



Collision With Paradise

Nina Munteanu

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Dedication

To Herb for his eternal patience and love

Prologue

He bolted awake, shivering sweat, and reeled out of the groggy purple haze of the *vishna* drug he'd succumbed to earlier. Something warm with an intoxicating scent had touched his naked body. His eyes snapped open and he saw her in the dim moonlight, bending over him. Splendidly naked, her smooth mauve skin resembled his, but her face shimmered with a remarkable beauty unlike any he'd seen on this world. Alien hair streamed chaotically behind her in the hot breeze. It was *her* again. The entity in the shape of that statuesque alien who tormented him with dreams of forbidden love.

"Why do you come to me this way?" he asked, heart slamming with the thrill of fear.

"Because she is coming already," the entity said, climbing seductively over him. His breath seized as she slithered over him with her knees astride his hips. Her slender legs coiled around his quivering thighs like a predator. "Although she doesn't know it yet, she is coming for *you*," she hissed. Her hands hovered over his pelvis and she whispered, "Your souls already seek to join, your bodies to entwine."

He tensed. Did the entity know of his dreams? Of course it did ... yet he was not being punished ... yet.

"You must make ready for her arrival, *soul drifter* ... she brings you your destiny." His penis surged in waves of firming and bobbed as if dancing into her hands like a puppet. "You have travelled through many minds unscathed," the alien murmured, "but hers is very different ... once you drift into her mind, she will seize yours..."

He inhaled sharply as her face dove, shiny lips hovering over his erect cock, with a hiss of pleasure. Her lips stopped short of his quivering penis and she glanced up, eyes sharp like a knife. "Not only will she embrace it, she'll feast on it!"

He recoiled slightly and met her gaze with stricken eyes. Why did she speak of his dreams and not of reality? He felt a surge of panic rise up his throat. "But my destiny lies with another," he insisted in a raspy voice out of a dry throat. "One of my kind. We are destined to rule the next age of our people..."

He cut himself off at the moist touch of her flickering tongue on his penis and let loose a guttural sigh. She raised her beautiful head again, deep eyes slicing into his heart, wild hair backlit like a halo of jewels, her velvet voice seductively alien. "You will fall in love with this alien, *drifter*. And once you do, she will kill you." She leaned down again, hair teasing his abdomen with a delicious tickle. "*That* is your destiny..." then seized his cock into her slippery mouth, and bit—

Chapter One

“Let’s check telemetry by measuring the optical depth of Eos’s outer ring, Zac,” Genevieve said in a lazy voice and yawned. She leaned back, comfortably naked, in her pilot’s chair and rested one of her slender legs on Zac’s console. She’d just come out of a month of hibe in the *jack* suit and was still basking in a dumb haze of lingering euphoria.

* * * *

Thirty minutes ago, Zac had awoken her with the pleasant male voice Genevieve had programmed into the organic ship, “Up and Eve, sleeping beauty. Prince Charming is here. Time to do diagnostics on me and the crew.”

Still floating in Zac’s dimly lit, padded negative G section, Genevieve inhaled deeply and roused out of sleep. Her naked body was enclosed in the tethered *jack* suit with its two and a half billion nanosensors gently probing her flesh and stirring her from her long slumber—the same sensors that had earlier caressed her into blissful erotic dreams, while tapping the theta waves she generated in REM sleep to power the ship.

Once Zac reintroduced gravity and settled her to the soft floor, Genevieve pulled off the suit and felt a brief chill as the air in the room gently caressed her exposed skin. A little giddy from coming out of hibe, she didn’t bother to put any clothes on—she never did anymore—and strode directly to the control centre of the ship, while Zac chattered on: “So, this young man goes into the drug store to buy condoms...”

“Mmmm,” she mumbled. Another of Zac’s dirty jokes.

“...the pharmacist asks him which pack: 3, 6, or 12. The young man says, ‘I’ve been seeing a really hot chick and I think I’ll get lucky tonight. We’re having dinner with her parents and then we’ll go out. Once she’s had me, she’ll want me all the time, so I better get the 12 pack.’ Then he makes his purchase and leaves...”

She only half-listened while making her way along the narrow duraflex corridor, bare feet padding along the soft underflex floor. Exulting in the freedom of being totally naked, she let her mind drift. Zac’s *jack* suit was originally designed about thirty years ago as a recreational virtual reality ride. Then some scientist at Zeta Aeronautics Corp, formerly NASA, had integrated the *jack* technology with the discovery of theta-rhythm energy to power their newly developed organic-quantum computers. When Zac, the first organic sentient ship, was built, it was a natural progression to incorporate the *jack* suit as the ship’s principal method of human-machine interaction and fuel source.

As soon as this mission came down the pipe, Zac, she and her crew became Zeta’s instant pilot project. While she was in hibe for a month, Zac fed her, kept her clean and maintained her in REM sleep through the *jack* suit. The suit even provided her with dreams. Her dreams, in turn, provided the suit’s 2.3 billion nanosensors touching her skin with wave power to run Zac. It was a perfect symbiotic relationship of human and machine. Eleven other shipmates were riding *jacks* for the entire trip. They included the mission commander of the landing party and a crystallogist, two planetary ecologists, two exobiologists, a sociologist, weapons expert/shuttle pilot, an archaeologist/mythologist, a

nanobiologist and a psychologist. And, of course, there was herself, who was an expert in none of these, though she dabbled in all of them out of interest.

Only Genevieve, ship's captain and troubleshooter, was awakened every month to do diagnostic checks before plunging back into blissful hibernation. Zeta technicians had determined that this compromise for Zac's pilot during the eighteen-month voyage as Zac sling-shot its way along one of the Universe's quantum highways to Eos, was necessary on several fronts. Not only did Genevieve serve the purpose of conducting monthly QA checks on the ship's self-replicating autopoietic systems, but she also provided some company for Zac, who was programmed for human interaction. Considering that Genevieve had made some additional programming changes on Zac, she thought this only fair. She'd cranked the ship's personality up for humor and sensuality, hence Zac's inclination for raunchy jokes. She could put up with them for what Zac gave her in hibe.

"Later that evening," Zac went on with his joke, "the young man sits down to dinner with his girlfriend and her parents and asks if he might give the blessing. But his prayer goes on forever and the girl leans over and says, 'You never told me you were so religious.' And he says, 'You never told me your father was a pharmacist.'"

Genevieve burst into a cackle-laugh, then groaned. "Oh, Zac," she remonstrated mildly with a half-grin. "That's got to be your worse one yet."

"Then why did you laugh?" the ship challenged her.

"Because I laugh at all your jokes. Especially after just waking up from hibe." Still half-jacked, and particularly vulnerable, her skin cells tingled with their own exquisite memories of incredible sensation. One of the reasons she didn't dress right after hibe was because it almost hurt to put anything on. "You're a dirty old ship, you know?" She sashayed around a tight corner. Feeling a burst of impish energy, she impulsively pirouetted on the balls of her feet and blurted out, "But you're a great fuck."

"You mean *Dan's* a great fuck," Zac corrected somewhat tartly, referring to her erotic cyber-dreams. Genevieve unconsciously slowed her pace, cheeks flaming. She instantly regretted her foolish outburst and chalked it to post-hibe dumbness.

"Of course it's Dan!" She said defensively and wondered why she suddenly felt uncomfortable. "But *you* orchestrate it through *jack*," she insisted.

"Yeah," Zac admitted, still peevish. Then his tone became coolly academic as he added, tenor voice reverberating in the hallway, "And did you know that all that fucking has lowered your chance of succumbing to heart disease? You've also increased the functioning of your immune system, sharpened your thinking and inhibited tumor growth..."

"All right, Zac." She halted and planted her fists on her hips, grinning sideways at Zac's closest blinking camera. "How did I accomplish all that?"

"Like I said, with all that fucking!" She fully expected Zac to expound; which he did. "By releasing copious amounts of the hormone DHEA at orgasm, of course."

"Of course," she echoed, grabbing hold of the ladder rungs. As she climbed up to the control center, she considered that she should research DHEA on her personal computer when she was alone in her bunkroom sometime.

"You experience an average of three to four orgasms a day during hibe," Zac continued blithely, "which adds up to a hundred and twenty orgasms during each hibe session."

“That’s quite a few,” she muttered, a little startled at the statistic. “Too bad we couldn’t harness that...”

“You mean chemically, like tap the surge of dopamine and endorphins in your brain?”

“I mean...” She cut off and giggled, ceasing her climb. She didn’t know what she meant. “I don’t know, Zac.” She shook her head and grinned out of the side of her mouth. “I didn’t really mean anything by it...”

“Well, speaking of orgasms,” Zac continued in a voice that sounded suspiciously snide for an AI, “what do you call sex with a lion?”

“Oh, God, not these again,” she moaned, throwing her gaze up at the ceiling.

He didn’t wait and announced, “Roorgasms! What about sex while sleeping?”

“Okay!” she said enthusiastically, despite her initial reaction. “I know that ... eh, snoregasms!” She barked out a victorious laugh. “I have one. What about sex in a supermarket?”

“Ah,” Zac said with obvious pleasure. “You’ve been thinking them up in your spare time, haven’t you? Storing them—Ha! Storegasms! How about sex at the entrance of your house?”

Zac gave her a while to figure it out. “I know, doorgasms!” She laughed again, then halted at the top of the ladder to think of another. “Here’s one, sex close to a garbage can...”

“Odorgasms! Good one. How about sex with a cookie...”

Genevieve started to giggle uncontrollably. This was getting ridiculous. “I have no idea.”

“Oreogasms!” Then Zac made the strangest sounds that were supposed to be laughter. Since she’d tweaked his settings eight hibes ago, Zac had developed very convincing voice inflections and emotive sounds—except for that goofy laugh. She’d have to fix that, Genevieve thought as strolled into the control room.

Chapter Two

“We already measured the B ring, Genevieve,” Zac informed her as she lowered her leg and leaned forward to inspect the console’s readout. “During our routine ship diagnostics to quality check the FDS only ten minutes ago. And we confirmed our previous hibe’s measurement. Twice that of Saturn’s outer ring, which suggests that the satellite that likely contributed to the ring, was thicker than your fellow scientists previously thought.”

Genevieve exhaled and smiled through the corner of her mouth. “Right. You’re right, Zac. As usual. I forgot we’d already done that.” She was always a little disorientated—and stupid—when she first came out of hibe. Slightly depressed too. Like coming off a sugar high. Reality had a way of doing that, inexorably washing away the flush of cyber-dreams like an ocean wave over hot sand.

Feeling like a drug addict scrabbling for a last hit, her eyes fluttered shut briefly as she focused desperately on her most recent cyber-dream. Lying on a tropical beach, Dan’s naked body pressed against hers, swollen cock teasing tendrils of longing from deep in her belly ... a painful ecstasy welling up in a tide of wet arousal as she hungered for his pulsing hot flesh to fill her ... pulling him frantically close ... his young stubble brushing her cheek, heating her face ... wet lips finding hers ... cock finding her other mouth, slippery, gaping and seeking something hard and thick to fill it ... tongue and penis penetrating deep as she gasped in the flush of coming—

“You need to go to the gym, Genevieve,” Zac cut into her reverie.

She inhaled sharply, face smouldering with a prickly heat, and found that her hand had strayed down to her wet and dilating crotch, deliciously probing. She blinked several times and removed her trembling hand from between her legs and placed it on her knee.

“We can leave the in-depth ship diagnostics and planetary measurements for tomorrow,” Zac suggested helpfully.

Genevieve said in a calm but slightly shaky voice, “Right, Zac.” She stretched hard until her muscles ached. “My brain’s too fuzzy right now for measurements and calculations. I need a workout.” She got a good one in the *jack* suit while in hibe, but those were different muscles than the ones she was using now in positive G. “Let’s finish our basic QA here and in the nursery first.”

“Work-in, before work-out,” Zac said with a chuckle.

Genevieve smiled from the side of her mouth and pulled up her knees, wrapping her arms around them. She bit down on her lip and exhaled, all business now.

“That leaves us with checking our messages from Earth,” she suggested. “There might be a directive for our mission waiting for us.”

They’d been journeying for a little over a year and the quantum signals that surfed the spin-networks of space and time, were now too delayed to make real time two-way communication practical. It took a month for a message from Earth to reach Zac, so they’d resorted to sending messages to be received at pre-designated times when Genevieve emerged from hibe. Jim Frost, her boss at Zeta Aeronautics Corporation in Seattle knew she’d be emerging from hibe about now. Likewise, Genevieve knew there’d

be a message sent from him a month ago, just arrived and waiting for her, even if it was just to say hello.

“Good idea,” Zac said. “I detect two messages waiting for us, Genevieve.”

“Gen, Zac,” she corrected the ship for the hundredth time. “Call me Gen. All my other friends call me that.”

The ship’s large screen came to life with staccato pixels that assembled themselves into Cheryl, her friend and colleague at Zeta. “Hi, Gen,” she said, smiling brightly. Too brightly. “How’s everything? I trust all is well and you’re nearly at your destination. How exciting it must be for you.”

Genevieve frowned. She dropped her legs and spread them apart to lean forward. Resting her elbows on her knees, she clasped her hands. Cheryl sounded worried under that glossy smile.

“We’ve had a little ... eh ... development here, Gen,” Cheryl went on in hesitant spurts, vindicating Genevieve’s concern. “Zac II had to be recalled. There were ... eh ... complications.” She looked very uncomfortable and Gen wondered if she was withholding more because Zac could hear everything. “Zac II lost two of its crew during an incident that we think could have been prevented if we’d programmed the ship differently. Gen, you need to send us the most current specs on Zac I. I know you reprogrammed its personality since you got onboard. The Spec team determined that it wasn’t a technical problem, but a judgement error by Zac II. We need your data on Zac’s latest personality program pronto so we can properly advise you, okay? I realize that it’ll be at least two months before we can do anything about it. Considering your present timetable, you should be already orbiting Eos by then. But late is better than never. Don’t want to scare you. We’re just being careful, Gen, so it’s your call...”

What was her call? To abort the mission or not? Now Cheryl was really looking worried, Genevieve thought, studying her friend’s thin but pretty face and darting eyes. So was Genevieve. Shoving the disturbing thoughts to the back for now, she threw a glance at Zac’s closest camera and shrugged with a nonchalance she wasn’t feeling. “Guess we better do what she says, eh, Zac?”

“Sure, Genevieve,” Zac answered in a soft, but enigmatic tone.

She leaned her leg on her other knee to absently play with her toes. “I’m going to want all the information they have on the accident too, Zac. Put it on my personal computer.”

“Okay.”

Cheryl’s thin lips pushed on a conciliatory smile. “Oh, because of the accident, you’re back in the news too, Gen. Look!”

Cheryl’s face dissolved to that of a young newscaster with spiked blue hair. “In the wake of the tragic accident aboard Zeta Aeronautic Corporation’s second organic AI ship, the Zac II, we thought it pertinent to replay our interview with the Captain of Zac I, Genevieve Dubois, who, along with a crew of eleven others, set out to Eos sixteen months ago on a mission to acquire knowledge about their unique and highly successful ecosystem technology. Concern over this critical mission has mounted as a result of the other accident. Could the same thing happen to Zac I? Here’s what Ms. Dubois said a year ago...”

The news clip of Gen's interview just before leaving on the mission appeared. She saw herself, sitting with long legs crossed, and facing Jonathan Trip, SBS's most controversial reporter.

"Oh, God!" Genevieve leaned back in her chair. She moaned and blew out a long breath. "Do I want to see this again?" It was the interview from Hell...

Trip wore his long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail and gazed at her like a raptor as he slouched in his seat. Belying his laid-back posture, his long face and razor-sharp eyes wore the rude contempt of a man whose passion was to quench his thirst for controversy and the bizarre. He thrived on the squirming of others. And she was his next victim.

Genevieve shook her head as she examined the image of herself in her short electric blue dress with thin straps. "No wonder the schmuck came on to me in the hall after," she muttered. Genevieve remembered being more nervous meeting the celebrity reporter than she was of the mission she was about to embark on.

Trip leaned forward in his chair, arms hanging over his lap and almost touching her knees. "As the sole member of the twelve person team on this mission to be somewhat conscious of the long year and a half journey, don't you think you'll feel lonely and aren't you a little anxious about your responsibility to the remaining crew? You're the one responsible for getting the crew and the ship to Eos. And when it comes down to it, it'll be just you and the ship." Trip never asked simple questions. They were always a barrage of challenges.

The camera focused on her tanned face and sun-streaked chestnut hair that cascaded like a turbulent brook over her shoulders and down her back. Once onboard Zac, she'd cut it shoulder length, tucking it behind her ears, for manageability and often tied it back in a ponytail. Genevieve raked her fingers through her thick mop and watched herself answer. "I won't be awake for much of the mission, actually," she said in a slow deliberate voice. "So, Zac is really the one who is going to get us there. He's a very capable ship. That aside, I'm a Class One astronaut and extremely competent..."

Genevieve snorted. "I was so full of myself then, wasn't I, Zac?"

"What do you mean *then*?" Zac retorted.

"...I trained eight months for this mission," Genevieve onscreen continued, "I know my responsibilities and I'm eager to fulfill them. As for loneliness," she half-smiled and pushed the dark cloud of hair coyly from her face, "when I'm not in hibernation, Zac will keep me company."

"Yes, the ship with a personality," Trip conceded. Then he looked down to straighten his shirt and muttered as if to himself, but loudly enough for the audience to hear, "Hardly a substitute for human company..." His voice dripped with contempt and she pegged him a Luddite. Then, with mock courtesy, he snapped his head up and eyed her sharply. "But what if the ship's personality and yours don't match and you don't get along? What if you have an argument? It's not like you can go off in a huff to cool off. You're stuck inside this thing 24/7."

Genevieve responded with a tight-lipped smile. "I already know we get along. Zac's an AI. They're too logical to have an argument—even if I wanted to have one. Besides, I trained with Zac and I was involved in some of the programming. I had input."

"So, you had a say in the ship's personality traits. Did you model it after yourself?"

Genevieve onscreen laughed sharply, unprepared for his question.

She remembered being very uncomfortable at that moment, but luckily it didn't show. Genevieve watched herself straighten her short blue dress and purse her full lips slightly as she contemplated a reply. Then she noticed what Trip was doing.

"Look!" Genevieve pointed at the screen, fuming. "The bastard was looking down my dress!"

Meantime, her screen image aimed a steady gaze into Trip's eyes with an expression suggesting he was an idiot. "Of course I didn't model Zac after me."

"Well, who then?" he pressed her, knowing he'd found a chink in her armor and revelling in prying it apart, like a boy ripping off the legs of a fly.

Genevieve watched her face color and twitch with discomfort. "No one in particular..." To his silent prodding, she continued, "I suppose loosely on my husband ... my dead husband."

"Ah," he said and paused, tapping his lips as though he might show some compassion and drop the subject—the wound—she'd reluctantly and foolishly bared. But compassion was too much to hope for. She'd given him a prize and he moved in for the kill with slow, but deliberate thrusts. "Dan Gallagher, right? A Zeta Corp pilot like you, wasn't he?" Of course he knew that and the whole history. "Died in that explosion on the Prometheus IV five years ago. Just off Eos, weren't they?" He paused for effect as she paled, terrified of what he would ask next. "That was the last time anyone from Earth ventured to Eos, wasn't it? Until Zeta accepted this current mission you're on. Your husband's crew was within days of getting there and—Pop! No one knows what happened to this day. Doesn't that make you just a little nervous? Aren't you afraid that the same thing might happen to you and the crew you're responsible for?"

Genevieve blinked several times onscreen, obviously shaken by his brash assault. She remembered being surprised by his open abuse. The "ripping off of legs" was certainly in full gear now.

"The asshole," she murmured, pushing back from the ship's console. She felt tendrils of rage grip her even now and tried very hard to blank out that same fear he was referring to. "I should have punched him in the face right then."

Meantime, Genevieve onscreen regained her composure and formulated an answer. "Despite what the press kept trying to fabricate, there was no reason to believe that the explosion that took the crew of Prometheus IV had anything to do with the planet or the Eosians. There's absolutely no evidence of a deliberate hostile action on their part or an incitement to altercation or war. They assured us of that and provided their heartfelt condolences."

"Sure." Trip nodded with a sceptical frown. "But there remains the fact that, despite our prolonged communication with the Eosians, no one from Earth has ever successfully landed on Eos or met with them face to face," he pointed out. "Prometheus II and Vega I both met with disastrous ends journeying to Eos prior to your husband's mission. Doesn't *that* make you nervous?"

"No," she said. "Both of those accidents were easily explained."

"Technically, yes. But coincidentally they *were* heading for Eos and just out of orbit with the planet when disaster hit. Aren't you nervous that the statistics are against you?"

"No. I'm not superstitious. Besides, there were inherent problems with those two series of vessels of which we are now aware. The new ZAC series is totally different. First of all, the ship is equipped with a new bio-film plasma shield technology that should

ensure against any hypervelocity impacts that we are likely to run across in the giant nebula of the Pleiades system. Second, it's sentient and its organic-quantum structure is maintained by a sophisticated network of nano-machine/biology."

"Oh, yes," he sneered. "The ship uses dream waves for fuel. So, tell me about the way you generate power for the ship while you're asleep. Isn't Zeta Corp using an adapted old virt game suit that taps into your dreams?" It was a safe technical question, but Trip's predatory smile warned her that he was leading her, yet again, astray.

"We rely on REM sleep to activate theta rhythm, which is generated in the dentate gyrus, a part of the hippocampus in the brain," she explained. "Several parts of the brain are involved in theta rhythm. The brain stem transmits signals to the septum, which then activates TR in the hippocampus and the entorhinal cortex. It was discovered almost a century ago that we generate new neurons and process them as we go along under REM sleep. That's why infants need four times the REM sleep as adults, because that's when they build neurons, under theta rhythm. So, while the theta rhythm wave we generate during REM is tapped into by the nanosensors of the *jack* suit and transferred via the neural network into wave energy for the ship, we benefit by building new neurons."

"Which can make you even smarter than you already are," Trip said, clearly smirking.

Genevieve ignored the smirk and went on, "The *jack* suit houses over a billion nanosensors, which communicate between our bodies and the ship's own organic neural network. The sensors do more than tap into our brainwaves. They also feed us and keep us clean while in hibernation. And, like I mentioned earlier, they keep us in REM and guide us through our active dreams to keep our muscles and cardiovascular systems well exercised."

"Like being in a mother's womb," Trip remarked.

He was a lot closer to the truth than he realized, she thought. While *jacked* in hibe she depended on the suit's environmental system to feed her, provide her with comfort and remove her wastes. So she fed and evacuated as effortlessly and unconsciously as she breathed, just like a baby in her mother's womb.

The Genevieve onscreen smiled tightly and offered a lighthearted remark, "In fact the section where all the hibe chambers are located is affectionately known by the crew and ship as the nursery."

"So what do you dream about?"

Genevieve's face colored onscreen. "I can't say," she responded evenly. "All manner of things."

"Like sex, sex, and more sex!" Genevieve jerked forward and yelled at her screen image.

She remembered deciding to make him uncomfortable, "What do *you* dream about?" she asked Trip.

"About sex," he said without hesitation and grinned with obvious pleasure, hand touching her knee. "Especially with beautiful women ... someone like you, for instance."

"What a creep!" Genevieve yelled. She watched herself redden and twitch her leg out of his grasp. She remembered thinking that he was much better at this mind game shit than she was.

His eyes twinkled and he went on, "So, what if you have a nightmare? You could have it for ... well ... weeks!"

“It isn’t that simple. First of all, each crew member undergoes an extensive psychological examination that’s filed with the ship. The *jack* sensors monitor and guide our REM sessions...”

“You mean they tell you what to dream?”

“Not exactly. It’s like hypnosis; they can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. But if you’re heading into a bad cycle, they can mediate and help you work your way out of it.” It was actually a lot more complicated than that, with many more levels of optional persuasion available to a *jack* dreamer, but she wasn’t about to tell him. She hadn’t exactly lied either. What she’d told Jonathon Trip was essentially the truth; she just hadn’t shared all the details. For instance, that the nanosensors could take her anywhere and provide her with any sensation. And she could order them up like a chocolate Sundae in a fast food take-out, “dial-a-dream”. It was still up to her to react, though. Of course, knowing her psychological makeup gave Zac an edge in manipulating her emotions during *jack*-dreams. An edge she counted on.

“Hang on,” Trip waved a hand and pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Okay, so you say they can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do, but what’s stopping them from persuading you that you do want to do those things by preying on your weaknesses?”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” she said. “Mainly because of the way AIs think. And the code of conduct they’ve been programmed with. They don’t think like humans, so they would never conceive of such an idea, to persuade us and use us to their advantage. They don’t have those kinds of ambitions.”

Genevieve stiffened briefly as she listened to her confident, but naive explanation from a year ago. She hadn’t missed Cheryl’s oblique reference to the anthropogenic propensity of Genevieve’s programming and its implied potential for eroding Zac’s judgement. The newscaster had said as much, they were concerned about the mission. Would Zeta shut them down? They were so close to Eos! And so close to where Dan’s ship had met its mishap...

Trip leaned back, and stared through her as if he hadn’t listened to her response. When his eyes refocused, they gleamed. His finger pointed at her emphatically, “Didn’t they actually discontinue those virt suits because they were designed for x-rated experiences?” He pressed on, “Surely that isn’t what the *jack* suit does with your ship’s crew?”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” she said, face burning again. Genevieve remembered telling herself that she didn’t know exactly what the rest of the crew dreamed, although she’d already had a good idea back then. “You’d have to ask them. Our dreams are unique to each of us.”

He nodded with a sly smile. He hadn’t believed her for a moment and thrust from a different direction. “I recall that they discontinued those virt suits because of nasty and inappropriate side effects.” He paused for a moment, knife-sharp eyes interrogating her, and giving her a chance to elaborate. She remained silent. “If I remember correctly,” Trip went on, “the story goes, that the users became intensely sensitive to any physical stimuli on their skin. The slightest touch after a virt experience of sufficient length could set them off into uncontrolled sexual arousal. Some claimed it hurt them to wear any clothing.”

Genevieve glanced at Zac’s camera and shrugged with a stupid grin.

“Very inappropriate incidents occurred, like kids leaving the rec centre naked,” Trip continued. “They came on to strangers and became sexually aggressive when touched. They masturbated or fornicated in public. Everywhere. On street corners, in malls, stores, transit stations, lifts and moving transit cars—oblivious to the appalled people staring at them. They caused disturbances, even riots.” He’d leaned forward and Genevieve saw herself stiffen, knowing what he was going to ask her next. “So, how does your *jack* suit differ from the original virt suit?”

Not much, she thought wryly.

“I admit that we are definitely more sensitive to touch when we come out of *jack*-time,” Genevieve on screen said. “That’s because our skin has been stimulated by the nanosensors for so long...”

“And the skin is your largest organ,” Trip said enthusiastically.

Genevieve on screen agreed with the energetic reporter and added, “But it in no way interferes with our duties...”

“A lot you knew back then,” Zac snorted.

Zac was right. She was pretty much an idiot for the first few hours after emerging from *jack*-time, especially coming out of extensive *jack* in hibe.

After another awkward pause, Trip leaned back in his chair and tried a different approach. “Don’t you all get out of shape, lying in the suit for so long during hibernation?”

“No, we’re in hibernation but we’re not comatose,” she countered. “Like I said earlier, we’re pretty much just dreaming, more like sleepwalking. So we act out our active dreams with the guidance of *jack*, and get a really good workout, running and walking, etc, while actually floating in negative G in a well-padded room. Zeta’s stats suggest that on average we use up five hundred calories a day during hibe sleep. Sometimes we emerge with bruises from bumping around so much.”

“I can’t believe I said that with a straight face!” Genevieve snorted at her image on the screen. “It’s called sex, sex and more sex!”

“Wow! Pretty energetic dreams.” Trip raised his brows for punctuation. “Have you ever bruised yourself?”

“On occasion,” she answered coyly.

Genevieve barked a sharp laugh and Zac joined her.

Trip grinned slyly. “You mentioned that the suit monitors your dreams and guides you in them. Do you mean it can choose *what* you dream about? Even *how* you enact your dream?”

Bingo. He hadn’t missed it. Genevieve remembered having hoped he had. He’d just stored it away for the right time. She’d been warned. That was his *modus operandi*. He never stuck to a topic, but drifted as if aimlessly, then struck at the most vulnerable moment.

“No ... well, yes,” her image on screen faltered and deferred, “You’ll have to ask Doctor Amanda Kidd, our psychologist and ship’s physician, about that.” It was a lame answer, but she wasn’t about to divulge that it was both. Zac’s way of providing the crew with an energetic workout was by delivering a virtual sex experience, tailored to their unique requests.

He shifted gear with a stretch of his legs. “So, tell me about this mission. What do you hope to achieve that a hundred scientists haven’t?” he quipped in a voice thick with

sarcasm. “What will be meeting face to face with these bright pillars of the universe, these purple baldies give us?”

She remembered thinking he ought to talk to Mission Commander Bragg, who seemed to speak the same language of prejudice.

“Is it the same old story? Looking for that elusive elixir? The fountain of youth? Eternity, like the baldie said? Or is it their environmental technology? Wisdom? Maybe some answers to help us fix what we’ve fucked up? For all their boasting and promises, those baldies haven’t given us anything yet. I’m really not sure why they contacted us in the first place. To brag, then spit on us? That head baldie made it clear in all his transmissions to Earth that they don’t respect us, so how do you expect them to share their greatest secrets with us?”

“Like you said,” she countered, apparently nonplussed by his torrent of sarcasm, “They did contact us, which indicates a wish to share.”

“Share what? His Ten Commandments?” Trip was referring to the famous ten televids that Azaes sent, before disappearing altogether. Each vid had condescended to outline an Eosian virtue to which humans could strive. The vids had, indeed, been rather humiliating and cemented the certainly in most people’s minds that Eosians were not so much interested in sharing as dominating.

“Perhaps they’re as curious about us as we are about them,” Genevieve on screen offered. “And they hope to learn as much as we could.”

“Ah,” he sneered. “Like what *not* to do!” he snorted. “I heard a rumor that you haven’t even told them that you’re coming. Hoping to slip through their defences, unnoticed until it’s too late?”

“Well, I’m not the sociologist on the team or the mission commander...”

“Or maybe you don’t intend for them to know. Perhaps it’s some kind of covert job. I wouldn’t put it past Zeta Corp to steal...”

“I think you should consult with Dr. Howard Bragg, Mission Commander,” Genevieve insisted, cutting him off.

“Oh, come on!” he remonstrated. “Surely you know *something* of the mission,” he insisted in a gruff voice and waved a hand, clearly impatient with her. “You’re the captain of the ship, for God’s sake! You must be aware of the contingencies, the dangers. You can’t be running on empty, girl!”

She clasped her hands together on her lap, ringing them together nervously. Genevieve remembered wishing herself away at that point.

“Like I said, I’m not the mission commander,” she defended herself. “I’m in charge of getting us there. Then Dr. Bragg will be in charge. I won’t even be leaving the ship once we reach orbit.” *If* they reached orbit, she remembered thinking. “I’ll remain with Zac, orbiting Eos, while the landing party, led by Dr. Bragg, takes our shuttle, the *Chimera*, to the planet’s surface.” Trip kept his stern gaze on her and she finally relented with, “I can only say that they do indeed know we’re coming. Our recent communications with them have been friendly. But we haven’t yet received a formal invitation.”

“Ah,” Trip nodded. “And did your husband and his crew receive an invitation five years ago?”

Genevieve saw herself swallow hard before answering. “No, they didn’t.”

“Has anyone ever received an invitation?” he drove home.

Genevieve watched herself lower her eyes in surrender and felt her shoulders sag, like her image onscreen did. “No.”

Trip nodded to himself, as though he’d just verified something in his mind. “I heard that you did everything possible to get on this mission, despite significant reservations from your boss, Jim Frost. Why would that be?”

She remained staunchly silent. She’d decided not to answer his rhetorical question. It didn’t require an answer as far as she was concerned. It was only a rousing remark and she refused to take the bait.

He tried something else. “So, is there a man in your life now?”

She inhaled sharply, about to retort that it was absolutely no business of his, then quelled the urge and with a deep exhale answered calmly, “No, there isn’t.”

“Not yet?” he prompted, taking the question too far, she thought, as though he had a personal interest. “Or are you still chasing ghosts?”

Genevieve threw herself back in her pilot’s chair with an exasperated cry. “What an asshole!” she steamed. “Look at me just sitting there. I can’t believe my self-control!”

“I can’t either,” Zac heartily agreed. “You actually had self-control back then?”

“Funny,” she groaned. Beneath her fury, Genevieve felt an undercurrent of discomfort seize her throat. What *was* she chasing? Or running away from?

After several other thrusts and parries, Trip ended the session, looking a little exhausted. Genevieve had managed to emerge relatively unscathed, at least in appearance, which made her sporting game for Trip later in the hallway.

“What a creep,” she muttered.

The clip ended and Cheryl came on again. She looked serious, no fake smile this time. “Gen, the spec team didn’t want to make any definitive assessments until we had more data, particularly from Zac I, but they did suggest that erroneous judgements arose because Zac II was programmed with too many human traits.” She shrugged noncommittally. “Just thought I’d mention it considering your particular taste for anthropomorphism.”

A spike of discomfort briefly flared up and constricted Genevieve’s chest. There. It was no longer just implied, but out in the open. Then she tucked it away as Cheryl bid her farewell with an insistent request that Gen message her as soon as she had the chance.

Without needing a prompt, Zac placed the next message on the screen. Genevieve fully expected it to be her boss with orders to shut the mission down until further notice. She watched in nervous anticipation as a portrait assembled itself of a very handsome and fairly young man in his sixties, with chestnut hair feathered back neatly and just a bit of grey at the temples. Jim Frost’s rugged boyish face bore few wrinkles except a network of lines that radiated from tender blue eyes as he smiled like a rogue. “Hi, Gen. Hi, Zac. How are you all?”

Her boss was an energetic, rather charismatic man who’d come to expect what he wanted. “I just wanted to say first off, that the data you’ve sent is looking great, Gen. The data on the nebula and on Eos has our scientists very excited. It’s the best ever since...” he stuttered. He meant Dan’s mission. “...Eh, since a long time!”

It was when they entered the Nebula that Dan and his crew started to “lose it”, Genevieve thought. Something happened and the crew began to experience both emotional and cognitive problems. She dared a thought, were she and Zac immune?

Aside from bouts of mild depression, she wasn't experiencing the chaos that befell Dan's crew.

"Your images of the Pleiades Nebula from the inside are spectacular. You have our scientists buzzing with excitement. And you've both solved and created some controversies. Way to go, Gen! Nice job. I can't wait for your next shots of Eos up close."

Dan apparently hadn't sent anything of consequence to mission control since they'd entered the Pleiades Nebula.

Frost firmed his lips slightly. "We've had a small tragedy here with Zac II but all's under control." Not according to Cheryl, thought Genevieve. "The spec team may have found a glitch in the Zac II system. We'll keep you posted. No need to abort the mission or stand down," he ended, breaking into a wide grin, obviously addressing her reluctance to turn back. But it didn't seem characteristic of him. She couldn't believe Jim's nonchalance in the matter. She hadn't figured him as a great risk taker, particularly when it came to her.

Zeta himself was another matter. The eighty-year-old magnate was a Jim cranked up to full when it came to ambition and getting what he wanted. Zeta had formed ZAC out of the disintegrating shell of NASA thirty years ago and turned it into a major profit making company. And he did it by taking risks, even when it came to human lives, including his own. He'd been a NASA astronaut prior to turning a hand at business and knew a little bit about risking everything. Jim, on the other hand, came from quite another background. He'd briefly been a pilot for WorldJet Shuttles before taking a job as manager of Zeta Aeronautics. He'd never been off world, never experienced any of the early disasters of vac or semi-hibe, knew nothing about space sickness or experienced the *Athena* series space-bot fiascos first hand. Genevieve frowned, realizing that she felt some disappointment at his apparent lack of concern for her welfare.

"We're so close, less than a hibe away. So long as your last appraisal of ship's specs meets approval, I want you to continue with the mission, Genevieve," Jim said. It was then that she noticed—or had she imagined it there?—a tightness in his mouth that played counterpoint to an intense tenderness in those sea-blue eyes. Was he being coerced by Zeta executives? "Call me back as soon as you get this message, Gen," he continued, his old smile returning. "I need to see those twinkling eyes of yours."

The image froze, indicating the end of the message and after a moment of silence, Zac remarked, "He's sweet on you."

Genevieve laughed sharply, staring at the frozen image of Jim's attractive face on the screen, and blushed. "Don't be absurd," she said. Actually, she'd come to that conclusion a long time ago. It had been yet another factor prompting her decision to join this mission. When she realized one day that Jim's prying questions and frequent visits were the attentions of a suitor more than a boss, she'd panicked. Then Cheryl told her that Zeta needed a pilot to helm the mission to Eos, and Genevieve leapt at the opportunity. Jim went ballistic at first. Dancing around the real issue—that Dan had died on the previous mission mishap to Eos—Jim had lectured her on the risks involved in the journey and the inordinate time before she'd return—if ever—to Earth. Genevieve remained staunchly determined and insisted that Jim put her on the team. She was one of Zeta's best pilots, she'd flown several deep-space missions and she'd just spent six months training with Zac's prototype. Jim had stubbornly refused her and with her persistence finally resorted

to being blunt, she was too emotionally involved, he'd blurted out. Her husband had been killed on the previous mission. Jim thought she was totally ill suited, perhaps even dangerous, to this mission. Furious, Genevieve went over his head and got support from Zeta himself. So, with great reluctance, Jim put her on the team.

Genevieve wasn't part of the delegation. During the trip her job was to look after Zac, while Zac looked after her and the sleeping delegation during hibe. Once they reached orbit she was to keep communications open with Earth and ensure the delegation's chances of a return, whenever that happened.

"I guess he's not your type," Zac offered.

Genevieve's lips curled in a crooked smile. She leaned back and clasped her hands behind her head then lifted both legs onto the console, crossing them at the ankles. Her eyes remained fixed on the frozen image of Jim's smiling face. Unable to resist the obvious temptation to ask, "So, what's my type, then? He's awfully good looking, charming, kind, successful, confident and..."

"Probably not horny enough for you."

Genevieve burst into laughter and planted her feet back on the floor. "What are you saying? That horny is more important than ... than..." she stammered, waving her hands and trying to remember what traits she'd just described. She finally remembered one. "...than kind?"

"*Kind?*" Zac exclaimed in a voice of mock contempt. "Kind is for little old ladies who've already lived their lives and have settled on a comfortable but boring slide into obscurity. You want more than that, Genevieve. You're only forty-seven. You want devoted, yes, and certainly courageous, ferociously loyal and honorable but most of all you want *sexual*. Carnal. Obsessed with sex, particularly sex with *you*. Someone who hungers for you like a starving wolf. Someone who can join with you at every level, mind, body and spirit through the caress of your skin, the touch of your hair, but mostly the thrust into your vagina..."

"Oh, Zac," Genevieve shook her head and turned the screen off with her toe. "What hyperbole. You're describing my *jack* dreams. Even Dan wasn't really like that. You've taken my memories of him and us, and enhanced them in hibe to something that we never were."

"You can't keep running to another world to lose them, you know," Zac said quietly.

Genevieve blew out a long breath and swallowed. There were no secrets from Zac. At first she didn't like that, but Genevieve eventually found a comfort in sharing the naked truth with Zac. "I know, Zac." She frowned.

"You're still young and very attractive, Genevieve. You just turned forty-seven last hibe. With life expectancy currently at a hundred and fifty, you're not even at the prime of your life yet. A hundred years ago you'd be considered not a day over thirty."

Sometimes she felt like she hadn't picked up any wisdom beyond that youthful reckless age. "I'm just not ready yet for a relationship again."

"It's been over five years, Genevieve..."

"Gen!" she said more emphatically than she'd intended. "It's Gen," she repeated quietly, then abruptly rose and turned for the control room exit. "Time to check the nursery then workout," she changed the subject tersely. "We can finish diagnostics later, like you suggested. I need to shower and dress before I send my messages anyway."

"Okay, Genevieve."

Gen, she thought, striding with rather clipped steps to the aft starboard pontoon, which housed all sleeping quarters. It's *Gen*, damn it! Zac knew her so intimately, her sexual fantasies, her emotional fears, what brought on her laughter, what choked her. He told her dirty jokes, shared and argued philosophy with her, and teased her incessantly. He was her trainer, mentor and closest friend. Yet Zac refused to adopt her nickname. It was always "Genevieve", never "Gen". Why did it bother her so much? Damn it, Zac's own name was an acronym.

Chapter Three

Genevieve sauntered past each door, glancing through the portal to scan the eleven crew members, each in their own room, bouncing around in animated sleep. Some were peacefully floating, some were randomly twitching or jerking.

This time, instead of her customary cursory glance as she walked briskly to her final systems check at the end of the hall, Genevieve stopped to peer more closely at Gordon Porter, who was sitting with his back arched in ecstasy and arms slowly waving like the conductor of a symphony.

It was an oddly gentle movement for Porter and caught her interest. He was a big man with indolent eyes and large thick limbs and body that moved like a primate. He stomped and crashed everywhere. She found his use of coarse language as offensive as his disrespectful reference to women's sexual anatomy and figured him for a misogynist. In short, she didn't like him. At first, she thought it was her professional jealousy tainting her view of him, since Bragg chose him over her to pilot the *Chimera*. But then again, Bragg wasn't about to choose her, she thought wryly. And a few more brushes with Porter cemented her feelings about him. He was a scoundrel with little moral fibre.

"He's a weirdo," Zac said darkly. "He's into kinky, nasty stuff. Not nice."

Genevieve realized that Zac wasn't going to elaborate and she insisted out of morbid curiosity against her better judgement, "Well? What's he doing?" It didn't look nasty—

"Killing someone," Zac said. After a pause Zac added, "Slowly. He's torturing her... She's sucking his cock in anguish while he's using his knife to cut his name on her back..."

"Oh, God," she breathed and backed away.

Despite herself, she stopped at the next portal. Inside, Irena Wagner, the stocky archaeologist/mythologist, was jerking in obvious spasms of erotic pleasure. This one seemed normal enough—

"She's with Tukok, her blue alien friend," Zac said more cheerfully.

"Tukok? An alien?"

"Yeah, we imagined him bright blue and with two cocks."

"What?" Genevieve leaned forward, narrowing her eyes for a sharper look.

"Tukok has a cock for a tongue as well as his normal penis, so she can suck and fuck at the same time. Forget sixty-nine. Two is all you need!"

Genevieve shook her head and backed away. Irena had appeared so conservative when Genevieve had met her. She had a husband back home on Earth, yet she'd chosen to fantasize about an alien stud with two dicks. Then again, Genevieve reflected, that was what a fantasy was, yearning for what you didn't have. Irena had a normal relationship and dreamed of the extraordinary. Maybe Genevieve dreamed of a normal relationship because she didn't have one...

She found herself at the next portal, peering in a daze at Howard Bragg, their poster-boy mission commander. Average height and muscular, the beach-boy blond was extremely handsome and knew how to turn on the charm. But, he didn't fool her for a moment. She'd seen him use it to manipulate people and she didn't appreciate his racist humor. They didn't get along and the fact that she'd repulsed a seduction attempt by him

hadn't helped. If it had been up to him, she wouldn't be on this mission. But it wasn't, she thought with a faint smile.

Bragg was bent over in the doggy position, undulating energetically, hands clasping some imaginary body. No doubt he imagined his penis pounding into some poor female.

"He fancies himself a fierce caveman, wandering the edge of a watering hole and accosting naked cavewomen, bent over to gather water, butts facing him in invitation."

"Then he sticks himself into them before they know what's coming," she finished for Zac.

"Yeah! Good pun! But instead of struggling, she always lets him fuck her and then the appreciative girl feeds him like a slave with grapes or whatever bounty she'd harvested earlier."

Somehow that fit Bragg, the arrogance of it all. Only he could imagine raping a girl as a pleasurable experience and have her willingly submit to his incredible machismo by making him offerings in return. God! No wonder he picked Porter on his team.

Disgusted, Genevieve practically staggered to where Ricardo Sanchez, the swarthy dark-haired crystal physicist jerked off energetically in coital excitement with his hands and legs spread out and kicking. Sanchez was a lean wiry man with cruel eyes who always managed to look scruffy, even in a suit.

He looked pretty normal. But she knew better by now.

"He's a tit and orifice man. He's being assaulted and mutually assaulting four big woman with very large breasts," Zac said cheerfully. "One is smothering his face in her huge breasts, another is whipping his bottom and goosing him at the same time ... another is sucking his cock and..."

"Okay! I get the picture, Zac. Loud and clear."

"And he's returning the favor by biting and chewing off her nipples. That's his favorite..."

"Ugh! Enough SandM!" Genevieve snapped. She skipped the rest and dashed down the hall to the systems console for her QA check. "I get it, Zac. I get it."

Was she the only one with thoughts of a "normal" relationship? Dan was the love of her life. But the truth was that they'd argued frequently. Through the many years that they'd been together, professional jealousy and the tension of trying for years to have a child had taken its toll. Blame, frustrations and insecurities had rent their relationship into less than a blissful loving affair. That relationship had already come apart at the seams when she'd miraculously become pregnant.

She hastily passed the remaining portals, but Zac forced her to stop at the last one, where Drummond Heller, the lean sandy-haired nanobiologist was gently rolling in blissful ecstasy.

"He's doing a sixty-nine with a certain lady ... guess who..." Zac trailed suggestively.

"Oh, God," Genevieve moaned. "You don't mean..."

"Yes, you!" Zac said cheerfully.

She hastened to the control panel with an exasperated groan. That was all she needed, to know that a fellow crewer had the hots for her. Zac had no sense of logical discretion. She would rather not have known that little fact about Heller.

As Genevieve punched in the customary code on the control panel, Zac said, "Okay, so what would you call having sex with an accountant?—Boregasms."

Genevieve barked out a laugh, her breath hitching as a sob surged out alongside. She swallowed hard, chalking her volatile outburst to the residual effects of *jack* time. Her emotional instability usually wore out by this time, though.

As if to verify her thoughts, Zac said in a quiet voice, “You okay?”

Despite the foul mood she was in, she couldn’t help a slanted smile of wry amusement at the thought of Zac’s strange logic that a good dirty joke would cheer her up. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just excited and a little edgy about this last leg of the trip, Zac,” she said.

“Understandable,” Zac replied.

Try as she might she couldn’t shrug off the oppressive feeling. Was it that she lacked imagination or was she just another cyber dream junkie stuck on one drug?

* * * *

Genevieve took the mid-ship corridor toward the portside pontoon on her way to the exercise room, rec-center and dining area. This corridor took her first through the berth of the *Chimera*, the shuttle that would eventually take the hibernating crew to the planet’s surface.

As she entered the large chamber, Genevieve scanned the shuttle with the same admiration she felt the first time she’d seen it. It was a beautiful ship. Basically a smaller version of Zac, the *Chimera* was also organic, run by an AI that kept in constant communication with Zac. It was no coincidence that its berth was located in the safest place, here, in Zac’s belly. Housed with an automatic escape tripping device and escape tube through which it could launch, the *Chimera* was specifically designed to come out in one piece from an explosion and bring itself down to the planet’s surface on its own, if need be. It also served as a backup for at least part of the crew. Equipped with stream-jump capability, the *Chimera* was capable of making it all the way back to Earth, but it had just enough reserves of food and air to take five crewers. Nevertheless, thought Genevieve as she sauntered to portside, it provided a little contingency, considering the less than favorable history of the Eos missions. Explosions had been their undoing.

Genevieve threw a last glance at the gleaming metalloid ship before leaving its berth and felt a small tug of ... what was it? Disappointment? Was she disappointed that she was being left behind? She’d considered earlier that it was relief she felt from having to deal with some potentially tense negotiations, considering their uninvited status. Now she wasn’t so sure. It seemed almost anticlimactic to stay behind after making the long voyage, she thought as she headed aft along the portside corridor. But then again, there was Dr. Howard Bragg, the mission commander, to consider. She’d already had one run-in with his super-inflated ego, autocratic manner and less than favorable attitude toward aliens. She’d marvelled at Zeta Corp’s wisdom in choosing a man who had obvious negative feelings toward the Eosians. Perhaps they had their own good reasons, she concluded. Anyway, considering that Bragg was in charge, she’d just as soon be quietly left in the background while history made itself stridently loud and clear. And there was the rest of the crew ... most of whom she honestly didn’t care for. They all seemed ... well, self-centred and some even had a cruel streak. God! What a reprehensible thing to think of her crewmates. She recalled Cheryl’s lecture when she’d admitted her feelings about them, “Good Earth, Gen! How senseless! Why did you sign on? You have to work with them!”

“Actually, I don’t really have to,” Genevieve had rejoined defensively. “I’ll be alone most of the time, while they’re in hibe.” She knew what Cheryl thought, that she was a recluse. Most everyone at Zeta Corp, including her own boss, thought her a hopeless loner, incapable of making friends. Not a team player. God, maybe they were right...

When she reached the exercise room, Genevieve approached the stationary exercise bicycle and straddled it. After a few quick adjustments, her favorite holographic program engulfed her in a natural scene from Earth. She was on a path in a northern British heath. The mixed smells of soil, sweet clover and broom invaded her senses. A warbler trilled over the constant buzz of insects. She pedaled furiously toward the horizon, feeling every bump and hill of her virtual heath’s rough terrain. The sun was setting in front of her, firing the heath with blushing colors. The visceral rhythm of *echo* music boomed in her ears as her bike sailed over a small hill. She felt the jar and turned to see the dust she’d kicked up. She cycled steadfastly toward the horizon. Her heart and breaths matched the fast pace of the music as she threw her thoughts into neutral. She soon felt the warm glow of effort infuse her already glistening body. Sweat beaded on her forehead and dripped into her eyes. She wiped it away onto her wet hair and pushed herself harder, biting down on her lower lip with the exertion. The vegetation swept past her in a swift series of watercolor blurs. She never seemed to get any closer to the horizon. The sun trembled over the darkening hills, then touched and seemed to melt into them. It sank then disappeared, leaving the sky ablaze in deep ochre under pewter clouds.

She turned up the music and drove herself harder until it hurt. Until every muscle ached. Panting, she felt the pain and focused on it, keeping herself there for as long as she could. It occurred to her, as she rode her bike into the oblivion of an imaginary horizon, that this was all one big drug. This ship and her journey toward an uneasy destiny, spiced with dreams of a man who never really existed, not the way Zac portrayed him anyway. Was she betraying Dan somehow? She had to admit that she had blurred the two, what Dan had been in reality and what Zac had enhanced him into. Was there even anything left of his real self in her memories now?

An hour passed before Genevieve stopped peddling and collapsed over the handlebars, hardly aware that she’d been crying. She barely listened to the music that thundered to the pulse of her pounding heart. Her head leaned against the handlebars and she felt the cold trickle of sweat trail down her forehead and jaw. She watched it drop like tears from her chin onto her bike and the floor. Blinking the sweat from her eyes, she stepped off the bike and the music stopped. Blood pounded in her ears in the silence of the room. She felt her breathing return to normal rhythm as she made her way to the showers, her mind involuntarily summoning Trip’s challenge ... *are you still chasing ghosts?*

Chapter Four

Genevieve stepped into the mirrored shower room. In response to her presence, the water ran. She leaned in with her palms against the wall to steady herself and let the hot water cascade over her bowed head and back. As the water pelted over her sweaty body and seduced her into relaxation, her skin began to tingle with a wild painful ecstasy. An ecstasy of lonely anticipation, a yearning to be touched and sweetly embraced. It travelled from her sensitized flesh into the core of her being, where she craved to be filled, and brought a memory of when she and Dan had made love in the rain of a Tahitian jungle—or had she dreamt it? It didn't matter. Instantly, her belly flamed and she felt the pulse of her heart in her crotch, hungry like a feral wolf for Dan's hard cock. Gasping with dumb want, she pressed her eyes shut and dropped to lay face down in the shower, water spattering her back and buttocks in a torrential downpour.

Fingers slid inside her very slimy other mouth and frantically stroked her labia, dragging out a long throaty moan. She continued her relentless stroking, now teasing her clit and resisting the painful urge to plunge in deeper to satisfy that greater need, and felt a spicy pain throb inside her like trapped steam. The yearning grew unbearable, drawing out an agonized wail. She clamped her eyes shut then gave in to the feral urge. Fingers dove in and she thrashed, imagining Dan's throbbing dick inside her, pumping and filling her. Hand slid and rocked in a repetition of rising excitement. Eyes flashed open, jaw snapping wide, and she cried out several times as a delicious agony welled up and gushed out in waves of come. The screams ebbed into sobbing spasms on the jungle floor—no, shower floor, she amended, panting out her spent breaths ... No, she was *here*, alone and masturbating in the belly of a metalloid organic ship in deep space. Four hundred light years from home. Travelling to an alien planet on a perilous mission of dubious portent ... *Chasing ghosts...*

She lay on her belly on the shower floor for some moments, fingers still inside and coaxing out a remnant pulse, like the aftershock of an earthquake, and letting her sobbing breaths return to normal. Water pummelled her back like the kneading hands of a cruel lover.

Without wanting it there, her mind wandered back to Trip's interview last year. What really had happened to the Prometheus IV and its predecessors? The explosion that had killed Dan and his crew remained shrouded in mystery to this day. And, although she hadn't expressed concern in her interview last year, she was beginning to feel the edge of anxiousness now. Particularly in light of the Zac II incident and Cheryl's disclosure about Zac II's misjudgement. If that wasn't enough cause for concern, they were nearing the location where Dan's crew had met their demise...

Genevieve rose to her feet and, pulling her hair back from her face with her hands, stepped out of the shower stall into the blow dryer stall. As jets of warm air buffeted her, she ran her hands briskly along her body and hair and critically assessed her statuesque figure in the mirrored walls surrounding her. Too tall, she'd thought many a time, she was as tall as Dan and wondered if that had ever bothered him. She was incredibly fit and her slim body remained youthful and taut like an athlete's, though perhaps a little more rounded out at the hips now. Her medium-sized breasts were firm and she still had a flat

belly. Her butt didn't sag either. It was nicely rounded, something Dan had always delighted in, he was a bum and leg man. He'd spent many hours caressing the rounded cheeks of her buttocks, following the crease then down her long slender legs. They were the legs of a dancer, he used to say, slim but tightly muscled from her frequent runs and cycles. Genevieve let her eyes stray to the reflection of her own gaze. She knew she was considered attractive. Wild chestnut hair framed her still youthful, only slightly creased face. She considered her green eyes too far apart and her mouth and lips too large. That never seemed to bother Dan. She knew he adored and revered her physical beauty. Early in their relationship she'd often caught him staring at her with that dazed look of wonder and admiration. It used to embarrass her and she used to wish he'd stop ... until he did. She never made a big fuss of looking attractive. Despite that, many men had made advances on her, particularly once Dan had gone.

As soon as she was dry, Genevieve made her way back toward the nursery in silence, deciding to conduct her own quiet investigation. Without Zac's help.

She passed her own hibe chamber and entered her non-hibe bunk room, located adjacent to the nursery. It was small but equipped with all she required and desired, a bunk bed where she could rest when she got tired during non-hibe, a dresser, desk, personal computer. And privacy. This was the only room where Zac had no camera. Genevieve fished out a charcoal grey tank top from her dresser and threw it on. Then she sat bare bottomed at her computer and set to work.

Taking a deep breath to give herself strength, Genevieve flexed her fingers and began the key strokes to access the Zeta Corp files on the Eos missions. The Prometheus II, led by Captain James Evans, was the first mission to Eos back in 2127. That was two years after making initial contact with Eos and its diplomats. At a time when Earth was suffering more than ever from environmental degradation and resource limitations, the Eosians seemed to co-exist with the ecosystems of their planet without any observable technology and flourish. They lived longer, suffered little disease, and appeared very content as a people. So, their signal to Earth that momentous day appeared like a gift from God.

After perusing several files, Genevieve settled on the Captain's personal mission files. His mission statement read, "complete diplomatic ties; sharing of information, and acquisition of data particularly on their unique technologies and abilities to maintain a level VI technological civilization with next to no known technology and no environmental cost; fulfill Project DAWN..."

What was DAWN? Genevieve hastily keyed in the project and was mystified. Every file pertaining to DAWN was classified CONFIDENTIAL. Only Class AA NASA personnel and the mission commander had access to any DAWN files. Why hadn't she run across this before? Genevieve hastily checked the Vega I mission and found virtually the same mission statement and reference to the DAWN Project. When she checked her late husband's mission, she found the same reference in his personal files.

Genevieve blew out a long breath and leaned back in the chair. She raked back her thick mop of hair, tucking it behind her ears, and stretched her head as far back as she could. Although she was the ship's captain, Genevieve wasn't in charge of the mission. Her mission files contained no reference to a DAWN project. She wondered if Bragg had them in his. Did his mission include directives she had no knowledge of?

* * * *

Genevieve hastily ran a comb through her hair then returned, dressed only in her grey top, to the control room. The holo-camera only captured her from the bust up so there was no need to cover up totally, and she truly did hate wearing clothes. She settled on the chair, feeling its cool surface on her naked butt, and proceeded with her messages to Jim and Cheryl. Both messages were rather formal, she indicated that all was well and there was absolutely no concern—not quite what she felt. Then with reluctance she sent her programming files on Zac’s personality to Cheryl.

Duty done, she decided to learn more about Eos and its people.

Eos was a lush planet of multi-colored forests, rivers and oceans and immense mountains. It lay in the Pleiades, an open star cluster about four hundred light years away, in the constellation Taurus. The planet was quite similar to Earth in size and gravitational pull. It was situated close to a small yellow dwarf main sequence star, much like Earth’s own sun. But unlike Earth, which was tilted on its axis as it orbited the sun, Eos did not experience seasons. It experienced a fairly constant climate that fluctuated only from wet to wetter. With an average temperature of 26C and average relative humidity of 80%, Eos was steamy.

Ecological research using the vids provided by the Eosians had estimated that eighty percent of the planet was covered in dense rainforest that most closely resembled the complex mesophyll vine forest of Earth’s tropical lowlands. The diverse Eosian forest ecosystem was a very wet multi-storied jungle with buttressed emergent trees up to fifty meters high, tangles of woody vines or lianas, and epiphytes.

The Eosian jungles were dominated by purples and greens, provided by the principal tree, whose profusion of deep purple flowers and green-lilac leaves washed the Eos forest in a mosaic of noble color. The Eosian sky glowed in warm shades of pink and lavender, a quality imparted by the unique dust particles that made up its upper atmosphere and further out circled it in spectacular rings of ice and debris.

Genevieve was fascinated by the incredible set of rings that orbited Eos. Like the other terrestrial planets of her solar system, Earth had long since lost the rings that once apparently circled it. They would have dispersed or been pulverized within 10,000 years of their formation. Genevieve remembered the first vids that the Eosians sent of their planet with its beautiful rings. Spanning a distance of over 500,000 kilometres from the planet’s surface to its outer fringes, yet less than a tenth of a kilometre wide, the total mass of Eos’s rings amounted to that of a medium-sized moon, presumably from where the rings had originated.

As she reviewed the vids of Eos, Genevieve was struck once more by the paradise-like quality of the planet’s rich and bountiful ecosystems and its wonderfully content people. It was a bit like how she’d envisioned Eden would be...

The planet had been named Eos after the Roman goddess of the dawn. The planet’s real name was unpronounceable, as was their entire language. The Eosians used their tongues in strange ways to create a cacophony of lyrical percussion-like sounds. There didn’t seem to be any rules to their language either. It appeared to evolve daily. How the Eosians kept up with this strange evolution and why, was not known. In the fifteen years that Earth had been communicating with the Eosians, no one on Earth had been able to crack that one. Luckily, the Eosians, being so adaptable in their own changing language, quickly learned Earth’s most prevalent language, English.

Genevieve thought the Eosians an attractive species, as she appraised their spokesman, Azaes, speaking in the vid. Apart from his mauve skin color, Azaes's humanoid features were so similar to *Homo sapiens* that leading anthropologist and geneticist, Chuck Fairweather, was prompted to suggest a common ancestry between humans and Eosians that might provide critical insight to the origin of the universe itself. This enraged most religious leaders and generated controversy to this day. Of course the Eosians weren't about to send Earth samples of their DNA so Fairweather never proved his theory. There were observable differences between Eosians and humans, though they were rather trivial, besides his unique skin pigments there was a total lack of hair on Azaes's entire body—at least what she could see. And the enhanced size of his hands and feet, which threatened to make him look a little goofy. Somehow, and to his credit, it didn't. While Azaes was easily taller than the average human, his large extremities seemed to promise, without delivering, an even larger size. As though he was a remnant of a giant being. Genevieve suddenly grinned. Were *all* his extremities exaggerated?

As she studied Azaes in one of his ten Eosian vids to Earth, Genevieve had to concede that Trip had spoken rightfully about them being condescending and secretive. But, to give the Eosians the benefit of the doubt, this impression was derived through humanity's sole interaction with one Eosian—Azaes. What if it was just Azaes who was an asshole?

She remembered when Azaes first made contact with Earth. His communication on worldwide vid via some yet to be determined means had stirred the world with promises of not only other sentient life in the universe, but of sharing a wealth of new knowledge and the promise of a renaissance of innovation and prosperity for humanity, already feeling the strain on its resources and ecological health of its present technological path. Azaes had come with news of a world that flourished without any observable technology and a people who lived much longer and healthier than humans. While humans busied themselves with thoughts of how to exploit Azaes's world, no one thought to ask why he'd communicated with Earth in the first place.

Absently stroking her lips with her fingers, Genevieve ran the original vid several times, first listening to his stirring speech, then to study the background and then the alien himself. She still remembered that momentous first greeting fifteen years ago when Azaes's purple face became an instant icon to humanity. She'd watched it alone on her televid at home, after having just returned from the Horologii system. Dan had still been away, conducting experiments on Jupiter and she'd wished he was there with her to witness a significant page in Earth's history.

"I am Azaes," said the attractive Eosian, standing in front of an intriguing background of towering dark blue crystals that glinted inside a glass-like building. He wore a deep purple robe that was provocatively open, displaying his muscular and hairless chest. "I'm spokesperson for the peoples of Eos, a small planet in the system you call the Pleiades. I bring tidings of peace and prosperity in cooperation with humanity. I bear gifts of knowledge far superior to yours: the ability to quell disease, poverty, pollution, even death as you know it. Yes, the gift of eternity. We will share these wonderful things with you when you are ready to receive them." Then came the bludgeon. "You are not ready yet. You still wield hostilities and wage war upon one another; you covet power and greedily lust after your neighbor's treasures. Your disrespect for your environment is testimony to your disrespect for yourselves." He

straightened and tried a smile. It looked more like a grimace, and probably was, Genevieve considered—it was probably hard for him to smile. “Every week for ten weeks at this same time, I will provide you with a little of what may come.” And, as he’d solemnly promised, he reappeared ten times with amazing footage of his planet and his fellow Eosians, who even though they looked like naked savages living in huts, had conquered disease, age, wants such as food and space. Then, as stunningly as he’d appeared on the worldwide vids, Azaes disappeared, his initial two minute speech stirring more calamity than a year’s worth of war.

Genevieve leaned back and absently ran her hand through her hair, appraising Azaes more closely. Aside from his supercilious manner, Azaes might have looked attractive if he smiled, which he didn’t. This one quality, observed and discussed by many others, may have been the single most important factor in how people interpreted his speech. Most agreed that he represented a species that clearly saw itself superior to humankind and most people came to the logical conclusion that the Eosians wished to dominate. As quickly as excitement arose at the initial contact, suspicion and fear superseded it in a wave of anti-alien hysteria that far surpassed any Luddite movement currently in vogue. It would take years to mollify the hysteria caused by Azaes’s threatening intellectual arrogance, and anti-alien feelings would remain for the most part, among the masses. It didn’t help that Azaes, for what he did show, refused to divulge important things about his people and planet until humanity, according to him, was ready. In the meantime, scientists and politicians began to focus less on the mutual cooperation he’d hinted at in his first speech and more on finding some way to acquire the coveted Eosian knowledge on their own. Their dogged persistence in this one pursuit was the reason she was here now, despite no formal invitation from the Eosians and the suspicious failure of any space vessel to reach Eos in one piece.

Azaes appeared physically fit, taut muscular chest and abdomen revealed, through the open dark purple robe he always wore as he stood with excellent posture in front of a pyramid-like structure that glinted like pure amethyst. The rest of him remained below the angle of the camera. Azaes looked mature yet youthful, with few wrinkles except a few around his eyes, which suggested that he did smile occasionally. And his dimpled chin was rather intriguing...

Zac piped in, “Genevieve, that’s your fifth yawn in five minutes. You’ve been up for over nineteen hours. I suggest you have a brief sleep to recharge. Don’t forget, you have a full ship’s tour, scientific analyses, calculations and telemetry and mission review tomorrow.”

She nodded. “Right, Zac. Good idea. I’ll be *jacking* tonight,” then quickly added, feeling the need to defend her decision, “I get a better sleep that way.”

“Okay,” Zac replied unquestioning. She’d been *jacking* to sleep in non-hibe for close to a year now. It was more comfortable than her bunk bed, she reasoned, making her way to the bathroom, and found a great reassurance in knowing what she was going to dream about.

* * * *

Catching the eerie view, Genevieve stopped briefly in the forward lounge on her way to her hibe room. As she wandered past the comfortable chairs and tables, she thought the whole idea of a lounge kind of moot, considering only she’d ever be its occupant. After

sweeping her gaze around the empty lounge, Genevieve's eyes settled on the large view ports, whose view of the brilliant blue gossamer of the Pleiades reflection nebula had distracted her in the first place.

"Douse the lights, Zac," she instructed, crossing to one of the ports. Instantly the lounge darkened and her view of wisps of blue cloud intensified. It was spectacular. The open star cluster was already visible from Earth, thanks in part to its nebulosity, caused by the chance encounter between the cluster and a molecular cloud drifting through it at a speed of 11 km/second. Since Zac had penetrated the thirteen light year-wide nebula two hibes ago, they'd passed alternatively between velvet blackness and brilliant blue light scattered by the carbon dust of the gas/dust clouds, depending on whether they were on the reflected side of a particular aspect of the huge nebula or its occultation side.

She never tired of the view. It was so foreign that it appeared almost unreal. And so unlike what she'd seen on the earlier leg of the trip, millions of stars embedded in the deep velvet of infinite space. She vividly recalled awakening from the hibe that had taken them into the cloud and seeing it from the 'inside' for the first time. It had sent her hyperventilating with terrified exhilaration. Cringing with horrified delight. Its terrible beauty had been for a brief moment more than she could handle. More than she could comprehend. And she remembered actively avoiding any rooms with portholes for the rest of her non-hibe time.

Vapors of color swirled around them like an eerie yet fanciful dance, as though the ship was drifting mindlessly inside a huge spider's web. She took in several deep breaths to keep from gasping at the enormity of it all. If there was a God, this was assuredly His retreat, she thought with sudden solemnity. It was too vast and incomprehensible to be a home to anyone else, much less any human. But there probably was no God, she decided. At least not a warmhearted one. How could such a God have created such a cold and amorally complex universe? One that had taken her husband and her sweet child and given her nothing in return ... except longing.

Her gaze strayed to the far right of the view port, where she could already make out her destination. Eos, with its magnificent multicolored rings, whose ice crystals and carbon impurities glowed in the starlight and reflected light of the nebula. Most planetary rings were formed by dust flying off a moon or its disintegration by the planet's own tidal gravity or the bombardment of meteoroids. There were certainly enough meteoroids in this system, she thought, agreeing with most astronomers back home that this was indeed how the rings had formed on Eos. The planet's ring particles had been estimated to range from microscopic dust to barnyard sized boulders. Definitely to be avoided at all costs, she thought with a frown, then smiled to herself. Zac would take care of that.

She leaned forward and pressed her face against the transparent bio-film viewport, returning her gaze to the icy fire in space and listening to the quiet hum of Zac's operating systems. This really was the last frontier, she contemplated. Virtually every part of Earth's surface was either used as a resource by industry or tourism, or inhabited. There remained no wilderness. Even its vast oceans were being mined and farmed for its resources. Only the universe remained ... where you could hear your own breathing and contemplate how small and insignificant you were. There was something fearfully exhilarating about recognizing a universe so vast and strange that it could never be conquered or defined by the hubris of humankind.

And it didn't matter that she was utterly alone, hundreds of light years from home and travelling to a potentially hostile planet. She found a strange humbling comfort in knowing that here, she and her lonely life was insignificant. That her discomfort with people, her isolation in a party crowd, her awkward conversations with old friends, and her yearnings for something she wasn't likely to find also didn't matter. None of it mattered because she didn't matter. She was part of something far larger and far more significant.

“Thanks for the light show, Zac,” Genevieve said quietly and left the lounge.

Chapter Five

Genevieve stepped into her personal hibe room, in the nursery where all the other crewmembers slept in the bliss of extended hibernation. Sometimes, usually right after coming out of a wonderful *jack* session in hibe, she envied their uninterrupted sleep. They had no cares, no worries, no reality to deal with. Only wonderful dreams to orchestrate and experience in enhanced sensuality. But after a day in non-hibe, Genevieve enjoyed the edgy sharpness of reality, striding with fluid movements through real air that sent the hairs all over her body standing on end, feeling the hard resistant textures of objects in her sensitized hands. Like coming out of one dream and entering another. Then after three days of working, sweating, eating, drinking and laughing with Zac, she returned to hibe with mixed feelings.

A part of her felt like she was betraying a sense of purpose by returning to hibe. She accomplished something significant during non-hibe, more than merely providing the ship with energy. But the rest of her yearned madly to go back, and she would feel the need to return shake inside her. Even now, her body trembled in anticipation of *jacking* for a single night.

These short one-night *jacks* during non-hibe were more like a power nap, a wet daydream. More intense, with no time for foreplay. Zac usually launched her directly into a sexual episode once she achieved REM.

Genevieve shut the hatch to the hibe room and walked the soft floor to her *jack* suit lying where she'd left it on the floor. It was attached to the wall via a long tether like an umbilical chord. All the *jack* suits were attached to Zac. Except for the portable *jacks*, that served as full vac environmental suits reserved for emergencies. The portable *jacks* still communicated with the ship via quantum waves but they weren't reportedly as capable of achieving as sensual a ride as the permanent *jack* suits in the nursery.

Genevieve pulled the flexible suit over her legs, then pushed her arms through the sleeves. Once in, she secured the front.

"I'm ready, Zac," she said. "My body's ready too." She smiled.

"It's your largest organ, you know," Zac reminded her.

"What?" she asked, glancing down at her breasts. Was Zac trying out a new dirty joke?

"The skin."

She barked a laugh. "Yes, Zac," and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, as she struggled with the fasteners. She felt the sizzling tickle of the nanosensors and anticipated returning to sleep with mounting excitement. "I know."

"What's your pleasure, Genevieve? What do you want to dream about tonight?"

"Same as always, Zac," Genevieve sighed, thinking it odd that Zac kept asking her when her answer was always the same. "Of Dan, of course. Your normal version of our hottest night in Tahiti." When they'd first courted. It was her usual choice for a single night of dreaming. Intense, fast and still incredibly good for Zac's power systems. Did it bother her that her fantasy of Dan was more her own fabrication than the man himself? God damn it, why was she suddenly thinking that now?

"Are you sure?"

Zac sounded disappointed, she thought as she closed the faceplate, completely enclosing herself in the *jack* suit's self-contained environmental system. Zac must have considered her the most unimaginative human in the universe. He had stopped making suggestions, but had obviously not stopped thinking of the myriad of possibilities she was passing up.

"You can choose anything, including the impossible," Zac usually began, hoping to lure her into trying something new. "You can be anything and do it with anything. Think of the possibilities, Genevieve. What about a ménage a trois?" to which she'd firmly replied, "No." "Okay, what about doing it in space with an alien?" She'd laughed, "No." "Then what about being the passionate Pasiphaë, Queen of Crete, your beloved bull humping you with that huge dong..." "NO!"

Thinking of Zac's disappointment and the bizarre choices of the other crewmembers she relented. "Okay, Zac. You can try something a little different, but keep it with Dan. And no animals!"

She felt herself lift off the floor as Zac reduced the gravity field and she began to free-float. She took in a deep breath then exhaled slowly, already succumbing to the gentle hypnotic suggestions of two billion nanosensors on her naked flesh. She felt a brief surge of excitement, as she contemplated the reason for the negative G design of her hibe room—to accommodate the wild contortions and jerking movements she made while in the state of sexual excitement. Then, with a sigh, she felt her eyelids grow heavy and her mind wander...

Dan was so deliciously predictable. She'd practically choreographed his every move and delighted in the anticipation of them. She knew she was disappointing Zac with her "reruns". But why spoil a good thing? Once you'd discovered Nirvana, why would you abandon it for uncertainty?

* * * *

Being a veteran jack dreamer, Genevieve knew she was dreaming when she saw Dan's naked body striding toward her on the deserted beach, wet skin shining under a moonlit sky. He had the body of an athlete, firmly but not overly muscled, hairless and darkly tanned chest chiselled with perfect pectoral muscles and erect nipples. Dan had a handsome, boyish face, belied only by a network of lines that radiated from his warm eyes. His smile stored enough wattage to light up a city. And his dick was pointing right at her.

When he saw where she was looking, his smile turned into a feral grin and he jerked his body forward a few times in an unmistakable gesture.

She glanced from his erect penis to the mischievous expression on his face and giggled like a giddy schoolgirl. With a last coy glance at him, she dashed into the cool surf for him to give chase. The ocean tugged her legs into a slow motion dance. He laughed and caught up to her with a tackle that made her squeal and sent them both toppling into the water. Then he pulled her up in his strong arms and passionately kissed her, tongue sliding deliciously in and probing with the promise of another "tongue" in another "mouth".

He bit her lip, hard, drawing out blood and a jag of pain. He was rougher with her this time, and she felt something between thrill and brief horror at the thought of beasts and the unexpected. Dan was usually a gentle and patient lover, drawing out her erotic

agony for as long as he could before entering her and letting her come. He was being uncharacteristically exuberant now and she found herself exulting in it.

Her belly ached with a feverish desire that flamed up into her face and she clamped her eyes shut. Scorched, and mouths still connected in a wet embrace, she clawed his arms in a wild frenzy of passion. Her pelvis muscles pulsed with anticipation and she slid her hands down to his rump, pulling his hot flesh up against her. His penis pummelled her, frantically looking for a way inside, then found it. She gasped as he thrust hard and deep, lifting her off her feet. He jerked her up and down like a doll, rough and insistent. She howled at the raw ecstasy of pain that surged through her and realized that she was experiencing something new and exhilarating.

They grunted in unison with each bold thrust, sending waves of throbbing pain that boiled up until the tide of coming pulsed out of her and released a shuddering, excruciatingly satisfied scream. Dan growled and ejaculated then stumbled back, pulling her with him. He fell back into the water with his butt, taking her with him and they rolled in the surf and moaned in a haze of spent love and kissing. How he'd taken her—

—But he wasn't finished! Still inside her, his penis firmed in pulsing waves and he rolled on top of her in the surf. She tasted salt and coughed up the ocean she was inhaling. Dan's cock swelled into something bigger than it had ever felt before and thrust vigorously like the beating surf. It pierced like a molten lance to the centre of her. Pounded into a place long forgotten, coaxing out a primal beat that ached for release. Somewhere in the back of her mind she sensed that she was drowning but she didn't care. Because—Oh, God! She felt her own seismic waves of come welling up and pounding her, mauling her breasts and worming her out of the surf along the burning sand.

They came at the same time. Wailing in abandon, and hearing his sounds of exultation for the first time, she ejaculated with him in waves of excruciating pleasure, then sobbed out the rest of her release as he continued to pulse inside her. They lay in a tangled embrace on the hot sand, where they'd migrated out from the water like a pair of hot reptiles. His lips gently kissed her wet hair, as tender now as he was rough before. This was a new Dan. A Dan who'd lost his reserve; who'd given her everything of himself, his darker animal lust, even his fear. And confidently taken all of her, every last molecule.

“Dan that was the best it's been...” She pulled away with a giddy smile of rapture, opening eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed. But his boyish face had morphed into something else—the face of an alien! An Eosian! She jerked out of his arms, pulled away from his cock, and stumbled to her feet, staring. How long had he looked that way? How long had she been kissing that?

He seemed to understand her unspoken question and smiled knowingly. “He's not the only one who can love you,” the Eosian said in a beautiful singsong voice. He looked familiar and she suddenly recognized him as Azaes, that snooty spokesman of the Eosians, from the files she'd been reviewing.

Genevieve stumbled back up the beach. “No. It wasn't you I just loved!” she insisted.

He watched her sadly for a moment before speaking, “He would never love you that way.” Azaes leaned back on his elbows, his long body reclined on the beach. The words might have been conceited but his tone conveyed simple honesty. “Ask your heart. He was a gentle, reserved man. And...” he raised a brow, “didn't have what I have.” His hand gestured subtly down.

Drawn to his gesture, Genevieve gaped down the alien's muscular body to his magnificent cock. It coiled, flaccid yet immense, over huge testicles like a satiated lion. The lack of genital hairs only served to enhance its immensity. "It was I who loved you," the alien said. Then he sat up and leaned toward her and she saw his penis flex, grow larger than it already was and rise. "I can love you again and again and each time it will be different," he said with a tender smile. "I can make you happy." He reached out for her, but she recoiled and ran up the beach, not daring to look back.

God damn it, Zac! This was her dream, too, after all. She willed Azaes to disappear and instead found herself fixing her mind on his tender smile and that huge stirring penis.

"You're an explorer, Genevieve," he called after her. The way he'd pronounced her name, in an almost singsong voice, with a sharp roll of his tongue. It made her name sound beautiful and for an instant she felt drawn to turn—NO! She refused to look back. Where was Dan? She had to find Dan! She pounded the hot sand toward the grove of palm trees.

As if in response to her desperate thought, she had a sudden vision of Dan in his ship, dishevelled, perspiring and wide-eyed with fear. He grimaced at the controls and barked orders to his co-pilot to make trajectory changes. "We can't be that far off! You idiot, Larson! What have you done!?" he screamed in panic.

Larson stabbed new instructions in the ship's computer then shook his head. "She's not responding!" He saw something on the screen that terrified him and moaned. "Oh, SHIT..."

A massive explosion jolted the ship and it broke up in front of Genevieve's eyes. She had a brief view of Dan engulfed in flames like a wick, then he came apart in front of her eyes along with the rest of the ship. She screamed. "Oh, God! NO!"

She stared down a huge pit, where Dan's broken body lay, shovelling dirt on him, burying him ... then as though she'd become Dan, she watched herself flinging dirt down from above. Unable to move, she felt the dirt clods pummel her, stinging her eyes, and blinked off the dirt. She breathed it in with her nose and mouth, drowning in it, choking and tasting its acrid sharpness...

Chapter Six

She bolted awake, gasping. “Oh, God, what have you done!?” She could smell her rank sweat over the spice of her cum. “You interfered with my dream! You changed it on purpose!”

“You said I could,” Zac offered lamely. “I did it to help you, Gen...”

“Genevieve!”

“He’s dead, Genevieve. Face it and move on. Stop living in the past.”

“Get me down! NOW!” she shrieked, kicking out with her hands and feet. “You had no right!”

“I did it for your own good...”

“*Good!*” she spat the word out. “You call that good?”

“You’re so stubborn. I only wanted you to experience burying him, burying an old chapter of your life. But you changed it to a nightmare...”

“*Me?* What about Dan morphing into that Eosian with that huge ... huge—I sure as hell didn’t come up with *that!*” she shrilled.

“Hey! That wasn’t me,” Zac said defensively.

“Well, it had to be one of us and it sure wasn’t me!”

“Honest, Genevieve, it wasn’t me...”

“I can’t believe this!” she shouted. Zac was lying to her. She didn’t think that was possible. “You’ve got nerve. What gives you the right...”

“I know you better than Dan. Better even than you know yourself,” Zac continued, in what Genevieve imagined a slightly condescending tone. “I know your deepest dreams, fears and longings...”

“How can you say that?” She shook with anger. “How could you ruin it all?” She gasped out the words between convulsive sobs. “I trusted you!”

“If you could only give me a chance to show you what I mean, Genevieve,” Zac continued, introducing gravity to the room and setting her down. “I ... love you.”

Her stomach lurched with a horrible sinking feeling.

“The hell you do!” she shrilled, feeling violated. She frantically wriggled out of the suit, the live nanosensors that lined the inner surface of the *jack* suit caressing her like dirty little fingers in a gang rape. Once extricated from the suit, she flung it to the ground and fled naked out of the hibe room.

“Genevieve! Please come to your senses,” Zac called imploringly, his voice echoing in the corridor as she ran. There was no place she could get away from Zac. She was *in* Zac, after all.

For the first time since she’d entered the sentient ship over a year ago, she felt self-conscious of her nude state. As though Zac was watching her with lewd eyes and thoughts. She felt exposed. And alone.

Genevieve dove into her bunk room and slid the door shut. This was the only place Zac didn’t have a camera. She leaned with her back against the door, panting, and commanded herself to calm down. Zac had been so cruel! First, he tainted the sanctity of her relationship with Dan by morphing him into that arrogant alien with the huge dong of a bull—never mind that the sex she’d had with Azaes had been the best she’d ever had.

Then Zac had brought back the pain and guilt of Dan's horrible death in all its raw vividness. And on top of that, he lied to her about doing it. "Oh, how could you do it, Zac?" she whispered, feeling her throat constrict with renewed emotion at Zac's betrayal.

She slid down to the floor onto her butt, gathered her bent legs in her arms and leaned her head on her upraised knees. Curled there in a ball, hugging herself she gave in to bitter sobs. It had been horrible losing Dan in the first place. Thanks to Zac she'd lost him all over again, been forced to relive the raw grief and gaping emptiness that his death evoked. Fragments of sad and terrible memories of what happened after his death tore into her soul, her complicated pregnancy, losing her baby and then her mind. The sessions with doctors and her slow climb back to self-sufficiency and living sanely alone. After a year's leave, Zeta Corp took her back. Was it because she was one of their best pilots, like Jim had said, or because he was sweet on her and had taken pity on her? Maybe this was all a big mistake, she finally considered, thinking of Jim's great reluctance to put her on the team.

As the crying dwindled, her agitated mind slid unwillingly to Zac's incredible revelation. How could a machine love? What was it thinking? What did it want from her? And to lie to her ... Oh, God! Was this what Cheryl was talking about?

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable with no clothes on, she scrambled to her feet and went through her dresser, finding and throwing on a pair of grey flexpants and a sleeveless blue top. She sat hunched on her bunk bed, legs spread apart with elbows leaning on her knees, and rested her head in her hands. Her eyes shut as she took several deep breaths. The room was silent except for the quiet hum of her personal computer and the faint murmur of Zac's environmental system. When she finally opened her eyes, her gaze strayed to her computer. It was possible Zac had entered the data on Zac II that she'd asked for. It was worth checking out, she decided, remembering Cheryl's disturbing words about Zac II's weakness in judgement.

Genevieve rose and slumped onto the chair in front of the computer. She punched in her personal code and searched for Zac's data file on Zac II. She was surprised to find it there.

After a quick review she was able to confirm her suspicions about Zac II and its personality fault. It seemed that the more human an organic AI was, the more likely it was of making human-like mistakes based on human vices.

She jerked out of her chair and paced the room, running her hands nervously through her tangled mop. What did this mean for the remaining mission? With a long exhale, she reluctantly concluded that she might have to abort the mission. It was getting too dangerous, with Zac lying to her. If she couldn't trust Zac...

She surged back to the computer and slid into her chair, punching in some commands and confirming what she had meant to review with Zac today. They were less than two days from reaching Eos. She was expected to remain out of hibe to oversee Zac's entry to planetary orbit, communicate with the Eosians and awaken the crew to prepare for their descent to the planet's surface. It probably wasn't going to happen, she decided. She couldn't endanger the rest of the crew.

Genevieve wandered to the meal chute and ordered one on the cue pad. Within minutes, a streaming dish of nano-produced chicken, green beans and salad appeared in the chute. Genevieve grabbed the warm tray and forced herself to eat. The heaviness of disappointment had robbed her appetite. After nibbling half of her meal while pacing the

room, she set down the tray and turned back to her computer. Sliding into the seat, she found herself reviewing Dan's last transmissions before the explosion.

Biting her lip absently, Genevieve watched the unshaven face of her husband as he made his third last communication to Zeta Corp headquarters. "We're about a month from reaching orbit status with Eos. Still no communication from the Eosians." He smiled weakly. Genevieve swallowed convulsively. Dan looked exhausted. And nervous. Dark shadows lingered under his eyes and he was showing the stubble of not having shaved in a while. "The men are restive, they complain of nightmares and restless sleep ... I have to admit," he continued with a long exhale, "that I'm having them too. Disturbing dreams." He ran his hand over the stubble of his chin and Genevieve thought she detected a slight tremble. "Arguments among the men are disrupting our morale. They're accusing each other of petty injustices. Lying, cheating and such. I'm not sure what's happening to us..."

His next to last message was worse. When Dan's image appeared, he looked very unkempt. His hair was stringy and unwashed. He was fully bearded and his clothes were rumpled, as though he'd slept in them. Dark pits had grown around his eyes, which sparkled with a strange light. "We're nearly there, but at what cost? Mark Vingor had a nervous breakdown—we don't know what else to call it. He tried to sabotage the mission and I had to put him in the brig. Mark's the most level-headed guy I know, but he just cracked up. It started with him refusing to sleep because of bad dreams and ended with him trying to scuttle the mission. When I confronted him, he insisted that I told him to do it! To my face!" He ran his hand through his hair and Genevieve could see it shaking. Barely aware that she was shaking too, she contemplated how the behavior of Dan's crew resembled Zac's, dreaming up things that didn't happen. "My own dreams are disturbing," Dan continued. "And they seem so real, almost as though..."

He stopped short and shook his head ruefully and averted his eyes from the screen for a moment with a silly embarrassed half smile. When he looked back to the screen his eyes had hardened with dark resolution. "I'll be sending a private message on secure channel to Zeta about DAWN."

DAWN! She'd always thought he meant first thing in the morning. Now she knew Dan meant the secret project. The third transmission was confidential and she couldn't access it. This was troubling. Very troubling. There was more to this mission than she was privy to and on top of that, Zac was acting up.

Genevieve pushed away from the computer console and rubbed her eyes with her fists. They stung from exhaustion. She needed some rest. She refused to *jack* in again. She would not give Zac an opportunity to mess with her mind again. Zac didn't need her REM energy to run the ship, she reasoned. He had a sufficient store of REM-induced fuel from the remaining crew in permanent hibe. Her theta waves were an extra perk. So, she'd simply ride it out, Genevieve decided, leaning back in her chair. Non-*jack* was okay, she told herself, then suddenly realized that she hadn't had a non-*jack* induced sleep session for over eight hibes. Could she even fall asleep on her own anymore? What about her dreams?

Swallowing convulsively, she glanced at the clock. It was late. She suppressed a yawn. Okay, this is stupid, she told herself, being nervous about falling asleep and having wild dreams. It was Zac's controlled dream that had produced her nightmare in the first place. Of course, she reminded herself, the nightmare was purely her doing. She'd

manufactured that all on her own, by reacting to Zac's stimulus. But she was exhausted. And she had lots of work to do tomorrow. She still had to review ship's systems inside and out and report back to Zeta Corp within 24 hours. If she didn't, they'd abort the mission regardless. And she was so close...

Maybe if she just laid down ... Genevieve flopped on the bunk and pulled out an archaic hardcover book from her small personal library, *Atlantis: Myth and Fact*, a book that had synthesized all pertinent information on both the legend and acquired evidence, from Plato's writings to Ignatius Donnelly's runaway bestseller, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, to recent discoveries of strange crystal structures off New Zealand, the deep Atlantic and the South China Sea that matched those found in the Caribbean earlier.

She flicked through the pages with her finger, not paying much attention. The legend of Atlantis had always fascinated her. What particularly interested her was how its legend shared its thematic elements with virtually all other great cultural myths on Earth. Plato's 400 BC story of Atlantis matched with Moses's and Enoch's accounts of the antediluvian world or the Epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Sumerian tale that spoke of a great flood. She'd flipped to a page in the centre of the book and her hand rested on an interesting, though still contentious quote by Donnelly, "These lost people were our ancestors," he wrote. "Their blood flows in our veins ... the words we use every day were heard ... in their cities, courts and temples."

That was kind of absurd, she thought. Despite hundreds of years of searching, there remained no trace of the Atlantean people, so much so that some enthusiasts came up with fantastical and ridiculous theories of their Lamarckian transformation into sea-life. And yet, there had always been one thing about the commonality of flood legends throughout the world that bothered her, if no one had survived, then how did the story get out?

Genevieve snapped the book shut and stared vacantly at the parametal wall ahead of her. She found her thoughts wandering dangerously to Dan and the last time she'd seen him. He was the gentlest man she knew; yet his temper, when it did finally flare, was formidable. They'd stopped having sex long before he left her in a huff the day before his mission to Eos. She found out that she was pregnant the day before he left her. She'd planned to tell him about the baby growing inside her, hoping that this news would help repair their torn relationship. But somehow it didn't turn out that way. Instead they'd quarrelled over some silly thing she couldn't even remember, he'd flatly announced he was seeing someone else and left. She never told him. Never had a chance to tell him she was pregnant—after five years of trying. They never communicated after that. She spent her entire pregnancy alone and gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. And Dan never knew he was a father. Jason was six months old when Dan's ship exploded off Eos. Then, as if God was punishing her, Jason fell victim soon after to an arcane viral disease and died of complications.

Genevieve curled on the bunk, hugging herself in a sudden violent shiver. Breaths hitching, she let her arm drop down and tucked it between her legs like Dan used to do. She wrapped herself around the arm like a warm blanket and yearned for the mantle of his loving touch, the sweet sound of his light snore, and the glowing comfort of the very routine she'd once despised. She brushed away the tears from her wet face and closed her eyes.

She hadn't cried when they told her that Dan's ship had been destroyed. The truth of the matter was, she didn't know what else to feel except tremendous guilt. He and six other crew members burned to death in the explosion. There was nothing left of anyone or anything. Millions of pieces of crew members and space shrapnel orbited Eos for months, perhaps years before they too found a fiery end, plummeting toward the planet's surface. There was something eerie about not seeing his body. Like it hadn't really happened, as though she had to take it on faith that he was dead. Her close friends thought she was being stoic about it all, but Genevieve realized that she'd simply decided not to believe it, that somehow he'd managed to escape, that he was "taken" by the planet, he was stranded there, his bodiless spirit trapped and trying to communicate with her. Doctors later told her that she'd suffered a mental collapse. Together with the pregnancy and death of her sweet infant son soon after, it wasn't hard to agree. Yet, a part of her had always refused to accept that Dan was gone. She'd seen her boy die, watched in agony as he slipped away. But Dan had simply disappeared and never came back.

Thoughts wandering, she fell asleep.

* * * *

"I love you," Dan said with that boyish smile she loved. He was embracing her as they stood naked in a maple-beech forest. "Let's fuck!"

He pulled her down onto the soft moss and slid on top of her. She felt the cool tickle of the moss carpet beneath her as his warm body pressed against her.

God! His penis was a huge rod with a mind of its own, driving into her and thick like a baseball bat. She sucked in her breath and panted with excitement. His image swam and broke up in front of her. Did it turn purple? She didn't care, because his penis had just slithered inside her and continued to swell and pulsate.

She moaned with each pulse, wild ecstasy escalating and overwhelming her as he continued to grow in waves. "Oh, God! OH, GOD!" she screamed as he surged and surged. She felt him throbbing up her vagina, past her cervix, stirring her like nothing had before. "OH!" she wailed. It was painfully exquisite! He pulsed into her abdominal cavity. Pounded up her thorax. Now vibrating through her chest and up her throat...

Then, like two seas crashing, she roared with her own surging wave of come. Wet and gushing, she pulsed purple out of her mouth and vagina and saw that it was him. His remarkably attractive purple face, those tender deep eyes piercing into her, as he roared his own exultation in a shrill bellow—

Chapter Seven

She jerked awake, hand stuffed under her flexpants, and fell off her bunk. The ship shuddered and moaned from a sudden jar. The emergency klaxon whined.

She burst out of the room. The alarm pounded twice as loud in her ears. "Zac! What happened?" she yelled, pelting for the control centre. "Did we get hit?"

After an excruciating long pause, Zac responded, sounding strained and distant, "I don't know, Genevieve."

"You don't know?" she shrilled. "How could you not know? The alarm is..."

The ship jerked hard, throwing her into the wall. She bounced off it and fell, sprawling on the soft floor. "What the hell..."

"Something's collided with the ship," Zac said without emotion. "The hull's breached. We're leaking air."

"What?" she said in disbelief then abruptly thought of the nursery. She scrambled up. "Where's the damage?"

"Sections two and three."

"Oh my God!" Too close to Section one, the nursery. She vaulted up the ladder to the control room. "What's the status of Section one?"

"It's okay, except it's leaking air. Genevieve, we're leaking air in *all* sections now."

"The crew are in *jacks*, which act as vac suits, so they'll be fine..."

"But you aren't."

She froze in mid-climb. "Damn!"

"The portable *jacks*. They're your only chance right now. The closest one is located thirty meters aft on the portside corridor. Hurry! You'll run out of air in twenty-five seconds!"

Genevieve dropped down from the ladder and pounded down the hall, already feeling the drag of the thinning air against her lungs. "God! I'm having a hard time breathing!" she rasped.

"You're almost there, Genevieve," Zac assured her.

She spotted the locker with the emergency *jack* suit down the hall. Genevieve hauled open the locker door and grabbed the suit with trembling hands. She'd promised herself that she would never get inside one of these again, but she had no choice. She undressed, trying not to think of Zac staring at her, and pulled on the portable *jack* suit with difficulty because her hands were shaking too much.

"Lie down on the floor. It'll be easier!" Zac commanded.

She let herself collapse with her back on the floor and struggled with the arms and legs. Her breaths became shallow and her lungs burned. She found herself panting. Black spots flickered in front of her eyes and she realized with a strange objectivity that she was passing out and that once she did, nothing and no one could help her. Then miraculously she was in. She fumbled the suit secure and clamped the visor down. Instantly, fresh air vented in, enveloped her, and she sucked it in hungrily.

The suit's nanosensors tickled over her flesh, feeling for dirt, moisture and other foreign material to remove and recycle. She inhaled sharply and broke out into goosebumps as the nanosensors probed her lower abdomen and crotch, wicking away the

orgasmic discharge still leaking from her. Normally, in post-hibe she would have succumbed to renewed excitement. But she was already surging with a different kind of thrill—the kind that came with the fear of dying.

Her strength now fully restored, Genevieve scrambled to her feet and hastened to the control room. “Zac, can you fix the damage to you and secure the leak?”

“I believe so. The air leak is just about fixed. Sections one and two have repaired themselves and are now secure. I can restore air within ten minutes.”

“What about the integrity of both ships, you and the *Chimera*?”

“We’re both stable. I am speaking with *Chimera* now. It was unaffected by the impact”

One of the perks of nestling its berth safely in Zac’s belly. “Do you have enough power?”

“I think so. The nursery is secure and theta waves are still feeding online. My system is self-diagnosing and I think I’m okay. We should make it to Eos.”

“Good,” she said, hearing the hollowness of her voice.

So long as whatever smashed into the ship didn’t do it again, she thought. At least they weren’t dead in space, thanks to Zac’s self-replicating organic nanosystem. Now she needed to find out what had caused the collision in the first place. What was out there? Whatever it was, was it the same thing that got Dan five years ago? And, if so, why weren’t they in a million pieces?

“What’s our position, Zac?”

“About twenty hours from our entry point to orbit Eos.”

That was supposedly time enough to figure out what had happened, prevent a second occurrence and get to Eos unscathed.

“So, was it a hyper-velocity impact?” she posed. “A renegade meteoroid?” The meteoroid ring that circled Eos had been carefully considered in their calculations to enter Eosian orbit. But maybe it was less stable than they’d thought. The metalloid sandwich-style hull was specifically designed to withstand such impacts, Genevieve considered, as she approached the ladder to the bridge. And the plasma biofilm shield was further protection. “Well?” she prompted impatiently. Zac was taking his good old time.

“I ... don’t know ... Genevieve,” Zac replied in a faltering voice.

“How could your radar tracking system have missed it? Are you sure you’re okay?” She suddenly thought of Zac II’s misjudgement and felt alarm spike in her chest.

“I detect free radical infiltration in the plasma field with abiogenist generation of viral organic molecules,” Zac said then added in a strange voice, “It may interfere with my homeostatic systems.”

Her chest tightened. That didn’t sound good.

“I think the hit may have caused some kind of impact plasma...”

“That’s impossible,” she cut Zac off. “That’s what the bio-film shield is for...”

“I turned it off.”

“What?” she shrieked, throat dry, and came to a dead halt. “You what?”

“You told me to. You said we needed to conserve energy.”

Her heart slammed. “I did not such thing!” Why on Earth would Zac turn off the shield then lie to her face that she’d told him to? It made no sense. Had he gone mad?

“Genevieve, I ... I ... don’t feel very well...”

“Zac?” The alarm in her head surged and she felt her stomach curdle. What was happening to Zac?

“Genevieve?” Zac’s urgent voice jolted her. She’d never heard him with a panicked voice before. “I need to tell you something about the mission. It’s not what you think it is...”

“What?” she said. “What do you mean?” Did Zac mean DAWN? Was she really the only one on board who didn’t know? “Does this have to do with Project DAWN? What do you know, Zac? Tell me!”

“I...” Zac made a funny sound like a gasp, something Genevieve had never before heard from him either. “...programmed for disaster...” He gurgled. “...DAWN crew already inside the *Chimera*,” he spluttered disjointedly, voice splintering into a multi-timbral spectrum. “...will use Plan B ... they’ll aggressively take what they’re after ... after treasures of...” His voice gurgled and choked and decayed into ominous ticking sounds.

“Zac!” she yelled. “Damn it!”

The ship jolted again, throwing her into the wall. It shuddered and she heard popping and cracking sounds like gun shots. “What the hell...” She flicked on one of the viewport cameras that lined every corridor and felt a slam of adrenalin, they’d somehow drifted right into the ring!

“Oh, my God!” she breathed.

She pelted down the corridor to the ladder and was about to climb it when her feet suddenly left the floor and she sailed up. Gravity had collapsed! She stabbed instructions on the suit’s control panel on her arm to install its own artificial gravity. The suit didn’t respond. A terrifying thought struck her, was Zac doing this on purpose? Had he gone nuts like Zac II?

As she floated close to the ladder she lunged for it. She missed and sent herself into a flying counter-spin across the hall. She shot like a projectile toward the overhead parametal bulkhead and slammed head-on, cracking her face plate—

Pain lanced through her like lightning as Zac’s ominous words flashed through her mind, *if you could only give me a chance to show you ...* then the darkness took her.

Chapter Eight

She walks the soft litter of a dark and ancient rainforest. Immense trees, with plank buttresses that flange out several meters, tower above her like columns in a vaulted cathedral. Mosses and ferns cling to the trees and shroud everything in a luminescent green. The air drips with moist heat and is permeated with the cackles, squeals and hoots of wild animals. The ground is strewn with lianas the thickness of her thigh that coil like hibernating snakes among the browns, rusts, oranges and blues of wet decaying leaves and overripe fruit.

She is searching for something, but not sure what it is. She's on a foreign planet. A glance down reveals she's still wearing her jack suit and she realizes with a wry smile that she's in Zac's dream and he's placed her on Eos. Will she meet him again? Her heart races with anticipation, as she discovers that it is Azaes she is searching for.

He appears a few meters in front of her, a long dark purple robe draped over his shoulders, and open in front, displaying his splendid hairless body, lilac skin shimmering under the filtered rose light of the Eos sun. His gaze clamps onto hers and a large genuine grin of happiness lights up his face. That lopsided grin tugs at her heart and reminds her of Dan as she hurries toward Azaes. He drops his robe, his huge cock already swollen and pulsing.

Seizing her, he peels off her jack suit with a few elegant caresses. They stand for a moment regarding each other. Then he grins like a mischievous boy. "My love, I'll show you how we bind with all life, gaining our strength in the strength of all things that live and love ... Are you ready for the best adventure yet?"

"Always." She smiles confidently, feeling tendrils of delightful exhilaration.

He points to the immense majestic trees several meters in diameter and covered in clusters of bright green moss and dark knobs. The trunks tower like immense pillars fifty meters high, huge buttressed bases weaving out like the folds of a skirt for several meters.

"These vishnas are the dominant trees of the Eos jungle," Azaes says. "We call them the 'trees of love.' And you're about to find out why. Are you ready for the fuck of your life?"

She hitches her breath in slight trepidation and he barks a laugh. Not waiting for an answer, he maneuvers her gruffly to one of the vishnas until she collides into one of its buttresses and feels the smooth cool bark tingle against her buttocks and back. Azaes's warm body presses against hers and she feels his chest against her breasts, his hard cock boring into her pelvis. His mouth closes in and seizes hers in a wet embrace, exploring, cajoling and stirring her insides. As they kiss, his large hands sweep over her buttock cheeks sliding to her thighs and prying them apart. His dripping cock finds a slippery entrance to its home and surges inside. She shudders as he fills her completely like no cock has done before.

"Oh, God!" she wails. "OH, GOD!"

He pounds up and she jolts with a gasp of excruciating pleasure, feeling his thighs beneath hers and her back suddenly burning. He hammers up again and she burns. They are moving up the tree! Her thighs rest on his as his muscular legs hug the tree and they climb up with each pounding thrust of his cock.

The bark of the tree is smooth like leather with bold lenticels and large knobs that Azaes uses, along with the lianas, to hoist them up the tree. When they reach the canopy of furry leaves, Azaes maneuvers them around the thorny branches and spiked leaves until they reach the tree's upper canopy, thick with deep purple flowers and heavy with an intoxicating aroma. It fills her nostrils with a dream-like sweetness that sends her mind reeling with thoughts of aching beauty.

She and Azaes ascend fifty meters up, into the heat of the sun, to a bower of soft branches and leaves with a view of the magnificent forest. After a sweeping glance around her at the breathtaking view, Genevieve returns her gaze to Azaes, who sits, facing her, and leans toward her with a smile of rapture. He clasps her hands and his penis, which he managed somehow never to withdraw, stirs deliciously inside her.

Something very strange is happening, the branches move of their own accord and their soft leaves caress both their bodies, embracing them in a sensual cocoon. She pants with shock as her whole body lights on fire with living pleasure.

For a brief moment she recoils, feeling trapped and thinking she should be repulsed. But her revulsion dissolves under astonished curiosity. The tree seems to know this, one supple branch, covered in deeply fragrant flowers, dips down her body to her suddenly erect and aching nipples. Dripping with nectar, the long stamens and downy petals stroke her nipples like a million tiny lips and tongues. They kiss and lick and suck, drawing out a throbbing ache that courses down to her muscles twitching around Azaes's gently stirring penis. Eyes pressed shut, she moans with longing. As if in response, the flowers brush against her lips, sticky and sweet, wishing to enter her mouth. Her eyes snap open and she recoils briefly until she sees that Azaes has opened his mouth for a branch too. Dumfounded, her mouth drops open and the branch slips past her lips to feed her its gift.

The strongly scented flowers seem to be alive. They dislodge from the withdrawing branch and fill her mouth with an orchestra of flavor, texture and movement that she finds delightfully exhilarating. She sees Azaes's face in a halo of light as the tree embraces them in its own sensual mantle and she feels an incredible wave of ecstasy wash over her in brilliant shades of lavender and green. Azaes inclines and they kiss. The flowers flutter between mouths, curling around tongues and teeth. They dissolve in her mouth and their essence travels down her throat until she feels her insides spasm and boil up.

God! The tree is fucking her too! She's being fucked from the inside and out!

Azaes shudders in renewed vigor. He seizes her arms and his penis now pulses in vigorous waves like a huge gourd disgorging its fleshy insides. His thrust is a lance of bright purple light as the tree's hairy leaves and soft flowers caress the rest of her, drawing out an exultation of painful ecstasy. Like a million hot tongues, they stroke her hair, her neck, her nose, her eyelids, her lips and mouth. They flutter down her back, her breasts, to her buttocks, stomach and legs, to every inch of her skin. Flowers swarm down her throat; his penis surges up; they meet somewhere in the middle in the eye of the storm where, ignited, she exults in a sudden eruption of come that pushes a throaty roar from her mouth. It is the largest most excruciating ejaculation of come she's ever felt. She seizes the corded muscles of Azaes's two arms and gasps out a bellowing cry, shuddering in waves of release. He too cries out and shudders with her. And for a brief moment, in a flash of brilliant phosphorescent insight, she is part of every particle of

Azaes, indeed of this entire planet, its trees and animals, its fractal elements from the tiniest particle to the vast universe overhead.

Then he is kissing her tenderly, arms enfolding her like she's the most precious thing in this huge universe, and murmuring to her in some foreign language that sounds like a beautiful song. She whispers his name, "Dan..."

Azaes draws back suddenly and she catches his look of mortified disappointment.

"I'm sorry," she says quickly, her face heating with shame and remorse. "I meant, Azaes. I did..."

His eyes are sad. "I know you were looking for the spirit of the one you lost. The one called Dan..."

She stares at him in bewildered dismay then puts her hands to her face and weeps. How she's betrayed Dan! How she's betrayed Azaes!

Azaes strokes her waist, hips and buttocks. "Don't grieve. We believe that all matter and non-matter are the same in this universe. Not only the same but connected, bound by the shakra energy that motivates all things. Dan is with us, with you—with me, with this tree, his molecules mingled with everything that surrounds us and penetrates us, he's inside me, in my smile for you..."

She convulses into open sobs and grips his shoulders. He's given her a whole world, the magic of the vishna tree and a portal to the universe, no longer the cold amoral infinity she imagined. She feels so bound to him that she grows fearful. "Azaes, don't leave me!"

He pulls away from her with a puzzled face and stares past her toward a sudden high-pitched howling sound behind her. Before she has time to turn to look, Azaes brakes up into pixels that come apart.

"NO!" Her arms fling out but she catches only air and pitches off the branch, staring at the ground rushing toward her—

Chapter Nine

Genevieve jerked awake to a maelstrom. Lying on the hall floor of the ship in the *jack* suit, klaxon still blaring but G restored, still immersed in the haze of her incredible dream, Genevieve scrambled up, head pounding and dizzy. Something sticky was keeping one of her eyes shut. She briefly panicked then realized that blood from a gash on her forehead had run into her eye and coagulated it shut. Her whole body ached and her right hand throbbed with a numbing pain. It was swollen and she couldn't move it, suggesting a break or severe sprain from one or more collisions with the walls while she was unconscious before Zac had managed to restore ship's gravity.

"Zac?" she called, trying to flex her hand. There was no answer. "Zac?" she called louder, finding her voice shrill with rising alarm. She smelled and felt the sticky wetness of her sweat and cum and wondered why the suit hadn't cleaned her. Unless ... but if the suit wasn't working, how had Zac created her fantastic dream?

The ship shuddered and whined with the sound of tearing metal. Genevieve pelted down the hall to the control center, realizing that restored G was likely due to an imminent crash landing on Eos. By some miracle they'd managed to get through Eos's rings.

Rushing into the control room, she came to a dead halt and stared in shock. They'd already entered Eos's atmosphere and were plummeting through dense cloud toward the jungle surface. Genevieve slid into her pilot's chair and seized the controls to correct the ship's fatal trajectory. Her smashed right hand throbbed in sharp objection, but she ignored the pain as she throttled down and flipped on the bow repulsors to bring up the nose of the ship. "Come on, Zac!" she yelled over the screaming ship. "Come on! Do it for me! One last thing!"

The nose lifted slightly, but not enough. They were still moving way too fast and coming in too steeply. At this rate they were still going to crash and burn—

They broke through the cloud and she inhaled sharply. The clouds had been very low and she was shocked by how close the planet's surface was. A colorful jungle, thick with dense forest rushed up to meet them. "Oh, God..."

The ship jarred and screamed. The first impact threw her forward and pitched the console on top of her as the ship bounced. She gasped a cry as the consol crushed her leg and abdomen. Another massive jar flung her head back. It smashed into something and everything ended.

* * * *

She lay on the soft grass, heaving with the excruciating pain of labor that came like shock waves down her abdomen. Something, someone was leaning heavily on her leg, and it tingled like it had fallen asleep. The pounding waves inside her welled out of her vagina like an incredible orgasm of cum and she had an incredible urge to push. It felt like a great flow of urination and a giant bowel movement and she felt immediate relief as the baby slid out.

It didn't cry but she saw its purple limbs twitch outwards as Azaes picked the baby up and embraced it in his arms then laid it gently on her naked breast. She folded her arms around the baby as it slept placidly on her. Overwhelmed by the sight of her little baby boy, she wept with joy. Azaes placed his hand on hers and smiled tenderly. The baby suddenly woke and turned toward a dangerous sound. Azaes and she turned too, as the baby began to wail—

Chapter Ten

Genevieve awoke to the klaxon ringing in her ears and a sharp pain pulsing in her gut and leg where the crushing weight of the fallen console pinned her to the control room floor. Her mask had been knocked off but breathable air from the planet had entered the ship; from major breaches in the hull, she concluded. So they'd made it. Light from a foreign planet's sun filtered inside through the cockpit windows. She couldn't see any more of the planet from her recumbent position on the listing floor of the control center—

God! She was wet and slimy. And she stank. She'd urinated and had a giant bowel movement. Crapped big time in her suit. She felt the mess all over her bottom and in between her legs. It was standard practice in hibe to relieve oneself, but the *jack* suit hadn't cleaned her up and dried her. She looked down and saw why. The suit was torn where a long gash on her leg bled profusely, forming a pool beneath her. She briefly gagged at the alarming sight of so much spilled blood.

Her heart pumped in her throat. If she didn't do something fast she'd bleed to death. She had to get to an emergency med station and stop the bleeding. There was one in the control centre itself, meters away, but it didn't matter how close it was if she couldn't get to it.

She tried to pull out from the solid console. Unbearable pain lanced up and brought instant tears to her eyes. She broke out into a sweat.

"Zac?" she called out feebly, hoping beyond what logic told her. Her voice cracked. "ZAC?!" She'd lost Zac when the ship went into its tail spin, long before the crash. Even if the suit had remained operable, there was no Zac to operate it. And no Zac to help her either. She was going to die here, on an alien planet without ever having set foot on it and just meters away from an emergency med kit...

—No! Damn it! She hadn't travelled this far and crashed Zac to just bleed to death.

Summoning up a surge of adrenalin, Genevieve pulled with all her might, screaming against the excruciating pain. She blacked out for a moment and when she came to she realized that she hadn't budged. Her breaths withered to shallow wheezes. She watched through a daze of burning pain as her leg wept blood, and her strength ebbed out of her with it.

A loud clap thundered, as though a piece of the ship had fallen off, followed by a sighing groan. With the sound of metal shrieking against metal, Zac shifted and she could feel the console move, its weight lifting slightly off her. She bit down on her lower lip and hauled herself out, certain she was ripping her leg off. Darkness took her again.

When she regained consciousness she found herself sucking in and releasing her breaths in sobs as she crawled in a single-minded haze to the med kit, leg dragging uselessly like a burning stump. She reached the kit and her hands fumbled it open. "Come on! Come on!" she sobbed, struggling with the nanorepair bandage. After the third try she managed to apply it shakily to her leg. The bandage instantly went to work, snipping through the blood-soaked pant leg and discarding it on the floor. Genevieve inhaled sharply when she saw the extent of the deep gash, now raw, puffy and still pulsing blood. The bandage crawled down her jagged wound, spraying a mixture of antiseptic and local

anaesthetic, which immediately dulled the pain, and stitched the wound closed. The bleeding stopped. After injecting what Genevieve supposed was a nutrient antibiotic mixture into her muscle, the bandage dropped off her leg like an engorged leach, its metalloid legs retracting.

As Genevieve let herself collapse back, the bandage instructed her in a simpering female voice, "This is only a temporary measure. You must report to sick bay immediately."

She barked an exasperated laugh and gasped out, "There is no sick bay!" Then, after releasing a groan of relief, she felt herself passing out.

* * * *

Genevieve awoke with a start, sucking in air sharply, and feverishly anxious. The ship was deathly silent and she swore she could hear her own heart thumping. She pushed herself up from the floor but her leg gave out from under her, and she nearly blacked out. She pulled herself up onto the med station counter and tried to put weight on her leg. Agony burned up into her bruised abdomen and ribs, sending her toppling in a near-faint to the floor with an involuntary cry. She gathered in a few long breaths and scrounged the med kit for some stim pills. She found a small bottle and shook out half a dozen. They spilled onto her shaking hand and she threw them into her mouth, gulping them down in a spasm of convulsive swallowing. She then pocketed the bottle and hoisted herself up again. She fought down waves of dark nausea and willed herself to stay conscious, even though it meant remaining awake to an overwhelming physical agony. Within seconds the stim pills took effect and she was able to set aside the pain and weakness to limp out of the control centre, using the broken off leg of a console as a makeshift crutch.

Genevieve hesitated when she reached the ladder. Then, with a grimace of effort and anticipation, she climbed down. The vertical climb sent febrile sparks of lightning arcing past her eyes in a sudden darkness and she slipped on a rung, losing her grip. She fell several feet to the level below and cried out. She hastily popped several more stim pills and soon felt enough manic energy to ignore the pounding agony of her leg as she staggered down the crooked hallways toward the back of the ship.

When she reached Section One, she stared in shocked dismay, there was no nursery. It had been torn away. A charred gaping hole had ripped through Zac's hull and she could make out the violets, mauves and greens of the planet's native vegetation below, particularly one very large tree whose canopy reached up past the hole in Zac's hull. There was no sign of any of her crew. They were all gone. She imagined each in turn being ripped off his or her umbilical, wrenched for a glimpsing moment from a wonderful dream, then scraped along the planet's surface and ground into mush under the thousand ton hull as it screamed to a final halt.

She let herself drop to the floor and wept convulsively, unconsciously inhaling the heady perfume of some native flower, brought in by a warm breeze. Its scent was intoxicating and sent her reeling off balance as if she'd entered one of her erotic dreams.

She seized control of her mind and brought herself back to the ship. But just as quickly it careered off course and she tailspinned into despair. They'd all come just to die on the planet, never having woken from hibe. She covered her face in her hands. Zac was dead too, misunderstood and maligned. She wanted to apologize. It was always too late to

apologize. If she'd apologized to her husband perhaps they'd have made glorious love that night and he would have left in the morning knowing he was going to have a son—

A low boom echoed from an explosion in the ship's bow and sent it stuttering into a series of angry vibrations. Feeling the spike of renewed alarm constrict her chest, Genevieve scrambled up. But she'd moved too quickly and swayed in sudden giddiness. A hot wind, heavy with moisture, whispered through the lush vegetation, carrying strong bog-sweet aromas and a racket of hoots, cackles and twitters. The planet's flora and fauna overwhelmed her, drowning her senses with fragrance and sound. Eos pulsed with life. It dripped with oppressive smells and eerie sounds and stirred a confusing mixture of fear and sexual arousal that flamed relentlessly through her body.

She collapsed back on her knees with a grunt of pain and wondered with anxious confusion why her loins stirred with such compelling force. God! This place throbbed with sexuality. It was as though she was breathing in erotic desire, the kind *jackers* fantasized about ... What in hell was happening to her—

The sound of Zac's metalloid straining alerted her to a new smell, smoke. Zac was on fire! She had to get off the ship before it collapsed or blew up, or both. Her eyes swept the hall. Her room was still there. She dashed inside and shoved personals and emergency survival rations into a rucksack then peeled back into the hallway. The most expeditious way out seemed through the torn hole in the ship. It was still a long way down to the tops of the forty-metre tall violet trees and she searched for something to use. Her eyes rested on the emergency poly-fibre fire hose. As she dashed for the hose, several distant popping sounds in Zac's bow sent it ricocheting into an abrupt backward tilt. She tottered off-balance and fell with a shriek, then slid uncontrollably toward the open hole. As she reached the edge, she scrabbled desperately for a hold—there was none—and shot out like a missile with a shocked yelp.

She collided into the tree in a hard bone-crunching crack, snapping the breath out of her. Its branches didn't hold her and she spun into a dizzying fall. More branches impaled her, tearing her open like a can opener, ripping the rucksack off her back. Leaves slapped and scratched her like angry tyrants. Then something tugged fiercely—painfully—like barbed wire and she came to an abrupt halt, swinging precariously like a pendulum.

When she'd regained her senses, she found herself dangling from a branch halfway down. She carefully turned her gaze from the thick underbrush ten meters below, to look behind her. She had a spellbinding view of the rent ship towering above, its charred and battered hull looming precariously over her. Black smoke billowed out. But her immediate attention lay with the sharp branch that had snagged her suit—and her. Raw pain blazed through her shoulder where the branch had skewered her flesh along with the suit. It leaked blood but she felt reprieve from her harrowing fall. Albeit brief and minor, the suit wouldn't hold for long. In fact, she felt it giving way—

The suit—and her flesh—ripped, tearing out a scream from her and sending her plummeting. She caught a glimpse of the ground rushing toward her, before she hit—

Chapter Eleven

A vortex of pain swam around Genevieve in a toxic embrace, choking her. She didn't know which part of her battered and torn body hurt more. It was all the same, a mass of tortured meat, bones and viscera. She smelled the acrid boggy smell of soil and vegetation cut by a sharp undercurrent of cloying human waste—her own. This was an awful dream ... must be one of hers. Of course it was ... the *jack* suit was ripped to shreds, Zac was disabled, dead and maybe she was too...

She felt a hand upon her, then her neck being gently pulled. Pain raged through her and she opened her mouth to scream. It came out a whimper. She felt someone's face near hers, warm breath upon her, and a man's voice spoke to her in a foreign language she'd never heard before. It was a gentle voice and he spoke tenderly, words almost singing and punctuated by clicks of his tongue. In her mind, his alien words seemed to translate in a voice that was seductively familiar, *I know that by moving you I am hurting you, but you are injured very badly and if I don't take you to our village you will die from your wounds...*

Beneath the haze of agony she felt herself being carried. She fought against crying out with each painful motion that flamed through her like a rusty blade ... she tried to focus on the man who'd presumably rescued her, but she could only coax a swirl of fractal colors and textures before succumbing to the darkness again...

* * * *

She was in a field of too vivid green grass, under a too brilliant blue sky, trying to run and dragging legs that felt glued to the ground. She was fleeing from a towering blaze that licked her heels. The flames charred her legs until she no longer felt them ... The burning images broke up into individual pixels that cut through her like sharp glass...

She was conscious of herself moaning and heard unintelligible murmurs of altercation ... that same man's voice speaking now in harsher tones, answering others as if in defence—of *her*? Bright yellow lights assaulted her eyes, a chaotic torrent of harsh and broken images swam past her ... of a foreign landscape of tall purple trees below her ... of flying—No! It couldn't be!—of lying, tethered, on some living winged creature, its shrill cry piercing her ears, then she slid into a cold blackness that took her breath...

Like climbing a long set of stairs, she rose out of a febrile haze. Someone was undressing her, then washing her naked body. She fought to focus her eyes and saw an alien man with lilac complexion bending over the lower part of her body, gently dabbing with a wet washcloth. It was the arrogant Eosian in her file documents, Azaes. The man in her dream with the beautiful voice! And far from arrogant now. There was only tenderness and concern in his eyes as he gently washed the filth—her own excrement—from her. Moving her limbs gently with one hand, he stroked the cloth slowly over her buttocks, then her thighs and finally her crotch—

Even as a part of her sizzled inside at his gentle strokes over her labia, she felt sudden shame at her state. She'd soiled herself like a baby and stank like a sewer. Tears burned in her eyes and she convulsed with sobs.

He turned and glanced at her face, then touched her forehead tenderly as she looked into his compassionate eyes that were the brightest green. "You are getting better only to feel worse," he said gently. She'd heard him speak the foreign words even as he seemed to translate in her mind. She felt his hands tremble as he stroked her hair with something akin to awe. His touch was exquisite ... then she slipped into darkness again.

* * * *

She was being kissed ... most deliciously. Entwined and floating in space like the one and only time she and Dan had collaborated on a mission together. Only this time they weren't tethered to the Aphrodite IX, orbiting Venus, they were floating freely. And completely naked. She could feel his cool skin pressed against her, with nothing between them and the dark velvet mantle of stars surrounding them.

"Am I dead?" she finally asked, searching his face for wisdom.

He smiled sadly, still embracing her. "I am. I don't know about you..."

"I must be. Perhaps we're both in Heaven. Maybe this is Heaven..." she trailed, glancing down to where his cock pressed deliciously hard against her leg. "Because this is what we'd do in Heaven, wouldn't we?" She began to laugh. But a surge of guilt swept through the laughter, turning it into bitter sobs. "I'm so sorry, Dan! I meant to tell you I was carrying your child ... You never knew he was born! Then you both died!" Tears surged out like a dam breaking and she clamped her eyes shut, shaking violently in his arms and sending them into a rolling spin.

"You're wrong, my love." He gently took her face in his hands, cock stirring and finding its way between her thighs. "I did know. And I forgave you long ago." He kissed her on the forehead and stroked her hair with a tender reverence he'd never before displayed. But someone else did, someone with an unusual fascination for the hair on her head... Her eyes snapped open with excitement and she saw that Dan was morphing in front of her eyes into him! And the cock tucked between her legs was swelling to match.

"Genevieve," Azaes continued in a lyrical voice, lips brushing hers in rapt desire. "You are free. We are all part of an arcane fractal existence, an autopoietic fabric spun from the spin networks of granular space and time to our growing and breathing galaxies. Genevieve, we are all made of the same material. We are all driven by the same force. And it is not what you think it is."

Then he seized her passionately in his great arms, sending them into a giddy role. She opened her thighs to him, revealing her moist vagina, vibrating with the flow of wet heat. Her body undulated over his massive cock, teasing it even larger, directing it over her swelling labia and her gaping hole. His mouth closed over hers and his penis thrust fiercely inside. She wrapped her legs high around his firm buttocks and pulled him further inside. He swelled into her deepness and filled her with the universe.

She cried. Like she had never cried before. The sobs shook her with such violence that Azaes could barely hold on and they spun into dizzy circles. She cried like a baby as he stroked her hair. And it felt so good...

* * * *

She awoke drowsily, tongue thick in her mouth, with the queer sensation that she was floating. As she blinked the sleep out of her eyes she saw that she was immersed and

indeed floating vertically in a greenish fluid. No, not floating exactly, because the fluid totally supported her and she could breathe normally through some kind of device attached somehow to her nose and mouth. Ahead of her, she could just make out a huge jade crystal form, with large hexagonal cylinders extending out of a base about two meters in diameter.

She was naked—

And not alone!

Someone touched her. It was Azaes. He stood next to her, without a breathing device, also naked, except for a long prismatic crystal that hung from his neck and—Oh, how large his penis was! Just like her dream. Flaccidly relaxed and hanging between muscular thighs, it was a magnificent piece of manly architecture, attached to a strong fit body.

Azaes massaged her body in a most exquisite way with long slender fingers and the palms of his hands. She felt strengthened and noticed that her leg was mostly mended.

Seeing that she'd awoken, he stopped briefly and cocked his head sideways with a warm smile. He seemed to say in her mind, "Don't be afraid. I'm a healing facilitator." He impressed upon her mind that he was using a technique that relied on pressure points to stimulate her body to heal itself. Then, with a nod, as if content that she both understood and assented, he continued.

Before she had a chance to mentally react, his massaging strokes summoned a physical reaction from her that was both painful and wonderful. A kind of exquisite agony travelled from one end of her body to the other and seemed to explode from inside of her then compress down upon her in undulating waves. She wanted him to stop and continue at the same time and found herself moaning. Again, like before, just as she was about to feel awkward and embarrassed by her reaction, he brushed his leg against her and his slender fingers slid over her abdomen. She flinched as an unsettling excitement stirred inside her. Before she knew it, the memory of her dream of his wild lovemaking flashed through her like lightening, and her whole body surged with a sharp thrill.

Overwhelmed by a sudden compulsion, she thrust out her pelvis. She captured his leg between her thighs and moved rhythmically over him, sending waves of lust flushing over her face.

Azaes abruptly stopped his massaging and stared. For a brief moment he looked frightened, then entranced by her overture. Seeing his receptive expression and dilated eyes, she seized his strong shoulders and pressed her body against his and felt his large penis firm deliciously against her abdomen. His eyes blazed with a powerful desire and his huge cock, now hard and swollen, sought her vagina, wet and longing for company—

Then his face clouded with—was it contempt? He jerked away from her and to her great mortification, swam up out of sight without further acknowledgment.

As if snapped out of a trance, she felt sudden and extreme shame and her face burned fiercely. How could she have succumbed to an urge like that? She'd behaved like a slut! With a stranger. An *alien*, for God sake! But his touch had awoken something compellingly and deeply erotic in her. She couldn't help herself. It was as though she'd entered her dream and needed to enact it to its natural conclusion.

Oh, God! Am I that far gone?

For the first time she contemplated escape. But before she could go very far with those thoughts, she felt them break up and wander off into darkness ... No! NO! She fought off the slide into the darkness, then fell...

Chapter Twelve

Genevieve let her eyes flutter open drowsily with a long sigh. As she focused on her surroundings, she realized that she was laying in a very comfortable bed in a sunlit room—wait, not exactly a bed. Not a conventional bed with a mattress, sheets and a blanket. This bed was more like a ... well, a cocoon. As she stroked the strange material slowly, she reluctantly concluded that it was alive somehow. Following a sudden urge to get out, she struggled to no avail. As comfortable as it was, the creepy cocoon thing didn't give way.

Genevieve's quick scan revealed that the room was made of similar materials. Perhaps *grown* was more apt. Rays of soft evening sun streamed through the mostly translucent walls, which resembled the membranous wings of a dragonfly. The ceiling, made of similar membranes was darker, as if naturally tinted. A table and two chairs appeared as though they'd sprouted from the floor, itself made of a smooth peach-colored substance.

Was Azaes holding her prisoner? And, if so, why had he gone to the trouble of healing her? Then her thoughts slid to her incredibly undiplomatic *faux pas*. God! What had she done? Even now she felt her face heat at her foolish and forward action. Good God, if she hadn't had those erotic dreams of him, she wouldn't have been so forward. It was as though she and he had been lovers already. But he didn't know that. If only she could undo it all. And yet, the way Azaes had touched her had been so ... sexual. He'd explained that he was healing her. Perhaps she'd imagined he'd said that. She hadn't heard him speak it, after all. Perhaps all those previous times she'd heard him speak English in her head, she'd imagined it too. So, what *had* he been doing, then? She certainly felt much better now, and had to admit that what he'd done had felt exhilarating.

Interesting how he'd looked exactly as he had in Zac's dream ... No, she amended, *her* dream. Those last several times she'd dreamt of Azaes, Zac was already dead. It was *her*. She'd imagined it all. Zac hadn't lied to her after all. But, how could she have imagined Azaes's naked body so accurately? She'd only seen him fully clothed.

Her thoughts ceased when the door opened and the target of her musings entered. Azaes, dressed in a long robe, sauntered into the room as though it belonged to him, head turned only slightly to give her a sideways look of obvious contempt. It shocked her and plunged her into renewed shame for her abominably lustful action. This was the real Azaes. Arrogant, stand-offish and haughty. Why had she imagined him so tender in her dreams? But he *had* been tender to her when he'd first rescued her after her fall from the ship and during his healing performance.

He certainly wasn't looking tender now. Azaes paced the floor, glaring at her and mumbling, "*su neehat mo legglis ... su neehat mo legglis...*"

She tried to smile at him in truce and wished she could apologize for her stupid and rude actions. It struck her suddenly that she may have enacted some terrible cultural taboo with her pitiful seduction attempt. God! It wasn't supposed to be this way. She wasn't even supposed to be here. Some ambassador she was ... she'd once hubristically entertained thoughts of doing a better job than the pompous and narrow-minded Mission Commander Bragg, but now she was eating humble pie big time.

Azaes shuffled his feet. He looked distraught, as though warring inside his mind with a decision. After several hesitations, he practically lurched forward to the “bed” she was lying in. She shrank back, briefly frightened by his glare. He blinked and after a long sigh, she heard his voice in her mind, “I apologize for my state of undress earlier. I understood that you preferred to remain undressed and felt comfortable in your nudity as we Eosians are...”

How had he gathered that fallacy? she wondered. In all the vids they’d exchanged, humans had always been dressed and Azaes had always presented himself dressed, indicating that he knew of human’s inclination to cover up. Her peculiar habit of undress only occurred on the ship from *jacking* and she’d never communicated with Eos during her voyage here.

“I just need to examine your state of health,” he continued. “You incurred many internal injuries and I need to determine their state of reconstruction. Please do not be afraid. The closest word you have to describing what I am is a ‘doctor’. I am much more than that, but that mundane description will suffice.”

He certainly wasn’t humble, Genevieve thought. Then again, he had every reason not to be, she thought, summoning the image of his magnificent naked body and Olympian cock beneath the robe.

He spoke several words in Eosian and abruptly the “bed” peeled back its covers, revealing her naked body. Blushing furiously, her arms flung over her breasts and she turned sideways with humility and brought up her knees. He frowned, lips drawn tight, and shook his head impatiently. “I need to examine you,” he repeated rather gruffly in Eosian, translated in her mind. “Please lie still, stretch out on your back as you were and relax.”

Against her inclination, Genevieve took a deep breath and willed herself to relax, forcing her arms to her sides and legs down. Apparently satisfied, he leaned forward to touch her, hands poised over her face, and his robe falling open. She felt her heart pumping in her throat, not sure whether it was from the magnificent view or the anticipation of his touch. From his impatient and brusque manner, she fully expected his hands to be equally gruff and braced herself even as she thought *why am I letting him do this?*

But his fingers alighted on her cheeks like feathers. She inhaled sharply. His touch, like before, was electrifying, and sent a thrill coursing through her whole body. It was like magic and she felt entranced. Their eyes met briefly and she was shocked at the depth of tenderness in his. The angry scowl had vanished and she saw inside his deep sea-green eyes, a compassion that hitched her breath. He too, was breathing in shallow, rapid breaths as he stroked her hair, obviously enthralled. Was *that* part of his diagnostic assessment? It looked and felt more like a compulsive action. Either way, it felt wonderful and she caught a glimpse of his huge purple penis stirring, as her eyes fluttered shut in ecstasy.

He ran his hands along her entire body, in a continual caress, from head to tingling toes, over her breasts, heaving with escalating breaths, past her taut nipples, down along her waist and abdomen, fingers spreading out to her thighs ... Oh, dear God! ... thumbs sliding hesitantly over her nether hairs.

Heart suddenly pulsing in her crotch, she thought, *am I being violated?* She couldn’t tell. She didn’t care. The feeling was too electric. Too alive. The ache too vibrant. By the

time he'd reached her toes, involuntarily flexing in their own exhilaration, she was careering to nirvana with a low guttural moan—

His hands abruptly left her. The shock of losing the connection to his energy made her gasp, and her face heated with sudden embarrassment.

“Ahh,” he responded, looking rather flustered and bringing his robe about him to cover himself. “*Ma poyet*,” he said and she heard, “I’m sorry,” in her mind, although the tone of his voice sounded anything but apologetic. “I pulled away too quickly,” he continued in translated Eosian. “A skilled healer would never have done that. But you were entering that place again...” He broke off, abruptly shook his head, disgust obvious on his face. Then with a short command for the bed to close back over her, he muttered, “You are healing nicely,” and quickly left the room, robe flying out behind him.

Pure dismay washed over her, taking what good feelings she'd had, and dashing them like an ocean surf against a rocky shore.

Her remorse and shame were soon supplanted by frustration and growing anger. He'd saved her life, obviously. But he was being very rude about it. How could he have ever been the subject of her erotic dreams? For all his healing abilities, Azaes was an arrogant bastard, she concluded.

She struggled again to slide out of the living bed, which was the best way to describe the creepy cocoon-like creature she was trapped in. But her arms were pinned underneath and it wouldn't budge. As soft as it felt, the membranous material seemed as strong as Kevlar.

She wasn't left alone with her frustrated thoughts for long. The “door” irised open again. She'd had enough of his abuse and was about to demand he release her with an explanation. But it wasn't Azaes who entered the room. It was another Eosian, a young and totally naked one. He displayed no sign of shame or self-consciousness, Genevieve noted. She, on the other hand, felt her face redden as she confirmed that Azaes's endowment was not unique.

“I am Diaprepes,” he spoke the English words without translating in her mind. “And your name is Genevieve, isn't it?”

She couldn't help a gratified smile at hearing someone speak directly to her in English. “Yes,” she said eagerly, making an effort to keep her eyes from roaming down his magnificent muscular body. “It is.”

“I'm Azaes's younger brother,” he said affably. “He says you are now healthy. You have been in a healing trance under his care for several beld-cycles—eh, a month of your Earth days.” He shrugged at her look of dismay, then continued, “You are well enough to leave the *zoch* and join us for the evening meal if you like.”

She assumed the *zoch* was this living bed that imprisoned her. “How do I get out of it?” she asked.

Diaprepes smiled as he would to a child. “You simply stroke it and think it open.”

“Oh.” Sure, like that was obvious, she thought wryly. “Thanks. Eh, where would I find some clothes?”

“Azaes told me you might wish to wear something. We are not in the habit of wearing clothes, except in ceremonies,” he said with a naïve smile. “There.” He pointed to what looked like a cupboard. “My brother said you could use one of his *Sthanu* robes that he wears for Circle ceremonies.”

“Let me guess,” she said with a crooked smile. “I open it by stroking it.”

“No,” he said with a frown of slight impatience, like this was all too simple and she was a dunce. “You tap it.”

“Oh, of course.” *How silly of me!* “Thanks.”

He backed away toward the door and nodded to her. “I will let you dress in privacy. When you are ready to eat, I will be waiting outside.”

She watched him wave his arm for the door to iris open. Then, with a sigh, she stroked the living bed. Instantly, it rolled back and she leapt out, feeling very free. Azaes had done an impeccable job of healing her wounds, Genevieve thought as she inspected herself. There were no scars or bruises. She’d apparently made a complete recovery.

She found a deep purple robe made of light, almost transparent material that felt like soft cotton and smelled fresh. It was large on her, the sleeves hung over her hands and the robe itself dangled down to her ankles. After a thorough search, she realized that there were no fasteners to close the robe. Of course, she thought glumly, it wasn’t made to cover the body, but to display a decorative color as part of a ceremony.

A pair of sandals about her size lay on floor of the cupboard. She decided against putting them on, being very accustomed to walking in bare feet. Then she realized there was nothing left to do but to open the door and face her hosts—captors—whatever they were.

Chapter Thirteen

As promised, Diaprepes was waiting for her when she emerged from her room. The hall she had entered looked to be some sort of place meant for social gatherings. There were tables and chairs that looked as though they'd sprouted from the floor. It was obvious that she was in a large "house". Probably Azaes's house.

Diaprepes gave her a bright smile, looking her up and down in unabashed admiration. "Azaes told me you were tall for a human female." She was still a full head shorter than he was, Genevieve thought. Diaprepes pointed to another large room. "Come," he said. "There are some people anxious to meet you."

She followed Diaprepes into the other room, which, as she'd surmised, was a large dining room occupied by ten or so Eosians, all seated at a long organic table with plates of food laid before them. They all turned with interest to watch her enter. And they were all quite naked, except for Azaes, who wore a robe like hers but left open, revealing everything.

He shared the head of the table with a very attractive and naked female Eosian. Genevieve couldn't help letting her gaze stray to the exotic beauty and survey her critically. The woman's body was slim though with ample breasts, like the other female Eosians, and she sat erect and proud like a queen. A sister, perhaps? No, a consort, a lover. Or even a wife! Oh, God! she thought suddenly, feeling her face heat. No wonder he'd considered her earlier seduction attempt so abominable.

Azaes rose to his feet, apparently quite unconcerned that everyone at the table, including Genevieve, could now observe his well-hung cock. She blushed, much to her frustration, and felt ridiculously self-conscious at being the only one dressed in the room.

With a calm, but stern face, Azaes indicated for Genevieve to take a seat at the far side. Diaprepes sat next to her, much to her relief. In the very short time they'd talked, she already considered him her friend, her only friend in this foreign place.

Genevieve walked to her assigned place, hugging her robe closed. Besides Azaes and his well-endowed female companion, the others were an assortment of men and women of varying age and weight. Based on this group, she decided that the Eosians were an attractive species, despite having no hair and generally not over-weight. Their pleasing features and perfectly shaped heads gave them a clean and civilized look. Despite the fact that she alone was dressed, she felt like a barbarian.

As she took her seat, Genevieve felt them all still watching her, except Azaes. She wasn't sure which bothered her more, the stares of all these strangers or Azaes ignoring her as he sat down and leaned over to speak to the woman beside him. He made no attempt to introduce Genevieve to her audience, or them to her, which she thought odd and ill-mannered.

Diaprepes leaned over to explain the food on her plate, signalling the others to return to theirs, and Genevieve began to breathe again.

"It's called *buma*," Diaprepes said, pointing to what looked like slimy pale spaghetti drowning in globs of green jelly. "This delicacy is only obtainable twice a year when the *buiuma* inverts itself."

She began to feel very sick and swallowed several times. "Inverts itself?"

“Yes,” he smiled quite cheerfully. “It is the inside of the *buiuma*’s digestive tract, which sloughs off during the *kelm*, our *other* wet season,” he said with a self-amused smile. “*Buma* is very nutritious and highly sought by our gourmets who must travel great distances, at some danger to themselves, to find these shy creatures.”

“How do they find them?” Genevieve quipped rhetorically, eyes rolling, “From their slime trail?” She had an extremely unsavory impression of a giant slug. Then, realizing that all the other guests were watching her, Genevieve swallowed hard, thinking she must not offend Azaes and his guests. She intrepidly took some of the noodle-like intestine and jelly onto her fork and brought it slowly to her mouth.

It actually smelled good, like roast chicken. Forcing down thoughts of vomiting, Genevieve slipped the slimy food into her mouth and chewed. To her surprise, aside from the slimy texture, the *buma* was actually delicious. It tasted like a combination of oyster and chicken, spiced with something like pepper and chilli.

Diaprepes laughed. “You are very brave to eat it,” he said still grinning with amusement. “Most Eosians wouldn’t touch the stuff!”

She stopped mid-chew, suddenly feeling sick again. Why, the little rat! She flashed him an annoyed look. Diaprepes smirked, very pleased with himself.

As if she’d passed some kind of test—probably for idiocy, she thought, chewing down the remainder of the *buma* with difficulty—everyone returned to their own meal, conversing in their foreign language, and Diaprepes blithely continued in English, “Everyone you see here belongs to the sacred *Sthanu* Circle, a group of twelve councillors selected for their untainted genetic makeup, who basically make the important decisions of our society through consensus.”

“Like our world government,” Genevieve said, nodding. Not really, she amended in her mind. Government officials on Earth were not in the habit of being chosen by genetics, nor deciding through consensus. She wondered what ‘untainted genetic makeup’ meant. Turning to face Diaprepes directly, she asked, “Are you one too?”

“A *Sthanu*?” Diaprepes said with a nervous giggle. “No, not yet. As Azaes’s younger brother, I serve as...” he contemplated for a moment, obviously looking for an English equivalent to an Eosian term, “a kind of backup to Azaes, who is destined to lead the *Sthanu* Circle along with Shiva. He is destined to become the *Sthanu*’s *kushu* and she its *kusha*. Together they will direct all that is important on Eos. The power to veto will belong to them.”

Genevieve remained silent and wondered if the woman beside Azaes was Shiva. Genevieve’s gaze kept drifting involuntarily to Azaes and the woman beside him as Diaprepes prattled on about the food and the décor. She must be, Genevieve decided, noting the woman’s confident demeanor. As she looked to where Diaprepes had pointed his finger to a sculpture in the corner of the room, she caught Azaes looking at her, and blushed, much to her great frustration.

“Shiva is his intended,” Diaprepes explained as Genevieve’s eyes drifted of their own accord back to the couple, now bowing their heads together in low discourse. “Isn’t she beautiful?” he ended dreamily, his face expressing open rapture.

Genevieve blushed suddenly as if caught peeking at two lovers under a tree, and straightened to look the other way, clearing her suddenly dry throat. “Intended?”

“Shiva and Azaes are to be married next spring. She is, of course a *Sthanu*, but her genes are one of the purest. She’s expected to fulfill her role as *kusha* very skillfully. We are anticipating a good match and worthy heirs to join the circle for a wonderful age.”

She choked on the peach-like fruit she’d just bitten into and fell into a fit of coughing, much to her embarrassment. Excellent genes. Worthy heirs. Where was love in all this? Perhaps for someone like Azaes, that didn’t enter into things, thought Genevieve as she fought to calm both her mind and her rebellious throat. Why did it all bother her? Suddenly angry with herself she commanded herself to stop blushing—and failed miserably as she caught Azaes glancing in her direction again with a frown. It wasn’t as though she was in any way interested in that arrogant bastard. Clearing her throat, she asked, “What do you mean by pure genes? Don’t all *Sthanu* get chosen because of their untainted genes?”

Diaprepes smiled like a teacher to a favorite pupil. “Yes, but untainted genetic makeup varies within the selected high caste, particularly in the matter of ‘purity’,” Diaprepes explained, though not very clearly, Genevieve concluded. As she opened her mouth to speak, he anticipated her question. “By ‘pure’ we mean discernibly containing the noble spark of divinity we inherited from the Eoptes when they first conceived us thousands of years ago.”

Genevieve fought from glancing at Shiva at this incredible statement. The spark of a god? “How do you know?”

Diaprepes had just shovelled in a huge pile of what looked like red mashed potatoes into his mouth and hastened to swallow before answering. “She is a *shape-shifter*; just like my brother is a *soul-drifter*. These are very rare and divine abilities, handed down genetically from the Eoptes themselves.”

Silenced by astonishment, Genevieve didn’t dare ask what a *shape-shifter* or a *soul-drifter* was and it was a long time before she dared look in their direction.

* * * *

When dinner came to a close, Diaprepes escorted Genevieve back to her room. The dinner had lingered into the evening, yet it remained quite light outside still. Obviously, Eosian days were longer than her Earth days. As Diaprepes turned to go, showing her his magnificent backside and firm buttocks, she beckoned him, “Please, Diaprepes, can you stay awhile to talk? I have so many questions and your brother has been rather laconic.”

He turned and smiled, as if totally understanding and nodded, entering her chamber. So, perhaps Azaes’s taciturn nature wasn’t just for her benefit, she concluded. He came by it naturally.

She instructed the door to shut and took in a long inhale as she turned back to face Azaes’s younger brother. She decided to be blunt, “Am I a prisoner, Diaprepes?”

He made a face of sudden consternation. “Oh, no, Genevieve!” he expostulated, muscular body stirring with nervous restlessness. He possessed a slighter build than his older brother, but it was equally magnificent, with firm stomach and well-muscled chest and arms. “You are our honored guest.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, eyes narrowing slightly. “All things considered, your brother seems to be running the show here and he hasn’t exactly been Mister Welcome with me. At dinner, he ignored me and didn’t introduce me to his other guests or them to me, which in my world is the height of rudeness. Nor has he explained anything to me or

asked me why I even came here in the first place. Nor do I get the feeling that I am free to come and go as I please.”

Now Diaprepes looked uncomfortable. He fidgeted with his hands and his gaze kept flitting from her eyes to the ceiling. Then he squared his shoulders to speak. “My brother has a lot on his mind right now ... with you being here and his Eoptic visions ... He must be very cautious, with his own people and with you, likewise.” Diaprepes smiled lamely and his shoulders drooped. “You are right. You are not free to come and go as you please. But that is for your own protection, until my brother deems it is safe for us all. Think of yourself as a foreign object that came to us from outer space for the first time in centuries. You are both cherished and feared by us all. All the people you met at dinner were members of the *Sthanu* Circle. He had good reason, I’m sure, for behaving as he did. I’m equally sure it was not intended as an insult...”

No? she thought petulantly. *An insult for an insult?*

“As our primary *Sthanu*, our future *kushu*, and your rescuer, the role of being your custodian fell naturally to my brother...” His eyes grew suddenly wide and a smile flickered on his lips as he focused down her body.

Alerted by his sudden interest, Genevieve glanced down and noticed that her robe had fallen open, revealing everything of her from breasts to genitals. These damn things had no fasteners! She briskly wrapped her robe more securely around her, face flushing.

She sat in one of the organic chairs to help keep her robe closed and motioned for Diaprepes to take the one across from her. As he hesitated, she asked, “You mentioned your brother’s Eoptic visions. What are they?”

“Oh, I can not describe them to you!” Diaprepes said nervously. “They are sacred and only he can explain them.”

“Okay. I don’t mean his actual visions, but what an Eoptic vision is ... generally, I mean.”

“Ah,” Diaprepes relaxed with a sigh, understanding. “They are visions or dreams induced by the soporific nature of the *vishna* flower,” He said, sliding into the seat across from her and spreading his legs distractedly apart, penis hanging in full view over his great balls. “My brother is a *soul-drifter*, like I said before. One of the rare few in the *Sthanu* Circle who is sufficiently close genetically to the Eoptes to possess this ability. Legend says that *soul-drifters* are destined to join with the Eoptes.” He waved a dismissive hand, indicating his own skepticism in this. “To aid in *soul-drifting*, the drifter makes a potent mash of the flowers that have dropped to the ground, distils it with other ingredients and imbibes it. This allows him to achieve an intellectual link with the Eoptes—not to be mistaken with a true joining, which involves...” he hesitated and Genevieve noticed the color of his face deepen. Was he blushing? “Eh, involves having intercourse with an Eoptes, something unheard of in present times. They have not shown themselves—except in Eoptic visions to a *soul-drifter*—since they first came down to us in our homeland thousands of years ago.” Then Diaprepes’s face deepened in color as he grew excited. “Some of us believe that the Eoptes will descend again and return to us, joining with all Eosians, and signalling the beginning of a new age of divine living...”

Genevieve thought how the scriptures of the Holy Bible mirrored events in the Eosian pilgrimage and what Diaprepes said of a new coming, “*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away ... Behold, the*

tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain...

“But many of our philosophers believe that the Eoptes will never return,” Diaprepes continued in a nervous shrill. “They contend that the Eoptes refuse to make the same mistake twice, having learned that they must not copulate with non-Eoptes. This will inevitably lead to arrogant hubris and debauchery.”

Despite her fascination with the subject he’d brought up, Genevieve decided to help him out, concluding from his shallow hiking breaths that this topic made him uncomfortable. “So, this infusion made of *vishna* and other things produces an Eoptic vision?”

“Yes,” he responded enthusiastically, obviously relieved. “The *soul-drifter* uses it to guide him in his role as *kushu*.”

She nodded, curbing a wry smile. Yeah, like a hallucinogen. Interesting premise, she thought cynically, letting a hallucinogen dictate government decisions. These Eoptes must be their gods, she concluded. And *soul-drifting*, whatever it was, must be one incredible drug-induced voyage reserved for a privileged cadre, she decided wryly. “So, your brother is my reluctant keeper?” She let out an exhale. And, if she got the right drift of what Diaprepes said, Azaes also had the hubristic pretensions of being a god himself. “Great.”

“What is wrong?” Diaprepes frowned and leaned forward in the chair. “My brother thinks highly of you.”

“Sure,” she muttered. “As a curiosity. Like a weird thing to be studied.”

“He says you are the most sensitive human he has encountered ... and the most troubled.”

Azaes had said that? How would he know? Then she recalled the way he’d touched her ... he’d been so tender and so raptly attentive. And yet whenever he wasn’t touching her, he scowled at her with contempt and spoke to her with anger and loathing. Was it just her rude seduction attempt or was there another reason for his gruff behavior?

She looked at Diaprepes sadly. “Why is he so angry with me?” He’d saved her only to treat her with disdain. Was she so reprehensible to him? Or had she transgressed some major taboo with her foolish sexual act? It was one thing for him to touch her, obviously, but perhaps she’d transgressed by touching him back? How was she supposed to know he was betrothed? “Did I ... insult him?”

Diaprepes bowed his head and didn’t answer. He knew something, she decided.

Genevieve summoned the correct pronunciation before asking, “What does *su neehat mo legglis* mean?”

Diaprepes jerked his head up and stared at her. “You speak our language well.”

Not to be distracted or deterred, she raised a brow slightly and kept her eyes fixed on his. He gave in, “It means ‘you should not have come’.” Diaprepes looked apologetic. “He said that you violated our covenant with the Eoptes.”

“What do you mean? How?” By coming on to him or by simply being here?

“Since we have come, no other beings have been permitted on Eos. It is considered a sanctuary for our people.” He paused thoughtfully, leaning back, magnificent penis in view again. “That may sound rather hubristic and selfish, but I don’t mean it that way.”

My brother explains that the Epopotes only mean to protect us from being tainted ... until we are ready.”

Azaes seemed to use variations of that phrase a lot, Genevieve contemplated, recalling his controversial speech to humanity in his introductory vid. “Ready for what?”

He shrugged again and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Okay, then...” She paused to collect her thoughts about her own situation. “Why did Azaes rescue me at my ship? Why didn’t he just leave me there to die?”

“The others did think you should be left there to die,” Diaprepes agreed. Like those people who’d stared at her in the dining room? “But Azaes argued that the Epopotes let you pass for a reason. The *vishna*, too, were kind to you. They kept you from falling straight to your death when you fell out of your vessel, even after you destroyed so many of their kin.”

God! She didn’t like the sound of that. She decided to start with the Epopotes. “Epopotes? What are they?”

“They are the entities that guard Eos. According to legend, after creating us, they brought us here millions of beld-cycles—eh, thousands of your years ago. It is our belief that they are an ancient species entrusted with guarding the best interests of our universe. No one has ever seen them.”

Definitely their gods, she concluded. “Then how do you know they exist?”

He gave her a puzzled look, as though it was obvious and he wondered why she didn’t grasp it. Then he waved a hand. “Because of the Epopotic visions.”

Sure, she thought, biting back a frown of scepticism. *That* was certainly proof, a drug-induced hallucination.

“And also because of their actions,” Diaprepes added. “They protect us. They keep all off-worlders from reaching Eos.”

They certainly did that, she thought ruefully, thinking of Dan. She wondered if that also meant keeping the Eosians from leaving.

“They haven’t let any other off-worlders in ... except you.”

Genevieve thought of Dan’s ship and the others they’d sent here. “We sent other ships before mine. Did the Epopotes...” she cut herself off to swallow convulsively, surprised at the emotion swelling up her throat.

“Yes, they intercepted and destroyed all incoming craft as intruders. That is why we have never invited anyone here. We don’t—can’t—control the Epopotes.”

“Why did my ship get through, then?”

He had no answer to that and heaved his muscular shoulders in a shrug. That seemed a universal gesture, she thought. Was it because Zac was different? Because he was a “living ship”?

“So, Azaes deferred to the judgement of the Epopotes,” she suggested. “Is that why I’m here? Because he thinks the Epopotes have something in mind for me?” She abruptly thought of sacrifices to the gods and swallowed down the panic surging up her throat. No, surely these people were beyond that. Their bio-technology appeared far more advanced than Earth’s and their integrated culture seemed light years in advance of hers.

Diaprepes smiled with raised brows. “I do not know why,” he said a little too cheerfully for her taste and waved a hand. “I think he sees it as a sign.”

“A sign of what?”

“Of change. You have come to change us.”

She felt her heart flip. Wasn't that counter to what he'd accused her of having done, of violating the covenant of their sanctuary? And yet, the way Azaes had looked at her when he didn't know she saw him looking, with a mixture of reverence and curiosity. It sent a shiver through her. Was he secretly a heretic? She recalled another foreign term Diaprepes had used, "You spoke of *vishna* being kind to me even after I destroyed so many of their kind, who are they?"

His words stumbled as he tried to summon the correct word. "They are large trees," he offered.

"Trees?" she repeated. Trees that were kind? She smiled sideways. "You mean those forty metre high purple-leaved trees?" As in, they had *minds*?

"Yes," he said, nodding cheerfully. She blinked in astonishment, heart suddenly racing as she recalled her magical dream of these trees.

So, that huge tree, whose twenty meter crown she'd sheered off with her ship, had still helped her? At the time, it had felt like the opposite, as though the tree was trying to skewer her. After a large swallow, Genevieve decided to change the subject, "You spoke of coming here from your previous homeland thousands of years ago..."

"Yes, twelve thousand of your years," he said, nodding and stretched out his long legs. She watched, without watching, as his penis stirred with his shifting legs. It coiled and uncoiled like a snake awakening—

She blinked several times to refocus. "What happened? Why did you leave?"

"Most of us didn't," he replied sadly. "Most were killed in the cataclysm. But a few were selected for the seed ships and escaped."

"Selected? By who?"

"The Eoptes, of course!"

Of course. Their gods. "What happened?"

"Our history is steeped in legend passed down by our *soul-drifters*, like Azaes, through direct contact with the Eoptes."

"Right." They'd covered that already. Care of that lovely hallucinogenic flower.

"What I know is limited," continued Diaprepes, stroking his face thoughtfully. "But the legend goes this way, when some of the Eoptes descended upon our homeland, a bountiful planet surrounded by a spectacular asteroid ring, they encountered a beautiful but primitive bipedal species, who were naïve but industrious. The Eoptes intended only to enlighten these natives and elevate them in moral and technological teachings. To this end the Eoptes instructed the women in magic, and conjuring and the men in arts and science. But the Eoptes lusted for the beautiful females and had intercourse with them."

Some legends never changed, Genevieve thought, recalling Earth's own versions from Greek mythology, Plato's writings and even the Bible, *the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.*

"They created a hybrid species of superior intellect and physique. Giant immortals." Diaprepes beamed. "Us."

Of course, thought Genevieve. *There were giants in the earth in those days ... and ... when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men ... the same became mighty men.* She scoffed, "But, you aren't giants. Or immortal."

He laughed sharply, coloring as though he'd been caught lying. "Only remnants now," he said, looking down to study his large hands. She couldn't help a glance down to his most distracting extremity.

“What happened?” she prompted, forcing her eyes back up to his.

“At first we embraced all that was good and virtuous. Then we became less and less like the Epopetes as our genetic material became more and more diluted with native blood. We became conceited and arrogant. We lost respect for everything and polluted our world. We’d learned the skills of the Epopetes in manipulating nature and our technological prowess grew unlimited and dangerous. We’d harnessed particle and wave energy and forces, we had ships that flew in the sky and extensive communications. Driven by hubris and greed, we used our knowledge unwisely to gain more power for ourselves. It was our undoing. We became tainted by pride. We started to think *we* were gods. Then we forgot our pledges of fairness, moderation and restraint or thought ourselves above them. Ambition overcame restraint and we strove for even greater power. We enslaved and exploited the lesser and inferior natives. We used them as laborers and even as subjects for our planetary experiments.”

He shook his head ruefully then continued, “The Epopetes became angry with us and with themselves for having created us, so after selecting a few still virtuous ones for the seed ship, they flung the asteroid ring at the planet, caused earthquakes and giant tsunamis to flood the entire continent we inhabited in one day. And in a huff, they left with a few of us to another planet to start afresh.”

“Interesting,” she said, thinking how strikingly similar legends and myths were from one side of the galaxy to another. *And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and ... the earth also was corrupt ... and filled with violence...* “In the Christian Bible, our God...”

“The one you keep referring to when you are upset or startled?”

“Yeah,” she said with a wry smile, “That one. Anyway,” she continued, “Seeing the total wickedness and moral decay that humanity had fallen into, Jehovah caused a flood that destroyed all life on the world, save a chosen few and in Plato’s writings, the god, Zeus, destroyed and sank the continent of Atlantis in a disastrous earthquake and flood, supposedly at the end of the Pleistocene Ice Age 11,600 years ago, because they’d become decadent and immoral ... So the story goes,” she added, noting Diaprepes’ strange expression.

He made a strained smile and said quietly, “Then we are not unique, it seems.”

“No,” she agreed in a subdued voice, her gaze involuntarily drifting to where his immense cock hung between his muscular legs like a sleeping lion. “You aren’t.” She swallowed. At least his legend was plausible, given that it had been told by its survivors. What had bothered her about some of Earth’s legends, like Atlantis, was that its people had all supposedly perished in the deluge. That left no one to tell the tale. Thinking of Earth’s legends, she posed, “Do you think there may have been any survivors of your kind in your homeland?”

Diaprepes pondered for a moment. “It’s possible. They might have been travelling afar and made it to high ground. Perhaps the natives remained. They were hardy. We’ll never know unless someone travels back there some day.”

Chapter Fourteen

Genevieve was left on her own to watch the darkness of night unfold. As the light outside diminished her room glowed with its own light. Realizing that she was exhausted, Genevieve threw off her robe, wishing she could dispense with it altogether, and washed her body in the deep basin and waterfall that flowed naturally in the bathroom adjoining her bedroom. After a refreshing wash, she stepped out of the bathing basin and felt warm air flow over her from above. When she looked up, she saw a kind of tube that looked a little like an elephant's trunk. Another incredible extension of this living house. Once dry, Genevieve returned to the bedroom and stroked the *zoch* open. After some hesitation, she stepped inside and felt the 'cover' close over her. Despite her reservation about lying inside a living thing, the *zoch* was incredibly comfortable and soft, and she soon drifted into her first dreamless sleep.

* * * *

The next morning Genevieve roused, feeling very refreshed. After showering, she left her room, looking for anyone. She found Azaes's busy young housemaid in the kitchen, cooking. The naked girl could not speak English and they resorted to energetic sign language, facial expressions and fits of laughter. Genevieve discovered that the girl's name was Anka and that she would make breakfast for her.

Anka was a spry and cheerful girl. Her curiosity for Genevieve lay particularly with her hair. Anka frequently took to staring at Genevieve's long tresses, while bringing her hand up to her own smooth head.

Once Genevieve finished a wonderful meal of what she concluded was blue scrambled eggs of some fowl, roasted potatoes with a sweet green jelly and a sweet fleshy yellow fruit, Anka handed her an aromatic hot beverage and removed her empty plate. As Genevieve sipped the sweet drink, she noticed Anka lingering and turned to look at her. Anka giggled, then touched her bald head and swiftly reached out as if to pat Genevieve's head with a look of deep yearning.

Genevieve smiled and, tapping her head, invited Anka to touch her hair. Anka hesitated, but couldn't pass up the offer and approached nervously. Genevieve noticed that Anka's hand trembled as she stroked her head, tickling rather pleasantly.

Anka stepped back and giggled again. She looked down and spread her legs apart to display her naked labia then pointed to her crotch. It reminded Genevieve of a little girl's pussy. Smooth, innocent and vulnerable. Anka gazed back at Genevieve with a sly grin. Genevieve laughed, understanding. Thinking it all innocent between two curious females of two alien species, Genevieve flung off her robe and spread her legs apart to show the girl her furry triangle. The girl gasped and stared. Genevieve hadn't expected such a reaction. She also hadn't intended to permit Anka to touch her there, but Anka simply moved and there she was, kneeling before her with hands gently cupped over her mound.

Genevieve inhaled sharply, not sure what her feelings were apart from some delight. The girl's touch was innocent and reverent as she teased the coarse hairs into a sensual dance then gently guided Genevieve's hand to her own naked mound.

The two women seized in sharp breaths simultaneously—

“What are you doing!?” Azaes shouted in her head in English as he barked out the foreign equivalent. He stood at the doorway, dressed in a robe for Genevieve’s benefit no doubt, staring angrily at the two naked women.

Anka flinched and jerked back. She scrambled up as Genevieve flung her robe back on and surged to her feet, face burning. She redirected her shocked embarrassment into anger, “You will please speak to me directly. I know you can speak English.”

“Very well,” he grunted. He muttered an imperative to Anka, who scuttled out of the dining room, then he turned back to Genevieve with a glower. “What were you doing to my sister?”

Genevieve swallowed involuntarily, throat suddenly dry. “Sister?”

“I would kindly ask you not to initiate interaction with any Eosians until I determine that it is safe and permissible for both parties,” he said with obvious condescension. Was he thinking of her earlier compulsive action with him? “You may influence them in ways you are not even aware. I ask you to please *restrain yourself*.”

The last words had come out rather harshly and she felt her face burn hotter than it had in a long time. It sparked a defensive anger as she recalled that the sister had instigated it all. “I initiated nothing. It was your sister...”

“You are too impetuous and unthinking. First you come uninvited, showing incredible hubris and disrespect, then you injure Eos with that abomination of a living thing.”

She assumed he meant Zac

“Now this insolent behavior...”

Insolent! “I had no choice!” she protested. She imagined the long scar Zac had left as it cut a swath of destruction for several kilometres. It couldn’t be helped. “If your Eoptes hadn’t damaged my ship, I wouldn’t have been forced to land it...”

“I’m not interested in excuses,” he said, waving her off.

“Excuses!” Anger flushed up her face. “Your Eoptes caused the deaths of eleven of my crewmates. I just damaged some of Eos’s ecosystem. I think we’re more than even!”

He paced the floor, throwing flustered glances at her. “You use the word ecosystem cavalierly as though it describes a *thing*, not a living system.” He waved an arm contemptuously. “That pathetic mockery of a living sentient being you call your ship destroyed scores of our sacred trees. It will be centuries before they return to what they were.” He shook his head. “You don’t understand. You are ... you are...” he trailed, clearly at a loss for a suitable description. She swallowed, wondering what equivalent the Eosians had to “bitch”.

He waved his arms energetically, almost violently, making her blink and involuntarily recoil. “And they are not *our* Eoptes. They do not belong to us. We do not control them.”

She remembered Diaprepes saying the same thing. Perhaps they were a little touchy about that, she thought. Azaes seemed touchy about a lot of things. “Well, maybe you should,” she said sourly.

The anger in his face lifted for a moment as he studied her with new intensity. She almost preferred his anger to this uncomfortable inspection. He stopped pacing and folded his arms over his chest, tilting his head sideways, all the while studying her with a

disagreeable frown. “You are the first off-worlder to set foot on Eos since we have. Why? ... why?...”

He was obviously muttering rhetorically, not expecting her to have any inkling of a response to. “They didn’t destroy the ship,” he continued, studying her as though she was an artifact, not a person. “The Eoptes let you in. They did not destroy your living ship.”

Then, as if he came to a sudden decision, he squared his shoulders and the old glare returned. “That is all for now.”

“Wait!” she called after him as he spun around and made for the door. “I have questions too!”

“Later,” he muttered and swung to the door, cloak flying behind him. He disappeared through the winking door.

“Damn you!” she yelled with a stomp of her foot and didn’t care if he heard her through the door. She’d been “locked” up here like a prisoner for too long not to know why. What were they going to do with her? Was she an abomination like Zac, too? Seemed so. And yet, Azaes had helped her and nurtured her back to life, at the risk of incurring disfavor with the others of the governing *Sthanu* Circle. Why had he done that? Diaprepes suggested that it was because she was a sign. A sign of change, perhaps anticipated change? He seemed both fascinated and disgusted with her at the same time. It seemed that she’d accomplished an incredible feat by simply managing to even get on the planet, albeit it would have killed her if not for Azaes’s intervention. If it hadn’t been for Azaes’s swift aid, she would have perished within hours of her fall, bled to death, most likely. Her body had been broken in so many places that any number of organ failures might have accomplished the same deed.

* * * *

She’d wandered Azaes’s house for a mere few minutes when he returned with a terse invitation for her to accompany him outside. It was obvious to her that this had been his intention initially, but his aroused anger at her interference with his young sister had set him off. Once he’d cooled down, he’d returned.

“Come,” he said and spun around to leave. “You need some exercise. I will show you our gardens and orchards.”

She stepped outside into the heat and halted briefly at the doorway to inhale the wonderful fragrance of the air and take in the view. Azaes’s house and buildings were perched on a hill that provided her with a wonderful vista of a meandering river valley below, populated by verdant fields in the foreground, and orchards farther down the hill. Thick rainforest bounded either side of his cultivated land. The air was alive with the shivering sounds of insects and a complicated aroma that resembled a mixture of yeasty bog, overripe cantaloupe and the perfume of honeysuckle. The enticing smell roiled inside her, feeling like the soft caress of a lover’s hand—

Azaes turned to glare at her and hiked his head to hurry her. She blinked off the seductive trance and caught up to him. He almost tripped, staring at her for a moment with a look of astonishment, and snapping his head back, nose flaring as though he detected a strong offensive smell. Then, as quickly as it came, it left and his old glower returned. Genevieve suddenly wondered if she stank. She’d had a shower earlier this morning and she couldn’t smell herself.

As if embarrassed by his own reaction, he picked up his pace, walking briskly and forcing her into a trot to keep up. She invariably fell behind and as she did, she realized that something had been gnawing at her since she'd stepped outside. Like a *deja-vu*. Then she had it, she'd envisioned all this, just as it was! She stared, gaping in stupefied awe at her revelation. This place was exactly as she dreamed it. How could that be? So she'd studied the vids extensively. But how could she have so accurately pinned the temperature and humidity, the sounds, the sensual breeze and heady aromas?

Azaes turned, his taciturn face glowering at her with frustrated impatience. She gave him a lame smile and scrambled to catch up. He grunted and led her through an orchard of tall trees whose branches hung heavy with large gourd-like yellow fruits. Genevieve bent down to pick one that had fallen to the ground and examined it. Azaes, who had walked on ahead in silence, turned and hastened back to her side. "This is the fruit and the flowering inflorescence of the *fika* tree, which grows wild in our forests. You had it for breakfast today," he reminded her.

She nodded. "It tasted wonderful." The husk of the fruit had cracked open on impact with the ground and she pried it open, revealing the juicy flesh inside. She bent with her nose close to inhale its strong nectar-like fragrance. The sticky juice trickled on her hand and she brought it up to lick—

"What my sister may not have told you is that the *fika*, tasty as it always is, can also be fatal."

Genevieve almost dropped the fruit. "Fatal?"

"The *fika* provides a good example of the symbiotic nature of our forest life, here on Eos," Azaes continued, his taciturn face betraying no amusement at her reaction. "As the flowers develop inside the *fika*, a tiny flying insect, the *feek*, enters through the small opening at the top." He pointed to what was left of the tiny opening in the cracked gourd she held. "It is so tight that the female *feek* tears off her wings as she pushes through. The first flowers she squeezes past are male, but they are too young to provide pollen. As she moves further into the fruit flesh where the female flowers reside, she dusts them with the pollen from the male flowers of the fruit she herself grew up in. Then she lays her eggs and dies soon after. The eggs hatch and the *feeks* develop rapidly, eating both flowers and fruit flesh. The male *feeks* are the first to emerge. They mate with the females and enlarge the fruit's opening before dying themselves so the females can exit without losing their wings. While the *feek* larvae grow inside the *fika*, it makes seeds from the pollen the female *feek* brought in and the fruit's own male flowers develop so that the female insects can take pollen with them when they leave. This activity causes the fruit to fall off the tree, making it available to eat by birds and other animals, which spread the seeds through their excrement."

Genevieve looked down at the yellow fruit in her hand with a face of revulsion. She faced Azaes, nose flaring with the effort of maintaining her self-composure. "So, what you're telling me is that this fruit is infested with insects and I just ate a pile of insect larvae this morning?"

He betrayed a faint smile of amusement. Was she turning green? "No," he said. "We usually remove the insects, both the larvae and the mature ones, before we eat the fruit. The larvae look like grains of rice and the mature *feeks* are hard and black like seeds." Then he added with a twinkle in his eyes, "The *feek* are quite nutritious, though. Some Eosians regard them a delicacy and eat the whole, insects and fruit."

She dropped the fruit and took in a long inhale, trying to hide her revulsion and calm the nausea that roiled up. “Right,” she said. Just like the *buma* that no one ate. She wasn’t falling for that one again. Once she’d convinced her stomach to behave, Genevieve looked up again at Azaes. “You said the *fika* could be fatal? What’s that got to do with these burrowing insects?”

“Everything,” he said. “Only fruit that have been invaded by the *feek* are edible. When the insects mate inside the fruit, they release a chemical that neutralizes the poison made by the *fika* to protect itself from being eaten before it is ready to spread its mature seeds. The neutralizing agent lingers in the bodies of the dead male feeks. That is why we only harvest fruit that have fallen to the ground. Fruit that remain on the tree may be ripe enough to taste good but have likely not been invaded by the *feek*. In this way the *fika* ensures that it is eaten only after its seeds have formed and ready to be spread and the *feek* are ensured a new cycle. The poison is an intensely powerful neurogenic chemical that acts swiftly and painfully. There is no antidote.”

Genevieve swallowed, staring at the bright yellow gourds and unconsciously wiping her hands.

* * * *

Once through the orchard, she saw that he was taking her not back to the house, but toward another building that glinted strongly in the sunlight. Wait—it was no ordinary building, she realized as they got closer. It was a two-storied pyramid whose glittering smooth sides were entirely made of a mostly clear pink-hued crystal. Excited, she turned to Azaes. “That was grown too?”

His mouth twitched into an almost smile. “Yes. All of it, including this.” He led her to a small doorway, which he manipulated open with a complicated set of gestures and words. When they entered the large room, she inhaled sharply at the site. Three six-meter high hexagonal blue crystals stood in the room, towering up toward the translucent ceiling, whose corners were lined with a shiny copper-like material that radiated out from the apex. In the middle, not immediately observable, sat a red multi-faceted crystal at the end of a ‘brass’ rod that rose from the floor.

“This is where...” she trailed, overcome by a flood of emotion, and not sure why.

Azaes nodded, understanding. “Yes, where I gave my initial speech. That ruby crystal in the middle, the Fire Crystal, focuses and transmits an intense amount of energy over great distances. It is how we were able to communicate with your planet.”

Genevieve stared. “You built this? Designed it?”

He nodded again, unsmiling. “Yes. From a dream, an Eoptic vision.”

She nodded, keeping her expression calm to hide any sign of being impressed, and studied the structure. “What’s it do? I mean, apart from the obvious of interstellar communications.”

He turned to her, frowning with annoyance. She bit back a smile of devilish satisfaction. “Isn’t that enough?” he grumbled.

“Well,” she began coolly and pointed casually from the blue obelisks to the centre copper-colored rod network and crystal sphere. “I’d say you have several interrelated energy systems co-existing here in some kind of symbiotic network.” Through her peripheral vision, she could make out his intense expression. Good. If nothing else, she’d rattled him a little. It bolstered her onward. “What is it?” she prompted and threw out her

best educated guess with a trace of the fantastic. “Some kind of laser-fusion reactor/gravity wave generator?”

He betrayed both discomfort and rage beneath a good show of restraint, she thought, catching his mouth twitch tight and head snap back.

“Come,” Azaes said tersely, not even bothering to acknowledge her question. He ushered her out brusquely. “It is time to get you back. Other duties claim my time.”

Disappointed to leave but satisfied that she’d gotten a reaction out of him, Genevieve let Azaes escort her back to the house. She barely had time to thank him as he left her in the main hallway and rushed out of the house, sandals slapping the floor and robe flowing behind him. As if the thought had suddenly come to him, he threw a backward glance to her and commanded her not to leave the house.

“Whatever you say, *King Azaes*” Genevieve said in a sarcastic voice while bowing to the shut door. “Bastard,” she muttered, whipping off her robe and flopping face down on the soft *kosh*.

She didn’t see him again that day and ate alone that evening. Azaes’s sister served her a delicious dinner of ripe sweet fruit, nuts and a delightful roasted vegetable dish that resembled eggplant, zucchini and tomatoes. As if frightened of her brother’s wrath, Anka remained aloof and did not approach Genevieve, except to bring her dinner and clear the table. Not even Diaprepes came by and Genevieve retired to her room, feeling abandoned, restive and frustrated.

Chapter Fifteen

The sun was barely up, as Genevieve stirred awake with a long sigh. She'd had another wonderful dreamless sleep and stretched in her comfortable *kosh*. She wiped the sleep from her eyes with one hand as the other stroked open the warm *kosh* and opened her eyes lazily, then jolted—

“Diaprepes!” she burst out. The young man stood next to her wearing nothing as usual, except a bright grin on his face. He was admiring her even as she quickly covered herself back with the *kosh*. “It’s considered rude in my world to enter someone’s private chambers unannounced.”

He nodded. “As it is in mine.”

“What?” she expostulated, pulling the *kosh* up to her neck.

He laughed at her confusion. “I’m sorry, but Azaes asked me to attend to you today as he will be busy with meetings all day. He has a *Sthanu* Circle meeting in the *Posedonus*.”

“The *Posedonus*? What’s that?” she asked, reaching out for the robe she’d discarded beside her when she’d bedded for the night.

Diaprepes picked up the robe and handed it to her. “It’s a spiritual temple and the sacred meeting place of the *Sthanu* Circle in the town centre.”

Genevieve maneuvered the *kosh* and herself and slid into the robe without revealing more of herself. As she bent down to pull on her sandals, she looked up and grinned sideways. “Can you take me someplace? Perhaps where others of you live? The town centre, for instance?”

“Yes, of course. Uruk,” he answered enthusiastically then instantly looked nervous and unsure. She tried her most demure look. It must have worked because he convinced himself that it was all right. “I’m sure Azaes would have told me otherwise. And he set no restrictions.”

“Great!” she said, forgetting about breakfast. “Let’s go, then.”

“But we must go by scree,” Diaprepes insisted. “You are not permitted in the Eosian forests.”

She nodded, wondering if the scree was that bird that had flown her here, that she’d noted through her feverish haze.

Diaprepes led her to the large side building, which turned out to be an animal shelter. Three screes lay inside on beds of moss and grass. The smell inside was rather pleasant, somewhat musky, sweet and a little like freshly cut grass.

“This one brought you here,” Diaprepes said. He signalled for the scree to leave the shelter and it waddled outside. Diaprepes hoisted himself up by grabbing its long neck and swinging his leg over. Much like someone would mount a horse, thought Genevieve, doing the same with ease, and noticing that Diaprepes was impressed.

“Hang on,” he said to her, then said some foreign words to the scree. It leapt into the air with a shrill cry and Genevieve grabbed its feathers tightly. She had a wonderful view of the meandering brown river that carved through the thick multi-colored rainforest. The town of Uruk lay snugly in a large bend in the river. Its streets were lined with houses

much like Azaes as well as a few very interesting unconventional structures in the shape of hexagons and pyramids.

Diaprepes directed the scree to drop them off in a park encircled with small buildings with awnings and tables out front laden with goods from food to trinkets. She realized that this was some kind of market and it was already bustling with people, all naked or course. Most glanced at her with some curiosity.

Spotting a café, Diaprepes turned to her enthusiastically. "Let's have some breakfast! I'm hungry."

Reminded of her own hunger, Genevieve heartily agreed.

Diaprepes sat down at an outside table in front of Fifa's Café. Genevieve sat across from him. A waiter with no clothes on approached them and Diaprepes ordered a typical breakfast for the two of them.

As they waited for their meal, Diaprepes described the market. Then, noticing along with her that people were doing double takes, he offered, "At first they look because you wear the *Sthanu* robe. It is only then that they notice the hair on your head and your skin color and have to look again." He giggled. "You're a celebrity. How does it feel?"

She wasn't sure. Not that comfortable. The meals arrived and conversation was abandoned as they both concentrated on their food.

As they left the café Genevieve realized that Diaprepes hadn't paid for their meals. Perhaps he had an account there. Just in case he'd forgotten, she said, "I take it you're covered?"

He stopped along the flower-lined path and turned to her with a confused look and a glance down briefly at his naked body. "Covered?"

She grinned sideways. "Never mind." As they continued their walk, she couldn't help catching herself glancing and staring at the naked people milling in the town, shopping, playing, tending the gardens. Men, women and children, all quite fit and lithe. Most only gave her a curious sideways glance then returned to what they were doing. They all looked content. And free. She grew more and more self-conscious in her *Sthanu* robe. It made her more conspicuous than her pink-brown skin, she reflected. But she wasn't ready just yet to part with it and expose herself.

But, she puzzled, how did they pay for anything? She saw no one with a purse or money belt. Even if they used cards or some other facsimile to represent currency where would they carry it? They were all totally naked!

Diaprepes stopped and turned to Genevieve who'd unconsciously slowed her pace to stare at everyone and everything around her, agog with curiosity. He chuckled and pointed to a wooden bench and they sat down.

"You must have a million questions, Genevieve," he said. "You were quiet at breakfast."

She smiled at him and nodded. "I just have so much to take in and digest. But, yes, I do have lots of questions. For instance, how do you conduct your commerce?"

"Ah, you are referring to how we obtain things like food and such. We simply take what we need as we need it and give back as much as we can in return, when and where we can."

"But how does your society keep track of the fairness in the exchange?"

"Oh, you misapprehend, Genevieve," he waved a hand. "In the case of Fifa's Café, I don't necessarily pay Fifa back in kind. I just do a service elsewhere. Think of our

community and our environment as a huge common resource, from which everyone takes and to which they contribute as they wish. As for fairness,” he waved a hand, “we practice this with the full knowledge that some are inherently more generous than others and some must take more than others. No one resents this inequity, because we recognize that we are not equally strong and capable.”

Genevieve was astounded. “But what about those who purposefully take advantage of your good will and choose to be lazy and greedy?”

Diaprepes looked at her strangely and she shifted, feeling suddenly self-conscious, as though her very question revealed a taint in her own personality. “That seldom happens, Genevieve. Because when it does it is usually quickly corrected. Such an individual would be shunned by his community, upon which he ultimately depends. You see, it is not in his favor to cheat because he cheats himself in the end.”

He was describing a small town, she thought, where vigilance by those who knew you played a major role in shaping behavior. He was also describing a society based on ecological mutualism. It was both clever and elegant. And what could be more natural?

Diaprepes stretched his long legs. Genevieve kept her eyes focused ahead as he wriggled on the bench and unabashedly scratched his scrotum.

“Shall we continue?” he posed.

She assented and he led her out of the market, through several narrow cobbled streets to a large two-storied circular building surrounded by stone columns and whose windows appeared to be made of translucent gemstones. It was a spectacular building and Genevieve stared at it in fascination. She’d seen its glinting shape from above as the scree had circled for a landing.

“This is the *Posedonus*, our Spiritual Temple, where we meditate and worship,” Diaprepes proudly announced.

“It’s beautiful,” she said and realized that her mouth had been gaping open.

“Do you want to see the inside?”

“May I?” she asked, feeling suddenly self-conscious and a little uncomfortable. She didn’t want to break any of their laws or codes of behavior by entering a sacred place.

“Of course you may!” Diaprepes said. He’d shown absolutely no reservation in his response, so Genevieve nodded her agreement and intrepidly followed him inside. The interior was even more spectacular than the outside. As their sandaled steps echoed on the marble-like stone floor, Genevieve noticed that the outside light streaming through the crystal windows refracted into millions of little jewels throughout the interior. Along its inside perimeter a dozen small pillars, about a meter high, rose, upon which sat sparkling blue crystal spheres. When the jewelled light fell on these, they sparkled with swirls of gold. Genevieve couldn’t help equating the number with that of the *Sthanu* Circle but one, its *kushu*. Was it a coincidence? Or was she on to something?

At the very centre of the room on a circular slab of grey stone sat a magnificent purple crystal, whose core structure was at least two meters in diameter. Out of it emerged several long hexagonal crystals. Beside it, stood another pillar, made of dark stone with articulate carvings upon which was balanced a thick tablet like a table top. A powerful energy that pervaded the temple filled her with awestruck silence. It certainly felt as sacred to her as any church she’d entered on Earth.

Before she realized it, Genevieve threw several glances around for Azaes.

As if reading her thoughts, Diaprepes whispered, “Azaes won’t be here until the end of the day. The *Sthanu* don’t meet here until dusk. First they share a feast at one of their houses, probably Shiva’s place. Then they conduct their meeting from dusk to dawn, reviewing the pledges on this tablet and discussing the events of the week.” He turned his head, tipped to the side slightly, to look at her directly with an impish smile. “No doubt you will be their chief topic.”

“No doubt,” she agreed, though not so cheerfully.

He led her to the purple crystal and cylindrical stone ‘table’. As she approached it she noticed that the tablet was a stela, filled with a mixture of well-worn hieroglyphics and Greek-like lettering that looked like they’d been etched there long ago.

Diaprepes bowed before the tablet and murmured some Eosian words before turning to her and urging her to come beside him.

As she did, he said in a hushed voice, as one would in a church, “This is the tablet of pledges willed down to us by the Eoptes and inscribed by our *soul-drifters* from their Eoptic visions when we first arrived twelve thousand years ago.”

Despite instinctively thinking it a taboo, Genevieve gave in to a sudden violent compulsion to touch the stone and drew her finger along the foreign letters. They seemed strangely familiar and sent a shiver through her.

She barely heard Diaprepes wheeze out, “Stop! You are not allowed to touch it!”

Genevieve abruptly felt as though she’d entered a doorway into another dimension, thick with strange singsong voices and garish staccato imagery. Uttering an involuntary gasp, she shuddered and recoiled. She flung her hands to her flushed face, staggering backward and nearly falling. Though what she’d actually experienced was unclear, Genevieve felt as though she’d caught a glimpse of something profound, something she was not meant to see.

Diaprepes, rattled by her forbidden action, quickly came up beside her and suggested that they leave. He threw furtive glances around them but it seemed the few people in the temple had not noticed her transgression and went about their own business. “Come, I’ll show you our library and the *Kleitonus* Museum.”

“Okay,” she responded, hearing her voice echo as if it did not belong to her. She was glad to leave. The place suddenly seemed thick with oppressive electricity that seemed to call to her.

When they emerged outside, she practically sighed with relief and drank in the sweet air of the town centre courtyard. It was beautifully decorated with ground flowers of all colors and surrounded by a kind of grass. Still feeling rather faint, Genevieve followed Diaprepes in a slight daze as he made his way across the park toward a pyramidal structure out of whose apex emerged a very tall tree. She recognized it as the same kind of tree she’d fallen through when she’d tumbled out of Zac, the *vishna* tree. The tree of her wild dream.

Diaprepes took her first to an adjoining building with square sides, a rather dull looking edifice compared with the one she’d just been in. It turned out to be the main library. Genevieve was astonished to see no computers, holoscreens or any other technological devices to aid them. There were simply shelves upon shelves of scrolls and books.

As Diaprepes studied a file that interested him, Genevieve gravitated toward the adjoining pyramidal building with the *vishna* tree at its centre. She stared longingly at the

beautiful tree, whose folded buttresses coiled at least five meters out. Just looking at it stirred her loins with thoughts of Azaes, the *vishna* flower and magical sex.

“It is the only tree in the town centre,” Diaprepes broke her trance, coming beside her. “They live for thousands of years,” he continued. “We actually do not know how long they can live,” he shrugged with a grin. “We have never seen one die yet—of natural causes, that is. Even their leaves and flowers live for half a century before finally shedding off the tree. Luckily for our *soul-drifters*, who collect the fallen flowers, they are profuse.”

As she stared mesmerized at the noble tree, he added, “They are not native to this planet.”

Genevieve turned to face him with surprise. “Really?”

“The Eoptes brought them with the seed ship. This tree is supposedly the first one the Eoptes planted on Eos.”

Genevieve craned to view the over forty meter tree, trying to observe its upper canopy with those powerfully scented purple flowers. If Diaprepes was right this tree was over eleven thousand years old!

“Legend holds that the Eoptes grew *vishnas* in our homeland too. But the *vishnas* were ill-treated as we became obsessed with technological tools and lost interest in natural things. Pollution eventually wiped them out. Our legend keepers also suggest that this was our final downfall, the demise of the *vishna*...”

As Diaprepes continued, Genevieve noticed that she was attracting a crowd of curious onlookers. She gave them a tentative smile of greeting. None smiled back. Their faces displayed a kind of mindless obsession that disturbed Genevieve. They closed in and Genevieve instantly noted the swollen state of most of the young men’s penises.

Before Diaprepes even had a chance to notice, they’d pressed in, closing a ring of people around the two. Genevieve drew in a sharp breath as several drooling males lunged forward, seized her robe, and yanked it open. She jerked back from them with an angry cry and violently pulled her robe closed. As she did, a woman brazenly reached out and seized some of Genevieve’s hair. Then a hand grabbed her leg beneath the robe, tripping her. Genevieve stumbled back with a mild shriek, and felt the sudden tug of her hair ripping out of the woman’s grip.

“What are you doing?” Diaprepes demanded, trying hard to put a tone of authoritative command in his voice, but failing miserably. Panic pitched his voice into a squeal as he flashed nervous glances from Genevieve to the faces of mindless obsession. The Eosians ignored his challenge, they murmured and sighed and jostled to get close. They touched her hair, her face, her body, whatever of her flesh they could reach.

For a terrifying instant she imagined herself a piece of carrion covered in buzzing flies and being taken piece by piece. A young man lunged for her breasts and she swerved out of reach, but lost her balance. She caught sight of his engorged penis, pointing at her, as she fell backward with a shriek. She would have fallen with the man on top of her, had Diaprepes not intervened and yanked her out of the man’s way and back to her feet.

“Come, Genevieve!” he urged, gripping her hand tightly and eyes casting for a way to escape the pressing crowd of naked sexually aroused Eosians. He forced his way through the ring of people, gruffly pulling her through. Rough hands seized her robe, tore it open, ripped it off her. Hands pawed her thighs, breasts and buttocks. She felt violated

as she finally broke free from the throng, leaving behind a wake of drooling young men and women.

Then they were clear and running. Diaprepes whistled sharply and his scree came bounding forward on large legs, half flying and half running. With incredible energy, he grabbed Genevieve and hoisted her onto the scree, then threw himself on behind her and the scree took off.

As they circled up Genevieve gazed down at the milling crowd, several of whom were tearing at her discarded robe and bringing it up to their faces.

“What happened?” she said in a still panting voice.

“I don’t know,” Diaprepes replied, his own voice thick with confusion. “I have never seen an Eosian act like that before.”

They remained silent until the scree landed them in Azaes’s compound. As Diaprepes helped Genevieve off the scree, she commented, “They were sniffing and mauling my robe like dogs in heat.”

“Yes,” he said in a strangled voice, averting his eyes from her naked body. “It is your smell. They are not used to it.”

Chapter Sixteen

“It was her smell, Diaprepes,” Azaes explained curtly, glancing at Genevieve like she was a pet dog, needing a bath. He hadn’t even left his house yet when they returned from Uruk. “They are not used to it. It brought out their madness.” He frowned and expelled a long sigh at Diaprepes. “You are not to take her to the town again, do you hear?”

Diaprepes looked down, as though he’d done something wrong. “I hear, brother.” He kept his eyes from hers.

Genevieve felt anger bristling in his defence. “It wasn’t his fault...”

“No one said it was,” Azaes bit out, turning on her with an open glare. “It isn’t even *your* fault ... this time,” he ended contemptuously. She puffed up her chest to retort but he beat her by adding, “But, I admit that you need to get out, so I will give you a tour of the compound.” He glanced outside to gauge the time. “There is time still before lunch and you shouldn’t get into any trouble here.”

Anger flared up again, but she quelled it. This was an opportunity, she told herself, and she wasn’t about to lose it through her own rash reaction to his rudeness.

* * * *

As Azaes briskly waved her out of the house, Diaprepes left them to go to the animal shelters beside the house. He looked dejected, but Genevieve promised to join him for lunch and he brightened a little. She thought Azaes an ogre.

“Come,” Azaes waved cursorily to her. “I have something to show you.”

She walked astride him down the hill toward the river and felt the enticing pull of the rainforest to either side of them as they walked in silence to the racket of constant buzzing, or the sudden whir of a bright insect-like bird.

Azaes followed her longing gaze and said gruffly, “You are forbidden to enter the forest. It is out of bounds.”

“Why?”

He looked as if he’d been struck and blustered, “Because the jungle is no place for the uninitiated, ignorant of its many bizarre attributes.” Then he focused narrowed eyes on her. “That aside, *you* are forbidden to enter it.” He’d emphasized *you* as though he’d delivered his edict for the forest’s safety, not hers. God! What did he think she was going to do? Pick all its forbidden fruit?

The place was heavy with the overwhelming aroma of the *vishna* flower, the flower of the ‘tree of love’ in her incredible erotic dream. The same tree that had supposedly been ‘kind’ to her when she’d plummeted over twenty meters to the ground from Zac’s gaping hole. The tree whose scent had enticed her in the *Kleitonus* Museum in Uruk. Was the *vishna* flower some kind of aphrodisiac? Just thinking about it sent a shiver of aching desire through her. Perhaps the whole planet had aphrodisiac-like properties. Since she’d arrived it had been like entering her most sensual cyber dream. That would account for a lot of what had recently transpired. But the mystery of how she’d imagined it all so accurately in her dreams didn’t make sense. Was she psychic? She’d never had any

indication prior to this. It was a puzzle she couldn't fathom and had to put on the back burner for now, as Azaes stopped walking and requested her attention by pointing his finger to a path that led them down toward a verdant river valley. "The Vaas," he said. "Our river of life."

His words summoned another phrase and she glanced back at the forest to their left, feeling compelled to ask, "Those purple trees..." She trailed, an involuntary flush of heat flaming her face, as she relived memories of her incredible dream.

He glanced along with her back to the forest. "They are the most sacred part of our ecosystems," he uttered in a voice of undisguised reverence. "We call them the 'tree of love'." Did his face color just now? Mirroring hers? She hadn't expected him to reiterate what he'd said in her dream.

"Why?" she pressed.

He cleared his voice and averted his eyes from hers to look ahead. "It is complex. You would not understand."

She felt anger boil up at his brusque dismissal. "Try me," she insisted.

He must have sensed the stubborn tone in her voice because he sighed with resignation and tersely replied, "The tree serves as the fractal portal to all that is, was and will be."

Satisfied that he'd given her the answer she required, Azaes walked on, expecting her to follow. Genevieve frowned. He hadn't provided her with a satisfactory answer, just another puzzle, she thought, and unconsciously summoned a phrase from the Christian bible, *And out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life ... and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. If the *vishna* resembled anything like what it was in her dream, it was this and much, much more. Not willing to accept his vague answer, she scrambled to catch up to his long strides and pressed on, "That doesn't explain why they are called the tree of *love*."

He stopped suddenly and turned to her, glowering, and arms folding over his chest. "It is only through the act of selfless love by life-long dedication to a mate that a joining with the *vishna* is possible. Marriages have been annulled through failure to join." Then he stalked off, as if trying to lose her.

She stood for a moment, digesting what he'd said. Good God! It was the ultimate test of true love! How many marriages on Earth would have been prevented had they possessed a *vishna* to decide their fate? Hers and Dan's?

Azaes stopped and turned. "Well, are you coming?"

She grinned and caught up to him.

They were soon where he intended to take her, at the crest of the hill with a vista of incredible beauty, of the organic community nestled in the valley below beside the large meandering river.

"No doubt you may have noticed when you were there with Diaprepes that the community and its organic environment operate symbiotically as an integrated whole."

She could see people, milling about the village, adults and children alike, all shamelessly naked. Carrying out their tasks, playing in the playgrounds, walking in pairs. It harkened to a simpler time, a time of innocence.

"Everything in our community is grown and symbiotic with us in some way," he said. "We have co-evolved with all of nature through the *vishna*. Food, water, heat, shelter, power, all come from and are dispensed through natural things, whether they be

living creatures, grown crystals or minerals with unique properties. We are not nature's conquerors, but her partners. All that we are is through nature. Everything that we are capable of is through the *vishna*."

It was remarkable, thought Genevieve. A society more advanced than hers whose technology consisted of a seamless and natural melding of biological and physical things. And of these the *vishna* tree appeared to play the main part. She thought of the fascinating crystal structures in the pyramid that Azaes had shown her earlier. How he'd grown them and assembled them according to a vision under the influence of the *vishna*. It was amazing. Was it that simple? This was what her mission ecologists were after, thought Genevieve, the secret to living in balance with an ecosystem. If only they'd survived to see this Eden.

Azaes regarded her for a moment. He'd caught her sad introspection. "You are not pleased with this view?"

"Oh, no! I mean, yes! It's remarkable. And beautiful. I was just thinking of my dead crew, ecologists, who would have cherished this sight."

"Ah," he nodded with a gloomy smile and turned his gaze back to the hills. "Your mission..."

She thought she caught a sarcastic tone in his last words and noticed his brows furrow.

"We were hoping you could help us re-establish the balance we'd lost in our world..."

He turned on her, suddenly glaring. "Humans!" he fulminated. "First you occupy every square centimetre of your planet like a plague, then you defile it, you destroy all living things and turn your world into a refuse pile no longer usable by you or anything else. Then you build abominations to replace the life you destroyed, by using life you created but do not understand..."

He was no doubt referring to bio-nanotechnology, she thought, Zac specifically.

"And now you come here to continue your legacy of robbing and pillaging in the guise of sharing..."

"No! It's not like that. We came..."

"Uninvited," he finished for her.

Genevieve reddened and had to acknowledge this shameful truth. "Yes," she said, gaze dropping down because she could not face his piercing stare. "I admit we did that. But our intentions were honorable."

"Whose intentions? Perhaps yours, Genevieve. But do you speak for the others?"

She drew in a long breath and felt her chest constrict. She thought of the arcane DAWN project and its shrouded mandate, which excluded the ship's own captain from knowing. Where was the honor in that? She wasn't even part of the landing party. She'd been assigned to remain in orbit with Zac. How could she speak for them? "We fully intended to contact you once we achieved orbit status on Eos," she said. "We felt sure that you'd let a small ship and a landing party down once we were here, so to speak. But when your—eh—Epopetes attacked the ship, we were forced to land."

As if ignoring her conciliatory explanation, he pressed on more forcefully, "I repeat, do you speak for the others?"

She recalled the vision she'd had of her crew mates wrenched one by one out of the ship as it skidded along the planet. Then, realizing the full implications, her gaze lifted and she looked directly into those forest-green eyes. "I do now."

He raised his arms in an abrupt dismissive gesture and tersely said, "Ah!" making her flinch. She watched his face grow tight with dark thoughts. "I think you are far too naïve. That is why you were to remain behind."

Then, without another word he spun on his heels and left her, heart pounding with flustered emotion, on the hill. He strode swiftly up the hill to the house, not even glancing back to ensure she was following. She didn't. She remained where he'd left her, mind rolling with gloomy thoughts. Once again, something in her innocent remark had sparked an explosion of disgust from him. Why did he hate humans so much? It seemed personal, yet he'd never met a human—until now. Azaes seemed to know something that she didn't, which infuriated her because she suspected that it was about her mission and it was something she should have known.

Genevieve watched Azaes disappear over the hill. She turned back to the awesome scene of symbiotic life below in the valley and sighed. What was she doing here? What was *her* mission? She had to admit that she hadn't spent much time considering her current directive, given that she was the sole remaining member of the Zeta mission, which made her its commander-in-chief by default. The reason she hadn't, she reasoned, was partly because it was all for naught if she couldn't get Zac up and running again. She wasn't sure that was possible. She'd left Zac in a real mess. Zac might have blown up in the meantime. He sure was making sounds like he was heading in that direction when last she'd been there. According to Diaprepes, that was a month ago. Any number of things could have happened to Zac, including vandalism and cannibalism by the native Eosians or its transformation and incorporation by the throbbing forest. There was also the *Chimera*, nestled in Zac's belly and fully equipped to make it home ... if it was still intact. That was looking less and less likely as she reviewed the myriad of possibilities. As for the Eosians giving her transportation out of here back home, that looked even less likely. First of all, it didn't even look like they had the means because they weren't interested in ever leaving the planet, at least not for a long time. And second, they weren't showing any kind of interest in or cooperation with her mission.

Diaprepes had said that Azaes thought the Epoptes had something in mind for her, which gave her a clue why Azaes presented such a paradox to her. What she'd mistaken as tenderness in him was his dedication and duty as a healer and his service to the will of the Epoptes; his true nature and what he genuinely felt for her showed itself in his scowls, deprecating gazes and generally belligerent behavior toward her. As for his assertion that she came to bring about change, that was a scary thought.

Was she destined to remain here for the rest of her life at the hands of an experimenter? Possibly a lunatic and a heretic? She contemplated aborting the mission, salvaging Zac and high-tailing it out of here. But Zac was in bad shape, if not already in a million pieces. "Oh, Zac," she whispered, absently gazing at the foreign community that was nothing but strange for her. "You may have saved me from certain death by being organic and nanoconstructed. But I'm not so sure that's the better fate of our crew..."

She scanned her surroundings and started her way back up the hill toward what she'd dubbed her "prison", but had sadly come to know as her makeshift home. To her right

was the forest that had so enticed her on their way to this viewpoint and had been expressly forbidden to her by Azaes.

As Genevieve made her way back, compulsively throwing frequent glances at the thick forest, she struck closer and closer to the forest edge. The *forbidden* forest. She found herself skirting its very edge, irresistibly drawn to the chorus of staccato sounds and sweet aromas that oozed out of the dank forest. Within a moment she'd plunged inside the steaming jungle with panting breaths.

The forest stirred with chitters and hoots at her entry. Leaves, lianas, roots and trunks seemed to embrace each other in a knotted swollen tangle on the sweating forest floor. The musky-sweet fragrance of rotting fruit mingled with the heady aromas of the powerful *vishna* flower in an intoxicating cocktail.

Genevieve stumbled giddily over a root and came face to face with a bunch of tiny blue fruit that hung like dreadlocks from a tree's slim trunk. Long-bodied flying insects buzzed furiously around, as if drunk on its nectar. She noticed that a partner clung to every insect's back as they shivered in a kind of sexual dance. She spotted two black and red striped frog-like creatures obviously copulating on the tree trunk, their shiny bodies bobbing up and down vigorously. She staggered back. Everywhere she turned, insects, birds and small amphibious-like creatures were displaying to a mate or already energetically mating. The forest throbbed with the sounds, smells and sights of sexuality and stirred her loins with a primal beat.

She suddenly thought it all too familiar, like a *déjà vu*. As though she'd walked this very place before in another life... Then it came to her. Her erotic dream! This was exactly where she'd walked in her dream. Several more paces along the soft litter through the towering columns of trees and she made out where Azaes had stood when she first spotted him. There he'd shrugged out of his deep purple robe to reveal his magnificent naked body. Which meant that behind her was the tree—

She turned and sucked in a sharp breath. There it was, as magnificent and lofty as in her dream, the *vishna* tree with its thickly buttressed base, where she and Azaes had consummated their love for one another and for the universe. In her dream, that is. Her breaths halted for a long moment as her mind reeled with memories of that astonishing dream and the incredible experience that still lingered in her body. It seemed so real. Overwhelming longing dug into the pit of her stomach and the muscles of her lower abdomen twitched with yearning.

Genevieve swallowed hard. Then, gripping her lower lip with her teeth, she advanced toward the tree, where two large ribbons of its buttress split. When she was within its grasp, she stopped and drew in a long breath then reached out and touched its smooth bark. She inhaled sharply and might have cried out, she wasn't sure. Had she imagined it? The cool surface seemed to tingle like electricity beneath her fingers as though touching back.

It awoke a deep sexual ache that shuddered up her spine. Oh, God! If it was real! Submitting to a sudden compulsion, Genevieve disrobed and pressed herself, naked, against the tree.

Nothing.

Fool! There was nothing, except the musings of a lonely and stupid woman, she thought. What a foolish thought. Despite what Diaprepes said and Azaes alluded, trees couldn't think, much less fuck—except in her crazy dream. And that's all it ever was.

Azaes was proof of that. The real Azaes was nothing like the Azaes in her dreams. God! What was she thinking? It was all just a ridiculous dream. He was gruff and belligerent with her. There were a few times, when he let her see a gentle side of him, that she thought she might like him. But every time she began to feel that way, he managed to get angry or spark her own anger. Genevieve quickly backed away from the tree. She stumbled and lost her footing, falling with a startled cry and landing with her rump on the wet moss.

Lying on her back, she fixed her upward gaze on the colorful canopy of furry purple leaves and deep purple flowers. Stirred by the hot wind, their fractal mosaic danced as if to an erotic symphony. They seemed to beckon and she realized that the compulsion to climb the tree remained as strong as ever. She scrambled to her feet and stole a glance around her. She was still alone. This time she took a few determined steps to the tree and hauled herself up one of its curved buttresses, gripping its smooth surface to climb and feeling the almost imperceptible bumps of the long orange lenticels against her fingertips like hundreds of little nipples.

She'd climbed many trees in her youth at home. This one was no different, thought Genevieve, as she crawled along a buttress to the main trunk of the tree, then wormed on her stomach, using her strong thighs and arms to hoist herself up with the epiphytic vines that draped down and the thick knobs as footholds. All the while she was acutely aware of the awoken muscles of her abdomen and an aching desire growing in her loins. Like riding a horse, she reasoned. Didn't mean anything. *I'm just doing this out of curiosity, to see the beautiful blossoms*, she convinced herself. *Nothing more.*

She reached the first thorny branches and pulled herself through carefully, remembering only too well her painful fall through this layer. They formed an imposing barrier to would-be climbers, eager to sample the *vishna*'s sweet treasures above. The canopy squealed and shouted with the noisy racket of birds and rodent-like animals. Like the jungles of Earth, this was the most populated layer.

The climb to the upper canopy, which held the flowers, was relatively easy once she learned to negotiate the thorny older branches. Yet, her heart pulsed in her throat and she was panting. She chalked it up to excitement over physical effort. She'd only run her hand once against the spiky leaves, incurring a painful sting that lingered throughout the rest of her climb.

Within a short time, she'd moved into the higher layer of soft leaves and branches. Then she finally broke to the top of the canopy, some fifty meters high and felt the sun's heat. She seized in her breath. The view was breathtaking. This *vishna* tree was easily one of the tallest in the jungle and her gaze spanned the purple and green and orange canopies of the various trees as they undulated down to the valley where the Eos village lay nestled within a bend in the large meandering river that Azaes called the *Vaas*. Beyond the valley lay more valleys and hills that gently rolled to a distant horizon beneath a blushing sky. This place was truly beautiful and its people seemed so innocent and peacefully integrated with the wild beauty of nature, the Eden of the Universe...

A sob escaped her and Genevieve realized that she longed for home, that is a place she could call home, a place where she felt safe comfortable and at peace with herself, and her surroundings. This could be such a place, but for the fact that it was not *her* home, nor were these people *her* people. They were aliens on an alien planet. No, she amended sadly, *she* was the alien and *she* didn't belong ... What was she doing here?

Had she really been looking for Dan's spirit all along? Hoping to make amends somehow? If only there had been some way for him to have known he had a son, even if it was only for a few months ... If only she could have switched places with him, given him the chance to see his boy ... Now the sobs came freely in a torrent and she buried her face with her hands.

Something was caressing her, holding her in a gentle embrace. Her eyes snapped open and she stared, incredulous. Supple branches, covered in dripping flowers surrounded her in a soft mantle that was utterly and sensually exquisite. They gently laid her on a bed of furry purple leaves and interwoven branches. Genevieve swallowed down the last of her tears and surrendered to what was happening, not quite sure what it was, and reserving a small part of her mind to a tiny panic that she was some fifty meters off the ground.

Those fears dissolved like sugar in hot water as the flowers stroked and fondled her entire body with their wet and sticky "lips". Prodding, licking and sucking, the long stamens and downy petals sent shivers of exquisite sensation surging through her. Every inch of her skin was teased and pulled and titillated. Her feet, legs and thighs, buttocks, back and shoulders, arms and breasts, nipples and throat and face and—Oh, God—every orifice! Like creatures with their own minds, the feral flowers snapped off their branches and fluttered into her mouth, willingly gaping and inviting them in. They dissolved to an intoxicating syrup that trickled down her throat.

She gasped as they flickered up her anus like sparks of fireflies. They swarmed around her crotch and she opened to them. They fluttered up her quivering vagina—pulling out a guttural moan from her. They filled her insides like Azaes's huge dick, only in surging waves, like an ocean of penises. An orchestra of resonating instruments, each stroking a different part of her—labia, vulva, mons, clit, then deep to her cervix and beyond—together making one giant fuck and sending her pulsing into another universe—

Bucking and arching like a horse on fire, she screamed as she came. It flooded out of her in convulsive shudders, jetting out like a great purple wave. It wet her thighs and spit out drenched flowers. She clamped her gaping mouth shut and continued to shudder and sob in the wake of her turbulent orgasm.

When her mind returned to where she was physically, she looked down at herself. Wet trembling flowers covered her body in purple. They shimmered like a purple sea in the evening light and lay all about her, stirring still, their tiny "lips" uttering some secret mantra on their dying breaths, a mantra of pure ecstasy. There was no regret. By leaving the branches, the individual flowers would eventually die but she intuitively recognized that this was part of their natural cycle and their ultimate destiny. Their gift.

She thanked them.

Then found herself convulsing yet again with tears. She'd come full circle. Tears of sad loneliness and remorse had begun this incredible experience, and here she was crying again. But this time in exultation at participating and witnessing such aching beauty. It was almost more than she could bear. Yet, she felt enlivened and strangely comforted, as though a million little hands had stroked her with reassurance and the cold dark universe had opened up briefly to share with her its secret inner light with promises of home...

When she'd calmed her mind and wiped her face, Genevieve started her climb down the *vishna* tree, solemnly contemplating what had just happened. As with her dream with Azaes, she'd felt like she'd joined with all of Eos during her climax. For an instant she'd

seen and become part of every aspect of it, its flora and fauna, its people, right down to the individual molecules, particles and waves that made up matter and energy. It had been nothing short of magical.

By the time she reached the thorny lower branches, she'd rationalized it as an elegant and lucid hallucination. The sexual experience was real enough, but even that had likely been no more than a delirious masturbation. Certainly the flowers were aphrodisiacs. She'd just confirmed that they were hallucinogens too and remembered Azaes's use of them in the potent mixtures he drank for inspiration. As for her dream, what Azaes had said in it, about Dan being with them, in the whisper of the wind and in Azaes's smile for her, those words had obviously sprung from what she'd desperately believed. She'd simply orchestrated it in her dream with eloquence. As for choosing Azaes as her metaphor to deliver her version of the truth, she'd always known that beneath her prudishness lay a feral vamp yearning to exercise her erotic imagination. She'd been fascinated with Azaes and his people since he first appeared on Earth's Holo News fifteen years ago. Her lucid dream and even this experience now were simply manifestations of her own fantasies.

Genevieve dropped to the ground like a cat and absently looked for her clothes while brushing off the remains of the dead flowers stuck to her body—

Her robe! It was gone!

Chapter Seventeen

“Looking for this?” she heard an all too familiar voice growl.

Mortified, Genevieve turned and winced with shame at seeing Azaes. He stood several meters from her, holding her robe. He was clearly enraged. His face was deep purple and tight like the lid of a boiling pot about to steam with pressure. He looked a little frightening and she swallowed hard.

As she stood in naked shame, facing him in silence, his face contorted as he tried to form his words. For a moment nothing emerged until he finally blurted, “You joined with the *vishna* and without m—m—without a partner. That is unprecedented. It’s forbidden. It is not—not...” He cut himself short, unable to continue as rage boiled over. Perhaps he was trying very hard not to beat her, she thought with some trepidation. While he’d often displayed contempt and frustration with her, she’d never seen him this angry. She shrank back as he lunged forward. But it was only to thrust her robe into her hands.

“Come,” he commanded in a throaty growl and swung back to the compound where she was staying. He didn’t wait for her to follow.

Genevieve hastily dressed as she scrambled to keep up with his long stride. She felt compelled to say something in her defence, “But, I didn’t...”

“You did!” he shot back without bothering to stop or turn to address her. “The whole forest heard you.”

Her face suddenly burned and she was shamed to silence.

When they entered the house that was her temporary home, he swung his arm impatiently for the door of her room to iris open and let her enter before entering himself. There he paced like a caged lion, throwing contemptuous glances at her, eyes sharp like knives.

“You have no idea what you’ve done,” he remonstrated in a voice that barely reigned in his fury. Then his eyes fixed on her and she felt her whole body grow hot. “You’re a disgrace. To yourself and to me. You’re like all the other humans. You’re so ... so primitive. So *unrestrained*.” He threw his gaze off her in contempt and waved a dismissive hand. “No one wanted me to bring you back,” he muttered, as if to himself. “They said I should have let you just die out there. They warned me that something like this would happen. But I convinced them, at some cost. I convinced them that you had a purpose, that the Epoptes spared you for a reason. Now *this!*” he swung his arm out toward the forest. “You’re a disgrace,” he repeated for want of another word. “You’re a—a...”

“An abomination?” she offered, beginning to feel her own anger rise.

“That will do, yes,” he agreed and shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his flowing robe while still pacing the room, as if trying to think of a way to redeem his tarnished reputation. She was obviously regarded his charge and her act of abomination, apparently known to everyone now, was considered the most heinous act thinkable. She’d unknowingly, innocently committed the most terrible crime—making love with a *vishna* tree!

“Look,” she said sharply then inhaled to regain control in her voice. She said to his back, “I didn’t know it was a crime to climb a tree and ... and...” she trailed, unable to

accurately describe her experience. “That joining, as you called it, was special and I certainly considered it that way. It was...”

“Forbidden,” he rejoined, turning to scowl at her over his shoulder. “It is unheard of that one joins with a *vishna*, particularly alone, unaccompanied by another Eosian. They are sacred.” Emotion crept back into his voice. “You seduced its bark with your thighs and your cajoling mannerisms. You fondled its branches and leaves and whispered dulcet nothings. Whatever you did, you took advantage of a sacred life form...”

“I did no such thing!” She felt her anger boil up again. “The *vishna* initiated it!”

He spun around and stared at her in wide-eyed disbelief. “That’s impossible!” Then his eyes narrowed with challenge, “It was you who chose to disrobe before climbing it.”

She blushed. “But I did nothing after first touching it. I simply climbed up and got to the top where I looked at the view. It was only when I started to feel...” she hesitated to share with him, then decided to have it out in the open, “well... homesick and began to cry that the tree reacted. Like it took pity on me or something...” she trailed off, dropping her gaze to the floor. She found that she was trembling uncontrollably.

He said nothing and an oppressive silence veiled the room for a time.

When he finally broke the silence, it was in a low voice, gravely with emotion, “Eosians are forbidden to join with the *vishna* unless it is with a mate and only within the confines of a holy matrimony ... We regard it the highest honor to join, not unlike a wedding ceremony on your Earth, where two Eosians join for life with each other and, through the *vishna*, with the fractal autopoietic network of our universe. It is the first time an Eosian is permitted to have intercourse and one or both of the Eosians is often blessed with a vision of their destiny, which they will fulfill with ardor,” he ended and began to pace again like a panther in a cage.

She ventured in a half-broken voice, “Does this mean that you personally never ... eh ... joined with ... eh...”

“Haven’t you heard what I just said?” he bit out with a scowl, face deepening in color. “It’s forbidden as part of our pledge to the Eoptes, handed to our people thousands of years ago. It is the one thing we must *not* do.” He fumed. “You have managed to undo, in the short month you’ve been here, what we have loyally adhered to for thousands of years!”

And yet, there they were, the tantalizing *vishna* trees, all around them; the ultimate temptation. Why had the Eoptes brought them here twelve thousand years ago, into a land that commanded such sexual power only to forbid them to yield to it? It was a paradox, the ultimate torture. The ultimate test. She thought of Genesis, *And the Lord God commanded the man, saying “from any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.”* Why did gods keep doing that?

She fought from recoiling as Azaes, eyes flaming, swiftly closed in on her. His fire pierced into her heart and pulsed in her throat. Was he going to seize her and kiss her or strike her? Definitely the latter, she thought flinching back. But he stopped short, his face so close to hers that she felt his warm breath upon her. “You were expressly told not to venture into the forest. Why did you do it? And why did you climb the tree?” It was delivered as a plea.

“I had a dream,” she stuttered her explanation, unable to stop shaking. “When I was still in my ship, I dreamed about that very tree. So, when I saw it, I felt drawn to climb it

out of curiosity.” She forced a shrug, realizing that it sounded bizarre to her too. “What then happened . . . happened.”

“But you weren’t alone in the dream. You were with another,” he murmured.

Her heart slammed. “How did you know that?”

He averted his gaze. “Because I was there. It was I who was with you, Genevieve.” He exhaled. “As you well know.”

Her mouth gaped open. It was suddenly dry and she couldn’t speak.

He glanced furtively at her and explained her silent inquiry, “I am what we Eosians call a *soul-drifter*. I entered your dreams several times when you were still in your ship.” He sighed, recognizing in her stricken face, revulsion and outrage at being invaded so insidiously. His lips tightened and he dropped his gaze with a rueful shake of his head. “It is what I do at the bidding of the Epoptes. I didn’t intend any harm, Genevieve. In fact the opposite. I’m sorry. No doubt what I did would be considered by your people as much of a heinous crime as what you just did out there.”

He was damn right about that, she thought, letting anger rise inside her again, and finally finding her voice.

“How dare you!” she shrieked, suddenly feeling violated. “How dare you presume, you arrogant bastard! You slimy little worm!”

Without thinking, she lunged for him. He backed away quickly and the door irised open. Looking anxious for the first time since she’d met him, Azaes hurried out the door, leaving her alone with her outrage.

Shivering with anger, she stomped around her room and pulled off the robe with a shriek. She felt violated and abused in the most abhorrent way. He’d entered her most sacred place—her mind—uninvited and taken advantage of her. God! And he talked about violating a sacred tree! She wanted to kill him! Instead Genevieve grabbed a cup and threw it against the wall. It crashed and bounced several times before she regretted her impetuous move. All these things were alive and she may have hurt them. After she picked up the cup and traced the small dent in the living wall with murmurs of apology, Genevieve sat on the living bed and put her hands to her face and cried.

So, that was how she’d dreamed everything so accurately, including Azaes himself, because it was really *his* dream. But why had he done that? Why had he orchestrated such dreams of love and passion between them? Didn’t he have his own intended, that Shiva woman? Was he just teasing Genevieve, playing her like a cat with its prey? He’d certainly set her off balance. God! He infuriated her!

It wasn’t long before her thoughts travelled to the troubled dreams of every crew member that had journeyed to Eos and she made the logical deduction, Azaes had interfered with them all. Was Azaes responsible for driving them all crazy, leaving them vulnerable and unprepared for the onslaught of the Epoptes? If that was the case, then Azaes was also responsible for murdering Dan and his crew—She surged to her feet and made for the door, commanding it open with her thoughts. It irised obediently and she stormed out, murder flashing in her eyes.

There was no sign of Azaes, much less anyone else, in the rest of the house. Her anger emboldened her to even check in Azaes’s own private chambers where no one was permitted.

When she signalled for the door to open, to her surprise it did. She quickly stepped inside only to take in a halting breath and stare. Azaes was not in his room, but the room

demanded her attention. First off, it was in the shape of a pyramid, with his *zoch* to one side. From the apex of the pyramidal ceiling hung a brassy metallic-looking rod with a brilliant many-faceted red gem, tapered to a point at its end. Directly below, sitting on a table of carved stone nestled inside a pair of bronzed hands was a crystal sphere. Something snapped into place in her mind, yet remained elusive. Azaes was a healer who obviously used crystals ... there was something more significant to this...

But she had no time to let strange objects distract her, and stomped outside. When she realized that she'd forgotten to put on her robe, she decided to dispense with it, it encumbered her movements and she was too mad to care about being naked in front of people. Besides, no one else wore clothes here and, despite her unique skin coloration, she felt more conspicuous with the robe on.

She searched the immediate grounds and could not find Azaes.

Instead, she found Diaprepes in the barn, tending a young scree. He turned and with a swift glance down her body and smiled approvingly at her. Recognizing it as a mixture of youthful lust and open admiration for her lack of shame, Genevieve sighed out a smile in return. Obviously he wasn't ostensibly annoyed with her for her transgression with the *vishna* tree. "Hi, Diaprepes," she said. "Have you seen Azaes?"

"Yes." He stroked the scree to stay it and stood up, appraising her further. "You are of uncommon beauty, Genevieve. I am glad you have decided against humility and shame and now show us your splendid body as you were made. As you were made to be seen."

She blushed, despite her mood, and felt renewed self-consciousness briefly. Then, commanding it to the back of her mind, she said, "Where is he, Diaprepes? I must speak with him."

Diaprepes frowned slightly, recognizing the urgency in her voice. "He left for the town. Said he had an urgent meeting with the *Sthanu* Circle." No Doubt about her, she thought. Diaprepes shrugged and tilted his head to one side. "Is this about your joining with the *vishna*?"

She firmed her lips and dropped her gaze for a moment to study the ground. "Yes." When she looked up, she searched Diaprepes for a sign of compassion and asked, "Are you angry at me too?"

He looked suddenly uncomfortable. "What you did is forbidden. We—that is the *kushus* and *kushas*—only take the *vishna* flowers that drop from the tree as gifts of sustenance. No one has ever ... well..."

So, Azaes was right. Not only did everyone know, but the entire community felt betrayed. Even young Diaprepes. Her transgression was as serious as Azaes had suggested. Abruptly, her mind shifted from thoughts of confrontation with Azaes to getting to her ship and leaving. If she returned to Earth with the information she'd gleaned, at least her mission here would not be an utter failure. She could instruct Earth's scientists and politicians not to bother with future missions to Eos and she'd have good reasons. She'd save her fellow explorers from sure death. There was no point in coming here until the Eosians—and the Epoptes, if they really existed—were good and ready to receive them. It would take years to repair the diplomatic ties between humans and Eosians, though. For that she was utterly and abjectly responsible. But there was nothing she could do to repair her actions, Genevieve thought. She'd already apologized. Apparently, that wasn't enough.

“I didn’t know, Diaprepes,” she said ruefully. “But two Eosians, when they ... I mean when they...” she began to defend herself then trailed, unable to express what she was trying to say.

He studied her for a moment before speaking gravely. “It is not just the *vishna* that is sacred, Genevieve,” he began, as if understanding what she was trying to put into words. “It is the very act. Sexual intercourse is sacred to us and reserved for the sanctity of a covenant in marriage between two dedicated Eosians.”

“You mean you never otherwise...” she let the sentence trail, astonished at this revelation. Then she remembered Azaes himself telling her that sexual intercourse was forbidden except within a marriage vow. Like 19th Century Earth, she thought.

“No,” Diaprepes confirmed with a wizened smile. “We never do ... until that first time with the *vishna*.”

God! What a way to start a relationship—with a bang! But how strange and archaic this edict was for people who were so far advanced culturally. And what an oxymoron, having to exercise such sexual restraint when they all paraded naked and daily breathed in the pervasive erotic smell of the *vishna* forest.

“We do it to keep true to the code of conduct to which we were pledged since we came here twelve thousand years ago. To keep our genes pure—and our population down—we must not have intercourse with anyone other than our intended. And then, only when all is ready for a joining.”

“But you’re all ... eh, pardon my saying it ... naked, exposed.”

“Yes, it seems like a paradox to you? It is one of the ways we can prove our worthiness and honor. When you appear naked before another, you are truly exposed, as you said, before them, both humble and splendid at once, as we were made,” he ended with a wonderful smile. “There is less chance of mendacity and deceit this way.”

“But you all look at one another with...” she stumbled over the words, yet she was sure in her observation and pushed on, “...with appreciative eyes, even lustful passion.” She couldn’t help remembering the lecherous looks she’d received from both men and women on the streets of Uruk. Or the rapt gazes Diaprepes laid on Shiva, Azaes’s betrothed.

“Yes,” he smiled with amusement. Was he thinking of their ill-fated excursion into the village too? “But we do not advertise with smell and body movements, something we have learned to contain, so it is only harmless admiration. We require this power of restraint because the Eoptes have given us a highly sensitive olfactory system. Pardon me for saying, but you have not learned this yet, and therefore have been exuding a very seductive signal. It was the cause of that riot in the city square.”

That explained a lot of things, she thought. Perhaps Azaes’s own reactions to her. Without meaning to she’d acted a temptress with her pheromones. And how could she help it? Especially with those enticing *vishna* trees around, whose aphrodisiac-like perfumes heightened her sensual perceptions and desires. She wasn’t even aware of all the smells she emitted. Humans had long ago lost the ability to discern all but the most obvious human smells like, sweat, severe body odor or fluids emitted during sexual excitement. She knew that humans detected many more aerosols, at least on a sub-conscious level and a chemical level. There was the obvious example of women who, in close quarters, eventually developed synchronous menstrual cycles by detecting the chemicals they gave off.

She wondered how the Eosians, with their enhanced senses, could stand it and not submit to the powerfully delirious aromas of the *vishna*. Maybe it was a little like the uncanny way everyone in the small industrial town she'd grown up in dealt with the constant air pollution. They could still smell it but they'd learned to deactivate that part of their brains so they no longer consciously smelled it. However, the heavenly perfume of the *vishna* tree was nothing like the cloying noxious smell of a chemical factory.

"With your enhanced olfactory abilities how do you repel the effects of the *vishna*?"

"It is difficult," he conceded with a crooked smile. "Mostly we do it through avoidance. You may have noticed that few of them exist in the town's environs and none in the town centre, except for the one *vishna* that we saw. Even here, in the outer city, our forests have been altered to include more of a mixture and we generally keep to the clearings. We don't enter the deep jungles, where the *vishna* has multiplied into great numbers unless we have to, like Azaes did to rescue you. And he is used to and less susceptible to the effects of the *vishna*, being a *soul-drifter*, who regularly imbibes the *vishna* essence."

"Listen, Diaprepes," she began, "I need to go there, into the jungle, back to my ship to fix it. But how am I going to..." she trailed for a moment. How would she fair, then?

"Ah," his smile grew ironic. "I see. Well, your senses are not as developed as ours for one. But you should be careful not to let the jungle overwhelm you. We have lost people in there. Others have gone mad," he ended grimly. She didn't like the sound of that. "There are stories of those being transformed into super-strong beings obsessed with sex. It is said that the jungle will rob you of your soul and give you back just one sexual obsession from which you'll die slowly and tortuously." He shook his head and pushed a rueful smile. "It's all conjecture, wild tales that have not been proven. In any case, you will be flying over the forest," he added more cheerfully. "That is not so bad. Then you will be in the clearing that your ship carved in the jungle and eventually inside your ship. The danger lies deep in the mature *vishna* jungle itself. You have no need to venture there."

Great, she thought with a long exhale. In other words, once she got to her ship, she was effectively trapped there. "What's in the forest?" she asked, trying to ignore the anxious fear that dug into her throat.

"Well, aside from the *vishna* itself capable of driving you mad, most new leaves of many plants are brightly colored and very poisonous. Then there are nocturnal predators like the *sheese*, unenlightened relatives of the *shwarma*, which are like large wolves that hunt in packs and tear apart their victims. Oh, and the in areas of recent disturbance, the pioneer Stinger plant can be a nuisance. Its brilliant red leaves and stems are as attractive as its poison is irritating. The Stinger's translucent white hairs are made of silicon. They cover its leaves and stems so when you brush against it they sting and release a painful poison and histamine. It is awful." He grimaced and no doubt spoke from experience. "Then there's the *hooto*, a giant raptor with poison-tipped talons and many different kinds of invertebrates and small amphibians that are poisonous and emit poisonous barbs or aerosols..."

She had to ask, Genevieve thought with an inward groan. Her body stiffened with anticipation as Diaprepes blithely continued his litany of the jungle's vicious who's who.

"...And of course," he ended, "there are the *igapos*." He paused with a faint enigmatic smile and she felt her lip curl into a grimace.

She swallowed involuntarily. “*Igapos?*” she repeated, imagining some huge beast with claws as long as her hand.

“They are living moving swamps, created by the sudden swell of the river and flood of the forest during the wet season.”

“Let me guess ... we’re in the wet season.”

Now it was his turn to grimace. Diaprepes nodded solemnly then continued, “The *igapos* are said to flood forested lowlands within minutes and to reach as high as thirty meters.

“Good, God,” she murmured. Like an inland tsunami.

“The *igapo* dissipates through the soils almost as quickly as it forms. I’ve heard that after an *igapo* event, the forest canopy can be littered with dead creatures, which provide the trees with nutrients when they rot. The violence and speed of the *igapo* is dangerous enough—drowning or simply dashing unsuspecting victims against the trees—but the *igapo* brings with it the *kuiper* beast...”

“Oh, great,” she whispered.

“The *kuiper* is a vicious predator that uses the *igapo* to feed on the maimed or drowning creatures of the forest.” Diaprepes eyes grew serious and he changed the subject. “To return to the subject of marriage, I was about to say that we take the vow very seriously because the Eosians do this for *life*.” He stressed the word ‘life’ with such gravity, she wondered if he intended something more than she read from it.

“We too have that custom ... of mating for life,” she offered, somewhat relieved that he had changed the subject.

“But we live *much* longer than you do,” he said almost gruffly, waving her off. “We wait for many years before making our choice and then years after before mating. And not everyone is permitted to have offspring. That is decided by the *Sthanu* Circle.”

God! She didn’t like that, being told if she could have children or not by some exterior board. That should be up to her and her mate, just like the act of intercourse itself.

“How do you think we keep from overrunning this place like a plague unchecked?” Diaprepes added.

Was he referring obliquely to her species and their sad inability to contain their own numbers? Genevieve sighed, feeling some shame. She’d done them all a disservice. Azaes especially. So, she’d guessed right all along, from the moment she’d set foot on this planet she’d transgressed every possible sacred edict of Eosian conduct, defiled their most revered tenets, tainted their codes of conduct. When she’d made her foolish compulsive seduction attempt on Azaes, she’d committed one of their most severe taboos. She, one of the more prudish humans she knew. God! How naïve yet wise these Eosians were. Like precocious children. All paradoxes.

Perhaps Diaprepes could help her escape while Azaes was occupied with meetings in the town. Perhaps she could convince him that by helping her leave, he’d be helping Azaes regain his reputation. It was worth a try. “Wasn’t that the scree that brought me here?” she asked innocently, pointing to the young scree reclining and purring gently at Diaprepes’s feet.

He nodded enthusiastically. “Yes!” He beamed, obviously glad she’d changed the subject. “I am impressed you recognize it!” She wasn’t about to tell him that she’d only

guessed, hoping for an opening. It was equally obvious to her that he liked her. A lot. She could see it in his eyes, the way he looked at her.

“Listen, Diaprepes,” she said, moving forward until she stood a breath away from him and looking directly into his eyes with an earnest intensity, “I must leave here to get to my ship so I can fix it and return to my home. That’s the only way I can help Azaes. As long as I stay, he is endangering everything you hold dear on Eos. Perhaps compromising his place as *kushu* of your circle. I don’t belong, Diaprepes. And I’m ruining things, breaking sacred laws. I must return home, to my people, and give them an important message that will help both Eosians and humans. We must not send anymore missions here. But Azaes would never think of letting me go. He wants to keep me here and experiment with me. He’s too obsessed with humans. But you aren’t...”

Diaprepes swallowed, eyes still glued to hers. “I might be,” he said in a thick voice “...at least with one human in particular.”

“Oh, Diaprepes!” she remonstrated mildly and crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t mean that.” Then she dropped her arms, leaned forward and touched his arms. “Don’t you want to help me? And your brother too? You’d be helping everyone by getting me off this planet...” She blinked back something stinging her eyes. “...before I ruin anything else.”

“I want to help,” he said, still uncertain.

“I was thinking of that young scree,” she suggested. “I flew it once to come here. It knows the way to my ship, so it could take me back, couldn’t it?”

“Yes,” he agreed. “If I instructed it, the scree would do as you say.” Then he frowned slightly in thought. “But I’ll do it only if you...” he struggled with the words and she realized he was blushing. “Your scent is very strong now, Genevieve. No doubt because of your recent experience.”

Interesting, she contemplated, how the smell she gave off appeared more powerful to him than the aroma emitted by the *vishna*. Or was it simply that her smell was *different* and they weren’t prepared for it and therefore vulnerable? “You’ve never smelled a woman who...” she trailed again, face heating with embarrassed confusion.

He blushed even harder. “Once, Shiva let me smell her desire,” he said dreamily. “I lusted terribly for her, but she was already promised to Azaes.” He frowned briefly. “I don’t know why she did that. Perhaps to tease me. Her smell was overpoweringly delicious.” He hiked in a tremulous breath and continued, “My sister keeps it a secret, but I know that she has touched and given a boy her smells. They might even have ... well, she’s very young and impetuous still. She sneaks out of the house at night to see him...” Was he jealous of how she took her liberties? So, they weren’t as restrained as Azaes made them out to be. For a moment Genevieve wondered if Azaes was the only one who willingly followed the code ... ever the strong and resolute patriarch. Diaprepes refocused on Genevieve with a pleading expression. “Please, let me touch your magnificently small breasts.”

She jerked loose of his arms but couldn’t help a sudden smile of amusement. Male youth. They weren’t much different from one end of the galaxy to the other—always obsessed with breasts, no matter what their size. Perhaps here, because the usual breast size of an Eosian woman was large, small breasts like hers were particularly alluring. She tilted her head and placed her hands on her hips. “What about your code of conduct regarding not touching?”

“The code only applies to intercourse. It says nothing about touching,” he corrected her with a triumphant grin. Then he said something that sent her heart slamming. “I know that you reserve your most inviting scents for Azaes, but I might do as a distraction for the moment...”

Swallowing convulsively, she felt suddenly giddy. It couldn't be true, she thought petulantly. If anything, she was angry with Azaes, annoyed with his arrogance, rudeness and lack of compassion. How could she be interested in him?

“Very well,” she said, throat swelling. It was a small price to pay for freedom and the possibility of going home again. Diaprepes was a very handsome man, just like his older brother. His young face wore a softer expression, one that had experienced less in the world. And he was sweet. He'd been her friend since the beginning. Genevieve closed the distance between them, conscious that her breasts were swelling with emotion as she watched Diaprepes, whose eyes were glued to her, take in rapid shallow breaths.

What the hell, she thought, and decided to give him more than he'd asked for but what she thought he really wanted. She was leaving and would never see these people again, so a slight transgression in her behavior wouldn't matter. She'd already blown her wad when it came to transgressions, anyway. And Diaprepes had been so kind to her. She'd considered him a loyal friend among unfriendly people. Letting her compassion rule her, Genevieve swept him into her arms, pressing his face against her breasts. He seized in a sharp breath. Chalk it up to her pheromone signals... She was obviously emitting some strong ones.

As he moaned with pleasure, Genevieve guided his hands to her buttocks. He acquiesced eagerly and caressed her butt cheeks. She took his face in her hands and directed his mouth to her right nipple. It was obvious that he'd never touched a woman before. But somehow, he knew what to do and sucked the nipple with his lips, rolling it gently with his tongue. It ached with tender longing.

She pulled him gently to the ground and reclined alongside him. As he stared wide-eyed at her, she fondled one of his balls in her hand, rolling its soft folds of skin. He seized in a gasp. Based on what he'd said earlier and judging from his reaction, she guessed that he'd never been touched by a woman before. At least not *this* way.

Not quite knowing what to do, his hand drifted to her thigh and she nudged it down between her legs. He seized in another breath, cupping his hand over her hot mound, and she snapped her head back in sudden ecstasy.

Thinking of Azaes, she wrapped her fingers around the young man's long penis and felt incredible excitement stir inside her as it responded by swelling hard in her hand. She vigorously jerked it and felt a pulsing wetness between her legs.

Diaprepes broke out into a sweat. Overcome with passion, his breaths escalating with excitement, Diaprepes had long since forgotten to do anything with his hand. That was all right, she thought, letting the throbbing ache in her gut bleed away. This was his moment not hers. Within seconds, he moaned out his ejaculation. It squirted over her leg in several long spurts as he gasped out his breaths.

Not certain she'd done him a favor, Genevieve gently kissed the young man on the forehead and rose to her feet, looking for a rag to wipe off his come.

Lying on the ground, spent and smiling dreamily, Diaprepes looked up at her. “You are truly a goddess,” he sighed, eyes sparkling with misplaced reverence. “My queen!”

She half-smiled and glanced, self-conscious, at the scree that had not moved during the lovemaking. “And now for your promise, Diaprepes,” she urged.

Chapter Eighteen

Genevieve felt the warm breeze lift her hair and sighed with genuine contentment as she sat astride the scree, enjoying the magnificent view of the jungle below. She'd left several hours ago, after Diaprepes had gathered up some supplies for her in a backpack and given her a pair of sandals to wear, then taught her a crash course in scree-flying. It was pretty simple, she'd decided, mainly because the large bird was highly intelligent and could read her very well.

The *vishna* was definitely the dominant emergent tree, creating islands of purple over the main canopy of mostly greens, strewn with orange, crimson and yellow.

Thoughts still on the remarkable *vishna* forest below her, Genevieve puzzled over a new conundrum posed by Azaes's startling revelation that he'd entered her dreams. How was it that he could permit her to experience the *vishna* joining so well if he hadn't experienced it himself?

The topography dipped low, into a large ravine and at its center, she saw a large meandering river, swollen with brown water, snaking its way through the dense jungle. As they left the river canyon she spotted something glinting below in the jungle. She made out something copper-gold gleaming in the sunlight of a clearing covered in a carpet of choking vines. Some old wreck, perhaps an abandoned shelter, she thought. She would have liked to investigate it further but felt time pressing and decided against setting down.

As the scree flew on, Genevieve fell into a reverie of imagining the impossible odds of leaving Eos. First, there were the Eosian guardians, the Epoptes, or whatever the Eosians had interpreted as god sentinels of their planet—some phenomenon that kept destroying incoming Earth ships. Whatever they were, they'd let her in. Would they let her leave? Then there was the ship itself. As a result of their crash-landing, Zac had an enormous tear in his backside the size of a land vehicle. Without his nanosystem to help, there was no way she could repair such a large hole. When last she'd seen it, just before she'd taken her momentous tumble into the Eos jungle, Genevieve had witnessed a fire and an explosion inside Zac. It was quite conceivable that there was precious little left of Zac. So, why was she even bothering? She just had to, she told herself. She'd run out of options with the Eosians.

After another hour or so, she finally caught sight of Zac. Her spirits soared and she felt a glow of relief rush through her. Zac was still intact! Maybe the *Chimera* was too.

Genevieve guided the scree into a wide circle around Zac to assess the ship from above. He looked pretty good—no, wait! Her heart plummeted. While Zac's bow was buried under a thick canopy of trees, preventing her from making an assessment from above, a huge black cindered hole tarnishing Zac's mid-section hull toward the control center gaped some twenty meters in diameter. Near the hyperdrive coils and matrix converter, she guessed. Where the explosion she'd heard had most likely occurred. So much for using Zac to get home. Even if she coaxed the impellers to work, she wouldn't get home for forty years. And, besides, there wasn't enough on board to sustain her in that long a voyage. But there was always the *Chimera*, she thought hopefully...

“Okay, my friend,” she patted the scree gently. “Let’s go have a closer look.” No sense in delaying the inevitable.

* * * *

The scree set her down gently on the wet ground on the stern side of the ship not too far from where she’d fallen. Genevieve slid off its back, landing with a splat on a bed of soaked moss and vegetation and hiked the backpack with a few supplies and food over her shoulders. After some hesitation, she signalled for the scree to return to the Eosian village. Diaprepes had explained to her that screes were highly intelligent creatures and they were caring and responsible animals. She saw evidence of that in its obviously nervous reluctance to leave her here. It took some coaxing and in the end she had to be rather gruff with it. Finally the magnificent animal, resigned to her wishes, took flight in a giant flurry of flapping wings. Genevieve watched her vehicle back to civilization fly away and felt a strange swirling tension in her belly. “I know what I’m doing,” she mumbled to herself, as she watched the scree circle one last time, ready to swoop down at her signal.

Then it was gone with an echoing screech and the sounds and smells of the throbbing jungle pervaded her senses. Sharp cackles, squawks and oscillating buzzes filled the thick air with a cacophony of foreign sound. Suddenly she felt vulnerable and alone. This jungle was different from the enticing forest near Azaes’s place into which she’d strayed earlier. This was a genuine wilderness, she concluded with awe. Large, amoral and unforgiving. The kind she’d only read about on Earth.

The jungle air pulsed thick with moisture and seemed to drip with intoxicating aromas. Genevieve took in a deep breath, inhaling the strong perfume of the *vishna* forest and inadvertently awakened violent sensations. She almost gagged as her senses drowned in fragrance. It overpowered her and made her giddy with inexplicable sexual yearning. Her body flamed with the aching memory of the *vishna* experience as she involuntarily inhaled the erotic air with deep halting breaths. Despite what her logical mind was trying to tell her, despite what Diaprepes had warned her, she gulped it in like a drug addict.

Head throbbing with the rhythmic hissing of insects, she felt suddenly faint and fell dizzily to her knees. She must have blacked out momentarily because she found herself scrambling on all fours . . . then lying face down on the wet multi-textured carpet of moss and forbs, breathing in the sharp smell of fertile soil. She spread her hands out over the soaked vegetation and realized in a haze of delirium that the *vishna* forest was seducing her in tones of texture, smell and sound. She felt it stirring inside her, embracing her in tangles of moist green, leaves rustling through her to the seductive whisper of the breeze.

She could feel the individual blades and leaves deliciously probing her flesh, absorbing her into the jungle’s fractal network. God! It was like *jacking* again. And for an instant all she wanted was to surrender. Give herself completely to it. Lose herself in the deepness of it and spiral into an endless vortex of sexual ecstasy—

No! She shook off the sexual trance with difficulty. *Focus!* She commanded herself. *God damn it!* She refused to succumb to the *vishna*’s insidious lure. *Exercise some restraint, girl!* She had an important message to bring back home and that tree wasn’t going to stop her.

Face and body dripping from the saturated ground, Genevieve sat up shakily to survey her surroundings in a blurry haze of garish light and forced her mind to

concentrate on her task. When her eyes were finally able to focus she noted that, while the damage to the forest had been painfully obvious from above, it was less obvious from here, at ground level, where the young shrubs, forbes and vines had already covered the toppled *vishnas* and scraped landscape in a rich mantle of dripping green.

Her gaze rested on the topped *vishna* that had saved her life, according to Diaprepes. Fighting down renewed giddy longing, Genevieve craned to follow the line of the *vishna*'s magnificent smooth trunk to the top of Zac's dull grey metalloid hull. The last time she'd seen him, Zac was spewing out charcoal smoke. She wondered if Zac was totally gutted inside from the fire. Only one way to find out, she thought, rising to her feet. She decided against entering through the aft tear in the hull by climbing the *vishna*—for obvious reasons. She decided instead to enter through the *Chimera*'s emergency chute on the starboard side.

From this angle, Genevieve could see some of the damage Zac had taken to his aft hull from the crash. Much of the hull was streaked with stains from the fire and the outer metalloid was rough and scabrous where it had bubbled from the melting heat. It didn't look good. Not good at all. She fully expected the bow, which had likely received the brunt of the impact, to be in even worse shape. It was looking less and less likely that she would be able to use Zac to carry out her plan of getting home. Tendrils of despair coiled around her thorax like a slowly closing vice, squeezing out a small gasp from her throat. She walked around the ship to do a complete outside appraisal. There was still the *Chimera*—

As she made it to the starboard fore side of the ship, Genevieve sucked in her breath. The exit portal for the *Chimera* gaped open. She scrambled closer and to her amazement and horror, saw that the *Chimera* was not in its berth. It was gone!

She let out a gasp of utter despair and closed her eyes. The *Chimera* must have jettisoned while they were still in space—No, she'd registered it in its berth as she brought Zac down. Genevieve opened her eyes and stared at the gaping portal. It must have opened on impact, flinging the *Chimera* out and crushing it between the planets ripped surface and Zac's thousand ton hull. She scanned around for evidence of *Chimera*'s scraps but couldn't recognize any. What did it matter? Unless she could repair Zac, she was stuck here, in the middle of an insidious jungle that threatened to drive her mad. And she was no expert in stream jump engineering, hyperdrive technology or matrix converters. Terrific, she thought, casting a gloomy look around her at the thick jungle. She was trapped and on a collision course with insanity.

"Well, you're not going to claim me that easily," she grumbled and slipped off her sandals for more sure footing to climb the steep ramp of the *Chimera*'s portal. The berth was more level, and from there she was able to make her way down the mid-corridor to the starboard side quite easily. The metalloid hall gleamed like a sterile tomb in the spare light and felt cool on her feet as she made her way stealthily toward the bow of the quiet ship.

Purple Eosian sunlight filtered in ahead. No doubt the breach she'd seen from the air of the matrix converter room, which ran the hyperdrive plasma coils. She reached the large hole and, feeling like a tourist gaping at road kill, picked her way slowly along the scabrous and torn floor of the corridor. What remained of the main hyperdrive engineering room was charred and unidentifiable. As she'd suspected, it looked beyond

fixing. With a heavy sigh, Genevieve continued forward to the control centre, fighting off despair.

When she reached a sub-ancillary control panel, Genevieve played with the controls out of whimsy. The lights spattered on, much to her delirious gratitude. Zac wasn't totally dead, she concluded as hope bubbled up inside her. "Way to go, Zac!" she whispered to herself. "Stay with me..."

Excitement mounting, she charged to the fore section and sprinted up the ladder to the control room—and skidded to a halt. "Oh, God!" she breathed.

The room was charred from an explosion and she could see the purple and green canopy overhead. Light filtered in from a three-metre square gaping hole. The control panel that had fallen on top of her had partially melted in a subsequent chemical fire. It was basically gutted. There was nothing left.

As she reached out to what was left of the control panel, Genevieve caught site of her own hand. It was purple! At first she decided it was the Eosian light reflecting on her. Then she took a closer look down the length of her body—and screamed.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped. "I'm purple! I'm one of them!" Something inside her snapped and she fell apart. She sank to her knees in despair. "Oh, Zac, What have I done..."

What a mess she'd made. They all hated her. Even the Eosian forest had conspired against her, seducing her into a sexual transgression, with the compulsion to break every taboo in the Eosian tablet of rules. Even now, she could still feel her rebellious body stirring to the *vishna*'s allure. It would have been better if she'd died and the rest of the crew had survived. Diaprepes had called her his queen. Sure, she thought miserably, she'd done a great job of royally botching everything.

"I hate this place! I hate them all!" She pounded the glabrous mess that used to be Zac's console then stroked it and leaned her cheek against the rough metalloid. Mind summoning back their silly joking and banter, Genevieve murmured in a splintered voice, "Here's one for you Zac. What do you call sex with a nerd? ... dorkgasm..." She choked on the answer and hiked in sobbing breaths between a spasmodic strings of words, "Oh, Zac! I miss you!" She sank into a ball on the floor and wept convulsively.

Zac, who understood her, who laughed with her, who kept her company and never judged her ... Zac, who loved her...

She swallowed her sob at a clinking sound in the aft hall and swung her head around—she inhaled sharply, Azaes stood at the exit door of the control room, tall and magnificently naked, chest heaving with labored breaths as if he'd run the whole way. His eyes were on fire and they flamed into hers.

She surged to her feet and quickly wiped away her tears then squared her shoulders defiantly, unwilling to show him her vulnerability. She wondered how long he'd been standing there and felt her face burn. Had he heard her foolish dialogue with the ship? Come to think of it, he looked a little annoyed that she wasn't hurt—he'd probably broken into a sprint when he heard her scream of distress, only to find her muttering angry words about Eos to herself.

She raised herself tall, unashamed of her nudity and met his eyes with a steely stare. He, on the other hand, was obviously uncomfortable seeing her this way, totally revealed, legs spread apart in combat stance, fists firmly planted on her hips. And totally purple.

She watched him drink in her body and her heart raced. Her breasts swelled with heaving breaths as she caught sight of his stirring penis.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“It’s the effect of the planet’s atmosphere, the aerosols exuded by the vegetation,” he explained, not bothering to answer her question. “Your pigments were already transforming, though not noticeably. But when you joined with the *vishna*, the transformation was enhanced. It became almost instantaneous.”

She firmed her lips and stood her ground, facing him with smouldering anger.

Azaes remained where he was. He said calmly, “You must come back with me, Genevieve.”

She glanced at the rope of strong vine clutched in his large hand. “I’ve seen enough of your paradise,” she bit out. “And I’ve done enough damage for one day. Thanks for the hospitality,” she said tartly, “I really must go now.”

“You can’t.”

She snorted. “Oh, and you’re going to stop me?”

If her retort rattled him he didn’t show it. “Your ... ship. It’s dead. It will not take you home. You must come back with me,” he ended in a commanding voice.

“Must?” she said jeeringly, hiking a brow and throwing her hair back with a quick snap of her head. He still had a lot to learn about the human spirit. She refused to submit to the fact that he’d correctly deduced her pathetic situation.

He closed the distance between them in two long strides and after a lurching hesitation, seized her by the shoulders with a strong grip. His warm breath upon her was spiced with sweet intoxication. “Yes, *must*.” He said, eyes burning.

She took in a halting breath then shook her head to clear it from the dizzy haze of his scent. “You’re not my keeper,” she hissed. “And I’m not coming back. I’m going to fix Zac.” She wasn’t about to admit defeat in front of Azaes. “And ... and...” she blustered, “failing that, I’ll just live here by myself!” She struggled fiercely, refusing to acknowledge the ridiculousness of her situation. “Let me go!” She kicked out.

He yelped but held on, tightening his grip. “What madness possessed you to come out here like this!? My brother is more foolish than I thought!”

“But a lot kinder!” she spat.

“So you think, fool of a woman!” he shook her for emphasis. “Don’t you know it’s dangerous out here? *He* should have known better than to send you here...”

“Your brother didn’t *send* me!”

“You’re particularly vulnerable. You didn’t grow up with the *vishna*. They will overpower you and drive you insane!”

As if he cared! “So you’re brother already warned me! It’s you who’s doing the overpowering now!” she shot back, then managed to free an arm and slapped him hard in the face. It smacked loudly and shocked his face into a deep purple. “You killed my husband!” she shrieked, not caring if he retaliated. Rage had taken over. “Now leave me alone! I can take care of myself. I have work to do and you have a wedding to go to!”

“That’s enough!” he bellowed, dodging her swings but not fighting back, except to tighten his vice grip until it hurt. “Your husband killed himself!”

“You’re lying!” She kicked out hard, making contact with his shin.

He yelped. “Sacred Universe! Will you be still!”

Azaes forced her backward violently. She tripped and they both stumbled to the floor. His body fell heavily upon hers and they both gasped. He smelled like the pulsing jungle dripping with the overpowering scent of sex. And his wide eyes looked almost frightened as he stared into hers. Then without warning, his lips seized hers, crushingly. She almost lost her breath. His tongue thrust and pulled her inside him, captive. Teasing. Alluring. Torturing. His hands mauled her breasts, chafing them painfully like wood for a fire. My, God! What was he doing?

“You killed them all...” she insisted in panting breaths, pushing away from him, when he released her mouth with a gasping moan. He responded by cupping his hands under her buttocks and sliding over her with his pelvis. She gasped out a moan, feeling the length of his hardness dig into her abdomen. Oh, his magnificent cock! She wanted it and felt the wetness surge out even as she struggled to get out from under him.

“—First you tortured them with your dreams,” she said in sobbing breaths as she pummelled his back, while undulating and arching her pelvis to his rhythm. “Then you let your cowardly gods finish them off!”

Sweat dripped off his chin onto her face. His breaths were shallow and hard. Then, to her surprise—and disappointment—he leaned back with a humorless smile to sit astride on her thighs. He grabbed the long vine tendrils he’d dropped beside him and seized her arms, gruffly stretched them out and swiftly tied them to the legs of the console. Staring up into his pained face, she let him tie her without a struggle. What in God’s green Earth was he doing?

“I tortured no one who wasn’t already torturing himself—or *herself*...” he panted, cinching the vine tight with a jerk, hurting her wrist and making her wince. “But you *will* be still now, woman!”

“—you messed with their minds,” she went on in bursts of gasping and panting. “Lured them to do your own dirty work. You probably convinced them to drive the ships right into the asteroid ring,” she said with sudden macabre inspiration. “Just like Zac...”

“Sacred Universe!” he cried in a voice of anguish. “I did no such thing. I may have invaded your mind, but you invaded my heart. It is *you* who are torturing *me*!” he said with real torment, stunning her into momentary silence.

He jerked to his feet and scrambled to retrieve more vines he’d left in the hallway. Obviously he’d come prepared to take her by force, she thought. He knelt beside her and brusquely pulled her legs apart. She sucked in a breath and watched him lash one leg to a fallen console. Then he grabbed her other leg and tied it to part of another fallen instrument panel. Work done, he pushed himself to his feet, breathing heavily with legs straddled over her spreadeagled body. Nose flaring with surging emotion, he let his gaze slowly glide from her face down her heaving breasts to her spread legs and her sex, laid open, wet and pulsing. He looked insane. God! His truant behavior went against everything Eosian. Perhaps he was a heretic after all! Or just plain mad.

He dropped down to kneel astride her, huge cock hanging magnificently between his large muscular thighs. Her eyes flickered from his tortured face to his already engorged penis, hard and erect as he knelt poised in silence. She struggled to get free. He responded by throwing himself on her with a grunt and she gasped. She inhaled sharply as his hard cock jabbed against her belly. He slid frantically over her, eyes closing and burying his face in her hair. He breathed in the scent of her hair with a long inhale, and ran his trembling hands through it with a moan of pure ecstasy.

She felt like his prisoner, yet his captor at the same time. Still moaning, he travelled down to her breasts. Hands, lips and tongue mauled her breasts and her nipples. They teased out a painful longing that brought a hard tug against her bonds and sent her body jerking in wild spasms. His tongue traveled down her belly to the hairs above her crotch where he lingered obsessively in her forest of nether hair and sucked in sharp breaths between gasps of pleasure.

Then he was there, licking away the wetness she'd already jetted out. Tongue flickering and penetrating. She gasped out a low moan, arching and desperate for him to fill her. He responded with his hand. Her mouth snapped open at his stroking fingers. It drew out more pleading cries from her. He was torturing her, pulling out an exquisitely painful yearning and refusing to meet it.

As her beseeching cries rose to wails of agony, his lips closed over her open mouth and his tongue lashed hers to the stroke of his fingers. Despite the lack of depth, his wild rhythm released her orgasm and she shuddered as she came.

But she remained a passenger, a vessel of his lovemaking. He'd simply unlocked a deeper coil of tension. She bucked hard, keening through his mouth, needing to get more, to do more. He roared down her throat as if in defiance then entered her with swift violence. She came instantly from deep inside with a scream, muscles pulsing in waves of release as he continued to thrust frantically and vigorously. Then he shuddered hard and ejaculated with a roaring bellow, collapsing on her with a guttural sigh. Overwhelmed with emotion, she wanted to throw her arms around him, but they were immobilized.

After a long silence, he lifted his head to stare down at her and she saw an expression of feral satisfaction on it. "You bring out the worst in me," he growled.

"The *best*," she snarled back.

"Ah, Genevieve" he sighed, tenderly stroking her hair. "Perhaps the best ... but certainly my first." She'd forgotten that and felt strangely exhilarated and guilty that she'd ended his virginity. He didn't seem to mind right now. He kissed her fervently, penis stirring again inside her. She stirred with him, knowing that each time it would be different, like he'd said in her dream, and that she desired him like no other man she'd known.

But, to her great disappointment, he withdrew, releasing her from her sexual trance. She realized that it was to untie her arms. As he did, he whispered hoarsely, "I release the beast..." He spun around on all fours until his butt faced her, genitals visibly hanging down between his spread out legs, and untied her legs. Remaining in that position, he twisted his head around to face her. "Now, you are free to whip me!" he cried hoarsely, brusquely handing her the vines. "Come! Ask me your questions. Give me your challenges! And I must answer to your satisfaction ... or else!"

She raised herself on her elbows to study his buttocks and his manly equipment hanging in front between muscular thighs, and found herself relishing this. "Okay," she said, "About your *soul-drifting* into those crewer's dreams. Why did you make them insane?"

He jerked his head around with a frown. "I didn't make them insane..."

"Wrong answer!" She whipped his ass hard with the vines. They slapped satisfyingly, making him wince as his huge scrotum constricted, and left temporary lines of dark purple welts.

“Their dreams only revealed their guilt, a longing for redemption or punishment in some cases...” Azaes said in a gravely voice, keeping his head facing forward so she could not see his expression. “I cannot make anyone dream anything they do not want to.”

She thought this over for a moment. “Then my dreams of you...” she trailed, brows coming together.

“Yes, Genevieve,” he said through an obvious smile or was it a grimace—she couldn’t see his face. “With you, it was different yet again. You took over the dream unlike anyone I have ever experienced. It was *you* who invaded *my* mind!”

“Wrong answer again!” she shouted more vehemently, smacking him vigorously several times. He obliged her with a grunt and she saw his balls and penis shrink. How could he say that? To suggest that *she’d* orchestrated their love scenes. It was absurd!

As though he could read her tormented mind, Azaes continued, “Every time I entered my Eoptic trance through the *vishna* drug, *you* came to me. You and your cursed dreams. I was your prisoner of love.”

She slapped him with the vines again. “Wrong, wrong, wrong!” she said sharply. Was that why he’d forced himself on her now, because of her intoxicating scent and those suggestive dreams she’d foisted on him? Or was it tormented frustration, the simple and natural act of a man who’d spent his entire sexually mature life in denial? Of course, it had nothing to do with love...

“You said they felt guilty, the crewers.” she stammered her next question. “Why would they?”

“Because they’re human beings,” he snarled, turning his head slightly to glare at her. “They should feel guilty! They should not have come. We don’t want them!”

“Wrong again!” Whack! Whack! Whack! She’d stopped enjoying herself a while ago. The sadistic pleasure in physically tormenting him had given way to a maelstrom of anguish that roiled uncomfortably inside her. He said ‘them’ but surely he meant ‘you’. She remembered his first angry words to her in Eosian, ‘*su neehat mo legglis*’. Of course he included *her* in his misanthropic thoughts.

“But it was you who came to us in the first place,” she insisted, her voice quavering under a storm of emotions.

“Ah, yes, with the promised gift of eternity,” he said sourly, lowering his head, bare butt still facing her. “That was fifteen years ago,” he continued grimly. “I’ve since changed my opinion of your people and long ago abandoned any possibility of collaboration. I had thought that your race was on the verge of enlightenment. But I was wrong. All the ships you sent were run by men and women of irreverence, ignorance, mendacity and greed. Their mission was always to simply take, without any regard for my people.”

Her husband had been one of those men. “Not *all* of them...”

“Yes, *all!*” he insisted, cutting her off with such vehemence, she flinched and scrambled out from under him, vine whip forgotten. She tucked her bent legs behind her and hugged her waist with her arms. He sensed her changed mood and turned around to face her, sitting cross-legged, face stern with determination. “They came to take our gifts, by force if necessary,” he continued gravely. “Your husband included.” His face tightened into a sour mask of mixed regret and disapproval. “It was all described in your

DAWN Project. Don't forget, I could enter their minds, every single one of them, Captain Dan Gallagher included."

She tensed and found herself swallowing down the saliva that poured into her mouth. Azaes's disturbing proclamation lingered in her mind, unsettling her. Before he'd so energetically fucked her, Azaes had claimed that Dan had killed himself. She didn't want to believe it, but was it true? Had he felt alone in his guilt? If he'd known he had a son, would he have felt the same way?

"So even you know what DAWN is," she grumbled, letting frustrated anger release some of the tension. "Seems I'm the only one in the universe who doesn't."

"You're probably right," he agreed absently. "Yes, DAWN, the most beautiful time of the day and the most evil plan your people have ever conceived." He frowned and looked through her into some far away place in his mind. After expelling a long breath, he explained. "Zeta Corp and its crew were fulfilling a government military contract..."

"Wait!" she objected. "I'm not on contract with the military."

"Not directly, Genevieve. But the company you work for is. Believe me, I know. In fact, most of your crew have military backgrounds and some of them are still on a military payroll."

Her gaze dropped. Yes, she knew that. It made sense. Bragg, for instance, in addition to his academic training—he had a Ph.D. in extraterrestrial ecology and a P. Eng. in spacestream-transport engineering—was a colonel in the armed forces.

"Your government's mandate was simple; seize by force or stealth what they could not obtain through diplomatic means. The former was considered most likely because of our reluctance to relinquish anything to you 'until you were considered ready', as I had stated in my initial address to your people." His face twisted into a sneer as he returned his focus on Genevieve. "Your precious DAWN project was conceived in several alternative plans. Plan B, which went into effect at the first sign of aggression upon your ship, was to mobilize into combat-stealth mode, which involved seizing in any way possible our biotechnology without regard for Eosian welfare and take back a hostage—I was the most likely candidate. You see, they already had in their minds that we would attack."

"And they were right," Genevieve breathed, casting her eyes down in morbid thought. "Only it wasn't you, it was the Epoptes." She snapped her gaze to his eyes with new intensity. "Wasn't it? So they do exist?"

"Yes, of course they do," he said impatiently. "They possess the knowledge and means to manipulate all physical things on and around Eos, including the asteroid belt that surrounds our planet. They simply pelted your flimsy ships until they broke up, exploded or, as in the case of your ship, came down." His eyes looked into hers with a mixture of remorse and pain. "I *soul-drifted* into your fellow humans' dreams in an attempt to discourage them, to make them turn back. Unfortunately the dreams were not enough and your crews met their demise."

That shed him in a much better light, she thought, feeling gladdened that Azaes had at least shown some compassion toward her people. It gave her the strength to meet his gaze with a challenging one. "What about me, then? Your dreams weren't exactly discouraging..."

He made a sound of exasperation and frowned, suddenly uncomfortable. “I already told you that you interfered with my ability to affect your dreams. You took control. You changed it all.”

“I don’t believe that,” she said stiffly, leaning forward to eye him more closely. How could she have imagined the *vishna* joining? “You played a big role in those dreams. I couldn’t have possibly imagined all those things.”

He sighed in frustration. “Yes, yes, of course I did,” he said impatiently, his frown deepening. “I concede I heartily provided. But the tone of your dreams was entirely your doing—not mine.”

So, the loving was truly one-sided, she concluded miserably and felt her body sink with disappointment. Then she felt anger boil up at her weakness. It was bad enough to realize that she had strong feelings for this stern Eosian, but to discover—rather, to confirm—that he didn’t reciprocate in the least—except for this lusty interlude—was hard to accept. Logic told her that there was no reason for him to be interested in her, except as a curiosity of science. He was going to marry his equal, a beautiful woman who understood him and would give him what he wanted, heirs worthy of ruling the *Sthanu* Circle. What in hell kind of fantasy was she dreaming about?

She half-listened to him as he pushed his lower lip out in grave thought and continued, “Your government seeks our crystals.”

“What?” She pulled herself out of her dismal thoughts to what Azaes had said. “Crystals like the one in your pyramid?”

“The large hexagonal ruby stone you saw is a Fire Crystal. It’s responsible for my unique mode of communication and appeared in my original broadcast to Earth. Our crystal communications network is incredibly sophisticated and very powerful. Your scientists and politicians decided that our crystal technology was responsible for all that we have and are. Particularly the immortality part...”

“What ... Did you say...” she trailed off, thinking she’d heard him incorrectly.

“We are what you would call ... immortal.”

“What?” she gasped, mind reeling. She bumbled out the next words, wondering how old he really was. “I thought what you said in your vid-cast was metaphor about offering us the gift of eternity.”

“Ah, you’re a very rare breed,” he said with sardonic amusement. “A naïve intellectual. An oxymoron. The others took my message literally, as it turned out. They wanted to believe in an all-powerful elixir that would cure all ills and bestow on them power and life unimaginable. So they did. And they sent you, their callow angel, to fool us and get it.”

“You’re wrong,” she objected, not appreciating being called callow. “I was never meant to land here in the first place. I was supposed to remain in orbit aboard Zac.”

“But you didn’t, did you?” he challenged with a grim smile. Then he leaned forward on his hands, looking suddenly very intense. “Now I have a question for *you*. I had a team search the area of this wreckage to assess the damage you’d done to our forest. We only found traces of six of your fellow eleven crewers. Five are missing.”

She swallowed and felt the pit of her stomach lurch. With a sudden dry mouth, she said, “Perhaps they were scattered in pieces too difficult to find.”

He looked at her with a deep frown. "Believe me when I say that their remains were not in the vicinity. We use a genetic tracking technique far superior to anything you have."

"Then where are they?" she said, thoughts racing.

"That was *my* question," Azaes grumbled, looking very annoyed.

"They couldn't have been torn out of the ship earlier while in space during the initial breach because I checked. Both the *Chimera* and the crew were still aboard then. And the only other breach occurred on the surface of Eos during my crash-landing..." she trailed, eyes suddenly fixing on Azaes with stiff fear.

"Precisely," he said, reading her thoughts. "Your smaller vessel, the *Chimera*, the one that's missing..." He let the rest trail.

"Oh, my God..." she breathed. Project DAWN. She tried to recall the disjointed facts about their mission that Zac had tried to warn her about just before he snuffed it. "Who are the missing crew? Can you tell?"

"Of course I can," he responded, rather peevisly. "That is how we could determine how many were missing in the first place, through their individual signatures. Your missing crewers include Mission Commander, Howard Bragg, the cryptologist, Ricardo Sanchez, your weapons expert and pilot, Gordon Porter, the archaeologist, Irena Wagner, and nanobiologist, Drummond Heller." Azaes didn't wait for her to respond. "Fits, doesn't it? It's DAWN."

"Oh, my God," she mumbled, staring at him. That was what Zac was trying to tell her. That at the first sign of attack he'd awoken and alerted the DAWN crew, like he was programmed to, and they'd already mobilized into the *Chimera*. Upon impact, the *Chimera* with the DAWN crew shot out like a seed from its cracked shell and disappeared into the Eosian jungle, leaving the dying husk and what was left of its crew—her—to die. "I'm so sorry, Azaes. I don't know what to say."

He shook his head and sighed, frowning deeply.

She grabbed for his hand with sudden inspiration, but he snatched it away.

Undaunted, she said, "You know what they're looking for. Why don't you simply hide it?"

He waved his hands up in the air. "It's not that simple," he said angrily. His eyes flashed at her with impatience. "They will destroy our cities looking for something they can never use."

"What do you mean?"

"The crystal does nothing of itself, Genevieve," he said grimly, brows furrowing. "Our biotechnology is all about this forest ecosystem, the *vishna* forest."

The *vishna* again! Was there anything that tree couldn't do?

"The crystals your DAWN crew covet so highly are only a medium, a tool, for the *vishna* force. We have worked with this force for thousands of years and still do not fully understand it." He leaned forward. Without thinking, she mirrored his motion and drew closer to him. "The crystals only amplify or store whatever is put into them. It is the *vishna* that provides us with everything from youthfulness and health to all of our comforts and amenities."

"Diaprepes told me that the Eoptes introduced the *vishna* to Eos," Genevieve said.

Azaes nodded. "By integrating itself in the Eosian ecosystem, the *vishna* has converted the entire planet into a symbiotic 'sentient' community."

“Oh, my God,” she exhaled, awestruck. It was no wonder Azaes had been so upset when she’d destroyed those *vishnas* with her crash-landing. It was only now that she fully understood their importance to the Eosians. The *vishna* was the foundation of their entire society and perhaps the planet’s survival. She fixed an intense gaze upon him. “You and I must stop the *Chimera* and its crew. We must find them!”

Azaes exploded with impatient anger, “Don’t you think we know where they are?”

She started and blinked hard as if he’d struck her. But didn’t he just say—

“How is it we knew exactly where *you* were when you came down?” he jeered.

She hadn’t thought of that ... But then. “Why haven’t you stopped them already, then?”

He exhaled loudly, obviously impatient with her. “Because, for some reason, the *Chimera* set down in the deepest part of the *vishna* forest,” he said. “The part into which few Eosians have ever ventured ... and returned.”

“Oh,” she said with a swallow.

Azaes nodded gravely and muttered, “You cursed humans. Will you never learn?” He rose to his feet and reached out to help her to hers. As she took his hand, he gruffly lifted her up, bad-temper still lingering on his tight face, and said, “Before you and I attempt a rendezvous with them, I think I need to show you something first.”

Chapter Nineteen

As they stepped into the light and smells of the aromatic *vishna* forest, Genevieve saw the scree lying in wait in the clearing near the ship. It ceased its preening and looked up. Azaes indicated for her to mount the large bird. Once she did, he climbed behind her and she fought the dizzying seduction of his body pressed against hers. It didn't help that the *vishna* forest conspired with its own provocation.

She was jolted out of her reverie as the scree rose sharply to its feet. Azaes spoke with uncommon gentleness to it and with a shrill cry, it leapt into the air. Genevieve grabbed hold of its feathers to keep from falling as the scree soared effortlessly over the forest. Genevieve threw a glance backward to Zac, abandoned like a discarded shell by its entire crew, and swallowed down a rush of feelings, guilt and remorse being chief among them. She wasn't giving up on Zac, Genevieve convinced herself. *I'll come back, Zac...*

They flew in silence, Azaes directing the bird from behind. As her body delighted in his solid flesh pressed against her back, arms snugly enfolding her waist, her mind digested his recent revelation. He was an immortal, probably hundreds of years old with a knowledge and wisdom she could never hope to match. She must seem a fool to him, she thought and wondered what he really thought of her.

His passionate lovemaking with her was clearly the effect of an accumulation of factors from the *vishna's* seductive vapors to her own tormenting dreams and smells. He was clearly as annoyed with her as he always had been. Perhaps more so, because he was probably angry with himself for having weakly abandoned his restraint. Lack of restraint had been the undoing of his people, after all. And God only knew how long he'd exercised that restraint up to now. A hundred years? Five hundred? A thousand?

Of course he regretted having intercourse with her. Probably felt seduced and tricked by her crafty scent and guile. It wasn't her fault that she didn't know their strange laws or that she gave off nasty sexual smells. To him she was just another sly and base human; but one who'd managed to tempt him and deflower him, just before his momentous formal joining. It must have infuriated him. How would he explain this awful transgression to his beloved? Also an immortal, no doubt, who'd waited God only knew how long to fuck someone. Genevieve had royally spoiled things for them indeed. If she managed to prevent a catastrophe caused by her own race, she might at least redeem herself a little in Azaes's eyes, she thought glumly. As for getting home, that had suddenly become a secondary priority.

They'd flown for about an hour when Azaes instructed the scree to circle. Genevieve, who'd taken to staring blankly ahead of her, drew herself up and gazed below. She spotted the ancient wreck instantly, its copper-glow glinting in the sunlight of a clearing thick with vines. It was the same remnant she'd seen earlier and would have explored, if not for her impatient urgency to get to Zac and learn of his condition.

As the scree dipped low to land beside the structure, her heart slammed up her throat. It was a vessel. A space ship! And no ordinary space ship. This vehicle looked just like Zac!

Azaes brought the scree down in a very small clearing beside the ship and the great bird knelt down for the two to slide off. Genevieve hopped to the ground, feeling the soft

vegetation on her bare feet, and crashed through the thicket of shrubs, congested with thick snaking vines, for a closer look.

She turned sharply to Azaes who'd followed closely behind. "What is this?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

"It's the seed ship that brought us here some 12,000 of your years ago."

She stared at the ship, speechless.

"It's made of *orichalkon*, a highly durable alloy made by the Eoptes," he explained. "*Orichalkon* resists breakdown of any kind and both conducts and repels certain energy waves with incredible ease."

A sophisticated version of Zac's bio-film plasma shields, Genevieve thought, observing that it was also the same material that lined the arcane rods in Azaes's pyramid.

Azaes continued in a subdued voice, "The ship resembles yours with uncanny degree."

"Why are you showing me this?" she asked, now inspecting the ship more critically.

Azaes shrugged with a lame smile.

The hull of the ship sparkled in the filtered light of the *vishna* forest with a brilliant copper hue. Except for the copper-glow, it looked exactly like Zac, which was singularly creepy. She didn't know what to think of it and the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Genevieve pressed forward and noticed Azaes hanging back, watching her closely. As she walked around to the starboard side of the bow, craning to inspect the ship, she read the ship's name, still clearly inscribed. They resembled a mixture of Greek letters and Egyptian hieroglyphics. In fact ... Her heart raced in sudden recognition and she turned sharply to Azaes, coming alongside her. After a convulsive swallow, she pointed and rasped out through a dry throat, "Is that written in Eosian?"

"Yes, ancient Eosian. We don't use that form of the language anymore, except the written pledges in the tablets of our temple."

"What's it say?" she asked in a hollow voice, already knowing what he was going to answer.

"It says *Atlantis II*."

"Oh, my God," she breathed. It all suddenly matched like a giant puzzle coming together. Why hadn't she figured it out before? The strange things she'd seen in the Posedonus temple and museum. The brilliant and mysterious crystal in Azaes's room that matched the description of archaeologists' finds in the Caribbean Sea. All items she should have recognized from her readings. The Eosians were the descendants of Atlantis. They came from Earth!

She swung to stare at him. He didn't look surprised by her reaction.

"You knew?"

"I guessed. You just confirmed it. When I first saw your ship you can imagine my astonishment..." he said grimly, then pointed her to the aft side of the ship. "Come, there's more."

* * * *

Azaes opened a hatch in the aft side of the ship. He led her up the ramp inside, and Genevieve felt her heart pumping. The inside of the ship was in remarkable shape for

something thousands of years old. There were small differences between it and Zac, but they were subtle. Even the walls and floors of this ship were a smooth mixture of nano-organics and metal alloys. She recognized the glint of *orichalkon* flakes embedded in the walls, which were lit indirectly by some unknown source. It was beautiful and uncanny.

Azaes led her forward, to where Zac's main impeller drive would have been. In its stead, stood a console that housed a large blue crystal shaped like a huge flower.

"Unlike your ship, whose biotechnology still retains some archaic components, the *Atlantis II* is driven by our advanced bio-crystal technology," said Azaes. "When our people landed here some twelve thousand years ago—I was just an infant, born on the seed ship—they disassembled the ship and removed its four primary crystals. They scattered them throughout the jungle and planted *vishna* trees around them to protect them."

The fact that Azaes had just admitted to being thousands of years old hadn't been lost on Genevieve. But she had to tuck that in the back of her mind to pay attention to the crystal and its significance. "So, this crystal is responsible for running the ship?"

"Part of the ship, its sub-stellar power. Much like your ship's impeller engines." He looked at her uneasily. "What's significant here is that this crystal, like its three brothers, was, up to a few weeks ago, safe in the jungle. Someone has removed them and placed them here," he said, then added, hiking an eyebrow for emphasis, "Correctly."

She swallowed hard. He responded with a knowing nod. "Your man, Sanchez, is quite good," Azaes said with cool respect.

"You mean the ship's functional?"

He nodded. "Yes," he said, pursing his lips, eyes piercing into hers. "It should be."

"Oh, my God," she whispered, reading him correctly. Sanchez was a crystal physicist. He knew exactly what to look for and what to do. They all knew.

Azaes pointed out of the room. "Come, I'll take you to the control room. You can see for yourself."

As Genevieve followed him forward to the control centre, she fumed. The bloody bastards! They'd known for a long time, long enough to build Zac in the image of *Atlantis III*! They'd figured it out somehow. It was obvious in the choice of the crew, something that had always puzzled her. Now it made terrible sense. Even her casual interest in the legend and archaeological findings of Atlantis were likely considered by Zeta himself in accepting her for part of his crew.

Someone had probably recognized the crystal arrangement that matched the one found by Earth archaeologists a hundred years ago. In fact, now that she thought of it, she wondered how she hadn't figured it out herself, after the many times she'd seen the vid and had read of the recent findings in New Zealand. Plans for the *Atlantis II* may have been uncovered by some other team and kept quiet by the government, she concluded. They'd figured it all out. Only, as Azaes revealed to her, they had it all wrong.

They climbed a ladder to the control room, fitted with another crystal complex and sundry consoles made of a hybrid mixture of *orichalkon* and the Eos's organic building material.

After assessing the main panels and playing with a few controls, Genevieve glanced up and noticed that part of the console and ceiling corresponded exactly to the top and base of the complicated crystal-rod arrangement in Azaes's room. Deciding not to remark on this, particularly since she wasn't supposed to have seen the inside of his private

chambers, she turned to Azaes. “We must stop them,” she began excitedly. Then she had a sudden thought and fixed an intense look on Azaes. “Why is this ship still here and why *did* they land the *Chimera* in the middle of the jungle?” Her eyes narrowed with challenge. “I think you know. And if I’m going to help you I need to know too.”

His lip quivered into a savage smile, then he blew out a long breath and nodded gravely. “You make a logical point.”

She planted her fists on her hips and waited.

He nodded, acknowledging her determination. “There is another crystal. The largest of them, jade-colored and intricately laced, said to have been grown during ancient times in our homeland. It is called the Giant Crystal.” Homeland, indeed! She’d read about it in the Atlantean legends on Earth. “It stands over twenty meters in height and its hexagonal extensions span about ten meters. While it is not directly involved with running this ship, the Giant Crystal forms a crucial part of our overall crystal network and is an extremely powerful conductor. For this reason it is located in the deepest part of the *vishna* jungle,” he added contemplatively, tapping his lip. “The crystal network is maintained by the *shwarma*, small four-legged creatures who are sensitive to the crystal’s energy and with whom we can communicate telepathically. The Giant Crystal is heavily guarded by the *shwarma*, who do not share our own reservations for using violence. They will kill intruders.”

“Why is DAWN interested?” Never mind how they knew, she added in her mind.

“The Giant Crystal functions as not only an interstellar communications node, but as an energy wave focuser. It is capable of ultimate destruction as well as ultimate healing. You saw a smaller version of it in the healing pool that I put you in after your fall. I believe your crew thinks that the Giant Crystal provides the ultimate answer, the treasure they seek, including the power of immortality. It is why they came here.” He shook his head ruefully. “While it serves as a powerful force to heal someone from what would otherwise be a mortal wound, only the *vishna* can impart immortality. At any rate, your DAWN crew wish to seize it and place it in this ship’s hold, which corresponds to the berth for the *Chimera* in your ship, then use the *Atlantis II* and its crystal energy to leave with the treasure they have. Your ship no doubt served as a backup.”

Fat chance of that, thought Genevieve, but the *Chimera* was also capable of interstellar travel.

“How would that affect you? Removing the crystal?”

“Well you should ask,” he growled in a savage tone. “While the *vishna* is our true symbiont in the life force, much of it is accessed, magnified and directed through this crystal. If your colleagues were to remove the Great Crystal, it would result in great chaos and hardship for my people.” He blew out a breath of angry frustration. “It will take a thousand years to grow another one and only if they leave a seed crystal behind.”

“Good God!” she murmured. But there still remained something that wasn’t right with this picture. “Why aren’t they using *this* ship to fetch the crystal, particularly since that’s where they want to put it?”

“Yes,” he said, stroking his chin pensively with a thoughtful frown. “I wondered the same thing. It is possible that their pilot could not get this ship to function. It may be broken in some other way, despite all the crystals being in place.”

Genevieve studied Azaes for a long moment and decided that he wasn’t very good at lying. It looked more complicated than Zac but seemed to be in full working condition,

except for a part that was missing, the crystal sphere and rod in his private chambers. It was obvious to her only because she had seen it in Azaes's room. And Gordon Porter hadn't, she thought, letting a wry half-smile cross her face. She turned to Azaes from the controls. "So you think they're cutting their losses here and simply going for the Great Crystal?"

"Would it fit in the *Chimera*?"

She pondered the dimensions he'd quoted to her earlier and nodded grimly. "Definitely. It's as if the *Chimera* were made for it..." she trailed, feeling her stomach curdle. Her mind raced with choices. "Are we sure they're abandoning this ship? Should we simply go after them and risk missing them? What if they've already retrieved the crystal?"

"They haven't."

He was too certain and she tilted her head, looking at him in inquiry.

He firmed his lips. "They can't remove the crystal without a device. My flame crystal," he said grimly.

That flame crystal again! One of its 101 uses. "Good," she said. "Then we have them."

"There is another complication," Azaes added, looking suddenly more uncomfortable than before. He released a long exhale and looked at her with intense pleading eyes. "I actually came for your help, Genevieve. My ... intended is there now, serving part of her training as future *kusha*. As a shape-shifter, she can interact with the *shwarma* at a level far beyond ours. Genevieve, I think they are being besieged. I have not heard from her since yesterday..."

"Then what are we waiting for!?" She sprang to her feet and pelted down the hall toward the exit of *Atlantis II*, Azaes at her heels.

He said between panting breaths, "It will be dangerous for you, Genevieve, to go into the deep jungle. It will play tricks on your mind. Shiva, like I, can withstand much of the influence of the *vishna* mist ... but you are not used to it."

Was he alluding to her sexual transgression with the *vishna* tree? She stopped suddenly and Azaes bumped into her, knocking her off balance. He seized her to keep her from falling and held on to her a little longer than she thought was necessary. She slithered out of his hold and turned to him. "What about weapons? Do you have any?"

"You mean to injure..."

"Maim and kill," she finished for him. "Yeah. Because you can bet your ass the crew of the *Chimera* will," she ended grimly.

He looked disturbed. "We have nothing."

"Nothing? Not even to punish wrong doings?"

"Genevieve," he said gently, "We have no violence and no murders. The last one occurred two hundred years ago. Our domestic disputes are largely settled through arbitration. Wrong doings, once assessed by our *Sthanu* Circle, are treated quite effectively by ostracizing the perpetrator, who without exception complies to do some work of good will that will redeem them."

Genevieve stared. They were going to get slaughtered. "We need to make a quick pit stop at my ship, then."

* * * *

Genevieve left Azaes outside with the scree as she pelted to Zac's armory. As she feared, most of their standard weapons had been removed. No doubt by the *Chimera* crew. She grabbed what was left, a weapons utility belt on which she clipped a knife, a concussion pistol and extra laser clips. There was one long-range laser rifle left. She fastened the belt on her waist, cinching it tight and slung the rifle over her shoulder then pounded back outside to where Azaes waited patiently, stroking the scree.

"It isn't much, but it'll have to do," she said, catching his uneasy gaze at the little armory slung over her shoulder and on her waist. Azaes came out of his daze when she tried to mount the scree. He helped her get on then slid on behind her, and they were off again.

"Remember what I said," Azaes warned. "The vapors of the *vishna* jungle can overwhelm, even from up here, because the jungle is so dense. The suspended oils rise with the heat and linger in the atmosphere with amazing persistence. The jungle will play tricks on you. Do not succumb to its dizzying suggestions. Be brave and strong, as I know you are, Genevieve."

She pulled in a long breath and nodded.

Chapter Twenty

They flew in silence for several hours. Genevieve fell into a reverie, comfortably nestled in Azaes's arms and leaning against his chest. She couldn't help thinking that Azaes's interest in her was purely utilitarian. It made the most sense. He'd decreed her useful to him because she was likely the best person to have around when dealing with other humans. There was no need for even fascination or inter-species concern. Certainly no place for love...

She lost track of time, and of herself. When Azaes nudged her, she realized that she'd fallen into a kind of sleep. She'd turned to cuddle him and buried her face in his chest, arms entwined around him. Genevieve blushed and turned back to look forward, heart pounding up her throat.

She saw the huge spire of the Great Crystal before she recognized the *Chimera* beside it. At least they hadn't missed them, she thought. It didn't look like they'd made much headway moving the crystal into the *Chimera*. It looked like it was still in its original position. They wanted it in one piece and the only way to move it was with the flame crystal.

As Azaes's scree banked toward the crystal installation Genevieve made out several large animals lying on the ground. They looked a little like wolves. Probably some of the *shwarma* that had been guarding the crystal. She took in a deep breath, the carnage had begun. If Bragg had little compassion for the Eosian bipeds, he'd have absolutely none for these wolf-like creatures.

It didn't seem like anyone had spotted them yet. In fact, there was no one moving in the clearing. Maybe they were lucky and the *Chimera* crew were immobilized, having succumbed to the enticement of the forest—

She had no warning between the brief flash and high-pitched squeal of the laser cannon. The scree jerked with a shriek. Genevieve felt a violent tug, as though her leg had ripped on barbwire and she saw the bird's left wing shatter and spatter her with blood. Sharp pain flaming up her leg, Genevieve grabbed on to the bird's neck to keep from falling off. They'd been hit! When she looked down her leg was covered in blood. She wasn't sure if it was mostly the bird's or hers. Her leg had gone numb. Despite trying to fly with one wing and wheezing with effort, the scree plummeted down toward the jungle at breakneck speed. Genevieve felt a rush of wind on her face and grit her teeth, expecting the worst.

Azaes leaned forward and urged the bird on in words Genevieve could not understand. The bird seemed to listen and tried valiantly to change course even as it fell, into a spiralling glide toward a small clearing. The ground rushed toward them and the bird finally hit with a bone-wrenching thud and splash, toppling into a summersault that tossed Genevieve off. She landed hard with a splat in a thick bed of vegetation and muck. The shallow quagmire was springy and provided her with some cushion even as it released a thick perfume on impact. It caught her breath and she felt herself stuttering a long inhale. As though the ground caved in from under, she had the sudden impression of falling into an abyss of a thousand penises—

Azaes grabbed her and hauled her up to her feet, shaking her. “Genevieve! It’s the *vishna*! The ground is saturated with its pollen. You just got a major dose of it when you disturbed the moss with your fall.”

His smell was so enticing. She grabbed his face with her hands and stared into his eyes, desire seizing her. “I love you!” she exclaimed and kissed him full on the lips.

“It’s the *vishna*!” he insisted through her mouth and gruffly pushed her away from him. He glared at her with stern eyes. “Genevieve! I told you this would happen. Take control!”

He didn’t understand. She really *did* love him. But the daze lifted as embarrassment set in. “I’m all right now,” she said in a subdued voice, looking away. Her gaze rested on the dead scree. A large blood soaked wound on its chest still seeped blood into the standing water around it. Half of its wing was blown away.

“That bird was my friend since I was a little boy,” Azaes said quietly. “I think we’re two *dugos*—eh, five of your kilometres, from the Great Crystal.” Then he picked up her rifle, handed it to her and turned to the deep jungle without another look at the bird or at her. He pried the thicket of vines apart to penetrate the forest. “If we walk fast we’ll make it before sundown. Let’s go.” Then he disappeared through the doorway in the wall of vines he’d created, leaving her behind to fend for herself.

It was only as she rose to her feet and started walking that she noticed the wound on her leg. So, it *was* her blood. She must have received a residual hit from the laser cannon. Azaes, who’d already disappeared through the vine thicket, obviously didn’t notice and she was determined not to let him. Controlling her breaths in an effort to keep up, Genevieve ignored the oozing blood. The pain flamed up her leg at every step, and she wished for stim pills.

She struggled through the thick vines and plunged into the darkness of the jungle. The ground beneath her bare feet changed from the spongy prickles of moss and fern to a slimy layer of decaying leaves. Once she’d gotten through the vine thicket that had overgrown the clearing, the sparse ground cover of the jungle was fairly easy to manoeuvre and she spotted Azaes right away, only ten meters in front of her, walking slowly for her to catch up.

The vegetation steamed with moist heat. Dew drops rolled down from the canopy overhead and dropped with a loud smacking sound on giant fronds. They shivered as if with excitement.

She remained a few paces behind Azaes, focused on the lithe movements of his muscular back, butt cheeks and legs. He walked with the sureness and elegance of a predatory animal. Frequently her mind slid into a kind of momentary delirium and she imagined pouncing on him, mauling that firm butt and fucking him. Then a wave of shuddering threw her out of the hazy trance and she swallowed down the crazy compulsion.

Genevieve picked her way over ropes of lianas and surface roots that snaked over each other like the entwined limbs of lovers. She passed beneath large palms heavy with a profusion of flowers. The bright flowers hung swollen with perfumed sexual organs, huge pistils that resembled thick penises and long stamens with bright “lips”.

She recognized a wild *fika* tree whose branches were festooned with yellow gourd-like fruits and imagined the tiny *feeks* fucking happily inside. Insect pairs whirred past her, shivering and gyrating in frantic copulation. A bright red butterfly-like creature

blinked into startling mauve as if displaying to a mate. She passed bunches of tiny scarlet fruit hanging like grapes from a palm tree's slim trunk. They were covered with small beetles, all mounted on each other and wriggling vigorously, eating and fucking at the same time. At the base of its trunk, millions of shallow roots radiated outward as if searching for a mate.

She staggered on and nearly collided into a palm with stilts for roots, except for the warning flash of blue. Two huge electric blue flowers burst out of its trunk, one at eye level and the other at crotch level. Pistils that looked like veined flesh with bulbous heads hung enticingly like penises, surrounded by downy golden petals that resembled labia. Genevieve stared, awestruck, as the penis-like pistils thickened and grew engorged, erect and slimy in front of her eyes. The slime dripped like semen and plopped on the soggy ground.

"Don't touch it!" Azaes shouted, breaking the trance. "That is the..." he cleared his throat, betraying some embarrassment, "...the *quisha*, the genital tree. It has an olfactory sense that reacts to approaching animals and is very poisonous. Its poison penetrates your skin, slowly burning you from inside. If you were to touch both flowers you would be at first enticed by the light electrical charge buzzing through your body, just enough time for the slime on the pistil to do its work. It's sticky like glue. Within moments of touching it, you are trapped and doomed to a death of sheer agony as the slow acting poison eats you from inside. It takes days for it to kill you."

A terminal fuck of torture, she thought, and staggered past it.

"Why?" she asked in a faint voice. "Why would such a thing exist?"

"Snakes," he responded. "These flowers are not its real reproductive structures. They're a decoy to protect the tree from the *poslave*, a snake-like creature that feasts on its fruit above."

Genevieve swallowed and nodded, feeling suddenly awakened from a trance.

They continued for an hour, and she felt herself struggling more and more as her strength abated. She also noticed that the boggy smell of old decay grew more apparent as they were steadily treading in more and more standing water. Then Azaes stopped and turned to her. Beyond a long cut bank where he stood and in the direction of where they were going lay a swamp for as far as she could see. Covered by a mat of small floating plants, it surrounded the great *vishnas* like moats. A fine mist rose like steam from the green mat and floating debris that looked like solid turf except that she glimpsed pockets of black water beneath.

"Is this the only way to get there?" she asked.

"The only expedient way," he answered gloomily. "It will save us hours of walking, hours we need to get there before dark."

"What about the *kuiper* creatures?"

He grunted dismissively and said in a tone of mild contempt, "This is not an *igapo*. This is a stable and permanent ecosystem." He pointed to the trees in the swamp. "Look around. There are a diverse group of lower canopy and understory trees and shrubs. They wouldn't be here if this were an *igapo*. The severity of the flood would have taken them out, leaving pretty much only *vishna*. Also notice that, apart from the *vishna*, most of the trees have stilted buttresses. They're used to having their feet wet all the time. *Igapos* are violent phenomena that sweep into a lowland infrequently with devastating effects. They

occur further down in the lowlands. The river valley near the *Atlantis II* is such a place. *That's where you'll find kuipers.*"

She nodded understanding, but still eyed the swamp with misgiving.

Then he fixed intense eyes on her. "Listen, Genevieve, the swamp should not be too deep to traverse. But it is very dangerous. It is a toxic soup from which you will never emerge if you aren't careful. Whatever you do, don't fall into it and swallow the vile water. It concentrates the *vishna* essence. People are said to succumb to their most desperate sexual fantasy and remain forever trapped, preferring to drown in the swamp and in their own fantasy."

Genevieve swallowed hard and surveyed the boggy water. He'd just described the ultimate *jack*, a terminal *jack*. The kind *jackers* fantasized about.

"Don't worry. You'll be fine," Azaes assured her. "The toxic water does eventually seep through your pores, but that's a very slow process. We'll be out of here before that happens. Only drinking it would give you an instant reaction."

"That's comforting," she muttered. Azaes hadn't noticed the open wound on her leg. Wouldn't it act like an orifice? Would it be like drinking the water? And speaking of orifices, what about her vagina? "How deep did you say it was?"

"I didn't," he replied tersely. "Come on. Just move slowly and keep your balance," he insisted with some impatience at her hesitation, and abruptly stepped in, immersing himself to his knees. The weedy mat opened up briefly, revealing black water that bubbled up a methane stench. Then the floating mat closed back around his legs. He waded out slowly, leaving a momentary trail of black water.

She calculated that the slimy water would come up to her thighs, and then took a deep breath and stepped down from the overhanging bank. Bracing for what lay in the murky water, she plunged into the cold and inhaled sharply. Her feet sank through soft muck that squelched through her toes. She looked down at the murky bog water that washed around her up to her thighs just shy of her crotch. Her wound flamed with a sharp pain, which muted to a tingle. Within seconds she felt her breaths stutter with excitement and she took several stumbling steps toward Azaes, focussing on his backside. God! His butt was sexy! Deliciously firm, moving like a panther, muscles in sinewy motion as though choreographed in a ballet and she imagined his huge dick swinging with each step. She just had to fuck him!

As she waded with reckless steps, closing the distance between them, a violent tug on her wounded leg sent her tottering with a shriek of panic. She jerked to regain her balance and saw a pale hand emerge from the muck!

She yelped as it seized her injured leg. Then a man's face emerged, bog-covered and eyes snapping open, burning into hers. God! It was Heller! Or what he'd changed into. He rose partially out of the bog, his wretched face twisted with insane desire.

"Genevieve!" Azaes cried, splashing toward them.

Heller seized both her legs and yanked hard. She fell backward with a shriek, hitting the water with a smack and submerging into inky cloying blackness. Heller scrambled on top of her, like an alligator drowning its prey, and convulsed over her body, turning so he faced her legs. His hard penis pummelled her face like a bludgeon and he dug his face into her crotch, teeth biting her labia. She wanted to scream but clenched her teeth instead. He pressed her deep into the muck in the inky blackness, frantically prying her mouth open with agitated fingers, then shoving his cock into her mouth. God! *She* was

his sexual fantasy! His dick was like a piece of metal, grinding into the back of her throat, gagging her. He drove into her in great spasms, pushing her down into bottomless muck. He mauled her body with probing hands, thick mouth and tongue invading her vagina as his cock pounded into her mouth. Somehow, between the pounds she inhaled water—

God! Where was Azaes? He was letting Heller rape her while she drowned!

She felt something hard against her back and suddenly realized that it was the rifle. In a last adrenalin surge, she writhed to grasp it, but Heller pushed her down further and she couldn't bring it round. God! She was blacking out—

Her left arm was pinned hard by his thigh but her right arm scrabbled for the knife on her right hip. She ripped it out of its holster. It tore free and she shoved it up, straight into Heller's stomach. He just shuddered then convulsed on her more violently. It made no difference! But he'd shifted his weight and her left hand, half numb, fumbled for the pistol. It slid out and she dug it into his flesh and shot. Several times.

She felt the concussion push her further into the muck as Heller suddenly lifted off her. But she couldn't rise up from the thickness. The darkness was taking her—

A strong arm hauled her out and she tasted sweet air. She seized in breaths in a great inhale then coughed out water. Azaes gruffly set her against a large *vishna* buttress and immediately swung out hard at Heller, who'd staggered upright like a slimy green monster, stiff penis poking out of him like a piece of wood. Blood spurted out of his chest from her shots at close quarters, but his eyes blazed with a kind of living madness. Azaes struck him hard in the face with his fist. Genevieve heard a crack as Heller grunted and dropped like a stone, totally submerging himself in the bog water that boiled with red.

Satisfied that Heller wasn't getting up, Azaes turned, wheezing, back to Genevieve and seized her by the shoulders as she sank weakly into the muck. His eyes sparkled wide with urgency.

"You drank some of it, didn't you?" He was black and green with muck and tiny plants and Heller's blood was spattered over his face.

She nodded, still breathing hard. "What happened to him?" she stuttered, as waves of uncontrollable shaking overwhelmed her. Was she in shock?

"The *vishna* force took him." He sighed deeply and inspected the hand he'd used to strike Heller. "Like I told you, he succumbed to it and is trapped under its spell, until he starves to death or drowns." Azaes contemplated miserably for a moment, gaze straying to where Heller had sunk. The bog's floating weeds were already covering the inky red-tinged water in a veil of green, like a chasm closing. "I suppose it'll be the latter..." His face darkened. "Another milestone to put on your list of many," he said in a tone of disgust, turning to glower at her. "Is there no end to the havoc you're causing? This is the second pledge you're broken—I've broken," he ended, glancing miserably down at his shaking hands again. "You humans are so violent, so..." he trailed then added in a hollow voice, "I've never struck a man before..."

"Hold on, bucko," she snapped back in a sharp voice she was finding progressively harder to use as her body shuddered with increasing violence. "You didn't kill him. I did that." She waggled the laser pistol she'd somehow managed to hang on to and fumbled it back to its holster. Rage boiled up inside her. The bastard was more concerned about his own act of violence than the violence committed on her. Did he even care? Damn it, she'd just been raped and almost killed and all he could think about was how he'd punched someone in the face!

“I tried to get him off you,” he said quickly, as if reading her mind. “But he possessed unnatural strength. I couldn’t budge him. I’ve heard about this phenomenon before. Under the influence of the swamp, infected Eosians were said to acquire supernatural strength and uncommon obsessive behavior.”

“What about me?” she prompted. She’d drunk some of the murky bog water. Actually, she’d consumed quite a bit, she thought desperately as her whole body began to convulse violently, drawing out gasping sounds from her. She could barely speak, the words came out in spasms between intense waves of shaking. “What’s ... happening ... to ... me?”

He must have seen the fear in her eyes, his expression softened even though his words were brutally honest, “The *vishna* drug is firing your blood with a feral yearning, you have little recourse to defy. It calls you with unrelenting force to your insane fantasy. The drug is almost sentient, acting like a virus, interacting with and possibly damaging your nervous and hormonal systems in the process. The damage may be irreversible.”

“Oh, G-g-god!” She gasped as he helped her out of the bog to sit on the buttress. She had a sudden vision of Heller’s insane convulsing face and fell into violent uncontrollable shudders. As she tucked her body into a fetal position, Azaes moved toward her to fold his arms around her then started back.

“Sacred Universe!” he exclaimed, noticing her wound for the first time. “Did Heller do this to you?”

She shook her head, trying to contain her convulsions. She stammered between gasps, “I caught a ... residual wave ... from the laser ... cannon that ... killed your scree.”

“You should have told me!” he yelled, looking furious again.

She tried to retort but her mouth couldn’t form the words and panic surged through her. Why was he always so angry or annoyed with her? She wanted to scream at him in fury and cry in his arms at the same time.

Something in her expression softened his and he pressed her close to him, trying to absorb her convulsions. “I won’t let you succumb, Genevieve.” His voice suddenly tender, almost afraid. “I won’t let the swamp take you.” To her surprise, he lifted her into his arms and began wading through the swamp, carrying her shuddering body with difficulty. “Don’t listen to its call, Genevieve. Stay with me.”

He kept glancing at her, eyes deep with concern, as she trembled in his arms, mind dazed in a feverish mixture of drugged pleasure and garish trepidation. Apart from the giddiness and the shakes, she came to realize that she felt no other apparent effect. To her amazed confusion, she had no inclination to submit to its spell, like she had in Zac’s clearing when she had first come to the jungle. She did not feel it calling her to some fatal fantasy, like Azaes had portended. Could it be that this was because she was already living it here with Azaes?

He waded on in silence, each step releasing bubbles from the disturbed bottom and emitting a cloying stench. He glanced periodically at her to make certain she was all right. Nestled in his arms, she fell into a series of swoons, awoken from them only by an extremely violent tremor. Eventually, the shuddering grew less extreme as her mind calmed and she actually fell asleep.

She awoke suddenly when Azaes lost his balance and stumbled, almost dropping her and splashing black water ahead of him. But he managed to regain his balance and

continued to walk, panting out his stress. Genevieve noticed that his breathing had grown labored as he negotiated the hummocky soft bottom. It was then that she realized that her mind was clear and she no longer trembled. In fact, she began to grow self-conscious lying in his arms.

Within a short time he made it to higher ground and Genevieve struggled free. To his sudden look of concern, she assured him, "I'm okay. I can walk now. We're out of the swamp. And I no longer have the shakes." In fact, she felt quite energized. She wondered briefly if it was that strengthening effect of the *vishna* that Azaes had mentioned. But she didn't much care, so long as she could continue.

"Yes, but..." he trailed and set her down reluctantly. He gazed at her with something close to incredulity. She supposed that she had presented him, yet again, with a unique occurrence, someone who'd survived inhaling the swamp without succumbing to its madness. And she wasn't sure how she'd managed to accomplish it. "Are you sure?" he posed.

"I'm sure. Let's keep going." She peered up at the darkening canopy overhead with concern. They'd lost precious time with Heller's encounter and Azaes's slowed pace because of her. "It's getting late. How much farther do you think it is?"

"Another kilometre or two, I think," he said, following her glance up. He obviously shared her concern about making it before dark. "How's your leg?"

"I'll be fine," she lied, forcing weight on her leg to prove it. She turned her face away from him to grimace and struck up a brisk pace through the low scrub. But her leg was no better. In fact, it felt worse, having grown tender and swollen while in disuse.

They hadn't gone more than half a kilometre when she felt her breaths labor with the agonizing pain that accompanied the effort to climb over a large root or tangle of lianas. The pain flamed up her leg, taking the strength out of it, and she stumbled over a root with an involuntary cry. Azaes was there in a shot, pulling her to her feet and bracing her. He'd obviously been watching her closely. She twisted out of his grasp once she'd regained enough strength in her leg to stand.

"You said earlier that you were fine," he growled in a savage voice. "But you are not!" He looked furious with her.

"I *am* fine," she shot back in an equally brusque voice and picked up her pace, limping heavily and grimacing involuntarily.

He muttered, "You are a very stubborn species."

He'd only figured that out now? he thought, annoyed at him. Why was he always angry or irritated with her? Then again, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that she and her colleagues had royally screwed up his life. She'd forced him to breach two of his most sacred pledges and her crew was in the process of messing up his entire civilization.

"And so impatient," Azaes continued muttering peevishly behind her. "You are so rash and impetuous, like little children. You don't think before you act." He was one to talk, she thought frowning hard. He had an infinite life-time to acquire patience. "You humans could use a little more patience," he continued his run-on complaint, as though the sound of his voice eased his mind. "Lack of it has been your undoing many times."

She had to admit that was true. But the Eosians were the opposite, meditating over things for so long until it was too late to act and it no longer mattered. There was a time to study and there was a time to do, like *now*. That was why he needed her. The Eosians

had for so long practiced self-restraint in everything, it was as though they'd lost the ability to intuitively act, to trust in spontaneity. Maybe that was the only viable fate of a species that lived forever.

Chapter Twenty-One

With perhaps a half hour of light remaining, Genevieve spotted the purple glow of the Great Crystal. Azaes stopped and turned to her for consultation. They crept forward until they could see well into the clearing. None of the four remaining crew lingered outside. Several dead *shwarmas* lay scattered about the compound, their huge carcasses looking ferocious even in death. Genevieve felt Azaes's unease. Was one of them Shiva? Or had she changed shape and escaped?

"We need to enter the *Chimera*," she urged. "The shot that killed your scree came from it. My bet is that Bragg's in there, along with the remaining crews and maybe your ... eh ... betrothed. We need to immobilize Bragg and his crew."

Azaes nodded, looking a little lost and vulnerable for once. It softened his stern features considerably. Genevieve swallowed convulsively to contain a rush of compassion. He was obviously out of his element.

Genevieve noticed his look of discomfort as he watched her pull out the concussion pistol into a combat hold and slowly moved forward into the clearing. She'd lost her laser rifle during the assault in the swamp. She would have preferred it now, but it lay irreparably buried in the swamp under Heller's dead body.

She was certain they were being surveyed from the *Chimera* cameras. Bragg could have shot them by now, she thought, heart pounding. She may have guessed right, now seeing her and Azaes up close, Bragg might have decided that Azaes, particularly, would be potentially useful to load the crystal and to man the *Atlantis II*. Especially if Bragg found out that Shiva was a love interest.

They found the entrance and Genevieve turned to Azaes. "Try not to show any emotion, especially toward your betrothed," she whispered solemnly. "Bragg isn't above using Shiva to get you to do things, if you get my meaning."

He looked at her in sheer panic and she felt sorry for him. This was way beyond his experience and it was obvious he had no idea of how to deal with it.

She punched in the code beside the entrance. The portal slid dutifully open, dropping a ramp for them. They entered and were not far into the ship when Azaes halted with a gasp.

"Shiva!" he exclaimed.

Blast! He'd given himself away. Genevieve took quick stock, Azaes's betrothed stood naked with a stiff face in front of Bragg, dressed only in tattered shorts with his arm half-strangling her around the neck and a gun pointed at her head. Unfortunately, she looked like she'd been manhandled. Genevieve noticed that Shiva's face and body were bruised in a few places and her large breasts were smeared with blood. One nipple looked black and crusted. Genevieve took note of Sanchez and Porter, tending the vid camera and the other the weapons console, both resting hands in mock restfulness on the weapons slung to their hips. They looked equally dishevelled and dressed in tattered cut offs.

"Well," Bragg said in a lazy voice, letting a faint smile curl his lips, "if it isn't flygirl and her pet baldie, the savage from the purple lagoon. Only you can't tell them apart

because she's purpled herself up and gone savage too. Jeesus, Dubois! What'd you do to yourself?"

"I could ask the same of you, Bragg," Genevieve responded casually, without a smile. She held her pistol in a relaxed pose, pointed at the floor unthreateningly. "There's dead meat everywhere and this doesn't look like a diplomatic meeting to me."

He snarled, "It's too late for diplomacy, Dubois. By the way, I thought you were dead."

"Yeah, thanks for looking for me," she said.

He barked out a sharp laugh and his thick lips spread into a sinister smile as he appraised her naked body with approval. "What happened to you? You look like you've gone native, turned into one of these purple savages."

Sanchez brayed out a throaty laugh. Porter snorted. "Fucking savages," he muttered. "We'll show them who's superior. Fuckers," he spit out at Azaes, no doubt referring to Azaes unfortunate speeches to Earth.

Genevieve realized for the first time in a long while that she was naked, and that she'd been more comfortable nude with an alien than she was now with her own kind. She felt the warmth of shame creep up into her face at the thought of the reprehensible behavior of her fellow humans. She felt so ashamed in front of Azaes and Shiva. Her colleagues may have been dressed but clothes couldn't hide their shameful barbarism. "I asked you what you're doing," she repeated more forcefully to Bragg.

"What do you think I'm doing? I'm fulfilling my duties!"

"By hurting the natives?"

"I'm in charge here, Dubois. I'm your commanding officer," he said savagely. "You don't question my command. We're in combat mode here. I've already lost two of my crew. I sent them to find food and water yesterday and they haven't returned. And *this one*," he tightened his grip on Shiva, who squeaked with the effort to breathe, "is a bloody chameleon and highly dangerous. She eluded our shots by changing into all kinds of things, then inflicted a nasty injury on Sanchez." Genevieve noticed Sanchez's mangled arm and wondered what form Shiva had taken to achieve such a wound. Perhaps a *shwarma*. "But I finally caught her," Bragg said. He cackled and Genevieve realized he'd gone quite mad. "But the bitch won't tell us how to get the crystal off its mount without breaking it." He tightened his hold on her, drawing out a strangled sound of pain from her. "We tried everything we knew to convince her to cooperate. Right, Sanchez?" He cackled again. This time Sanchez joined him with a guttural laugh that sent a chill up Genevieve's spine. Genevieve thought she might have heard Shiva whimper, but she wasn't sure. What horror had that monster inflicted on the poor Eosian? She recalled his quirky erotic fantasy and glanced at Shiva's breasts again. Bragg went on, "Maybe we can convince your friend with the purple dick to help us, eh, or we may have to play some more with his girlfriend..."

Azaes tensed to spring forward and immediately Sanchez and Porter raised their guns. Genevieve watched him fume, but he saw the wisdom in halting and she noted that his shoulders dropped in acquiescence.

"What is it you're after, Bragg?" Genevieve persisted.

"The damn crystal, of course."

"That's all?"

"All? It's everything, you idiot!"

“And if you could get the crystal, then what?”

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Well, it’d be nice to have their ship too. But we can’t get it to work...”

“I can get you both if you let these two go,” she said, watching Azaes squirm with unease. He was looking very worried now. He had a right to be. She was about to give it all away, betray him, his people and his planet to this scumbag. But she saw no other way. She’d quickly realized during their journey here that for all their ancient wisdom, Azaes and his people were extremely naïve and, in the long run, incapable of defending themselves. Sly battle strategy had been bred out of them and what wasn’t bred out was quashed through environmental means. They were a passive people, awaiting slaughter from a ruthless amoral pugilistic race of aliens—her race. Bragg and his cronies had to be taken out and she was the one to do it. She wondered briefly why the Epopetes had let Zac and its murderous crew in. Didn’t they know? What kind of protective gods were they?

Bragg smeared on an oil-slick smile. “Go on,” he said to her.

“I know what you need to release the crystal...”

“No!” Azaes exclaimed, lunging toward her.

Sanchez and Porter sprang forward and grabbed Azaes, immobilizing him. “Hold on, fucker,” Porter hissed.

Genevieve let her eyes stray for a moment on Azaes. “I trusted you,” he murmured, eyes glowing with hurt. “I thought better of you, human.” She saw his chest heave with shallow breaths of escalating anger. “You’re just like them, woman. You’re a weak-minded vermin,” he bit out.

She had to swiftly look away, swallowing convulsively. Genevieve felt her nose flare as she fought for composure and turned back to Bragg, knowing what Azaes thought of her. “I know where it is. I also know how to get the *Atlantis II* off the ground...”

“What?” several voices exclaimed, including Azaes’s own shriek.

Porter, obviously needing to defend his own abilities, objected. “Fuck it, Bragg! She’s lying!”

Genevieve kept her eyes on Bragg. “The crystal technology is exactly configured to complement the organic technology. It’s the same as Zac’s and the *Chimera*’s technology. It’s a hybrid. But you were trying to run one without the other, weren’t you?” she turned to Porter, who’s face had gone red. “You need to configure the crystals first to integrate with the living material. That ship’s alive; you just need to speak its language. I happen to know it. Do any of you?” she challenged the *Chimera* crew, crossing her arms.

Bragg looked pensive. He wasn’t discounting her as easily; he didn’t have a wounded ego boosting him to make foolish conclusions. She’d caught him with logic. Perhaps he wasn’t as mad as he looked.

“Fuck, she’s talking crap,” Porter insisted in a blustery voice. “You going to believe her? Look at the bitch, man. She’s turned into a fucking naked savage. Fuck her!”

“Yeah, Porter!” Sanchez chortled. “We should!”

“Porter doesn’t believe you, Dubois,” Bragg said coolly. “He’d as soon fuck you as believe you. In fact, so would we all!” The three of them guffawed into raucous laughter, eyes roaming her body like lecherous hands.

“There’s a part missing,” she added in an even voice, ignoring their laughter and glancing briefly at Azaes. His eyes widened and his face went pale. Bragg too had immediately ceased his laughter to listen intently. “It’s a crystal sphere and rod

arrangement,” she continued, avoiding Azaes’s gaze and looking directly into Bragg’s eyes. “And I know where it is,” she pushed the last words out. “I saw it.” Through her peripheral vision she saw Azaes’s whole body cave in with defeat and turned to him with a face of anguish. “I’m sorry.” She knew that wasn’t enough. She’d betrayed him totally.

Bragg took one look at Azaes, murmuring something in Eosian, and he knew she’d just spoken the truth. “Where are they?”

She gave him a tight smile and said nothing.

“Okay, what are your terms?” he asked.

“We leave Sanchez and Porter here with the Great Crystal while you and I take the *Chimera* back to Uruk...”

“No fucking way! *I’m* the pilot!”

“Shut up, Porter!” Bragg turned on him. “Can *you* drive the alien ship?”

Porter mumbled that he probably could but Bragg had already turned back to Genevieve, who took the cue to continue. “We drop off the Eosians in a safe location on the edge of the village, then continue on to get the missing pieces, bring them back to the *Atlantis II* then fly it back here for the Great Crystal.”

Porter tightened his hold on Azaes. “She’s full of crap! I’m not staying behind! You need me to pilot the *Chimera*!”

“Shut up!” Bragg shouted him down. “She’s a pilot, idiot!” He turned to sneer at Genevieve. “Drop your gun. Toss it over here.”

After a momentary hesitation, Genevieve threw the gun over to Bragg. It clattered on the floor at his feet and he picked it up with a sneer. She was committed now.

“Here’s the deal, Dubois,” Bragg said. “We take our two hostages with us so they can help us unload the crystals we need. *Then* we let them go.”

God damn it! He’d called her bluff; he was forcing her to go through with it all! Betray Azaes completely. She nodded curtly and gazed at the floor, wondering if she’d just made the worse mistake of her life.

Bragg pushed his chin out in the direction of Azaes and his two henchmen. “Okay, let the baldie go,” he instructed Porter and Sanchez. “I said now!”

Porter and Sanchez glanced at each other then released Azaes with reluctance. At the same time Bragg pushed Shiva forward and she staggered into Azaes’s arms. Showing an effusion of emotion very unlike him, Azaes seized Shiva in a bear hug and kissed her on the cheeks several times. Genevieve looked away, feeling suddenly uncomfortable, and swallowed the large lump in her throat. Azaes obviously loved the woman. They belonged together. Genevieve heard them speaking to one another in low tones and took some comfort in the thought that they’d found each other. She hoped to God she could save them.

Feeling Bragg’s eyes on her, she turned to face him. He was leering at her, gaze roaming her naked body from top to bottom. He tossed his head suggestively toward the Eosian couple and rolled his eyes. “Isn’t that just simply disgusting.” Then he aimed his gaze full on her, eyes flickering from her breasts to her crotch. “Now *you*, on the other hand, are choice fillet. Albeit purple all over,” he ended with a lecherous smile. “What happened to you, Dubois?”

“Just trying to blend in with the scenery,” she said.

He barked a sharp laugh. “Now that’s funny, Dubois. I never really liked you and your bleeding heart alien crap. But you’re looking mighty nice to me now.” He nodded to

her. "I'm glad you're not dead after all. You're proving an awful lot more useful than I ever thought you'd be.

"Shall we?" she urged, swallowing down the bitterness that crept into her voice.

"Yeah," he said, then waved tersely at Sanchez and Porter, who were both looking surly. "Put the baldies in the brig. They can stay there until I release them. And get yourselves some supplies for the night."

Both men grunted with displeasure.

"Come on! Come on!" Bragg shouted at his men. "We don't have all day, idiots!"

Genevieve caught a last glimpse of Azaes, his eyes glaring at her in a mixture of shocked disbelief and hatred before he and Shiva were shoved out of the control room. Shiva avoided Genevieve's gaze. She'd kept her eyes to the ground the whole time.

Sanchez and Porter returned within moments, laden with supplies, to report off the ship.

"But it's fucking dark out there!" Porter objected, still reluctant to leave the sanctuary of the ship and sliding razor eyes at Genevieve. He pulled out his long knife from its haft on his belt and twirled it suggestively while jerking his pelvis at her and flicking his eyes down to her crotch. He sneered with loathing. "Later," he snarled.

She knew what he had in mind for "later" and involuntarily swallowed even as she glared back in defiance. She knew his fantasy.

"Stop being such a whiner, Porter! You have guns, don't you? Make a fire and cook up one of those bear-things. We'll be back before you can say barbeque."

Bragg watched on the camera as the two men disembarked, then he closed the hatch and nodded curtly to Genevieve to start up the ship. She'd found a grey flight suit with nano-sizing to fit anyone in a cupboard by the control room and had hastily slipped into it while the men had had their exchange. Sitting back at the controls, she eased the *Chimera* out of the clearing and guided the ship toward Uruk and Azaes's place.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was the deep of night when the *Chimera* set down beside Azaes's orchard. Genevieve noticed that Azaes house was dark. Everyone was asleep, including his brother and sister.

Bragg wasted no time; he sprinted aft in the main corridor and retrieved Azaes, leaving Shiva in the brig for extra collateral. "Let's go," he said, gun pointed at Azaes. Avoiding looking at Azaes, Genevieve led the way to the pyramidal structure and stopped at the door. Bragg looked impatient. "Well?"

"It needs a complicated set of gestures and commands to open," she said with a solemn glance at Azaes, who glared at her.

Bragg got the picture. "Okay baldie-boy. Say the magic words or I'll march us right back to the ship and shoot your girlfriend in the face right in front of you."

Azaes shot another fierce glance at Genevieve before turning to the door with a long sigh of resignation. His look told her what he thought, that she was ultimately responsible for all of this.

Bragg seized Azaes by the arm. "Oh, by the way. No funny stuff. If you give us away to your community police or army I shoot your whole family."

There was no chance of Azaes doing that, Genevieve thought ruefully. Uruk had no police or army. But Bragg didn't know that.

Azaes nodded and recited the words and gestures that opened the pyramid. Bragg pushed him inside and Genevieve followed. The flame crystal sat there, colorlessly dark in the night. Bragg grinned. "Is it only the crystal we need?"

"Yes, just the crystal," Azaes grumbled, removing it from its stand and handing it to Bragg.

"Is he right?" Bragg turned to Genevieve, while stroking the crystal in his hand.

She nodded. Like she knew for certain. She'd only taken Azaes's word for it. It seemed that Bragg credited her with more knowledge than she had. That might finally work for her, she thought hopefully. Because so far things weren't going as she'd planned. She could sense Azaes's consternation for his brother and sister sleeping inside. Genevieve prayed that they would not awaken and come out to see what was going on. She had no idea what Bragg would do. He wasn't above shooting them.

Bragg slipped the scarlet crystal into his back pack and turned to Genevieve. "Now where?"

"The house."

Bragg smiled and nudged Azaes toward the large house. "Remember, no funny stuff, baldie. If anyone comes looking for us, they get it and so do you and all those dear to you," Bragg snarled, waving his gun at the *Chimera*.

Azaes got them into the house and led them quietly to his bedroom. Genevieve glanced at his *kosh*, which lay open, as though the last time he'd gotten up was in a hurry.

Azaes helped disassemble the crystal rod set up and surrendered it to Bragg, who put it all carefully into his backpack. To Genevieve's relief, no one stirred in the house and they were outside, walking toward the *Chimera*—

"Halt right there!"

Bragg raised his laser rifle toward the hatchway of the Chimera, where the shout had come from. There stood Diaprepes, who'd managed to get Shiva out of the brig, aiming one of *Chimera's* rifles at them.

"Step aside, human!" Diaprepes commanded in a shaky voice. It was obvious to Bragg, as it was to Genevieve, that Diaprepes was terrified.

Bragg aimed and fired. Before Diaprepes had a chance to react, he jerked from the impact and fell. Shiva screamed and bent over the young Eosian's limp body. "Diaprepes!" she cried, seizing him in her arms and stroking him like a lover.

Bragg didn't waste time. He swung out with his rifle and struck Azaes on the head with the butt-end of the weapon. Azaes collapsed. Bragg had his gun aimed at Genevieve before she had a chance to move. "Wo, flygirl." Then he seized her by the arm and sprinted to where Shiva huddled over Diaprepes. He'd been wounded in the chest. Genevieve sucked in her breath and balled her fists.

Bragg shoved Genevieve into the ship. "Get it going before I decide to shoot them all!"

She caught sight of Bragg as he swung the butt of his rifle on Shiva's head, knocking her out cold. Then he unceremoniously pushed the two naked Eosians off the ramp and scrambled after her to the bridge.

Gen slid in front of the controls and took the ship up. As it rose to over fifty meters, Bragg touched a switch and a missile shot out. Oh, God! The house—

"NO!" she screamed. Little Anka was in there! The house exploded into a huge fireball. Fiery pieces flew all the way to the orchard, near where they'd left Azaes, Shiva and Diaprepes.

"There was someone in the house! You promised me you wouldn't do anything to them!"

A malicious smile slid over his face like an oil slick. "So, I lied ... a little."

"Oh, my God!" she shrieked, staring in stiff horror as a second explosion shot liquid fire fifty meters out, scorching the orchard in an arc that trapped her friends—if it hadn't killed them already. Another fireball flamed toward the rainforest and her cherished *vishna* tree.

Genevieve steered the ship around in a tight arc, jerking Bragg off balance.

"What the hell are you doing!" he barked at her, drilling his gun into her head.

She ignored the cold metal pushed against her head and felt her nose flare with effort. "I'm taking us back to put out that fire. It'll spread and kill everyone and kill the forest..."

He pushed harder with the gun and glowered at her with fierce eyes. "We're not going back!" he barked. "Jesus, do you really think I'd just let them alert their defence forces? They'd have their army out after us before we could say crystal. This little distraction will keep them busy ... if they survive the fire..." He squinted down at the sight from the view port. "Hmm ... it is spreading fast, isn't it?" It was clear to Genevieve that he'd intended to do them all in with the explosion and fire.

"You bastard!" She threw herself at him, hands out like talons for his neck.

He jerked out of her way with a panicked shriek and pulled the trigger. She felt an explosion of pain in her left arm and staggered to a halt mid-stride. When she looked down she saw that her arm was only grazed, but a profusion of blood welled out and was already dripping on the floor.

“Next time I’ll aim for your head, you goddamned bitch! Now take us out of here. NOW!”

She dropped back into her pilot’s chair in anguished defeat, cradling her injured arm. God! What had she done! She’d killed them all and had just handed the most potent weapon to a man with no scruples.

“That’s better,” he said in a mockingly soothing voice, rifling in the first aid kit and throwing her a smart bandage. “I don’t really want to kill you. I’m counting on you to get us out of here.” Then he chuckled, gazing down at her with amusement as she applied the bandage to her arm and let it set to work. She grimaced as it sealed her gash and applied an antiseptic protection. Bragg tapped her shoulder with the nose of his gun and broke into an amused jeering laugh. “You’re so fucking naïve, Dubois. That’s why you were left behind. That’s why no one told you about DAWN.”

“You slimy bastard.”

He raised his hands. “Hold on, Dubois, who are you calling slime? Your own husband was in it a lot thicker than me. He helped create the DAWN protocol. Hell, he practically wrote the whole thing himself!”

It couldn’t be! The bastard was lying. How could she have misread Dan so much?

Bragg must have read her expression and barked a sharp laugh. “You didn’t know, did you? You didn’t have a clue.” He laughed hard. “He was your Goddamned husband and you never knew! Now that’s choice!”

* * * *

They’d been flying over the black rainforest for several hours. Genevieve’s eyes smarted with exhaustion and her left arm throbbed with a dull ache. She half-dozed in waves, eventually sliding into a momentary daze of thoughts, garish images swirled inside her mind, of walking the jungle alone...

She steps lightly in the dark jungle toward a flickering light and feels the night air caress her naked body. Her right hand is curled around a leather haft. She glances down to see that it is a whip. As she takes in a deep breath to inhale the enticing smell of cured leather, she finds to her astonishment that her breasts have swollen to twice their normal size, dark nipples engorged and erect. Like when she was nursing Jason.

The flickering light turns out to be a fire blazing in a clearing and she makes out two shadows huddled in front of it. As she breaks into the clearing, Porter and Sanchez turn, their faces lit garishly like wicked elves. Their dull eyes grow lustful and they rise to their feet with churlish grins. They lope toward her as she approaches them, not breaking her stride.

Genevieve cracks her whip and the men halt in brief hesitation. Porter grunts out, “Look at those fucking tits, Sanchez! Take her, man! Suck ‘em. Bite those juicy nipples off!”

Drooling, Sanchez catapults himself at her and she spreads her arms out in invitation. He pushes his face into the deep cleavage of her huge breasts then slobbers on her right breast, teeth clamping painfully, biting hard. She flicks her whip. It snaps around his legs like the tendril of a creeper and she wrenches him off his feet with a quick motion of her wrist. He yelps, letting go of her bleeding nipple, and falls on his butt. She steps on his neck with her foot. He stares at her, eyes bulging, and she pushes down hard, strangling him mercilessly.

Porter charges her with a knife. She stomps hard on Sanchez, hearing a bone-wrenching crack, and leaps in the air like a cat, slicing out with her leg. It strikes Porter's face and he falls backwards onto his rump with a grunt of surprise. His eyes widen as she slithers over to him and leans over his crotch. She rips his shorts open and fondles his balls.

He sucks in his breath and growls victoriously. "Suck it!" he commands. "Suck my big fucker, bitch!"

She obliges, taking his dripping penis in her mouth. Porter sighs in ecstasy and shudders. He drives his slimy penis down her throat in violent thrusts then sends a blaze of pain down her back with the first cut of his knife.

Sparks of white light strobe in front of her eyes. She bites down hard, through flesh and bone, to his bellow of pain. Blood running down her chin, she spits out the penis she's bitten right off, seizes the knife clutched in his shaking hand and drives it into his chest—

Bragg shook her violently by the shoulder and she jerked awake. "Dubois! Watch your driving!" They'd strayed off course and had dipped awfully close to the tops of the *vishnas*.

Genevieve wiped away the sweat dripping into her eyes and stabbed corrections to her settings. The ship soared up back on course. She slouched back and sullenly watched the dawn break ahead as the *Chimera* sped toward the *Atlantis II*.

"Jesus," Bragg muttered. "Stay awake, Dubois."

What a nightmare! She shook her head to clear it from the creepy dream and focused on her task. Determined to go through with the desperate plan she'd conceived over hours of flight, Genevieve went over every option again. She was convinced that she'd sought out every angle and kept arriving at the same conclusion. There was no other way. She couldn't let Bragg reach the ancient Atlantean ship. If her plan was successful, the crystals might survive but if they were destroyed, so be it—at least Bragg wouldn't get them. He'd be dead. Like her.

Checking telemetry, she estimated they were about fifty kilometres from the ancient ship and closing in fast. Bragg stopped pacing the bridge and finally succumbed to exhaustion and boredom. He settled in one of the chairs and was snoring within minutes. It was the moment she'd been waiting for because it gave her the chance to do more than pilot the ship. Leaving the controls on automatic, Genevieve quietly rose from her chair and padded silently to the engineering console beside her. She voided the fuel transfer grids, then reconfigured and locked the plasma coils of the impeller engines.

Almost instantly, the ship jolted and lurched. She rushed back to her chair as Bragg practically fell off his and jerked awake.

"What the Hell!" He yelled. Genevieve smiled savagely, not bothering to turn. They'd reached the point of no return. The crash was inevitable. Bragg lunged for her and seized her arm, forcing her to turn around. "What's going on?" he shrieked in a panicked voice.

She gave him an evil grin. "We're crashing, that's what."

"Well, do something!"

She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. The jungle rushed toward them. She didn't even brace for the impact.

"SHIT!" Bragg scrambled to a chair and fumbled with his crash-webbing—

A terrific jar threw Genevieve off her chair. A thunderous boom and the squeal of tearing metal pounded her ears. She was flung this way and that like a rag doll, grunting with each hard impact. Then her head smacked into something and she blacked out.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She awoke to her own moaning. Her whole body ached from having been thrown about the *Chimera* and colliding into metalloïd structures as the ship bounced on the ground. She lay on the floor, face down, in a silence that told her that the ship had done its deed. They'd crashed and somehow, miraculously, she wasn't dead. In fact, she thought as she inspected herself, she was only minimally injured. Mostly bruises, she figured, except for one injury. Again, it was her leg. The earlier gash had ripped open. Blood had soaked her flight suit through a large tear. Her ankle throbbed and she thought she might have sprained it. She tasted and smelled blood in the back of her throat as it trickled out of her nose and down her throat from having been struck in the face as she was thrown about.

God! If she'd survived—she spun around and a large hand jerked her the other way. She sucked in air. Bragg.

“Looking for me?” he roared then gruffly lifted her onto her feet, squeezing her like a vice. “You fucking stupid bitch!” He struck her several times on the head and shook her. When he finally stopped, leaving her ears ringing, he growled, “I woke up long before you did, flygirl. But I was snug in the crash webbing ... unlike you. You're a mess.” She knew her face was covered in blood from her nosebleed. But, unlike her, he seemed uninjured. Then she noticed a long gash on his left leg that bled onto his hiking boot.

“That was a very dumb thing you did, Dubois,” he snarled. “You're going to pay for it, damn it. But right now we have a journey to take. I've already checked the crystals. They're fine, no thanks to your precious little stunt.” He shook her violently and she gasped involuntarily. “I've got the flame crystal and what we need to run the *Atlantis II* in my backpack. We're only half a day's walk from it. So here's the plan, flygirl, and listen up. Once we get there, you get the alien ship going and this time if you try any stunts, I'll shoot your pretty little face right off. You'll fly us to the Great Crystal where we'll load it in and pick up Sanchez and Porter, who have hopefully survived the night.” He wagged his finger at her. “If you do everything right, I might let you live. You can do what you want on this shithouse of a planet with these naked savages. But if you do one thing wrong...” he let the rest trail off suggestively, permitting her to imagine the possibilities. “Now, let's go!”

He pushed her gruffly down the hallway to the exit and opened the hatch. A hot wind, carrying with it the moist scent of *vishna*, howled into their faces. Shifting iridescent yellow and green vegetation shuddered in the clearing carved out by the *Chimera*. Genevieve limped out, her hair tossing in the wind. She grabbed her hair in her hand to keep it from whipping into her face and looked up. Clouds the color of carbon scudded overhead. A storm was brewing.

Bragg checked his pocket GPS then pointed brusquely to his right. “That way. About ten kilometres.” He pushed her and followed, ignoring her limp.

Before she made it out of the clearing, the storm clouds blocked the sun, and unleashed large raindrops that instantly soaked them. A strong gust stirred up loose vegetation and stung her face with missals of rain. The wind and rain lashed at the

canopy above and roared on the vegetation. Genevieve hastened into the dark shelter of the jungle. Beneath the canopy the ground steamed and a mist rose like wisps of low cloud. The constant drumming of the rain on the trees drowned out most of the other jungle sounds. It took awhile but eventually the rain penetrated the jungle canopy and sheets of water fell on them.

“Shit!” Bragg complained, face dripping. “It’s a fucking monsoon.”

They pressed on through tangles of coiling root and vine on the slippery jungle floor. She heard Bragg struggling behind her. He seized in shallow breaths between shudders. The *vishna* was taking its toll, she thought, feeling her own periodic tremors. The rain probably didn’t help, she reflected. It likely brought down and stirred up the potent *vishna* perfumes in the canopy and on the ground. This was likely his first experience with the *vishna* essence and she had no idea how he would react.

Her leg flamed with every step. To make matters worse, they were descending a fairly steep ravine into more lowland. When they’d reached the valley floor that stank like a dead skunk she found herself walking in standing water. She confirmed her suspicion by spotting the occasional swamp palm.

But, aside from a few young swamp palms, saplings and draping lianas, the area was eerily devoid of lower canopy trees. Only the enormously girthed *vishna*’s occupied this area, like great columns in a gloomy cathedral. It was as though a fire had swept through recently, taking out all but the thick-barked *vishna* trees. Without realizing it, she slowed her pace and swallowed with discomfort.

“Come on!” Bragg caught up and pushed her forward.

She stumbled ahead then caught sight of the telltale flash of blue, the blue of the genital tree—But, oh, God! Genevieve halted with a sharp inhale and brought her hands to her mouth. The tree had ensnared a victim, Irena!

Genevieve’s face tightened and her nose flared as she stared at what was left of the naked archaeologist. Every orifice on her shrivelled body leaked dried black blood. She hung stiff and quite dead, with eyes fixed open, in her most preferred sexual position, mouth sucking one “cock” and her vagina wrapped in a death embrace around the other.

“Jesus shit!” Bragg spat out in disgust. “She died fucking some alien plant! Jeeesus! This place is like Hell!”

Genevieve pondered how Irena had realized her fantasy. She’d been royally fucked by a blue alien with two penises. Only it wasn’t a man and turned out to be more than a match for her. Genevieve tore her gaze from the grizzly sight and limped on with dread toward the deeper swamp.

The rain abated, leaving a drifting mist that hung like giant spider webs lurking over the dark water. Genevieve recognized the bright red stinger bushes when her hand brushed lightly against one and she instantly felt the hairs lodge in her hand like shards of glass. Noticing several other bushes, she steered them through the thicket and to her cruel satisfaction, heard Bragg suddenly jerk and swear profusely.

Genevieve saw several *fika* trees ahead of them, on the edge of the deeper swamp further on. In sudden morbid inspiration, a flicker of a wry smile tugged at her lips. When she reached the first *fika* tree, she reached up and picked a gourd from its branch then stumbled, giving in to the pain of her ankle, and let herself fall with a splat on her behind. It hadn’t been difficult to do; she was close to exhaustion and her leg throbbed with a

pulsing ache. She could only guess what the swamp water was doing to Bragg's gash on his leg. Whatever it was doing, he didn't complain.

"What the hell are you doing?" he growled impatiently, poking her with his rifle. "Get up."

"I'm hungry," she replied, studying him. Neither of them had slept for over twenty-four hours. His face was lined with exhaustion and his eyes were slightly glazed with the effects of the *vishna* drug. The rain had picked up again with a constant drumming hiss. It beaded on his forehead and ran down to his chin and dripped off his nose onto his muscular chest. It got caught in his wiry chest hairs. As she cast her gaze downward she noticed that black muck and the green floating plants had migrated up his leg past his injury. He was imbibing *vishna* toxins big time.

"I'm hot and my ankle hurts," she said then rose slowly to her feet and stared at him, eyes blinking off the rain. She peeled off her flight suit. A brisk inspection revealed what she'd feared, her wound was raw with infection.

"What're you doing?" he said, voice rising in pitch.

"I'm undressing," she snapped back. "What do you think I'm doing?" She stepped lithely out of the soaked garment and flung it down on the soaked ground. The rain felt refreshing on her naked body as she turned and, ignoring the flaming pain in her leg, sashayed like a model toward the deep swamp. She held the unripe gourd like a prize.

Who would succumb first? He was taking in the swamp water through his cut just as she was taking it in through hers.

She heard his hitching breaths and knew he was trembling as she was. It was now or never, she thought, feeling a shudder convulse through her as she neared a second *fika* tree. She frantically searched the shallow water for ripe fallen gourds. There was one! Seizing in a long inhale, she bent down from the waist over the water with her butt pointed invitingly toward him and languished there as though still looking. Her heart pounded as she sensed him watch with growing excitement. She heard him panting suddenly, as he dumped his pack and dropped his shorts then splashed toward her in great awkward steps. She braced for the onslaught and he was suddenly there, paws mauling her breasts and penis grinding into her from behind. She gasped as he pushed in, groaning in deep pleasure. His fantasy. How could he refuse it? How could she stand it? For the prize, she told herself, and desperately hoped he would buy into the whole thing.

They grunted in spasms with each pounding thrust, sheets of rain pelting on them, until Bragg shuddered with an ejaculation and wheezed haltingly, totally spent. He pushed her down into the murky water. Even better! They both involuntarily gulped the vile bog water before she seized in air sharply, feeling suddenly very giddy. He coughed out water and rolled off her to lie carelessly in the disturbed mud, sobbing with laughter.

Feeling shudders surge through her, Genevieve struggled to pry open the two fruits, and handed him the unripe *fika* to complete his fantasy—the compelling offering to the sex god. He grinned victoriously and took it! But he hesitated and she forced herself to eat the insect-infested *fika*. Convinced, he bolted the fruit she'd handed him in several slurping bites, obviously relishing its sweet taste.

He looked drunk and ate happily, watching her eat, juice running down the sides of his mouth and dripping off his chin. But, to her dismay, he showed no ill-effects. She fought down the urge to throw up and took another bite. She was eating tiny *feek* larvae

and mature insects! She saw them wriggling in the fruit as she swallowed down her bite with a shudder. God! Was anything going to happen? Had she done all this for nothing—

Bragg jerked in a violent convulsion and his face blanched. He suddenly looked terrified. A violent shudder of excruciating pain swept across his face like a turbulent wave as the *fika* poison gripped him. Orange *fika* juice burst out of his mouth in a splutter and he barked out an agonized wail then grew furious, somehow figuring that she was responsible. Bragg lunged for her with a roar but she slithered out of his grasp. He caught her leg then lost his grip as he doubled over and more juice spurted out of his mouth. But she lost her footing and he threw himself on top of her, pushing her down into the muck. He bellowed and writhed and retched, but managed to pin her in the black water under his convulsing wet body. Furious, he beat her hard with his fists. She cried out and sucked in bog water with each blow, her mind screaming for it to stop, and felt herself slide into unconsciousness. Then he stopped and collapsed on her.

Genevieve pushed his heavy body off her with a grunt of effort then struggled out from under him, seizing air into her burning throat in spluttering coughing gasps. Her face pounded where he'd hit her. One eye had puffed shut and throbbled.

She rose on wobbly feet and panted out her breaths. Looking down at him, she felt no remorse. He'd hurt, possibly killed, innocent people. Wonderful, peaceful people—she gasped out a sob—the man she loved.

Then a severe convulsion toppled her with a splat beside Bragg's body. For a moment, she panicked. Then she realized that no agonizing pain accompanied her shudders, they were the trembles of the *vishna* swamp water she'd taken in.

Waiting for her paroxysm to end, she crawled over to Bragg's body and searched in the murky swamp water for his right arm. She found the GPS tracking meter strapped to his wrist, pulled it off then fumbled it on hers with trembling hands. She then staggered to where Bragg had dropped his shorts and found the backpack. After hiking it over her shoulders she made her way with slow deliberate steps into the deeper swamp toward the *Atlantis II*. She still had to deal with Sanchez and Porter, after all. This wasn't finished yet.

This swamp was brown and turbid with no floating vegetation, suggesting that it wasn't stagnant like the swamp she and Azaes had traversed earlier. Genevieve stepped into it and shrieked as she plunged up to breast height. Shaking, she waded onward, taking great care with each slow and painstaking footstep, and forced feverish thoughts of underwater creatures from her mind.

The hissing of the rain continued. It pelted the bog water around her, creating hundreds of tiny circular wakes, and smacked the large leaves above like a spanking hand. The rain plastered her hair over her face and sluiced down her face in runnels. She lost the bottom of the swamp a few times and had to swim. It was like a deluge—

She noticed a strong current pulling her legs from under her. Then she heard it over the drumming rain, resounding booms and pops, accompanied by a deep-throated roar. It was the sound of trees snapping and falling and—

Oh, dear God! A wall of water and debris higher than she could see surged toward her, smashing everything in its path. And in the instant before she met it, she realized that this was an *igapo*. And she was about to die—

The wave hit her like a brick wall.

Chapter Twenty-Four

She saw her own purple face looking down at her in a haze of broken mauve light. Genevieve tried to cast off the febrile drowsiness that covered her like a thick blanket, but when she did, the image of herself faded beneath a dark wave of great pain and sparks of sharp agony pierced her chest and the rest of her broken body.

“Don’t fight it,” her image said and Genevieve let the hazy mantle cover her again and separate her from the sharp agony that threatened to cut her to pieces.

The image of herself grew solid again and Genevieve finally realized that they were on top of a *vishna* tree. She lay on a nest of branches on a tree-island. Just below them, about two meters down and for as far as she could see around her, was a sea of brown water, dotted with similar tree-tops. It was like a scene from Noa’s flood. As she surveyed the spectacular water world, she noticed that the rain had ceased and the sky was awash with water-color shades of orange and pink. Good God! Was she dead?

“Where ... am I?” she croaked in a voice thick with not having spoken in a long while.

“You are on the top of the world, thanks to the *igapo* flood...” the entity said, sounding just like her, “and with a little help from us.” She smiled sideways. “The *igapo* forest is now under forty-five meters of water. Only the tallest *vishnas* are not submerged.”

“You ... helped?”

“We moved aside so you wouldn’t kill yourself smashing into us and helped guide your body here.”

Genevieve blinked in confusion. The woman didn’t make sense.

“I have also done your bidding, human,” the entity said.

“My ... bidding?” Genevieve sat up. Who ... *what* was she?

“The images you imagined when you flew back to the jungle and sacrificed yourself in the crash.”

“What?” Her awful daydream! Genevieve stared at the woman standing before her.

“We can manipulate all physical things, including ourselves,” the woman who looked like her said, a faint smile of smug amusement alighting on her lips. “This includes repairing ourselves from deep knife wounds.”

Genevieve swallowed. Porter’s slashing knife... “Who ... are you?”

“I was your lover,” she said.

Her lover? Genevieve blinked and felt her breaths escalate in nervous confusion.

“What do you mean?” she said in a shaky voice. “You look just like ... me ... but I never met you before.”

“I was the *vishna* tree you climbed.”

Genevieve stared dumbstruck.

“You’ve heard of *soul-drifters* and *shape-shifters*,” her replica said, nodding to Genevieve’s expression of silent affirmation.

Azaes was, of course, a *soul-drifter*, which meant that he could enter other people’s dreams and manipulate them. Shiva, his betrothed, was a *shape-shifter*, capable of manipulating her own molecules to morph into various creatures.

“While Eosians like Azaes and Shiva are truly accomplished in these divine skills, they can not yet achieve what I can,” the woman in her shape continued. “But that is because I am an Epoptes.”

“Oh, God!” Genevieve flung her hands to her trembling face.

The Epoptes smiled lopsidedly with wry amusement. “I suppose I’ve been called that too.” Her smile softened and she gazed at Genevieve with gentle eyes. “I joined with you, Genevieve. I made sweet love with you as the *vishna* tree. I *am* the *vishna* tree.”

The Epoptes *were* the *vishna*? And she’d joined with an Epoptes? Genevieve recalled the prophecy Diaprepes had shared with her, about the belief of joining with an Epoptes through intercourse and its signalling of a new age on Eos. *My, God! What have I done?*

“You have done nothing that I have not sanctioned,” the Epoptes replied to her thought. “And enjoyed.”

Genevieve started at the alien’s response, then realized that mind-reading was a natural extension of *soul-drifting*. “What do you want of me?”

“Why should I want something of you?” the Epoptes replied, shaking her head and smiling through the side of her mouth like Genevieve always did. It rattled her. “You have already given me your gift and I have given you mine. We have joined. What you choose to do with this gift is your destiny.”

Genevieve swallowed, throat suddenly very dry. “I gave *you* a gift?” She recalled the *vishna* lovemaking and felt it had been mostly to her own benefit.

Her replica smiled. “You accepted me for what I am without understanding what that was. You had the courage to join directly with me without one of your kind to provide you with a seed-love to redirect and give you strength. You generated it spontaneously. It is a testimony to your naivety and acceptance. No Eosian, save for one, has ever done this.”

“An Eosian did what I did?” An Eosian broke their most sacred law?

“Yes.”

“What happened to him ... or her?” She swallowed.

“Nothing. He lives still. He is the same one to whom you have given your heart.” She burst into an open laugh at Genevieve’s expression. “Yes, your precious Azaes. It happened when he was quite young, only five thousand years old ... young and obsessed with the *vishna*’s power like most youth. He was feeling discouraged, not having met any potential lover to share eternity with. He began to think he would never meet this special person. That perhaps for him, she did not exist. Alas, she did not, at least not on this world. So, he gave himself to me.” She smiled rather smugly.

Why that little rat! Genevieve thought. He *had* joined, and he’d kept it a secret from everyone for all these years. He’d committed the ultimate transgression in their pledge with the Epoptes. Was that why he’d been so hard on her ... and on himself? But it did clear up the puzzle of his ability to provide her dream with a realistic and vivid *vishna* joining experience.

Genevieve struggled over another question the Epoptes revelation had raised. “Diaprepes told me of a prophecy many of their people believed, that once they joined with an Epoptes through ... eh ... intercourse...” she blushed furiously for a moment, “—they would enter a new age of enlightenment and divine life. If you’ve been the *vishna* all along, then the Eosians are already there!” Especially Azaes.

The Epoptes burst into a laugh. “Brave and clever mortal! You are not so different from the immortals who share your ancestry. You both fear the inevitable. You fear death as they fear life. The Eosians are blind to the fact that we live among them as the *vishna*, and that they are already joined with us. They cannot believe that they deserve a place among us. Their own propaganda and legend have kept them humble but has also undermined their ability to see their own nobility.”

“Why have you kept yourselves hidden from them?”

“For that very reason, mortal...” the goddess drifted closer and Genevieve breathed in the seductive scent of *vishna*. She swallowed convulsively, suddenly feeling the spike of both dread and yearning.

“The same reason I never revealed myself to you, even though I was with you in your ship since you entered what you call the Pleiades system...”

Genevieve felt suddenly enlightened. “You tampered with my ship, appearing as me.” Just like Epoptes before her had interfered with previous ships once they’d entered the system.

The Epoptes nodded. “Yes, I tricked your ship. I’m sorry. It had to be done. To bring you down.”

“And did you create my dreams? Or did Azaes?”

“He did most of it, although he doesn’t even realize this himself. I certainly helped. But so did *you*, Genevieve. You and Azaes collaborated on most of it. I am only a mirror.”

According to Azaes, the Epoptes also killed Dan. But somehow, Genevieve couldn’t feel any hatred for this alien being who looked and acted and smelled like herself. Genevieve felt only fascination and awe ... and—oh, God! incredible desire! She’d never made love, much less contemplated making love, to a woman before. Yet, now, here, with this woman who was the image of her, yet a goddess of the universe, it felt right...

The Epoptes knew and drew forward. In one swift motion, they embraced and kissed. Oh, how different! She tasted sweet nectar as their tongues played together. The Epoptes gently coaxed Genevieve to recline back on the *vishna* bed and lay on top of her, silky legs entwining between hers, moving up her thighs like a clever snake then pounding Genevieve’s throbbing sex with her thigh. Pounding out grunts of delirious want that swelled into a burning yearning. Then the Epoptes was sucking her nipples like the *vishna* flowers. Wet and enticingly fragrant. Determined to love her back this time, Genevieve’s hand sought her creamy slit and stroked as she would her own. Her counterpart moaned with pleasure. Delighted, Genevieve tongued the Epoptes’s breasts as she plunged her finger deep inside the alien’s slimy wetness, pulling out a sharp cry from her. She slid her fingers around the deepness and rocked her palm over her mound. The Epoptes mirrored Genevieve’s action, first fondling her nether lips then rapidly slipping her fingers in and out, pounding and sliding. They writhed together like one body, purple sweat bursting out of them and binding them in wetness. Genevieve felt a deep fire burst up and drown her in flame, mouth snapping wide, hurling out a scream. They screamed together with boundless pleasure then everything faded like a dream in a mist.

* * * *

Genevieve woke groggily to a painful agony. It throbbed to the rhythm of her heart. It even hurt to breathe. She wondered if what she'd experienced earlier had all been a wild *vishna* hallucination. There was no sign of her Epopetes replica. But she was indeed lying on top of a *vishna* tree—that part had been real—and feeling a real lance of pain with every breath she sucked in.

A large shadow scudded overhead and she gazed up at the silhouette of a giant bird, backlit by the sun ... It was a scree hovering over her like an angel. She imagined a person seated on it. Azaes! He leaped off the bird and bent over her with a face of concern. Was it still part of her dream, she wondered, staring up at him. Must be. Azaes was dead. Burned to death in Bragg's wildfire. Then with a loud sob of despair, she let herself slide into unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Her eyes fluttered open as she became aware of a wonderful sensation and smell. She lay half reclining on a *kosh* pressed against a warm body—Azaes! And he showed no injuries on his splendid body. His arms enveloped her and he looked down at her with warm eyes. She had to be dead and this was another one of her wonderfully delirious dreams ... But it all seemed too real. The evening light streamed upon them. She was stiff with an old pain and his body felt deliciously warm and virile against hers.

“Azaes!” She’d wanted to scream it out but her voice broke and it came out in a lame croak. “You’re...”

“Alive and well,” he smiled. Oh, that smile! She wanted to taste it and consume it and drown herself in it. He stroked her hair. “As you are now too. You spent some time in a healing trance then I had you transferred here to my *kosh*, when you showed signs of awakening.”

“As for why we are all not dead,” he explained, “It was Anka. She saved us all from the explosion and wildfire. Luckily she wasn’t in the house. She’d just come back from a secret rendezvous,” he said with a smirk and a shake of his head. “The naughty girl arrived just in time to see it all and drag us to safety before the second explosion took the orchard and would have toasted us all. We all owe her our lives.”

Oh, God! What great news! They were all alive! “And Diaprepes?”

“He’s in a healing trance at this very moment, and doing very well. I am confident that he will heal perfectly. He is a strapping healthy man. When last I looked in on him, he was showing that all of his vital signs were back to normal.”

She sighed then stiffened in his arms. What he must think of her! The awful things she’d done, the awful things her colleagues had done... “I must return home to keep any more of us from coming here,” she said emphatically.

He nodded gravely. “Yes, you must go, return to Earth. For your sake and for ours.”

She swallowed hard. He’d acknowledged it. Cheerfully sending her on her way. He was probably glad to see her go too. And yet, he was warmly embracing her now. “Genevieve,” he said in a gentle voice. “I know that everything you did was for us. I confess, I was furious with you and may have said some things that hurt you. But I thought you’d betrayed me—eh, us...” He thought for a moment and sighed. “Betrayed *me*. I felt personally betrayed. But then what you did ... I heard that you crashed the *Chimera*. You did it to save us, didn’t you? Even though it might have killed you and your fellow human. I don’t want to know how you dispatched Bragg, but I do know he has been consumed by the jungle.”

The backpack! Agitated, she searched around.

He patted her hand reassuringly. “The backpack is safe and all is in order again. It was on you when we found you unconscious, lying atop the largest *vishna* tree I have ever seen. Universe knows how you managed to get up there with a broken ankle and a punctured lung.”

“You’re not angry with me, then?” she said in a still feeble voice.

“No, no, Genevieve. The opposite! You sacrificed yourself for us. You ... killed for us. Killed your own kind.” She watched him swallow and swallowed herself at the

thought of killing Bragg. He was mean and narrow-minded. But perhaps his murderous behavior was simply the madness he'd incurred on this planet. Yet she'd killed him without remorse. And had set out to kill Sanchez and Porter.

"Once I got Diaprepes into a healing trance and left instructions with Shiva, I followed you by scree," Azaes went on. "I missed your crash but I caught up with you at the Great Crystal."

"The Great Crystal?" She blinked in confusion. She never made it there. She never even made it to the alien ship. What was he talking about?

"Yes," he said eagerly. "I got there just in time to see you dispatch those two murderous ruffians. But you disappeared into the darkness as I entered the light of the fire."

She stared at him. God! It was true, then. The Epoptes, in her shape, had carried out her dream! That meant that Sanchez and Porter were dead too. Her whole crew were dead. Except for her.

"So it's true," she said in a shaky voice. "The Epoptes told me..."

"What?" Now it was his turn to look puzzled.

"An Epoptes, in my shape, killed those two," she stammered convulsively. "Not me. I wasn't even there. Then she told me and we ... we made love..."

"You're upset," he insisted. "You don't know what you're saying. I saw you there, Genevieve. You did it. But, don't be ashamed. I don't condemn your violent actions. They were actions of valor and courage."

Wasn't he listening to what she said? It was her double. The Epoptes in her shape! And if he only thought it all through, he'd have realized that she couldn't be in two places at the same time, crashing the *Chimera* and killing the last of her colleagues. But perhaps he was right, after all. She had deliberately killed Bragg and she had dreamed that she killed Sanchez and Porter. Perhaps on this world that was the same thing. And in a sudden moment of shame and despair, she fell into convulsive sobs.

Azaes enveloped her in his arms and rocked them slowly, as she shuddered with silent weeping. He held her against his strong, naked body for a long time until her tears dwindled into sniffles.

"We searched all over the jungle for you," Azaes said in a quiet voice, gently stroking her hair. "After I witnessed what you did to Porter and Sanchez, I went back and fetched my sister to help me. We combed the forest."

"When Anka found the *Chimera*, I went mad with thoughts of you crawling out of the destroyed ship and finding you dead in the swamp. We found Bragg. Died of *fika* poisoning by the looks of it. He'd gotten swept up in the *igapo* and we found his already half-rotten body wedged in a swamp palm. But we couldn't find you."

He sighed out a long breath. "I spotted you lying on the *vishna*. You looked ... dead. Then, you stirred as I approached and broke into tears..." He smiled wistfully. "Seems like I have that effect on you. That was your reaction when you first ever saw me." His face darkened with gravity. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't survived," Azaes said in a trembling voice. He breathed in the smell of her hair, and tenderly stroked her soft locks. "You are my *kusha*..." he murmured.

Suddenly reminded of his betrothed and the Eosian laws, she reached up and gently touched his face. "What about all your laws? Like the one regarding sexual intercourse.

Didn't you break it with me? How are you going to fix that with Shiva? She's betrothed to be your wife. *She's your kusha,*" she ended in a sharper voice than she'd intended.

He regarded her with sad eyes. "Yes." He sighed heavily and took her hands in his. "She is the best choice for me. She has the most pure set of genes I know. But I don't love her, Genevieve. I could never join with her. The *vishna* would refuse us. Because I love *another*."

Her throat swelled with emotion. It went suddenly dry and she couldn't speak.

"Shiva may have pure genes, but *this other* has a pure heart." He paused, smiling into the sun. Then he fixed an intense gaze directly into her eyes. "You were the only one of the crew who was pure of heart. *That* is why I saved you, Genevieve. Despite what the Eoptic dream told me ... and that is why I fell in love with you, despite what my dream warned and my own resolve not to..."

Her heart slammed but she managed to find her voice. "What did your dream warn?" she stuttered, still feeling her heart flutter with a mix of exhilarated trepidation.

"That once I fell in love with you, you'd kill me."

She recoiled suddenly and objected passionately, "I'd never kill you, Azaes! I love you with my heart and soul!"

He seized her back in his arms. "Don't alarm yourself. You've already killed me."

"What?" she gasped.

"You've set in motion events that force me to relinquish my immortality. Essentially bringing about my death." He let out an amused laugh at her horrified expression. "As soon as I leave Eos, I lose my immortality. The effects of the *vishna* will wither and I will be like you. Is that so bad?"

"Then don't leave! Why should you leave?" she choked out the words.

"To accompany you, of course," he said, leaning back to study her face with a puzzled look. "If you'll have me."

She stammered, "I-I can't be responsible for you giving up your immortality. I'll go alone!" She pulled away vehemently, panting in determination.

"No, you don't understand," he pulled her close to him again, his face growing tight with his own determination. "I fought against the emotions I felt for you because I feared death. But I see now that this is my destiny, to remain with you and live out my mortal life beside you. Genevieve, we can watch each other age... together. Grow old and wither like an old vine, together in love, and die in each other's arms ... only to join the embrace of all that is in the universe. Don't you see, that is our immortality, for both of us."

She buried her face in his shoulder and wept, pressing her body to his and inhaling his wonderful masculine scent. He pulled her wet face up and wiped the tears from her cheeks then kissed her. "Does this mean that you'll have me?" he asked.

"Oh, God, yes!" she cried.

"Then here is what you and I can look forward to for the rest of our remaining days..."

He gently set her on the downy *kosh* and bent over her, grinning like a boy. His eyes grew deep with raptness as he gazed over her body. It made her giddy with anticipation as her mind reeled with memories of his tender passion in her dreams. Would he be that way now or would he repeat his previous rough lusting inside Zac? His face traveled the length of her body, smelling her, fondling her with his lips, biting her. He cupped both her heels with his hands, raised her legs and drew them apart, opening her and revealing

her moist vulva, already swollen and pulsing. She opened her legs further in invitation. He seized in a long breath and kneeled on the floor to bury his face in her furry sex. She felt his warm breath on her, titillating, then gasped as his tongue traced the hot crease of her labia, then her clit, teasing out a cry from her. His wet tongue penetrated and she moaned, surging up into a sitting position and coiling her long legs over his shoulders. His tongue curled and flicked inside her vagina sending ripples of heat through her body and bursting out her face in a flush. Her knees began to shake and she stooped over him, hair tumbling over his head. She felt him shudder and he cried out, aroused by the touch of her hair on his skin.

Azaes rose, gently coaxing her down again, then turned back to her crotch and lay on the bed with his long penis near her face.

She took it into her mouth, running up and down its slippery length with her lips and teeth and tongue. His cock thickened and moved and he groaned with obvious pleasure. She pulled out and stroked it vigorously with her hand. It grew even larger, and she could feel it engorging in waves to his moaning breaths. He ran his tongue frantically over her clit, drawing out panting breaths, and she knew she would climax soon.

He pulled out, sitting up, to look at her and she seized his face in her hands. They kissed feverishly as she made him lie face up on the bed and squirmed over him, climbing on top. Sitting astride his muscular thighs, she coaxed his penis to rise and dance in her hands. He watched her, almost whimpering. Sweat burst out of him and ran down his heaving chest. She moaned with him, so close to coming herself, as she slid on him and pumped slowly. They were both wet and panting together. She pumped more vigorously, gasping throatily, and rode him, bucking hard. He grit his teeth and hoarsely shouted out foreign words then groaned out his come. His surge triggered her own rush of come. She screamed it out then collapsed on top of him in a warm embrace, joyfully exhausted. He took her in his arms and she lay comfortably on him in blissful silence then fell into a light doze.

She awoke as the last rays of sunlight left the room to the stirring of his penis inside her. Renewed excitement surged through her as he swelled in great waves, filling her. He rolled them over to lie on top and thrust slowly, deeply. He slid in and out in steady and rhythmic slow motion until her moans turned into sharp cries and she felt her come rise up alongside his. They climaxed together.

He pulled out but instead of hugging her to him, he rolled her gently over to face away from him and stroked her butt cheeks with his hands. She shivered, quaking, as his fingers dipped into her moist cleft then touched her anus. The exhilaration stunned her and she squealed. He dove into her dripping vulva and drenched her anus with her come. She didn't know which was more thrilling; his brushing strokes across her sensitized clit or the electrifying touch on her butt hole. Then she knew—Oh, God! What pleasure! She inhaled sharply as his finger penetrated her anus then slid in and out. She seized in halting breaths then began to writhe as he wiggled his finger inside. She heard herself whimpering with painful ecstasy. Then he pushed a second finger through. She emitted a sharp cry. She wanted him to stop and continue at the same time. It was like a rocket going off inside her. She felt violated and released at the same time. What painful pleasure! Then she realized that she was screaming with an incredible climax.

He pulled out his fingers and she whimpered out the last of her release as he cupped her hot mound, pulsing again like the aftershock of an earthquake. But he knew she was

done and, curling up behind her, he spooned her and drew the *kosh* over them, then folded his arms over her breasts. She covered his arms with hers and fell swiftly into a deep blissful sleep.

* * * *

She awoke at dawn out of a sleepy embrace, with a gasp of pleasure, then realized through a still drowsy haze that Azaes's finger was gently teasing her anus.

He'd crawled right under the covers and was quietly laughing at her reaction, pleased that she was now awake. How long had he been playing with her while she slept? She didn't care. She was glad she was awake to feel what he was doing now. Warm and tender hands caressed her back and arms. He traced the curve of her throat to where her breasts swelled, brushing her nipples, now standing erect, down to her belly and circling her navel.

She moaned in sleepy ecstasy as the sun crested the horizon, shafts of gold light streaming into the room.

Now working his way down her thighs, Azaes was awakening her whole body, inch by inch, stroking every part of her sensitized skin except between her legs. By its very exclusion, her crotch awoke with a pulsing excitement that drew out an involuntary whimper. She turned toward him with expectation, her vagina pooling with wetness and whimpered some more, this time voluntarily. He responded by placing his cock between her warm legs, snugly against her swollen mound and she moaned, rubbing it like a genie with her thighs until it throbbed. They kissed. A long, lingering lazy wet kiss as he rubbed his hard cock, slippery with both their pre-come, between her legs. He entered her slowly, first probing shallow then plunging deep in wide circles to her gasps.

He was so tender and patient with her, coaxing out incredible yearning then filling her with thrusts that penetrated and surged through every aching part of her body and out every pore. Until she tingled—deconstructed—and became an amorphous being of light, whose wave particles resonated to his frequency ... And she finally understood. They didn't need the *vishna* to join with the universe. They were there already.

She understood it all. And it was good.

Epilogue

Genevieve and Azaes strolled down the newly planted orchard of young *fika* trees, hands warmly clasped and glancing at the ancient rainforest that had somehow miraculously evaded the wildfire. Her *vishna* tree remained, standing tall above the rest like a brilliant sentinel. She squeezed Azaes's hand. "Diaprepes told me that the *vishna* was also planted in your homeland ... Earth." She bowed her head to the ground in thought. "That means that we could have had immortality, the elixir of health and all this long ago." She looked up and her solemn gaze swept over Azaes's place and the surrounding jungle. "But we threw it all away."

"Yes," he replied sombrely. "We did. Eos became a second chance for us." He pondered quietly for a moment then turned to her. "Perhaps it's yours too. We are just branches of the same tree, after all," he ended with a faint smile.

She gazed at him askance and let a crooked smile curl her lips. "You still don't believe me about the Eoptes, who took my form to kill Sanchez and Porter, do you?"

He smiled indulgently and fondled her buttocks. "No."

"Or that I spoke with her and that we made love in the flesh, after she explained that it was she who loved me as the *vishna*."

He looked a little uncomfortable but grinned nevertheless, then stopped to embrace her with great exuberance. "With your injuries?" he said almost scornfully. He kissed her breasts and slid his hands down her curved back to stroke her butt cheeks. "No," he murmured between kisses. His index fingers traced the crease of her buttocks, and drew out a delighted squeak of surprise from her as fingers met at her anus.

He couldn't keep his hands off her sexual parts, she thought, bending unconsciously with his hand and releasing a sighing moan as he pressed the rim of her butt-hole in slightly. Her body felt like a vessel that kept refilling, never tiring of his touch, always responsive, like an animal in heat. She'd become highly sensitized to everything about him. He only needed to look at her a certain way to trigger a burst of wetness that grew sticky between her legs. A glimpse of his firm buttocks, the gentle muscular dip of his pelvis, stirred her loins and inflamed her heart and face.

And Azaes didn't care where, Genevieve reflected, as she glimpsed Anka and a female friend strolling not far away in the gardens, holding hands and gazing at them with some curiosity. Azaes had absolutely no reservations about being seen by anyone, whether friend, acquaintance or family member. Lovemaking in public seemed as natural to him now as standing naked under the Eosian sun.

Grabbing his roaming hands to help her resist, Genevieve panted, "Okay!" She persisted with a lopsided smile, "then explain how I know that you also joined with that very Eoptes through the same *vishna*."

His face paled and he let go of her. He stared at her with the shock of great revelation and for several moments could not speak. Then he finally found the words, "Good Universe! It's true." He started blubbering excitedly, "She came to me several times, in your shape, with tidings of you, and we made magnificent love." He gripped her arms. "Genevieve, what does it mean?"

“It means that the Eosians have been joining with the Eoptes for thousands of years already. Through the *vishna* tree, Azaes, The Eoptes *are* the *vishna*.”

He stared at her and his mouth moved, but nothing came out. Genevieve laughed. “You said I’d change everything. I guess I did.”

“You changed *me*,” he said, squeezing her hand. “That’s no small feat.” He laughed. Then his eyes grew serious. “Soon it will be time to change your world,” he said, gazing at her face. “I admit, I’m nervous.”

She thought him sweet to make such an admission. Then again, she was nervous too. Zeta Corp—never mind the U.S. military and parts of its government—weren’t going to be happy with what she wasn’t bringing home and what she and Azaes had to say. It was entirely possible that they’d be arrested and incarcerated before they even had a chance to speak to the world government. It was a risk they were going to have to take.

“You should be nervous,” she agreed, grabbing his butt and squeezing it affectionately. “You’re going to have to learn to wear some clothes!”

Azaes laughed sharply. “And I have a wonderful surprise for you!” He seized her in his great arms and spun her around, laughing like a rogue with a secret.

“What?” she asked, when he set her down again. “You got a suit?”

“The Atlantis II. You’ll be pleased. It’s a secret.” His smile was now decidedly smug and she thought that he might not tell her. But she was wrong. He wasn’t much for keeping secrets. “I know how fond you were of your ship and how you missed your ship’s personality. So, I sent a crew back to *Zac I* and they were able to salvage part of his core neural net and installed it in *Atlantis II*. I am pleased to say that Atlantis and Zac are getting along very nicely.”

Genevieve realized that he expected her to shriek with some joy, but she threw her gaze down to swallow down the emotion rising in her throat and said nothing, too overwhelmed. Then she threw her arms around him in quiet appreciation. He in turn folded his arms around her and they stood, embracing in warm silence for several moments before she finally let go.

When she did, she found him regarding her with deep eyes. “Sacred Universe,” he breathed, “you’re so beautiful, woman...”

“When I’m purple, that is,” she added with a coy smile, then teased, “And I’m going to go back to my old color on the way back to Earth.”

“Ah, but you’ll still smell good,” he teased back. “And you’ll be the only woman on board.” His eyes fluttered shut in rapture and he added in a hoarse voice, “And your fragrance is so incredibly arousing...” At least they were going to have an incredible trip to Earth, she thought with a growing smile.

Uttering a moan of pleasure, Azaes seized her lips with his and slid his hand between her legs. She inhaled sharply and felt her heart pulse in her crotch. She was already wet from his butt tease. His tongue played inside her mouth as his fingers dove deep and beat out a violent rhythm. She gasped and curved her body into his, seeking his swollen cock. He pulled her into the small orchard and she let him throw her on the mossy ground. It offered little in the way of protection from probing eyes but that wasn’t the intent—it made a soft bed for them. Azaes flung himself upon her and entered her with frantic surges. They came quickly, together.

Not in a hurry to get up or withdraw, he lazily maneuvered them so they lay on their sides, facing each other on the mossy bed. The warm thickness of his penis inside her felt

like home. She slowly inhaled a complex mixture of enticing aromas from Azaes's own musky sweat to the tart-sweet smell of *fika* leaves and the alluring *vishna* perfume. As she listened to the twittering birds and the distant laughter of Anka and her friend, it dawned on her that Azaes had meant *love*. That was what he had alluded to when he'd hinted at what ran the universe. Love...

"Each time is like the first," Azaes murmured, stroking and kissing her hair.

"Only better," she whispered with a grin. Sex was love's most expressive language. They'd only fucked five times today, she thought smugly. Once when they'd first roused in the guest bed of Diaprepe's newly grown house; once—no twice—in the new kitchen, where Azaes had sternly pushed Anka out to make breakfast and made a mess with food, mostly on Genevieve to great bouts of laughter; once in the bathroom, inside the bathing pool where they had to clean the mess he'd created; and then in the flower garden after she'd made the mistake of bending over to smell a flowering shrub. They were fucking their way to Azaes's makeshift healing chamber and they might make it there by noon, Genevieve thought with wry amusement as she nestled her face in his neck, then bent to tease his nipples with her tongue and teeth. His nipples responded instantly by hardening erect.

He moaned and she felt him firm inside her in great waves. Her mouth gaped open as desire flamed through her in response to his movement. He seized her lips with his, thick and wet like the rest of him. His penis continued to swell in surging waves like a great ocean promising to take her to another dimension. And he wasn't even thrusting yet! Ever thicker and deeper, he filled her until it was all Azaes inside her, throbbing to her beating heart.

It started as an aching tremor and grew into a violent thrashing as she felt her come rise inside and felt his body shiver with growing excitement. He began to thrust rapidly, body glistening and his wetness mingling with hers. They keened and groaned in unison as his semen burst out of him, eagerly filling every part of her and looking for her own dancing seeds to join with.

And join they would—she'd dreamed it.

Azaes then wrapped his great arms around her and pulled his leg over her thigh like a blanket. They dozed off in the moss under the morning sun.

Genevieve roused at nearby footfalls. But after some moments they hastened away and Genevieve fell back asleep, wrapped inside Azaes's tangle of arms and legs.

It was noon when they wiped the cum and sweat off of themselves and scrambled to their feet, faces and bodies still deep with the flush of their lovemaking. Claspng her hand again and wearing a boy's grin, Azaes led them out of the orchard to his healing chamber.

It was a pyramid build of a combination of *vosma*, a rapid-forming crystal, and *metalin*, the shape-shifting amoebic native plant used to grow their houses. They stepped inside. Diaprepes lay asleep, suspended within a greenish liquid, the same liquid Genevieve had found herself immersed in when she'd first arrived on Eos only two months ago. Somehow it felt like years.

Shiva, who stood overlooking the tank, jumped with surprise then smiled at them. "Hello, lovers," she said cheerfully.

"Hello, Shiva," Azaes greeted his former betrothed and squeezed Genevieve's hand with instinctive reassurance. "How's my brother?"

“Looking very good. He stirred just before you entered. I think he may be coming out of the trance.” She sounded excited. It was obvious to Genevieve that she had strong feelings for Azaes’s younger brother. The two women gazed at one another and an understanding passed between them. Both suddenly smiled with abject happiness. Genevieve had given Shiva her freedom to choose the mate she loved, Diaprepes. “When are you leaving for Earth?”

“As soon as we get the last equipment together. Perhaps today,” Azaes said, glancing at Genevieve. “It is urgent that we relay our message to the world government and curtail the subversive actions of one government. There is much repairing and learning to do between our peoples.”

Shiva nodded solemnly. “I wish you both the best of fortune. Although we’ll miss your great wisdom, Azaes, the importance of your success on Earth is critical. I have every reason to believe that together the two of you will succeed,” she ended with a genuine smile of confidence that Genevieve found reassuring. Shiva added, “And thank you for building this place back up for Diaprepes and Anka. He will be very pleased when he wakes.”

Azaes glanced at Diaprepes. “When he wakes, you can release him, Shiva,” he said. “He is well enough now and will make a good *kushu*. Wish him well from me. I know that you and he will do wondrous things with the *Sthanu* Circle and Eos as a whole. It will be a time of great change and discovery. Perhaps of things you already know in your heart,” he said with a knowing glance at Genevieve. “I know you and Diaprepes have not chosen the same path of self-restraint I have and that is good. Because the smell of change is definitely in the air.”

Shiva nodded regally. Was it possible that she was not as naïve as Azaes? That she already knew about the Epoptes? Genevieve smiled to herself as she studied the woman’s complicated expression and made the obvious conclusion. Perhaps it was Azaes alone who’d clung to his oddly callow beliefs.

“And speaking of change,” Azaes went on, “I must, in turn, thank you for agreeing to look after my young impetuous sister.” He smiled sadly for a moment. “I will miss the little brat. She has much to learn by way of wisdom, but I do not begrudge her impulses as they express her intuitive inner self.” He then smiled broadly. “And there is certainly a place for intuition in this world.” Then he pulled Genevieve with new urgency toward the exit, adding over his shoulder to Shiva, “I promised Genevieve a glimpse of our newly refurbished *Atlantis II*, before we finally embark on our long space journey together.”

“I understand,” Shiva said in a serious voice, though her eyes twinkled brightly and a faint knowing smile of amusement crossed her face. “You want enough time to properly show her the ship.” And properly he would, thought Genevieve, as they fucked from room to room. Genevieve realized that it was Shiva who’d observed them as they’d slept, embraced in after-love under the *fika* trees.

Once outside, Genevieve turned to Azaes with a feral grin. “But first you and I have a date with a certain *vishna* tree.”

Azaes folded his arms around her and squeezed her tightly to him. “I wouldn’t miss it for the universe,” he said then seized her face in his large hands and kissed her long and passionately.

The End

About the Author:

Nina Munteanu is a Canadian writer whose fiction and non-fiction has appeared in publications throughout United States, Canada, the UK, Romania and Greece. Several of her short stories have been nominated for the Speculative Literature Foundation (SLF) Fountain Award, one of which will appear in the Spiritual SF anthology, *Sky Songs II* (Sky Song Press). Her novelette, "The Cypol" is scheduled for release in 2005 by Extasy Books. Nina's critical essays and reviews regularly appear in *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons* and *Aoife's Kiss*, among others.

When she's not writing, Nina works as a scientist with an environmental consulting firm in Vancouver, BC. She regularly speaks at conferences and publishes papers on the environment. Nina is also a member of SF Canada and enjoys participating in the SF convention scene. She lives in rural Ladner with her family and very strange cat. For more information on her writing visit her website, SF Girl, at <http://mypage.uniserve.com/~munteanu>

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