her tight and touched her even though he knew he shouldn't. Touched her because she'd needed it--because she'd asked him too.

“Laura....” His voice caressed her name, a bitter benediction, an anguished goodbye.

Wait! Wet with the warm rain from above, she felt in front of her and clasped the brass doorknob, wreathed in shadows.

“You know how I feel, that I'll never forget.” His voice was fading, the rain had stopped as suddenly as it began. A sense of urgency filled her. Using both hands now, Laura twisted desperately ... *Wait ... wait!*

... and felt the knob turn.

The door fell open, spilling her into a new room, a room lit only by the dim green glow of medical equipment and a quiet spill of moonlight on the corner of a bed. Vince was across the room from her, looking haggard and worn even in the dimness. He was at the door and the knob was in his hand.

Laura opened her mouth, not sure what was going to come out. “Vince?” It was a croak, a caw--her voice was hoarse with disuse but his eyes lit up anyway. She licked her lips with a tongue that felt as rough and dry as a dead leaf and tried again. “Vince, what ... where am I? Where is this place?”

Chapter 34

“Laura? Was that you? Did you...?” He turned back from the door and walked carefully to her bed, afraid to believe.

“Ye....” She coughed, a dry, dusty sound. “Yes. Where am I?”

“In a hospital. In Phoenix--it's where the pod we were in landed. Here.” He poured her a glass of water from the plastic pitcher on a little rolling table.

“Thanks.” She tried to take it but her arms seemed to be too weak. “Sorry, I can't....”

“That's okay.” He held the cup to her lips, very careful not to touch her skin. “Better?”

“Much.” She sighed gratefully. “I just couldn't--”

“Hello, is everything all right in here?” The door opened and a middle-aged woman with a matronly face stuck her head in the room. She frowned disapprovingly. “Detective Roberts, you know good and well visiting hours are long since over so I', going to have to ask you to.--”

“She's awake. Can't you see that?”

“Are you sure?” The nurse came forward, switching on the light, and pushing Vince efficiently out of the way to lean over the bed.

Laura blinked in the harsh overhead glow and tried to smile. “Hi.”

“Oh my!” The nurse drew back abruptly. “I'll notify the doctor at once and of course her family will want to know....”

“Of course.” He tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. Her precious family. They'd gone back to Tampa, certain there would be no change. Now he supposed they would be back, demanding that he leave their pure, lily-white daughter alone ... He checked himself abruptly. Laura didn't need to have to deal with his bitter emotions so soon after waking up.

He looked at her apprehensively but she seemed untroubled, that tentative smile he remembered so well was curving her pale pink lips.

“Hey,” he said softly. He wanted to rush over and pull her into a tight embrace but that was forbidden. Dr. Katzenberg, her neurologist, was afraid any touching might be harmful in view of her hyper-empathy. So he held himself back and just sat carefully on the end of her bed. “How you feeling?”

She grimaced, “Lousy.”

“I'll bet.” And then he was quite, content just to look at her.

“I'll be right back.” The nurse bustled out of the room.

Laura yawned, looking suddenly exhausted. “I thought ... didn't you tell me you had a plane to catch?”

Vince smiled at her. *Knew she could hear me.* “Let it wait. I'm not goin' anywhere.”

Chapter 35

When she woke up the sun was shining brightly through the window and Vince was still sitting on the same place at the foot of her bed. The 3-D holo monitors that surrounded the head of her bed were blinking and beeping quietly to themselves. Apparently all her vital signs were normal. Except ... Laura looked closely at one of the monitors which showed a rotating holographic representation of her brain. A portion of it appeared to be highlighted in red, maybe showing possible damage? She *felt* normal enough....

“Hey,” Vince said, breaking her concentration. His face broke into a large grin of what looked like relief but, strangely, she couldn't feel it. After the intense sensations from his emotions in the Lepids' hive, it seemed strange, but it was probably just because he was sitting so far away and carefully not touching her.

“Hey yourself.” She wiggled to sit up, not very effectively. Her body felt stiff and slow, a reluctant child that didn't want to do what she told it.

He watched her, looking as if he wished he could help. “Don't worry about it,” he said, when she'd managed to get comfortable. “Doctor says you'll be stiff for a while until you get movin' again. Just the effects of bein' under so long.”

“Under?” She made the word into a question, raising an eyebrow at him.

Vince looked away. “In a coma.”

“I ... really?” She seemed to remember something about a long hall with a lot of voices in it but the last really clear memory she had was of the chamber of the Lepid Queen.

Vince nodded, still not looking at her. It bothered her that he was so far away--that she couldn't *feel* him.

“But....” Laura shook her head. “How long?”

“Three months.”

“Three *months*?” She could scarcely believe it. “Have you been here all this time? Waiting for me to wake up?”

He shrugged. “Didn't have anything better to do.”

“Vince, seriously.” She tried to catch his eye.

“Had to stay here a while with Kyra, anyway,” he said, frowning down at his hands. “She ... the doctors think it had something to do with bein' trapped for so long in an alien environment or maybe just malnutrition but, well, she lost the baby.”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, Vince--I'm so sorry.”

“I hate to say it but it's probably for the best. It....” He looked down again, picking at the bedspread aimlessly. “It was pretty deformed. The docs showed me. Looked like it was trying to grow wings, like ... like one of *them*. She didn't need that kinda grief.” He shook his head, looking sad. It was strange to see the emotion on his face without having it echo inside her head. She wished he would move closer but didn't know how to ask.

“I'm sorry,” she said again, feeling like it was inadequate but unsure of what else to say. “Is she is she okay?”

Vince sighed. "Talked to my Nana Gertie a couple of nights ago and she says she's managing okay. She's young enough to bounce back, I guess. Time heals all things, all that crap."

"So how long since she...." Laura let the sentence trail off, studying his face intently.

He looked uncomfortable. "They kept her for about a month--for observation. She's back in Tampa now with Nana."

"So you've been here for two months, just waiting for me?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it?" He got up abruptly and stepped over to the window, looking out. In the bright sunshine his face looked haggard and drawn.

"Vince--a"

"Lots can happen in three months," he said, cutting her off. "Had the election.... Brushard won by a landslide once everything came out."

"Came out?" Laura raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"Sure." He nodded. "The whole damn world saw the pods landing in their own backyard. When it came out what they were supposed to be carrying and how they came to be landing in the first place, Harris was completely discredited."

"That's good," Laura said. "So I guess the nation wasn't too hot on the idea of another four years with a president that'd trade good PR for any of his constituents' lives."

Vince snorted. "Specially at the cost of alien invasion. It's a pretty sure bet Harris didn't know what the Butters were planning--their mating cycle an' all--but once it got on the nightly news he was toast. Made Watergate look like a walk in the park."

"So ... if the media found out about it and reported it, you must have been the one telling them. Unless somebody else was up there on the ship too." She studied him, raising an eyebrow in question.

“Just us.” Vince smiled at her--a brief flash of white teeth.

Laura frowned at him anxiously. “But ... wasn’t it dangerous? Telling what you knew? I mean, we already knew the Harris administration would stop at nothing to get what they wanted.”

Vince grinned again. “Yeah, it might have been dangerous if our pod hadn’t come down in the middle of a media shit storm. By the time they might have gotten to me to shut me up, it was already all over the world what had been happening. Bad news travels fast.”

“I guess so.” Lauren tried to keep her voice low and even. “You said *everything* came out?” she asked. “I mean, about, um, us too?”

“Not exactly *everything*.” His voice had hardened a little but he was still too far away to *feel*. “Give me some credit--I kept what was between us private. So don't worry, your parents aren't gonna disown you. All anybody knows is that we were up there and what we saw. I was careful not to go too deep into the details.”

“You have to know I didn't mean it like that.” Laura could feel her cheeks heating and she looked down at the blanket covering her legs. She thought of his hands on her skin, his mouth kissing her ... tasting her. She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling the silky material she was wearing. Someone had dressed her in a light green nightgown she'd never seen before. It was too big for her and looked like something Gloria might pick out.

“I'm sorry.” Vince's voice was gentler. He came back to sit on the foot of her bed. “It's just that, well, your folks haven't been to happy about me bein' here. Your father was pretty pissed when I refused to leave.”

Laura sighed. “Yes, I guess he would be.”

“They're probably on a plane right now comin' to see you. They, uh, they went back to Tampa for a while when things weren't lookin' so good.”

“Weren't looking so good?” Laura stared at him, feeling lost. She seemed to remember echoes, voices saying that it was hopeless, that he was wasting his time. Sudden clarity broke upon her. “They didn't expect me to make it, did they? Didn't expect me to come out of it?”

Vince shook his head wordlessly.

Laura looked at him, wishing she knew what was going on behind that blank face. “They told you that but you stayed anyway. You stayed. Why?”

“Don't you know?” His voice was low, dark chocolate eyes pleading with her to understand. “To be with you.”

“Oh, Vince....” She shook her head helplessly. “If this is a guilt thing, you only did what I asked you too. We both knew the risks going into it.” She hated the way her voice was becoming detached and clinical but she couldn't seem to stop it.

“It's not about guilt and you know it. What happened to us up there--we formed a connection. I *love* you, Laura.”

His words, the intensity in those brown eyes, made her heart feel like it might pound through her ribs but still ... she shook her head, glad she couldn't feel the intense emotions scalding her. “You barely know me.”

“How can you say that after what we went through together?” He got up, pacing the small space at the foot of her bed.

“You just think you're in love with me because I finally lost some weight.” She gestured to herself, the light green nightgown hanging off her, trying to joke. “Just proves what three months on a liquid diet can do. Looks like I'm finally down to a size six--well, maybe an eight.”

He frowned. “Never did like skinny girls. When we get back to Tampa, I'm gonna have to feed you up. Get my Nana Gertie to make you some soul food--
put some meat back on your bones.”

“Vince,” she said as gently as she could. “There's not going to be any 'we' in Tampa. There can't be.”

“Why?” His eyes were flashing, his anger should have been biting along her skin like stinging sparks but she still couldn't *feel* him. He hit the end of the bed with the flat of his hand and the 3-D holo of her brain jumped in the monitor to her right. “You look at me and tell me you don't feel for me the way I feel for you. Tell me right now and I'll leave and never come back.”

“I....” She felt the tears coming and blinked hard to hold them back. “I can't say that. You know I can't.”

“Then *why*?”

“Because,” she burst out. “Because of what happened last time when we ... made love. Because of my disability. You think you'd like living with a woman you couldn't touch--couldn't hold?”

“I've managed for the last three months,” he said, his voice grim. He came closer, so close she could feel his warm breath on her cheek and see the agony in his eyes. “Not just me either. Nobody's been allowed to touch you. Doctor's orders.” His voice got a little softer. “I don't care about that, baby--marry me.”

“Vince, there's no way--” She broke off, staring at him. There was something wrong but she couldn't put her finger on it. Then she realized what it was--Vince was so close she could feel his breath on her cheek and he was obviously in emotional distress. And yet and yet, she didn't *feel* anything. But how could that be?

“Laura, please. You have to believe me.” He was staring at her, unaware that anything was different. He leaned forward, jostling the bed and the 3-D holo of her brain wavered again. For the first time, Laura turned her head to get a better look at it. And then she saw it.

From the time her hyper-empathy had been diagnosed as a child, Laura had gotten used to staring at diagnostic images of her brain. How many functional spectroscopy MRI scans had she undergone before she even hit puberty? Not to mention the CTs, PET scans, blood flow studies--and they all showed the same thing--a link between her limbic system and her amygdala. It was the basis of her

hyper-empathy, the reason she was helpless to block the emotions of everyone around her, just as she had explained to Vince. But now, as she stared at the image of her brain rotating slowly on the monitor beside her head....

“Burned out....” she murmured, staring at the image with rapt concentration.

“What? Laura, baby, we all get a little tired sometimes, a little burned out, but I know we can make it work.” Vince looked at her, his eyes filled with love and anguish and she didn’t *feel* any of it.

“No.” She shook her head. “That’s not what I meant at all. What I meant was that.” She motioned to the image of her brain. “It’s burned out--the pathway. Vince,” She looked at him, her eyes shining with barely suppressed excitement. “It must have happened while we were on board the Lepids’ ship. When we ... you know.” She blushed.

He frowned. “No, I don’t know. What the hell are you talkin’ about? I’m tryin’ to ask you to marry me, here, or didn’t you notice.”

“I noticed.” She smiled at him, feeling her hope grow. But she couldn’t let herself get too carried away. She had to know for sure--had to test her theory.

“Touch me!” she demanded, holding out her hand. “Now, Vince, I want you to.”

He drew back a little, a wary look in his eyes. “It might not be safe. Don't wanna hurt you.”

“Trust me!” Laura implored. “Something's different and I need to make sure it’s what I think it is. *Please.*”

Carefully, as though her hand was made of the finest crystal and might shatter at the least contact, Vince pressed his palm to hers. Laura closed her eyes, waiting for the flood of emotion to wash over her skin in a stinging wave--

but it never came. She opened her eyes to see Vince watching her closely.

“What?” Vince looked bewildered.

“Nothing.” She could scarcely believe it. “*Nothing!* I don't feel anything.”

I can't feel your emotions.” Laura felt like her heart was about to stop beating. “I can't feel *any* of your emotions. It ought to be so thick in here I could barely breathe but I'm *fine*. What happened on board the Lepid ship burned out the part of my brain that made me a Sensitive--I've lost my hyper-empathy.”

“Are you sure?” Vince looked at her seriously, carefully intertwining their fingers as he talked. “Are you really sure, baby?”

Laura looked at him, knowing there was one way to tell for sure, one way to be absolutely certain. “Kiss me.”

He leaned forward and captured her mouth, gently at first, but then Laura couldn't stand it. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his strong neck, pulling him down, lost in the brilliant beauty of a kiss in which she felt no one's emotions but her own.

The End

TERMS INDEX:

- 1.Live tattoos--a moving tattoo, which may be accompanied by noises from a voice module
- 2.Voice module--a microchip implanted under the skin that makes sound effects possible for a live tattoo
- 3.Message Buddy--a tiny personal computer only a little bigger than a vid-phone with large storage capacity for data
- 4.Vid-phone--a cell phone that sends streaming live video as well as audio.

5.Sound transference amplifier--a device that translates musical sounds into visual patterns

6.Holos or holograms--3-D light projections

7.Hyper-punk--a type of rock music

8.Safe-T-Skin--an antibiotic ointment that is also an artificial skin substitute used to treat minor cuts, burns, and wounds