



MATING FLIGHT

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“Everyone is a prisoner of his own experience. No one can eliminate prejudices--just recognize them.”

--Edward R. Murrow

Chapter One

The young Averan mother's eyes were huge with terror. She clutched her small child to the front of her body until it whimpered. The two Averans drew back from us as though we were monsters.

This was the strongest fear reaction to humans I'd witnessed since we landed on the planet two months ago. Averans in the capital had grown accustomed to us and no longer flinched at the sight of us. But this excursion was the furthest we'd been from the capital since we arrived. The Averans here had never seen humans before. It was a forceful reminder that they were afraid.

Dr. Sheleigh O'Brien stopped typing her observations as one of her orange curls fell forward into her eyes, obscuring the computer screen. She brushed it back, and then returned her hands to the keyboard. But her train of thought had evaporated like morning mist in sunlight.

She exhaled a disgruntled breath and frowned. She was a trained anthropologist and should have found a reason for their fear by now. Averans looked so much like humans that the depth of their fear didn't make sense. She'd found nothing in the Averans' current society to explain their reactions and, for some inexplicable reason, she'd been unable to learn their history. When she asked questions, she received polite silence. Why couldn't she concentrate hard enough to find answers?

She knew the reason why: Kleet Kryszan, oldest son and heir of the Averan ruler. She'd never felt the desire for another man that she felt for Kleet. Between studying hard for her dual doctorate, then anthropological missions to various planets belonging to Unified Sentient Planets, most of whose species weren't human, she'd never met a man as magnetic as Kleet. And he was forbidden fruit. Scientists were strongly discouraged from fraternizing with the native population on newly discovered planets like Avera. Too bad she couldn't seem to keep a clinical detachment about him.

As though her thoughts had conjured him, he dangled a piece of orange food in front of her. She followed the long familiar fingers up the masculine arm to gaze at Kleet's face. Her heart sped up and her breath caught, as it did whenever she saw him. His dark brown hair set off his burnished skin beautifully. His light eyes sparkled with happiness. They reflected whatever he wore. Today they were the warm gray of his neatly pressed shirt. He smiled and she melted inside.

"I brought you something," he cajoled in a smooth baritone that caressed up her spine. "It matches your hair. Open your mouth."

She'd learned to trust his frequent gifts of food.

She allowed him to slip the segment between her lips and she chewed the sweetly succulent fruit. It tasted similar to tropical fruits she'd eaten on Earth.

"Umm," she relished the morsel.

He smiled at her response and moved around her desk, handing her the rest of the fruit. "I chose the ripest one for you. I thought you'd like it." He sounded smugly satisfied. Her heart fluttered at the thought that she'd made him feel that way.

"You're going to make me fat with all this food." It was hard to think with him standing

so close.

He eyed her body, openly hungry, and she grew warm inside. "Never. May I taste it?" "Sure."

She offered him the fruit, but he sampled her lips instead. The kiss electrified her. A sensual jolt shot to her lower body. She savored the taste of his kiss as hungrily as she'd savored the fruit. His kisses had become more frequent and more ardent lately. They were always exciting and usually unexpected.

"Umm." The sound rumbled through their joined lips. His hand slid down her shirt to mold her breast and she jerked. "Easy," he murmured. She tried to calm her rioting nerves. Her nipple pebbled under his stroking hand. Heat pooled in her loins.

His lips moved to her neck to nibble the soft skin there. "When will you give yourself to me?" he invited, not for the first time. A nip on her ear made her gasp.

"You know I've never given myself to anyone. It has to be right." But her protest had begun to ring hollow in her ears.

"It feels right to me, Shel. Don't you want me filling you where you ache? Imagine me hot and full inside you, and the pleasure of joining with me. I want to be with you like that."

She groaned with want. His words made her lower body clench and she grew moist between her legs. She might not have physical experience with sex, but her girlfriends and female co-workers had described their love affairs to her for years. She'd collected those tales, mostly from a sociological and anthropological standpoint.

She imagined what it would be like, she wanted it, and she wanted to be one with him ... but she remembered the obstacles. She sighed. "I need time."

"I need you, Shel."

"I know. I'm just not ready. We've only known each other two months." And at that, they barely knew one another.

"You know enough to let me touch you here." He stroked her nipple, making her moan. "No man has been here before me. If this intimacy is right for us, then joining together is also right."

He was so compelling when he talked about them making love. She felt like getting naked and letting him come inside her. Her body burned with the desire to be filled with him. She wanted to see him naked and touch his bare flesh, hold it against her own body. He made her weak and mindless with need. In her thirty years she'd never met a man with whom she wanted to share her body intimately. She was beginning to feel ridiculous for still having her chastity in the face of her attraction to Kleet. If only this was Earth and not Avera.

"Soon," she moaned, giving him what he wanted. She'd think about the repercussions later, when she was alone.

He kissed her again, crushing her to him. The kiss was possessive and triumphant. She felt a tendril of fear that there was no backing out of it now. She'd just promised to give herself to him. She told her fear to shut up and enjoy the kiss.

Kleet was a marvelous kisser. He made her whole body riot, down to her tingling fingertips. She wanted to devour those wonderful lips, drown in them and savor them endlessly.

Being close to his hard, warm body was intoxicating. Her skin cried out with joy at touching him. Her breasts savored being pressed against his chest. Her arms clutched him fiercely, wanting, oh, did they want.

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against hers, panting. She controlled her instinctive sound of protest. "You'll be mine," he declared, and there was a triumphant ring in

his voice. He pulled away from her slowly, like a caress. "I have to go. I wanted to steal some time with you, and some kisses, of course." His smile was devilish.

"I'm glad you came." Her voice sounded breathless.

He cleared his throat. "You're going to be at the reception tonight?" It wasn't really a question.

"Of course. Most of my team is going."

"There will be dancing. You'll dance with me." Another statement.

"I'm supposed to dance with several of the council members and other important people."

He cocked his head and gave her a sardonic look. "Not more important than me."

"No, of course not. But I need to mingle a little. Harrier said the council members were curious about us."

"They are. But you'll dance many times with me."

"I look forward to it." A shiver ran through her at the thought of being in his arms again tonight.

He kissed her again, and then let her go. "Tonight," he promised. His eyes sizzled with heat.

"Tonight," she replied. She heard the yearning in her voice.

He turned and his long black cape swirled out around him. It trailed him out the door of her office like a tail would follow a proud lion.

She sighed. The passionate fog he engendered faded with his lack of proximity. Only his musky scent lingered in the room and clung to her body. She could still taste his kiss on her lips and she touched them with her fingers. His lips were magic.

"I see the heir was here again, Sheleigh," her human colleague, Dr. Marne Vorndran, sneered from the doorway of her office.

She snatched her fingers away from her lips and straightened in her chair. Had Marne seen Kleet arrive and followed him to Sheleigh's office, and then waited until Kleet left to confront her? Her cheeks burned at what Marne might have witnessed. She tried to brazen it out. "What do you want, Marne?"

He wore his wavy black hair a little too long and his trousers a little too tight. He would have been handsome except for the way his right lip and nostril pulled up as he sneered. It made one side of his face look like it had melted upwards.

"What I want won't be offered to me. It seems you want it kinky ... well, kinkier than I can be. Kryszan's not even human, Sheleigh. Are you making a detailed study of his alien genitalia?"

"You're foul."

"Me? I'm not the one doing it with an alien."

"This is *his* planet. *We're* the aliens here. And may I remind you it's with their reluctant agreement. They're sentient beings, not animals."

He waved that away with a manicured hand. "The Averans aren't even as advanced as humans are. They're sub-human."

"You know they're not human at all. They're unclassified humanoids, like many of the species in USP." Alarm rang through her that Marne might be a closet xenophobe. She'd thought him angry because she'd rebuffed his advances on the trip from Earth, but what if it was more than that? She had to tread carefully. He'd had a spotless reputation before he came on this mission. But if he hated or feared aliens, he could endanger this initial mission to Avera and Unified Sentient Planets (USP) would never be allowed back. The chance to learn about them

would be forever lost. She'd never learn why they were afraid.

"Maybe it's a power trip for you," he continued. "He's the heir to a planet, after all. Maybe you think he'll marry you and you'll help rule Avera one day."

She shot to her feet. "Kleet's a decent man, which is more than I can say about you."

"Hit a sensitive spot, did I?" His cold eyes gleamed.

A young woman with cornrows in her hair appeared in the doorway behind Marne. Her skin was the color of heavily creamed coffee. "Excuse me, Dr. Vorndran." She pushed past him. "Dr. O'Brien, Dr. Barazi wants to see you."

All thoughts of her colleague fled from her mind as she stared at their assistant. "Did he say what it was about, Deveria?" The head of their mission rarely asked to see her. He was content to receive updates at their weekly staff meetings.

"No, doctor, but he'd like to see you now."

Sheleigh moved around her desk and tried to pass Marne.

"I bet he disapproves of your affair, too. By the way, your shirt's unbuttoned." He gave his parting comments and turned on his heel. He strode stiffly to his office two doors down.

She shot daggers into his retreating back, wishing one of her thoughts could take physical form and sink deeply into his flesh. He *had* been spying on her! He must want revenge for her rebuff. She buttoned her shirt quickly, gently cursing Kleet for not being more discreet. She turned to see Deveria waiting expectantly.

"I saw that dishy heir leaving here. He's yummy. You're dating him?"

"No, I'm not dating him." She and Kleet had never had a date. They managed to get physical well enough in her office or his, or on her field observations.

"Really?" Deveria's gaze dropped to the newly buttoned shirt and back up. "I wouldn't mind a little inter-species relationship myself. There's a young man in the next canyon I'd like to get to know a lot better."

"Just be careful, Deveria."

Her assistant gave her a sharp look and stalked away. It was then that Sheleigh realized she wasn't following her own advice and Deveria knew it. Who was she to advise caution to a passionate young woman like Deveria? Sheleigh was too used to thinking like a virgin. Now she was a hypocrite. She hurried to her superior's office.

"Dr. Barazi, you wanted to see me?"

"Come in and close the door." He gestured her inside his small, cramped office.

She did as she was bid, swallowing nervously when she turned to close the door. A closed-door meeting did not bode well. She sat in the chair in front of his desk.

Dr. Barazi's short black hair was perfectly combed, not a hair out of place. The round collar of his tunic buttoned at his throat. The light color made his swarthy complexion even darker. "Are you ready for the reception tonight?"

His first question wasn't what she'd expected. "Yes, I'm looking forward to it."

"You know how important it is for us to make a good impression on the council and the ruler of this planet. After all, we're here by their grudging permission."

"I know." Unified Sentient Planets had begged the Averans to allow one tiny scientific group on the planet.

"Sheleigh, I'm concerned." He dropped his dark eyes and straightened his orderly desk with short blunt fingers. Then he looked up again. "I'm not sure that your making a play for the ruler's son is the impression we want to make."

She felt her face flame and cursed her redheaded complexion. "I've made no play for

Kleet.”

“He visits you regularly. I’m told he was just here. Why does he come to you and not to the head of the mission, as is proper?”

“I’ve done nothing inappropriate, Dr. Barazi. I assure you.”

Dr. Barazi was an astute scientist and she sat under his scrutiny now. “The heir pursues you?” he guessed. She nodded and he sighed. “This complicates things. I could go to his father ... no, that wouldn’t work.”

He sprang from his chair and paced the small confines of his office, radiating nervous energy. Sheleigh felt like she was caged with a wild animal. She didn’t know what to say to calm him or what she could safely admit.

“The mission is in jeopardy,” he groaned. He stopped suddenly and pointed a thick finger at her. “We’ll send you home. We’ll claim that you’re sick or something.”

She shot to her feet as though rocket propelled. “No!” Being sent home in ignominy would mean sure death for her career. No future mission head would ever accept her. She would be blacklisted as an unacceptable risk. The closest she would ever get to anthropology or sociology again would be to teach them to future xenos. No!

She had to admit her feelings to save herself. “Kleet’s advances aren’t unwelcome.”

Dr. Barazi froze, his black brows drawn together, studying her face. Her cheeks were warm with her infernal blush. “Is that the truth? You’re not just sacrificing yourself for the mission?”

“No!” she exclaimed, disgusted by that thought. “The attraction is mutual.”

“I see. There won’t be any ... repercussions if his attraction ends? To the mission, I mean.”

What else could he have been referring to? “No repercussions.” The way she had it figured, any attraction between them would die a natural death once Kleet satisfied his lust for her and moved on. That’s all there was between them. He was a prince, so there wasn’t any future between the heir to Avera and a xenosociologist/anthropologist from Earth. She wasn’t Cinderella and this wasn’t a fairytale.

Chapter Two

Or was it a fairytale? Sheleigh stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, her mouth shaped in an “o” of surprise. Who was this almost pretty woman with a complexion like peaches and cream? Where had the gawky, too-thin girl with the blemished face gone? When had the skeletal face and body filled out? When had her carrot hair mellowed into this luscious melon color? She touched her cheek with a disbelieving hand. This reflection wasn’t a result of how Kleet made her feel. Somewhere and sometime while she’d been studying other civilizations, she’d become a woman with more than passable good looks. Was how she looked now the reason behind first Marne’s and now Kleet’s attraction to her, when men hadn’t given her a second look before? It was something to consider.

She turned her attention to her clothing next. She wore her second best outfit, the gold silk tunic and trouser set. The rich color went well with her orange-red hair. She’d confined most of her vexing curls on top of her head in a gold clip and pulled down a few ringlets to soften the look. On her feet was the one pair of strappy dress shoes that fit in her luggage. They were lightweight, like the silk outfit, and took up little room, two musts for space travel.

Satisfied with her appearance for the reception, she rode the hydrolift up to the roof of their borrowed apartment complex to meet the others of her group. Water power made it move much faster and more fluidly than any elevator she’d used on Earth. There were no Averans living here while the human mission resided within, so they had the complex to themselves. That seemed odd to her, but Dr. Barazi said it was probably for the best since Averans were nervous about being close to other species.

Except for Kleet. Kleet had been stiffly formal when she met him the day the mission landed two and a half months ago. He’d been sent by his father to assess her group and he’d made it a point to speak with each member. He hadn’t seemed nervous about strangers at all. On that day, he hadn’t even singled her out for personal attention. It wasn’t until two weeks later that he’d approached her about being her lover. She’d been shocked and startled, and then she explained her chastity. But instead of deterring him, her status seemed to encourage him. No, he hadn’t been wary of other species at all. He wanted to get as close as possible ... to her.

Averans who’d met the humans more than once were outwardly friendly, but they still suffered from a strange reticence. Anomalies like that existed in this society and Kleet’s attentions didn’t help her concentrate on what was odd about this planet’s inhabitants.

Dr. Barazi stood with the group xenobiologist, Dr. Sarnia Dorf, by the rooftop landing pad. The large square had been carved out of the mountain top and sealed with some dark material that contained a pearlescent shimmer. The sealant made the pads easily visible from the air.

The color of Dr. Barazi’s perfectly pressed dark suit matched his impeccably smooth black hair. Sarnia Dorf was the mother figure of their group, grown thick with age but still straight backed. Dr. Dorf had been a xenobiologist so long that she peered at everyone as though studying a specimen. She turned around and peered at Sheleigh like that now.

“Very good color for you, Sheleigh. You and I are precious metals tonight.” Sarnia gestured to her own silver silk dress. With her gray and white hair, she looked very distinguished

in her outfit.

“You look lovely, Sarnia,” Sheleigh commented.

“I’ve noticed the Averans respect their elders. I thought I’d make the most of being elder.” She laughed a full-bodied laugh and Sheleigh laughed with her. Dr. Barazi just looked indulgent.

The final member of their party hurried from the hydrolift. Dr. Rahwen Suresh was untidy, as usual. He had a complete lack of sense of style and remained pretty much oblivious to anything outside of his field.

Sarnia moved to his side and began to straighten his tunic. “Rah, we’re trying to make a good impression tonight.”

“Lot of fuss and bother,” he blustered. “Cutting into my work time.” Sheleigh smiled at his comments. All he needed to make him a caricature would be thick glasses.

A “wop-wop-wop” sound heralded the arrival of the air transport. Sheleigh held onto her hair while it dropped neatly to the landing pad. She’d never seen air transports like the Averans used and she wished that USP would be allowed to obtain the technology. They looked like insects with their glass bubble fronts that allowed unhindered visibility. The transports came in all sizes and every Averan over a certain age owned at least one.

Because a multitude of rivers had carved the planet into an endless warren of crisscrossing canyons, there weren’t any roads. Thus, the only logical method of transportation was by air.

She climbed into the six-passenger transport, nodding to the pilot as she did so. She’d flown with this particular pilot many times. This was an official government transport, arranged for by the council. She belted in and took a deep breath in preparation for the wild ride to come.

The transport rose smoothly straight up, then zipped forward. It dove into a canyon to the right like a hummingbird darted into flowers. The canyon walls flashed by at an alarming speed and close proximity. Every Averan she’d flown with piloted like this and they loved it. Their faces glowed as they flew and it was hard to capture their attention while the transports were in operation. She’d tried. Pilot and machine appeared to function as one. She’d watched and studied them, but didn’t understand how the young people learned how to fly without splattering their machines against the canyon walls. The Earth expedition was banned from flying any type of air transport because of the danger involved.

The setting sun glinted off the glass panes of the residences as the transport flashed past. By USP standards, they were nothing more than primitive caves modified with technological advances. Carved into the top levels of the sheer walled canyons, almost all of them faced south in order to receive light all day long.

Primitive people would seek shelter in a southern facing location, but modern people would seek shelter anywhere. The Averans retained their original shelters even after they’d gained technology, and that made no sense to her. Technology hadn’t freed them from their primitive past. How had those primitives gotten up to those high caves in the first place?

Technology had made their lives easier, though. A hydrolift ran through the center of each residence or business, from landing pad top all the way down to the river’s edge at the bottom of the canyons. The rivers provided a powerful source of hydroelectric power. The Averans also harnessed solar power with huge arrays of photoelectric panels strategically placed along the cliff tops.

So the caves had electricity, an odd form of refrigeration, running water and plumbing, while the insides of the residences were smooth rock walls, floors and ceilings. Steps going to

the various levels were carved out of the rock. The surfaces and interiors were cool, a relief from the hot outdoors.

Sheleigh had ceased to feel claustrophobic as she moved about under tons of rock. Many of the places she'd been, like the council hall, had a very old feel to them. Business offices had a newer feel about them, although they were still carved out of the sides of cliffs.

Their transport lined up for a landing and she relaxed. The hairy ride would soon be over and she'd be with Kleet again. Excitement bubbled inside her. They'd never been together in a public arena. They would be unable to conceal the attraction they felt for one another. Maybe Kleet didn't want to hide what they shared. She should have asked him what he thought, instead of going in blind like this. She couldn't make assumptions about what he did or didn't want. Her group's presence on Avera was too fragile. Blast him for fogging her mind with passion when they should have been talking instead.

There were numerous transports landing and disgorging their passengers. It was a well-rehearsed dance of drop, empty, and lift. Soon it was their turn on one of the many landing pads. The government center was a huge flat-topped mountain that contained many levels of government offices, including Kleet's and his father's. It also contained the council assembly hall and the huge meeting room where tonight's reception was to take place.

Her group got in line with all the glittering attendees, who were resplendent in their best evening clothes. Their capes were richly and elaborately embroidered and detailed, and many of the females wore jeweled clasps to hold their capes around their necks.

Sheleigh had wondered about the meaning of the capes from the moment they'd landed on the planet. Every inhabitant wore one--male and female, adult and child. The men's were usually dark, the women's were lighter colored, and the children's were brightly colored. They covered from neck to below the knees. At first she'd thought them an affectation, until she saw the children wearing them. Later she asked someone to remove his cape and saw the fear in his eyes. That's when she realized the Averans clung to their capes for a terrifying reason they would not disclose.

Fifty feet away there was a scuffle and she craned her neck to see what was going on. Security guards held back several young adults from coming near the reception attendees. The young people wore everyday clothes, not party attire.

A sandy-haired young man in the group looked right at her. He shouted, "Share the wealth. Share the power. Hear us *aquila mancens*. Our time has come."

"What did he say?" she demanded of Dr. Barazi. "I didn't understand some of those words."

"I've never heard them before. They weren't in the USP tutorial."

The young man shouted his rhetoric again, making the party-goers shy away nervously. Several of them glanced apprehensively at her group. What did the Averans have to fear from the four of them? Did it have something to do with the words she couldn't understand?

She grabbed the middle-aged couple in front of her. "What is he saying?"

There was real fear on their faces and the woman moved slightly behind the man. The man answered. "It's not nice. Very derogatory. I won't repeat it to you."

Derogatory toward whom? "He said something about wealth. I didn't realize you had poor people here."

"Not poor. But some people have more material possessions than others." He turned away, putting his arm around the woman, and they moved forward in line.

His answer wasn't really an answer. If the standard among Averans was to have a certain

number of material possessions, then persons having less than that number would consider themselves poor or disadvantaged.

The shouting stopped mid-word as two burly security guards knocked the protestor down. One pressed a knee into the young man's back while the other bound his arms behind him. Sheleigh moved slightly in that direction, wanting to talk to the dissidents.

A guard blocked her path. "No, madam. Please stay with your group."

"I'm here to observe. I want to hear what that young man has to say."

"You don't want to hear his foul words. Please move forward. I believe the next hydrolift will hold your group."

Dr. Barazi took hold of her arm in a fierce grip and moved her forward. Sheleigh wanted to know what was going on. "Dr. Barazi," she spoke softly in English, "something's going on here. A protestor means there's an issue to protest. That's a part of social relations and cultural development, which are two of my fields. You can't say I don't have a professional interest in hearing the other side of their dispute."

"We've been told to move along. We can't risk alienating our hosts this soon in our stay. For now, let's do as we were told."

Sheleigh fumed. Dr. Barazi was in political mode right now and didn't want to make waves. She wanted to know what the Averans were hiding. Perhaps these dissidents held the answer to the questions that nagged at her about Averan society. Her professional curiosity was like a hound held back from the scent. She wanted to howl her displeasure. Their group did, indeed, fit into the next hydrolift cab, and they descended quickly to the reception hall. The Averans in the cab were subdued. She caught a number of curious glances aimed her group's way. It wasn't the first time she'd been on another planet, nor the first time she was the alien in a society, but it was still uncomfortable being treated as an outsider.

The hydrolift door opened and spilled its passengers into the corridor outside the reception hall. She'd never been in this hall and she looked around avidly as they waited in line. Exquisite pottery filled a series of glass cases that lined both sides of the corridor. Her palms itched to hold the beautiful pieces in her hands, to study the evolution of their culture through their art. Here was a gold mine of history that had almost as much pull as Kleet did.

As though thinking his name conjured him, her move forward in line brought Kleet into view. He looked up and smiled intimately, then turned his attention back to the glittering couple in front of him. She could breathe again once he looked away, and she used the opportunity to study him and his father.

They stood side by side, dressed in the finest lightweight fabrics. They wore straight black trousers, tightly woven, and tailored white shirts. Kelfer's black cape was edged in deep purple, while Kleet's was black on black. Each of their capes was secured with a clasp of shiny metal. Sheleigh couldn't discern the design of the clasp from this distance. The men looked handsome and regal.

Kelfer was an older version of Kleet. His dark brown hair was liberally salted with gray now, but he had the same proud nose and wide forehead. They were the same height with similar breadth across the shoulders. Kelfer's eyes were darker than Kleet's. He had a presence and intensity that were only foreshadowed in his son. Sheleigh thought it came from a lifetime of being first the heir and then the actual ruler of the whole planet. They called him the Avatier, and he held a hereditary position like that of a king. With the backing of the council, he directed the fate of Averans all over the planet.

Kleet projected the hope and the promise of the future, the vitality of youth, even though

he was thirty-five. He was the next generation, filled with incipient power. Robust energy and health glowed in his rugged face. Dark and brooding described him better than classically handsome, but she still found him compellingly attractive.

Then she was in front of Kelfer, shaking his hand. "Father, you remember Sheleigh O'Brien," Kleet introduced her. Suddenly Kelfer's intense scrutiny sharpened and she felt seared clear through, as though he saw right down to her bones. She tried not to flinch under his probing gaze. What had Kleet told him about her? Had he told his father that he was trying to have an affair with her?

Then she was released from the laser-like gaze and she moved in front of Kleet. He clasped her hands in his warm ones and she clutched him almost desperately. She wanted to be reassured, she wanted to be in his arms, she wanted him to kiss her. Her face warmed with a blush at her heated thoughts.

Kleet smiled. "Later," he whispered, and let her go.

She moved away from him and only then did she realize that she'd become the focus of many stares. Oh no! She'd been indiscreet and had flaunted their attraction in front of his people and her peers. Mortified at being so brazen in public, she ducked her head. Her embarrassment helped to cool her boiling blood and heated loins.

Sarnia took hold of her arm as their group moved further into the room. "I'd heard the heir came to see you often. Now I know why." She spoke softly so that only Sheleigh could hear. "He's a lot of man for a woman's first time."

"I haven't done anything," Sheleigh protested. She tried to pull her arm out of Sarnia's grasp but failed.

"But you want to, and so does he. It's as clear as the nose on your face. Be careful, Sheleigh. I have nothing against inter-species relationships, but we've barely begun to study the Averans. You don't want to get caught in anything you weren't expecting."

"I'm being cautious," Sheleigh murmured. "Don't worry about me."

They moved forward into the milling throng. A passing server gave Sheleigh a slender glass goblet of a pale liquid. She sniffed it discreetly and verified it was wine. She sipped carefully, not wanting to become intoxicated, especially not tonight. It had a tart, refreshing snap to it. She appreciated it more after having traveled to the vineyards to see the wine industry. The vineyards were nestled in the high mountainsides where the Avera sun wasn't so hot and where it seemed only mountain goats should be able to go. But once again she found Averans prospering in high places.

She savored another sip while studying the room. It was a huge cave, a story and a half tall inside. Its walls and ceilings were smooth rock marbled with veins of some gorgeous red ore that sparkled in the light. It needed no additional decoration to make it a spectacular room. There were numerous glass chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Glassmaking was a booming industry on Avera.

One of the council members captured her attention and she was soon absorbed in a discussion of cultural evolution on other planets. She was excited to discuss this topic, hoping her descriptions of other societies would lessen the apprehension Averans felt about other people. She was so wrapped up in her tale of the wonder of Carisi society that she didn't notice who was standing next to her until she turned slightly.

"Kleet. I was just telling councilwoman Verreaux about the culture of the planet Caris," she told him breathlessly. His presence, combined with the excitement of wooing Averans to universal knowledge, made her feel slightly tipsy. She knew it wasn't the wine making her feel

that way.

“I can see you’re enjoying yourself. I hate to interrupt, but you promised to dance with me.”

Her face warmed a little and her heart beat faster. “Yes, I did.” The councilwoman faded from her view as Kleet pulled her out among the whirling couples.

“Kleet, I don’t know your dances,” she realized belatedly.

“Just hold onto me and move where I move.” He took her in his arms and began to move. A glide, a swirl, turn, twirl, and glide to the side. After a few moments she realized there was a rhythm to the movements and she began to anticipate which way to move. She was enjoying the press of her body against his through her thin silk. The other couples were holding each other close, but not as close as Kleet held her. In her higher heels her lower body was more closely aligned with his and each twirl allowed him to rub intimately against her. By the end of the first song she was flushed and heated by more than dancing.

The musicians launched immediately into another tune and Kleet moved to its equally exuberant rhythm. The musicians played mainly string and wind instruments, and the melodies were exciting and strangely pagan. By the end of the third song she wanted a different kind of dance and rhythm with Kleet.

His eyes had darkened and she drowned in them. His face lowered and she thought he was going to kiss her. She had lifted her face before remembering they were in the middle of the reception hall. She turned her head away and looked straight at the Avera liaison to their group, Harrier. He was an older gentleman, a contemporary and friend of Kelfer’s. She flushed and tried to push out of Kleet’s arms.

His lips brushed against her ear, part caress, and she shivered. “Later,” he promised in a silken voice. He released her and she moved away from him on shaky legs.

At the refreshment table she conversed with a councilman who was interested in commerce. She was frustrated at not being able to answer all of his questions, and he seemed equally frustrated by her lack of knowledge. Her field was science, not industry. She could tell this man how an industry went from infancy to maturity, and generalities about USP trade, but nothing specific. Here was a perfect opportunity for USP, but Avera uneasiness with strangers prevented that opportunity from being utilized.

Another council member rescued her and the talk turned to how USP obtained members. While she stressed that belonging to Unified Sentient Planets was voluntary, the Avera did not seem to believe her.

“How many species have left your USP?” he insisted.

“Why, none. None of the ten species have felt any reason to leave. They’ve found the relationship to be mutually beneficial.”

“What if individuals don’t want to belong, but their rulers do?”

“USP tries to find out what the majority of the people on a planet think. We investigate before we invite membership, so it’s hard to hide dissent. As a matter of fact, I saw a protestor outside when we landed. Maybe you can help me understand what he was shouting. It was something about ‘*aquila mancens*,’ I believe.”

He stiffened. “Radicals, I assure you. Their number is small and they definitely do not represent mainstream Avera society. Dismiss them.”

“But you see, this is exactly what we were discussing, Councilman. There is a division of thought on Avera, but no one will explain the point of contention.”

His face grew mottled and he shifted uneasily. Shelegh began formulating her next

argument, when a strong arm slipped around her waist. She wasn't surprised to find Kleet tugging on her.

"I want to dance this next song with you."

"I believe the Councilman was going to explain something to me."

"He can explain later. Come." He tugged harder and she went with him. Half of her wanted to be in his arms anyway. Besides, he could explain more easily than the councilman could. He was the heir, after all.

The music was slow and eerily haunting. The notes of the wind instruments circled and rose high on the scale. They were calling, calling out for something or someone. As the song continued and the notes found whoever they'd been searching for, she felt like liquid love flowed through her and her heart soared. She clutched at Kleet as the song became a celebration of love. His arms held her tightly to him, as though he felt the emotion, too. She found the romantic part of her wishing that he was not the heir, that he was just an ordinary man. She would marry someday, and if he was ordinary, he could be her husband. But Kleet was far from ordinary, so an affair was all she could have of him.

He nuzzled the side of her face and she made her decision then. If an affair was all they could share, then she wanted it to begin tonight. She wanted to experience as much of him as she could while she was here. She would suspend reality for awhile and pretend that he was just a man, although a man unlike other men in so many ways. She took a breath for courage.

"Come home with me tonight," she whispered.

She felt him start, perhaps in surprise. "You're sure?" His voice was thick and husky.

"Yes. I'm yours, beginning tonight."

He crushed her to him. "Shel, you've made me so happy. You'll be as happy as I am. I swear it."

The rest of the evening was a prelude to what was to come later in private. The dancing was intimate and suggestive. The looks were heated and provocative. The touches were barely-there. The promises made by bodies and touches, looks and words, made Sheleigh heavy with desire. She had no idea how she made it through the long evening. She spoke intelligently to many of the council members about many topics. But thoughts of Kleet lay in her subconscious and simmered. She would belong to him.

Chapter Three

The transport departed, quickly swallowed into the black hole of the night. Sheleigh turned to dash through the rain to the hydrolift, but Kleet caught her arm and swung her around to face him. The reception had seemed interminable after she'd delivered her shocking proposition. He'd waited all evening for the privacy of this moment so he could collect on her promise. He couldn't wait any longer.

"Kleet!" she squealed. "We're getting soaked."

"I don't care." He ground his mouth over hers, relishing the feel of her cool lips against his. She made a hungry sound in her throat and he crushed her body against his. He felt her pebbled nipples against his chest through their wet clothing. He wanted her desperately. She'd told him she would give herself to him tonight. His loins ached for the joining, ached to claim her as his own. But he had to be sure she could take his body into hers. He had to get her naked and see if her human physiology was similar to Averan women. If it was, he'd do many things to her body: pleasurable things, carnal things, things to overwhelm the senses. And he'd let her do the same to him. Oh, yes he would.

He growled deep in his throat and bent her over his arm. His mouth fastened on one nipple through the wet silk. She groaned. He suckled her nipple until it was hard and taut, then he moved to her other breast and did the same there. It was frustrating and exciting to have her breast in his mouth. Finally he pushed up her shirt and bra and fastened his mouth hungrily on the feast.

She gave a long moan. Her hand slid into his hair to hold him at her breast. The rain poured down on them and he sipped the moisture from her naked flesh. She thrust her breasts against him, wanting deeper penetration into his mouth. He wanted penetration, all right, between her legs.

He growled in frustration. If he wasn't careful, he'd take her right here. "We need to get inside." She seemed bewildered at the loss of his mouth, so he pulled her shirt back down and moved them towards the hydrolift. He held her pressed against his side in the ride down to her apartment, eager to see her body in the light.

There was no one in the corridor as they slipped into her apartment, so no awkward explanations were necessary. Once inside he pulled her straight into her bedroom. When he turned on all the lights in the room, she protested.

He reeled her to him slowly, eyeing her body with fierce hunger. "I want to see you naked. I've dreamed of this for a long time."

She turned into his arms and he kissed her hard. It was a fusion of lips wet from the rain. He slipped his tongue into her sweet mouth and she jerked in his arms. He sought her tongue, stroked it, and she tentatively stroked him back. Then their tongues caressed and they both groaned.

He broke the kiss long enough to peel the wet silk over her head. She came after his lips and he let her. She stalked his tongue and he surrendered it. She possessed his mouth and he succumbed. He loved her lips, had loved them from their first kiss over a month ago. Each contact was electrifying, like now. It took all his willpower to part from her lips after each kiss.

His hands moved to her breasts, which were cool from the wet rain, with tight nipples. They were plump handfuls for his eager hands. He molded and shaped them and made them warm again. She groaned and pressed into his hands.

Slowly he backed them to the bed. He released the throat catch of his cape and it fell in a sodden heap to the floor. "Put your hands on my chest, inside my shirt," he murmured.

She was eager and her hands opened his shirt quickly. He groaned as her palms smoothed his skin. Flesh against flesh at last. Without instruction she found his nipples and stroked them. He growled deep in his throat, feeling the burn of desire shoot to his already aroused loins. His cock throbbed, wanting relief and release.

He stroked one hand down her ribs, over her abdomen to her mound, and then slipped his hand between her legs. She moaned as he rubbed the sensitive flesh. She needed arousal and he gave it to her. He felt possessive about her flesh. This was his territory to explore and tantalize. She would know who owned it when he was done. And she would own him. A primitive thrill ran through him, thinking about being claimed at last. He'd waited so long.

One of her hands mimicked his and slid down to the front of his pants. She rubbed his cock and he thought he would explode.

"Careful. Not too much there."

Her caress gentled, but that was almost as bad. She had skillful hands for a virgin.

When her hips thrust instinctively against his stroking hand he slipped both his hands in the waist of her pants and peeled them down her hips and off. She stepped out of them, breaking apart from him to do so. It was his first opportunity to see her naked. He looked and savored what he saw. She had high round breasts, firm and beautifully shaped, with pale mauve nipples. Her waist indented pleasingly, her belly was firm and he followed the flesh down to the dark orange curls that covered her mound. She was shaped like an Aeveran woman. Her loins had to be compatible with his. Gods, he wanted her.

"You're beautiful," he breathed.

"You're overdressed," she retorted. She was nervous. He sought to make her less so.

"I have to keep my clothes on or I'll go too fast for you. You'll enjoy what I do to you while I'm trapped inside my clothes."

There was interest in her eyes and he went to her. "Lie down. Let me show you how you please me." He lay down on the bed beside her. He reached out to stroke her breast, liking the satin feel of it. The nipple peaked, begging for his mouth.

"I know you're nervous. Why don't you close your eyes and just feel? It will heighten the sensations," he encouraged.

"All right." Her eyelids slid closed and he relaxed a little.

He leaned over her and put his mouth on the pouty nipple. She gasped. He suckled, enjoying the feel of the firm nub in his mouth. Possessiveness surged through him. She was his. This breast was his. He moved onto her body and his hand slid to her other breast. She groaned. He tweaked the nipple, arousing it mercilessly. He rubbed it until it was firmly swelled. Then he sucked it.

She groaned again and pushed her chest upwards into his face. He took her breast deeper into his mouth, sucking greedily. He aroused her breasts with hands and mouth. Then he slid downward, keeping a hand on one breast.

He kissed her navel, and explored her flat belly with his tongue. As the haze of pleasure threatened to engulf him, he knew he could wait no longer. He slipped between her legs and spread them wide.

Her eyes flew open. Her face showed a nervous anxiety. She needed soothing. He smoothed his palms over her loins and spread thighs. "Let me look at you and see how beautiful you are. Lie back, close your eyes and just feel. I won't hurt you."

She sank back into the pillow and closed her eyes. When he was sure she wasn't looking, he studied the anatomy between her legs. She looked a lot like Avera women, but with some interesting folds. He opened those folds and caressed inside them. He found the opening to her vagina and circled his finger around it. It was smaller than he was used to in his limited experience--it would be a tight fit. His cock throbbed, wanting to be inside her.

He dipped a finger into the tightness and she gasped. It was very tight. He pushed his finger in deeper, and then circled the mouth of the opening with the wet finger. Over and over he dipped and circled. The radius of the circle widened as he searched for her pleasure center. When he hit a firm knot where her legs joined and she jolted, he knew he'd found it.

He lowered his face and touched his tongue to the knot, licking as she jerked and writhed, intent on giving her pleasure. His other hand joined the first between her legs and he pushed two fingers into her. She groaned and thrust upward. In and out the fingers slid until he could push a third finger in as well. He licked the pleasure knot while his fingers imitated sex, picturing his cock where his fingers were. He was on fire to be inside her, but he controlled his urge to thrust while she bucked and writhed. Her body took all he had to give and still wanted more. The need to claim her roared through his veins. He transmitted that need to her through his hands and tongue. Suddenly she bucked violently and screamed. Her body squeezed his fingers rhythmically and his heart soared with joy. He could mate with her!

He soothed her when she was spent, petting her sex possessively. His cock would be next to cause her joy inside. His hands were on his trouser fastenings before he could rein in his lust. Then sanity prevailed. This was not the proper place.

He climbed off the bed and took hold of her hand. Her eyes opened on darkly sated pupils. "That was wonderful," she purred.

"I have something even more wonderful for you." She reached her hand to the swollen bulge in his trousers but he blocked it. "You're giving me a precious gift and I want the giving of that gift to be perfect. The sunrise on Avera is spectacular. I want to receive your gift as the sun rises. It will be symbolic, Shel, the dawning of a new day, and the beginning of a new relationship between us. Will you give yourself to me at dawn?" This was so important. She couldn't refuse.

She gave him a come-hither look. "What about right now?"

He swallowed. Should he tell her the truth? Would it really sway her? No, he couldn't risk it. "I've given you a taste of what's to come. The rest has to be in the proper setting. Most Averans consider the giving of a woman's chastity to be an important step, to be honored and celebrated. Say you'll come to the cliffs to watch the dawn as I join myself to you. Please, Sheleigh."

She studied his face and finally nodded. "All right."

He sagged with relief. "I'll send a transport for you before dawn. They'll take you to a particularly beautiful spot. I'll meet you there." He backed to his cape and donned it in a soggy swirl. He had to leave swiftly before he lost all control.

"Wait!" She sat up in bed, a naked goddess with a well-loved body. He fought his base desire to claim her now. It had to be the cliffs. "Aren't you going to stay?"

"I need to make some arrangements. It's only for a few hours, Shel. Then I'll make you mine." Unable to stop himself, he stepped forward and kissed her deeply. *Soon*, the thought beat

in his mind. He broke the kiss reluctantly. "Be ready at 0530."

"Yes."

He turned and fled. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done, leaving Sheleigh unclaimed. If only he could have taken her to the cliffs first, she'd be his already. He should have told her the truth, or at least warned her. She might be angry afterwards. Sheleigh didn't like secrets. It was too bad he had so many of them. Their joining couldn't happen soon enough. Once they were joined she'd have to forgive him.

* * * *

The rain had stopped and the sky was clear once again as Sheleigh waited in the circle of light beside the landing pad just before 0530. She waited for her fate, she thought fatalistically. She'd barely slept after Kleet left. True, he'd given her her first orgasm, but she'd been expecting to join her body to his. She felt unfulfilled. Her body had still been aroused. Her breasts had tingled and between her legs had burned from her first penetration, even though she was still a virgin.

Kleet had given her an astounding orgasm, but had asked nothing for himself. He hadn't even undressed. What kind of man held back like that? Perhaps Averan men did. He'd said the giving of chastity had to be in the proper setting. He didn't plan to hold back when the sun rose, which he considered to be the perfect setting. Then why had he come home with her last night? It made no sense, since he'd planned to bed her.

She'd had plenty of opportunity to change her mind. She could have contacted him and called it off. She still had time to tell him no. But the die was cast and she was resolved to it. She'd never felt what she felt for Kleet, the mind-numbing attraction. When she'd been naked under him it had felt absolutely right. The feeling of rightness had been so overwhelming that she had to have the promised consummation. She had to finish becoming a part of him.

Would she be heart whole when their affair ended? Already she knew she would give him everything she was. She would become subsumed in him. She didn't understand how other women went from man to man unscathed and unaffected. She sensed that Kleet would affect her deeply. Obviously she didn't give herself easily, and most likely this was the reason why. Kleet was the only man she'd ever met who she thought would take her gift of self as seriously as she would give it.

The sound of the arriving air transport echoed in the darkness. It sat down gently in her pool of light. She recognized Kleet's personal guards, but not the others who exited and walked off towards the hydrolift. One of Kleet's guards helped her into the transport.

She swallowed. "Where's Kleet?"

"We're meeting the heir. He said to hurry."

Sheleigh blushed. The guards knew what was going on. She wondered if they'd brought other women to Kleet this way. That thought made her chest hurt. She didn't want to be the next in a series of affairs, even if he took each liaison seriously.

She didn't even have time to get nervous over the flight because she was so involved with her own thoughts. The darkness helped hide the closeness of the cliffs. Before she was really ready the transport set down. Kleet opened the door and pulled her out by the hand. Her body went haywire at his touch, and she almost missed what he said to the guards.

"Everything's arranged?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good. Pick us up about thirty minutes after sunrise."

"Yes, my lord."

The transport door closed and Kleet pulled her away from it. As they moved out of sight around the cliff side, it took off again, the noise fading quickly into the night. Then they were alone in the pre-dawn with only Kleet's small hand light to light the way. In a few moments the light shown on blankets spread on the ground. Not exactly romantic, but their meaning was unmistakable. A bed for a bedding.

* * * *

Kleet turned off the hand light and she could see the sky had begun to lighten in the east. "The dawn will show us what we need to see." His voice was a velvet caress.

His arms enfolded her and she wrapped hers around him under his thick cape. It had a furred lining, very soft to the touch. "I've wanted you for so long, Sheleigh." His lips sought hers before she could answer.

She eagerly accepted his kiss, impatient to take the most important step of her life so far. His lips were warm and hungry, but not as greedy as hers. Every bit of intimacy she'd given him, from their very first kiss, had felt right. Everything he'd given her, from the touch of his lips to the touches between her legs earlier tonight, had felt right. The heated bulge pressing against her belly felt right.

His hand caressed down her back to her buttocks. He pressed her loins against that bulge. "Mmm." She made savoring noises against his lips. She pushed against him again and made him groan.

His other hand moved around to her chest and slid beneath her shirt. She sucked in her breath. He used the space to slide his hand to her breast. His fingers rubbed across the nipple, back and forth. It took only that movement to make her breasts swell and her nipples tighten.

"You like that," he murmured.

"Do it again," she encouraged. She pressed against his cock to arouse him.

He growled, "I want to be naked with you."

"I want that, too."

He unbuttoned her shirt and pushed it off, dropping it to the blanket. Her nipples pebbled further in the slightly chilled air. Her trousers and underwear followed, landing next to her shirt on the blanket.

Her hand crept to the front of his pants to stroke him gently.

He growled, "Open my pants."

She fumbled with the unfamiliar fastenings, making him groan further. Finally his trousers were open and she slid her hand inside. His cock was swollen and heated, silky flesh over hard strength. She learned him and he groaned hungrily. His cock was thick and long.

He nibbled her ear. "Free me, Shel."

She slipped her hands into the waistband of his trousers and pushed them off his hips. His butt felt smooth and muscular under her hands as she slid his pants off. He kicked out of them. She touched his cock, and then held it between both hands. She caressed to his testicles, exploring their heaviness. He thrust into her hands.

His fingers stroked the folds between her legs, as she stroked him. She wanted his cock inside her where it belonged. She made hungry sounds until his lips covered hers and stopped her sounds of need. She plunged her tongue into his mouth to mate with his and his response was immediate. His tongue simulated the stroking going on between her legs.

The sky had lightened enough that she could see his outline. She removed his shirt and ran her hands up his muscular chest. It was hard as a rock, covered by warm, smooth skin. He stood proudly naked as she explored him.

“Come see the dawn with me, Shel.” He pulled her with him to the cliff edge. There she stood with her back pressed against his warm chest, his arms across her stomach. The first rosy tentacles of the sun peeped over the side of the far cliff half a mile away as he slid his cock between her legs. She welcomed him there, thinking he would take her now. But to her surprise he simply remained between her legs.

She felt the warmth of the Averen sun touch her face and little stirrings of air current in the canyon below her bare feet.

“This is how it all begins,” he said huskily. “This custom has been handed down from generation to generation. From the cliff edge we know what we are as Averans. Shall we give ourselves to the wind, Shel? Will you give yourself to me in the ancient way?”

His words meant nothing to her, except she knew he was asking for permission to join his body to hers. “Yes, I give myself to you.”

The sun leaped fully over the cliff edge and with its arrival Kleet took hold of her waist with both hands. She braced herself for his penetration. But she wasn’t prepared when he jumped with her into the air. Suddenly there was nothing under her but a bottomless chasm. Even her scream rose above her as she fell.

Chapter Four

Sheleigh threw her hands out futilely to stop her fall. What had Kleet done? Why? *Why me*, echoed in her mind. A black terror rose to engulf her and she screamed. Strong fingers gripped her waist and she gave a startled shriek.

"Spread your legs, Shel," Kleet shouted against the rush of the wind.

"We're going to die!"

"No, we're not." He bumped against her back, and then his hands spread her legs wide. His cock probed for entrance to her body. His hands clamped roughly on her shoulders. He didn't think they were going to have sex before they died, did he?

"What ...?"

Kleet thrust hard and deep into her, breaching her maidenhead with a single stroke, and her question became a scream of pain. Her vaginal muscles fought the impalement, and she fought for breath. He withdrew slightly, and she prepared herself for more pain. He thrust again, but there was only pleasure this time. His hands on her shoulders forced her body into his hot thrusts while the wind whipped coolly across her breasts. She wished she could enjoy what she'd wanted for weeks, but they were plummeting to their deaths.

One of his hands moved to her breast to tease each of the taut nipples into hardened nubs.

"Kleet, stop it! We're going to die!"

"No, the mating flight is tradition on Avera," he said into her ear. "I'll explain on the ground. We must finish the mating."

"Kleet ..." Her protest died as he moved strongly inside her, thrusting over and over until her lower body throbbed with hungry need. She knew what she needed--she needed orgasm. But her fear prevented complete arousal.

She'd never parachuted, bungee jumped or hang glided, so she didn't know to do anything other than fall through the cutting air. She was helplessly spread-eagled for his handling and he took advantage of it. His hand moved between her widespread legs and there his skilled fingers found and worked her clitoris as he'd done last night.

He was ruthless in making her body hunger for him. She cried out in desperation for his next plunge inside her. She couldn't get close enough to him. He wasn't deep enough inside her.

"Hurry, Shel!" he urged her. His hands and cock worked their mind-numbing magic on her body. He tormented between her legs while his cock tormented her womb with sensual jabs and tantalizing brushes. His skill was too overpowering for a newly-breached neophyte like her. Her body exploded with a climax that filled her senses. She cried out as she tried to absorb his essence into her soul. He poured his life force into her while he gripped her shoulders so hard she knew she'd have bruises there.

Kleet's arms came around her and he nuzzled the side of her face. Time seemed to slow, or maybe her mind had slowed under his sensual assault, because it seemed the ground didn't rush at them so fast.

"Put your arms over mine, Sheleigh."

"The ground!" she screamed belatedly as her senses cleared at last. She saw her death approaching her at what seemed like light speed.

“Do as I say!” he ordered fiercely, and then gentled his tone. “We won’t hit the ground.”

Sheleigh gave herself up to his ridiculous instructions, because what did it matter now? She gripped his arms tightly. The sensation of falling lessened and finally stopped. There was a large swishing sound she couldn’t identify. She looked down to see the ground a foot below her feet, which were dangling in the air. All of her weight rested on Kleet’s arms. How was he keeping them in the air?

Then for a moment she knew Kleet’s feet must be on the ground, because all of her weight impaled her deeply on his cock. She groaned at the exquisite pleasure. Then he lifted her from his body and her feet gently touched the ground. She would have collapsed except for Kleet’s arms sustaining her.

“Easy,” he soothed. “You need time to regain your earth senses after a mating flight.”

As her overworked senses slowed and then stopped whirling, she realized that since Kleet’s body had left hers she was empty and throbbing between her legs. She whirled to confront him.

“Are you crazy? Why did you throw me over the cliff like that? I thought I was going to die. How did we survive?”

“You weren’t in any danger. It’s an honor to give your maiden virtue in a mating flight. Two future mates pit themselves against the elements to show how strong they are. The power of their mating shows how strong their bond will be. The mating flight tests their ability to fly ...”

“Fly?” Her voice cracked in surprise. “You can fly?”

“Of course. What else are wings for?”

“Wings?” she asked weakly, and then she noticed a dark outline against his shoulders and arms. *Oh my God!*

“Most Averans are winged, but we can talk about that later. By tradition, I’m to mate with you once more now that we’re earthbound. Will you lie down with me on the earth?”

“I think I’ve had enough for my first time.” *What have I done?*

“Sheleigh, don’t you understand that you’re my permanent mate now, for life? That’s what the mating flight is for, to bind a man and woman together as mates.”

She gasped. “I never agreed to be your mate. You know I have no plans to stay on your planet permanently. Why would you believe otherwise?”

“You’re a perfect match for me, Sheleigh. You’re strong, intelligent, inquisitive ... and your body fits mine perfectly.”

That was all the warning she had before her nude body was pressed tightly to his. Her breasts pushed into his lightly furred chest, where the still-taut nipples were abraded by his chest hair. He was almost a head taller than she was, much broader across the chest and shoulders with finely sculpted muscles under the taut skin. He exuded a musky scent, part male, part sweat, but not offensive to her nose.

His erect penis pushed eagerly into her belly. The man definitely had stamina! His warm muscular thighs pressed against hers and she felt a liquid melting sensation inside and was stunned by it. She wanted more of his thrusting. After the pain of deflowering had subsided, being filled over and over again with his pounding essence had been highly pleasurable. What would it be like to make love with him face to face, to be wet with arousal and lost in a pounding rhythm as old as time?

She quelled her traitorous thoughts, although it was difficult, and raised her hands to push him away. But her hands brushed across warm skin over smooth muscle and she found it hard not to caress his body.

Her eyes rose to his, and she was honest enough with herself to know they held both plea and denial for him to see. How could they not show the desire she felt when her lower body was pressed so tightly to his?

His head lowered to hers. She wanted to taste him, to experience his kiss just once more before turning him down, and so she allowed his lips to touch hers. But she wasn't prepared for the jolt of electricity and excitement that seared her body and aroused her sex with a vengeance. His lips were warm, moist and familiar. They sealed to hers and she fed hungrily upon them. He had kissed her many times before, but never with the possessiveness that he used now. She felt owned, branded, taken and conquered.

She tilted her head to the side to deepen the contact with his fabulous lips. Her hands moved around his back to bring him closer. The hungry "piggy" grunts coming from her throat startled her.

His hard arms closed tightly around her. A deep satisfied hum rumbled from his throat and she felt it through his chest. He wasn't unaffected by the kiss.

The world tilted and she thought absurdly of something one of her friends had told her about her reaction to a man. The friend had said, "I felt the earth move." At the time Sheleigh hadn't put credence into her friend's words, but now she did.

When she felt hard ground against her back, she knew that Kleet had lowered them to the earth. The earth itself hadn't moved. His heavy male weight felt good on her, hard where she was soft. The insistent prod of his penis between her legs, coaxing them to open almost against her will, didn't alarm her as much as it should have. She experienced only slight discomfort as his full cock slid into her vagina and she arched against him. She was totally absorbed in the wonder of his kiss.

Only when her groping hands found the bones protruding from high on his back, and she opened her eyes to see wings the exact shade of his dark hair extended outward, did she balk. She wrenched her lips from his, ignoring the sense of dislocation and loneliness she felt once she was parted from them.

She tried to push him away from her, but he was imbedded deeply in her and moving strongly. This man was no man at all, but an alien!

"Kleet, stop!" she demanded. She pushed futilely against his muscular body.

A hard thrust made her gasp and instinctively arch her pelvis to deepen his penetration.

"Kleet!" she complained again. She tried to control her body's reactions to his sensual invasion. It was an alien invasion, she reminded herself. "Kleet, you're not human. I can't do this with a non-human." Another deep, deep penetration made her words end on a groan of pleasure.

"You're the alien here, Sheleigh. Your physiology is different than ours ... except for here." Kleet drove hard into her again and again, and she found her arousal ratcheting higher and higher towards the climax she wanted badly.

Of their own volition, her legs wrapped around his back under his wings, opening herself for his deeper thrusts. Her inner muscles clenched around his pistoning cock, while the head of his shaft stimulated her overly-sensitized inner tissues. The pleasure bordered on pain. She wanted it to stop--but more, she wanted the 'little death' he could give her. She strained desperately against him, her body pressed so tightly to his in her seeking that she was almost a part of him. And she wanted to be a part of him, she realized with amazement.

"That's right, Shel. Go with what's happening." It was a masculine rumble of approval, and she wondered what he was approving.

She marveled again at his stamina and at her ability to accept the sensual pounding she

was taking. She was on the verge of climax, but couldn't seem to push herself over the edge. Her vagina throbbed and she didn't see how she could last much longer under his sensual assault. One of his hands slid between her legs and caressed her exposed clitoris. Pleasure jolted through her sex to her womb. Her body arched to press hard into his as orgasm swept her over the edge of the precipice.

Once again she found herself flying through the air with Kleet at her back, both spread-eagled to ride the thermals in the canyon. He was deeply imbedded in her as they rode the mating flight with joy and the ecstasy of freedom and climax. It was the most wonderful feeling she had ever experienced. It suffused her entire body and colored her mind with a rainbow of hues. She clutched after it as it faded, not wanting to lose it.

She felt the hard ground under her once again and the heavy weight of Kleet on top of her. His breathing was harsh.

"I claim you as my mate, Sheleigh," he managed to gasp.

"No," she refused weakly.

"You flew the mating flight with me, both physically and just now in your mind. Only a mate can do that, and you've clearly shown that you're mine. We'll fly often, from the cliffs and like we did just now. We'll have a long and happy life together." He nuzzled her neck and she felt the need to protest his assertions.

"I can't be your mate, Kleet. I barely know you."

He lifted his head to look at her and framed her face with his palms. "Our matings have sealed you to me. The mating flight joined your body to mine as my mate. This mating joined your mind to my mind for communion of thought. Now you're able to fly mating flights without leaving the ground. Your heart has been touched, although you hold it away from me now, but in time it will be opened to me too."

"I don't feel any differently." That was true if she didn't count the discomfort between her legs.

"Let me show you. Wait here."

Kleet slipped his body out of hers and she felt terribly empty. He rose smoothly to his feet and pulled her to hers. Then he turned and walked away from her. Sheleigh saw his wings fully for the first time. They were brownish black, like his hair, and extended from his shoulders to below his knees. They folded sleekly to the vertical line of his body, the large feathers running in a vertical line as well. The wings parted just below his spine so that she caught glimpses of his taut round buttocks as he walked away. He had a fluid stride on long, smoothly muscular legs. He was a fine specimen of a man, if you overlooked his wings.

What had she gotten herself into? She'd only wanted an intense affair with him, not to be mated to him. She had no other lover to compare him with, but she knew he must be a fabulous lover. Her throbbing body was adequate witness to his sexual prowess. He was handsome, intelligent, and concerned for his people and his planet. He was curious about other species and other worlds. He had strength in body, mind, will and character. He was heir to the ruling seat of his planet. A woman couldn't ask for a better potential mate. But those wings ...

Those wings were one of the answers to the anomaly of Averen society. It answered why they lived up high, why their herds and crops were raised high in the mountains, why they flew machines as though born to it. Because they were born to fly.

Chapter Five

A flying species! Unified Sentient Planets had no members like it. Excitement ensnared Sheleigh as answers tumbled in her brain in response to her pressing questions about Averans. She was yanked out of her preoccupation by a wrenching pull. She looked down, expecting to see Kleet's hand on her arm, but there was no one beside her. Then she realized the pull was on a cellular level--a mating bond! It was a rare species in USP that bonded mates together, making them two halves of a whole. She'd studied the ones that could bond: the Bonwee, the Grimari and the Felisians. Cross-species bondings were rarer than that, and never happened to humans. But in all cases, those mates became part of one another during a sexual bonding ritual. Oh, God, Kleet had told her the truth!

Sheleigh became aware of her isolation and her nakedness. Searching desperately, she located Kleet nearly two hundred meters away. The pull came from him! She fought it and the feeling of neediness it engendered in her. But he continued to stride away from her and she didn't want the separation between them. Seemingly of its own volition, her arm raised toward his retreating form and her fingers extended. But whether it was to reach out to touch him or entreat him to return she couldn't say. Her other arm rose to him and she began to whimper quietly. *Don't go*, her mind screamed silently, but she was afraid to voice the words aloud. What had Kleet done to her? A mating bond was one thing, but this ... she'd never heard of anything like this. She could accept a mating bond eventually ... but being physically tied to Kleet? A terrible loneliness and desperate yearning for him consumed her. Finally, she couldn't stand the feeling anymore.

"Kleet!" Her shout held entreaty, desperation and despair. She winced at the sound of it.

He stopped, but didn't turn around. "Yes, Sheleigh?" His tone, echoing off the canyon walls, sounded bored.

How arrogant! She swore she wouldn't beg him. She gnashed her teeth in frustration. He took another step away from her, and her defenses crumbled. "Kleet, come back!" she shouted.

He spun on his heel and was by her side in moments, his wings mantling in agitation. To his credit there was no smug look on his face. He simply gathered her nude form against his own bareness and accepted her clutching hands without a word. He lowered his lips to hers and once again she felt joined with him. She savored his taste and warmth and gave a little hum of pleasure.

He moved his lips across her cheek to her temple, then to her ear to nibble and finally to her neck to kiss and lick. "Do you want me inside you again? We have time."

She could feel the evidence of his eager desire, but she was very sore from the two previous matings and she admitted as much to him. "I don't think I can. I'm sore already."

"I can be gentle, although it's hard for me to hold back once I'm inside you. Knowing that you're my mate is a prod to my libido."

"We have a lot of things we need to discuss. Maybe we should talk instead."

"I'd prefer to talk while I'm inside you." Leading her to a low, flat boulder, he sat down first, but when she would have sat next to him he urged her onto his lap. At her protest he assured her, "I'll be gentle."

He guided her slowly down onto his erect penis. She made a small sound of discomfort at the initial entry, but when he was seated to the hilt she sighed with relief and wrapped her arms and legs around him. He wrapped her tightly in his arms.

"You're my mate, Sheleigh. I chose you and my parents approved of my choice."

"They did? They know what you've done to me today?" Her voice rose in incredulity.

"Yes, they did, and of course they know about the mating flight. It was how they were mated and how I was conceived. They would have preferred an Avera mate, a winged one would have been their first choice, but they saw the strength in you. When I argued for you as my mate, they saw the logic in my arguments. They'll accept you into their family without hesitation."

"I barely know you," she protested again.

"We have years to get to know one another. It was important that we bond first and begin a mating relationship. Everything else will be easier now that we're permanently joined."

"I have to be able to go more than a few hundred meters away from you. I have my work to do. It's important that I finish it."

"We'll learn to tolerate small separations of space and time, but for the first few months of being mates we won't be able to be very far apart. This is how Avera family units are made. The man and the woman become partners in everything until they are a strong pair, able to protect and hold their family together. Our society is only as strong as our family units."

"But my work can't wait months."

"Then your work will have to come to you. You know that as my father's heir I must be in the government hall each day."

Sheleigh looked away from him in frustration. "You're making me a prisoner."

"No, you'll still have your work and soon you'll have my heir to take care of."

Her head snapped around to glare at him. "I'm not ready to have children yet. I want to wait a few more years."

"That's not a choice for you. A mating flight is almost always fertile. Our family physician will examine you to confirm a pregnancy when we return."

She sputtered in her outrage. "How could you do this to me? We'll have to hope we had one of the unfertile mating flights."

"If it wasn't fertile you'll conceive some time in the next few weeks."

"If I'm not already pregnant I'll begin using a birth control implant."

"You will *not*!" he thundered, then tried to temper his tone. "It's the way things are done here that new mates bear fruit within the first year. You must learn to abide by our ways now that you're one of us."

"I won't stop being who I am or thinking my own thoughts just because you chained me to you." Sheleigh was defiant in defeat.

Kleet cupped her face between his palms. "I chose you knowing who and what you are. No one is asking you to change who you are, just to adhere to the rules of this society. You've been happy here on Avera, haven't you?"

"Yes. But I hadn't planned to stay here, Kleet. I have parents and siblings and other relations at home. I never planned to leave them forever."

"You can still communicate with them often."

"It won't be the same."

"We'll have a family of our own soon. I'm hopeful that you're carrying my heir right now. A baby of your own will make you miss your family less."

“That’s not helping.” She glared at him for bringing up the sore subject of pregnancy. Although to be fair, she had done nothing to prevent pregnancy. The events of the night and morning had made her forget to visit the human pharmaceutical supply.

“Maybe this will help.” He took her lips and she was lost in the whirlwind of pleasure and feeling. His hands moved to her breasts to touch her tender nipples and she drew in her breath, which served to thrust her nipples into his hands. He fingered her nipples expertly, rubbing the straining tips with just the right amount of pressure. Pleasure streaked to her loins, causing her to clench around his cock. They both groaned.

“Move on me, Shel,” he murmured, and then he took her mouth fiercely again. His hands unlocked her ankles from his back and helped to get her knees under her so that she had leverage in his lap to move up and down on him. Then his hands returned to her nipples.

She slowly lowered herself on his cock, and then rose up again while she endured the sensual friction inside. Up, down, up, down. She gasped for breath and strained for release. Her nipples were on fire with arousal, swollen from his handling. She wanted the pleasure to go on, but knew the end had to come soon.

As though she had communicated her need to him, one of Kleet’s hands slid down between her spread thighs to rub hard against her clitoris. It was too much for her, and she leaped into the chasm of pleasure. Once again she and Kleet were locked in the pleasure of the mating flight, soaring together while their connected loins convulsed. It was a perfect flight.

Slowly she sank back into her body to find herself locked tightly in Kleet’s arms. He gasped for breath, his face was flushed and his body was sheened with sweat. He watched her as she studied him.

“How much time do we have left?” she asked him.

“Not long. I don’t think I can mate with you again so soon, though,” he added, smiling.

Sheleigh remained serious. “You should have asked me if I wanted to be your mate before you did something so drastic. You should have been gentler the first time. You hurt me.”

“Mating flights are often aggressive to the point of violence. They have to be in order to achieve penetration against the force of the air current. That’s how the mates prove their strength. The breaching of a woman’s maiden virtue is a forceful action, and I probably used too more force on you because I wanted to breach you quickly. You’re smaller than Averen women, between your legs, but I’m sure you’ll grow used to the way I enter you during a mating flight.”

“You haven’t addressed that fact that you didn’t ask me to be your mate. I would have preferred being given a choice in my fate.” She tried to separate herself from him, but he held her fast.

“I think you would have refused me if I’d asked, even though you wanted me.”

“Yes, I would have refused. I don’t know you well enough to be your mate.”

“Then I’m glad I didn’t ask. To have been denied the wonder we shared today would have been a travesty. To have gone without you as my mate for much longer would have been intolerable.”

“Why couldn’t you have told me you were interested in me that way? I thought you wanted an affair, not this.”

“Once the idea occurred to me that you should be my mate, I needed to fly you. I couldn’t have had you any other way. No affair for you. It had to be a mating flight. And it had to be now.”

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“You’re mine, Sheleigh. Why should I have had to wait to claim you? You’ve chained

my heart. Why shouldn't you be chained in return?"

"Your heart?" she exclaimed, enthralled and appalled. "Are you saying you love me?"

"Of course. What do you think we're doing her? I'm consumed by thoughts of you. I have been for months. I can hardly breathe when I'm in the same room with you. I devour the sight of you. I feel empty inside when we're apart. Of course I love you."

"Oh, Kleet, I didn't know." She wished she could say the same thing to him, but she was so confused. She lusted after him, she liked and respected him a lot, but love him? She just didn't know.

Sheleigh heard the heavy footsteps of a group of people. Remembering that she was stark naked, she leaped from Kleet's lap and her gaze darted about, searching desperately for cover.

"You don't have to hide, Sheleigh. The guards will expect you to be naked."

"I'm not a peep show to be leered at."

"They won't leer at my mate. Come here and stand proudly by my side. You have nothing to be ashamed of. The mating flight is a revered part of our traditions."

"I can't. I was taught modesty and to be clothed in front of strangers. I can't follow your traditions." She took refuge behind a tall boulder, despite his calling her name. This planet had some strange customs.

She heard the guards approach Kleet. "Where is your mate, my lord?"

"Her ways are different than ours. She didn't want you to see her naked. Let me have her clothes."

"My lord, we mean no disrespect, but her absence by your side throws doubt on the mating flight. A newly breached mate displays her status openly before witnesses."

"Sheleigh," Kleet shouted, but she refused to answer him. Let him wonder where she was. Better that than to bring the guards to view her nudity. Witnesses, ha.

"Sheleigh, come here." Exasperation crept into his voice. How rudely sexist! He thought she should jump when he said jump, even though she had already explained her objections. She wouldn't give him that satisfaction.

She heard his sound of exasperation. "Here, give me those." That must have been directed at the guard. Moments later he appeared around the boulder and threw her clothes at her. She set her face mutinously as she quickly pulled on her things.

"What are you trying to do, impugn my reputation?" he demanded. "Or is it your intention to throw doubt on our status as mates?"

Sheleigh reacted to his tone with one of her own. "I'm going to teach you a new word today. It's 'chauvinist.' "

"And what does it mean?"

"A chauvinist is a man who expects women to jump quickly to obey his every command. A chauvinist belittles what a woman wants or thinks. A chauvinist thinks females are less than he is." Now that she was dressed she felt strong again and able to fight for what she wanted.

"I don't think I would like your planet. I think things go on there that would horrify me."

"There are things that happened to me today that horrified me."

"I'm not that word, whatever it was. I don't think you're lesser than I am because you're female."

She imitated his earlier words in a degrading tone. " 'Sheleigh, come here.' I might as well have been a trained pet. Why won't you put your clothes on?"

"Please come and stand by my side so that the guards can see us together." He offered his hand, palm up.

She placed her palm in his and allowed him to pull her out to where the guards studied her like she was fascinating. Clearly her argument with Kleet had been overheard. Her cheeks burned and she was sure they were fire red.

"Here's my mate. As you probably heard, she is very strong-willed and has strong opinions. We need to return to my home now so that the physician can verify the pregnancy." She noticed that he didn't say "if there *is* a pregnancy."

Kleet dressed quickly and unselfconsciously. For the first time she saw how the back of his clothes were cut out around his wing bones. The long capes that Averans wore obviously covered their wings, which is why she hadn't seen them before. But why did they hide their wings?

The group was quiet during the trip to Kleet's home. The transport landed on the roof and other guards helped her disembark.

They descended the hydrolift to the third floor where the doors opened on a stone corridor laid periodically with fiber rugs. She'd never been on this floor--this was the family's floor. Kleet's mother and father and an older man met them at the lift.

"Welcome to our family," his mother, Lefair, exclaimed and hugged her.

"Thank you," Sheleigh replied politely. She didn't know what else to say.

Kleet's father hugged her next, and she stood stiffly in his arms. This was the most powerful man on the planet. She'd never expected to be his son's mate. She didn't know what the consequences would be if she angered him.

He drew back from her and his brow furrowed. He addressed Kleet. "What's wrong?"

"She's angry. She didn't want the mating flight."

Two pairs of concerned parental eyes drilled into her. *Thank you for putting me on the spot with your parents, Kleet.* She glared at Kleet, and then turned back to his parents.

"I've explained to Kleet that I never planned to stay here. He shouldn't have made life-altering decisions for me without discussing them with me first." She wanted away from these people whose concern was for Kleet. She needed to be with someone who cared for *her*. Reaction had finally set in.

"Was the mating flight completed?" his father demanded.

"All of it," Kleet replied.

"Then she'll need to be examined by the physician. Dr. Rotairn, would you please finish your part of the proceedings?"

The elderly man came forward and took her elbow. He gently prodded her to follow Kleet's mother. Lefair opened the door to a bedroom decorated in understated elegance and ushered them inside.

Here Sheleigh balked. "Why are we going in here?"

"I'm the family physician, Dr. Rotairn. I'll confirm your pregnancy."

"I don't know you and you're not touching me." Sheleigh backed away from him.

"I'm a highly respected physician. An examination is required after a mating flight."

"I said no." She moved backward again and ran into a firm wall she identified by smell and feel as Kleet. His arm slid around her and she pressed against him.

"What's wrong now?" he asked.

"She won't let me examine her."

"I don't know that man."

She and the doctor spoke at the same time.

Kleet sighed and turned her to face him. "This man helped deliver me when I was born.

He delivered my brother and sister. He helped my mother through all of her pregnancies. He's taken care of my family since he became a physician. It was him who examined my mother after her mating flight and confirmed that she was pregnant with me. He's a gentle and caring doctor. Let him confirm your pregnancy, Sheleigh."

"I don't know him," she whispered.

"I'll stay with you and hold your hand while he examines you. Mother will be here too. We have to know whether you're pregnant."

She gave in. She wanted to know, too. "All right."

She took off her clothes in the bathing room and wrapped the sheet that Kleet provided around her. Then she lay down on the bed for the exam. Kleet and his mother each held one of her hands. She was embarrassed to have Kleet's mother in the room, but she'd protested enough for the moment.

The physician poked and prodded her womb and used diagnostic equipment, and drew blood and fluids. There had been a little furrow between his brows and now it smoothed out. He nodded his head and smiled at them.

"Pregnant," he announced happily.

Kleet's shout of "Yes!" almost drowned out Lefair's exclamation of, "That's wonderful!" Sheleigh's little sigh of disappointment as her hopes of freedom plummeted was lost in the general celebration and congratulations.

Kleet leaned down to kiss her lips and for a few moments she forgot why the news upset her. When he raised his head to look at her his eyes shone with happiness. "I told you that mating flights were fertile."

Before she could reply, the physician recaptured Kleet's attention. "Kleet, there's something else you need to know." He had her attention now, too. "I'm positive there's more than one baby. I'll have to wait a few days while the cells divide and then do a microscopic scan to count the number of fertilized eggs. My guess right now is there are two."

"Twins!" Lefair squealed. She was clearly in grandmother mode.

Sheleigh felt claustrophobic, like she had been caged. "No."

Chapter Six

"That must have been some mating flight." Rotairn seemed in awe of Kleet's prowess as a progenitor.

"It was. Sheleigh, isn't it wonderful?" Only then did Kleet look at her face, and his smile dimmed immediately. If she looked the way she felt, then she must be a pitiable sight. She couldn't take any more catastrophic changes in her life today and that knowledge must have shown clearly on her face.

"Aren't you happy about the news, Sheleigh?"

"No. You've ruined my life." Kleet winced and she cursed her unguarded tongue. One didn't tell someone who loved them something hurtful like that.

He turned away from her. "Thank you, doctor. Please make arrangements for the scan and let me know the details as soon as you have them finalized. Mother, would you please give us privacy."

Sheleigh didn't watch the others leave. She was too busy trying to shape an apology and decide what to do next. There was a pregnant pause after the room cleared and finally she looked up into his stern face. She was no coward, so she sat up to face him.

Kleet spoke first. "I believe you owe me an apology. What you said was rude and hurtful."

"I'm sorry I said it."

He inhaled audibly. "But you think it's true."

"Yes. You've imprisoned me here against my will."

"You don't want a mate?"

"Not right now."

"You don't want children?"

"Not this year."

"You don't like me?"

Sheleigh drew in a deep breath. "I like you."

"You don't find me attractive?"

"You know better. You're very good-looking, all over, and you know it."

"You don't like it when I'm inside you, thrusting, pushing you down onto my cock, making you come ..."

"Stop it. You know I like all that."

"So you *do* want all those things--a mate, children, me, my mating. My mating you want now, but the rest you don't want until later. It's unfortunate, then, that you have all those things now. I can't and won't stop being your mate. Our children will be born in nine months. I can't and won't stop loving you, although your behavior today is making it difficult to like you. So what do we do now, when you want to discard the most important things in life because, in your opinion, the timing isn't right?"

Sheleigh winced at his bitter sarcasm. She wanted to accept all the blame, but he'd played a part, too. "I want to go back to my apartment and talk to my own people. They can advise me what to do."

"Your apartment is empty. When the guards came to get you this morning, some of them stayed behind to collect your things. Everything you own is either down the hall in our suite or in storage."

"You had no right."

"You came to me for claiming. Why would you need a place of your own afterwards? You'd live in your mate's home."

"You don't ask. You just make sweeping changes in my life without consulting me."

"What happened today was in your best interests. Look at all you gained today."

"Look at all I've lost."

Kleet heaved a great sigh. "I didn't realize that you were negative or pessimistic."

"I'm not. I've had a very stressful day. I can't think positively right now."

"Let me ask you something. Is it a common practice of your species to throw away love when it's received?"

She was shocked and appalled. "No! Love is a great gift, a rare treasure. If a person is a theist, love is a blessing and a miracle."

"Then it's just you who throws away love when you receive it?"

She stared at him mutely. Was that what she was doing?

He was relentless. "Because the time isn't right for you, will you reject all love until the time *is* right? Will you hope that those who love you now will keep on loving you while they wait for the time to be right for you to love them back? Will love be there for you then, in that nebulous future you call 'when I'm ready?' If you spurn all love now, wouldn't it make sense that love won't be easy to find later on?"

"Or is it just my love you want to throw away? Is my love not good enough for you because I'm not human? Or do you think I don't know how to love because I have wings? Would you rather throw my love away and see if a human love comes along later in your life? I offer you an all-consuming love. Can you guarantee that a human love later in your life will be as big as what I offer you now?"

"Averans mate for life. They bind themselves to their chosen mate during the mating flight. They join their very cells to the cells of their beloved until there are no longer two separate entities but one. I've done that with you today, Sheleigh. How will you excise me from your cells? It can't be done surgically. Will you have me killed or kill me yourself just to free yourself from my love, because the time isn't right for you? Doesn't that seem extreme to you?"

She was ashamed of her behavior when she looked back on it now, after his words. He'd said he loved her and she'd written off and rejected his words as meaningless, because *she* didn't love *him*. She couldn't get far from him. She certainly couldn't get his babies out of her body for nine months. So she was stuck with him. It was just her pride and her fear and her anger that made her fight what couldn't be undone.

"I'm sorry," she told him, and hung her head.

He framed her face with his hands and raised it. "I didn't make you my mate to make you unhappy, Sheleigh. Nothing bad has happened to you, but there are going to be a lot of changes happening to you very quickly. I'll try to buffer you so that you can adjust. I know you *can* adjust. You came to this planet and learned a new language and a new lifestyle. You learned space travel. How much easier will it be to learn to be my mate and the mother of sweet little babies?"

"I could do it. But Kleet, except for when we're mating, I feel like you're a stranger."

"We'll use the time before the babies come to get to know one another. We'll be sleeping

together each night and mating together every day. We'll talk every evening and tell each other what we need to know. By the time the children come, we'll feel comfortable together."

"I'm afraid. I don't know anything about being pregnant, giving birth or taking care of babies, and there will be two of them."

"The doctor will help you with the pregnancy and births. My mother is here to answer any questions. She had three children, after all."

"Won't we have a place of our own, now that you have a mate?"

"I hadn't planned on it. There's plenty of room here, and I am the heir. Besides, you're far from your own mother and you'll feel more comfortable having my mother nearby during your pregnancy." Kleet urged her to the bathing room to dress.

"What about privacy, for ... you know ... intimacies?"

Kleet laughed. "My parents know I flew you. They know we'll mate every day. They won't interrupt."

"Kleet, um, we made noise when we mated."

"Our room is away from my parents' room. They won't hear us."

"My friends tell me they don't always mate in the bedroom."

"Intriguing. Averages do that too, you know. Ah, you're wondering if *we* will. The answer is a resounding yes. Let me finish. My parents are gone a lot, so I'll make sure we're alone before I begin anything like that with you."

"Kleet, I think I want my own mother here for the births, but she's never been in space. How could we arrange it so that she gets training and clearance to come here?"

"I don't know. I'll have to talk to my father and the council. Any more questions?"

"No. I really am sorry about what I said. I feel out of my element, unsure."

"You'll get used to your new life. We have a formal ceremony we have to go through now to recognize our status as mates. We need to dress well for it. Because I'm the heir the council will be there. Can you handle it?"

Sheleigh took a deep breath. "I think so. At least I'll be dressed in front of them."

Kleet led her from the bedroom, past his staring parents and down the hall to a large suite of rooms. "This is ours."

"I'll never find my way here." She was awed by the wealth he took for granted. This residence was huge and their suite of rooms was bigger than her apartment had been.

"You'll learn. We don't have much time, so we'll have to hurry. The bathing room is in here. We'll have to share."

She was a little nervous about sharing the intimacies of a bathroom with him, even though, technically, he was her husband. It was silly to be modest over her nudity after the things they'd done together this morning. But he was a stranger to her, except when he was deep in her body. She stepped into the shower to wash the stickiness from her body. As she turned her back into the spray she saw Kleet through the clear glass. He stared at her nude form with hungry eyes. Clearly he liked what he saw. She felt a clenching in her loins and her breasts tightened. Not again. He pulled off his clothes and she liked what she saw of his well-shaped, toned body. He turned slightly and his wings became visible. She felt a new type of clenching, that of apprehension. Once again she was struck with the knowledge that he was an alien.

She turned to wash, but was not surprised a moment later when Kleet's hands took the soap from her. Then his big hands washed her. He wasn't a stranger now as his possessive hands claimed all the territory of her body, and her body recognized the touch of her mate. She turned to soap him and her hands recognized the feel of her mate. Her hands became hungry, needing

communion with her mate. She pressed closer to him, then closer, until her slick body was pressed tightly to his.

“Umm,” she murmured as his hands molded her buttocks. Hers slid down his back under his wings to do the same. The long feathers were cool and damp against his warm, firm buttocks. There was an insistent prod against her belly.

“We have time, Shel,” he urged in a husky voice. He punctuated his words with another prod.

“I can’t,” she moaned, clutching him tightly. “I’m so sore.”

“Shh, it’s all right. I should have been gentler more than just once today so that we could mate more often. In my own defense, I felt fierce in my claiming of you. I’ll probably feel that way for a long time.”

“My female friends told me of a way I can make you feel better until we can mate again. I could do that.”

He hugged her fiercely. “Thank you for offering, but no. I want no empty pleasure. I want only to be joined with you and to fly again with you. No momentary relief will ease that need.”

“Oh.” She hugged him just as fiercely and raised her lips so that he could capture hers in a voracious kiss. It was wonderfully fulfilling and they groped one another while it lasted. Their fierce grips on each other’s flesh gentled to caresses as the mate recognition accepted that the mate wasn’t going anywhere at the moment. She reveled in being held against his wet naked skin.

“Oh, love. This is why I wanted you. You’re a part of me, the part that makes me complete.” He nuzzled her face and she wished she could lie down with him and let him do what they both wanted to do.

“Hold me tighter,” she begged him, although his arms were like a vise around her already.

“Only one thing will help right now, Shel, and you’re in no condition for it.” He released her and pushed her under the water’s spray, then followed her under. When they were thoroughly clean he pulled her out of the shower with him and they dried one another off. It was an inefficient use of time, for there was more caressing than drying, but she needed his touch.

She found her clothes in his closet and dresser drawers. But she stood staring hungrily at him, her clothes clutched in her hands, not wanting clothes between their naked bodies. He watched her from slitted eyes, as though waiting for her to make a decision. She marveled that last night she had been an untouched virgin and now she couldn’t think of anything but sex.

“Maybe we could ...” she offered.

“I think it would be much more painful for you afterwards. We can wait awhile.”

How could she explain to him this yearning she felt for him. Was mating the only way to satisfy the yearning? Wasn’t being a spouse or mate more than just the sexual relationship between two people? How else could she quench this need?

“I ... feel empty,” she began.

“Do you?”

“On my planet, after a man and woman are ... mated ... they go off alone to be together. They don’t need to get out of bed for days if they don’t want to.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Is it possible?”

“I don’t think so. We both have heavy commitments right now. Besides, it’s not our custom to sequester new mates, although that practice of lingering in bed for days interests me.

And as much as your naked body interests me, if we're not going to mate we'd better get dressed and attend the ceremony."

Sheleigh hesitated still, wanting desperately to be joined with him, to have his mouth on her pouty nipples, to have his cock filling her where no other man had ever been. She wanted to clasp his warm male body between her thighs and wrap herself around him. He accepted her hesitation without becoming frustrated or exasperated with her. Then he pulled on a silky shirt. Covering his virile body broke the spell that held her frozen.

She picked out her most formal outfit, her jade silk trouser and long tunic set with the Asian-influenced styling. Her breasts seemed to thrust out the tunic more than they'd ever done before and she wondered if it was the remnant of her arousal being displayed. It couldn't be her pregnancy, which was less than a few hours old.

While she brushed her hair she looked at herself in the mirror and felt extraordinarily feminine. For the first time in her life she was a woman in every way. No longer was she on the outside of the feminine mystique, but now she was a full participant. Now she understood all the comments women had made in her hearing over the years. Now some of those comments attached themselves to her personal memories.

Kleet appeared behind her in the mirror, handsome in his fine clothes. The expert tailoring showed in his well-cut white shirt and sleek black trousers, which were cut snugly to his well-built form. She knew what his clothes hid now, and it was like taunting her, covering the pleasures and sexual strength of him with such a thin opaque covering. He stood directly behind her so she couldn't see if his arousal was visible on him like she thought hers was on her.

"That's a beautiful design. That outfit flatters you," he said. His look was possessive.

"It's based on a very ancient design from an ancient race on my planet. The fabric is lightweight and takes up little space, and it's very comfortable," she babbled nervously. He was a stranger now that he was clothed.

"Ancient people whose designs carried over into the future. It can be a good thing to preserve ideas for millennia. Are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Will I be expected to do anything?"

"No. Witnesses will testify to the mating flight. The doctor will testify to your pregnancy. You'll be formally presented as my mate to the council and anyone else present."

"That sounds easy enough. Will you stay beside me?" She watched him throw a long black cape around his shoulders and fasten it with an elaborate silver clasp to cover his wings.

"It's proper for me to be by your side." He held out the crook of his arm to her and she looped her arm through his. He escorted her out of their suite and down the hall to the hydrolift. He was very serious now and very much a stranger to her ... an intimate stranger.

Chapter Seven

“Why do you cover your wings?” When the lift enclosed them inside with the two guards, Sheleigh strove to find something to talk about to lessen her case of nerves.

“It’s a practice dating back several hundred years, when the first break in our DNA appeared. Before the break, all Averans were winged and were active flyers. We had to be, with all the cliffs, canyons and mountains on the planet. But as the population grew and became technologically advanced, the need to fly decreased until non-wingeds appeared in the population.

“At first we thought them an anomaly. Then, when more non-wingeds appeared, we thought there was something causing birth defects in the population. But no scientific or medical study found any cause for the change to the DNA. Gradually the number of non-wingeds in our society has increased until we realized it’s not mutation but evolution that’s occurring. The need for wings has passed, you see. We’re now mostly gliders, without actually lift capacity. So the winged cover themselves to blend in with the non-winged.

“The non-winged radical fringe has become restless in the last generation and a half. They think the winged hold too much power and wealth. It’s better for everyone if no one can point to a physical difference between those who have wealth and those who don’t.”

“I didn’t realize Averans had class distinctions. I’m familiar with those from my own planet’s history.” She hesitated before voicing a new thought. “Will our babies have wings, do you think?”

A pained look flitted across Kleet’s handsome face. “Wings are being bred out of my species, family by family. For my family, the change will come sooner.”

“I’m sorry. You should have chosen a winged mate.”

“I wanted *you*.”

There was nothing she could reply to that statement, so she asked a related question. “Will the mating flight be eliminated, too?”

“No, that’s the strange part. Even in the non-winged the urge to fly the mating flight is strong. There are several non-winged mating flights a month now. We have to make sure there’s an inflated cushion for them to land on.”

Sheleigh thought that a hang glider or parasail would help the non-winged Averans. But before she could ask about this idea, the hydrolift stopped and opened onto the roof. There was a transport waiting for them and they were hustled into it.

She held on tightly to the door handle and tried not to watch. Soon she saw the flat-top mountain that contained the Averan government. It seemed strange that she had left here less than twelve hours ago.

They landed on the pad marked for important government officials and took the hydrolift down to the big council hall. She’d been here twice previously and both times she’d been restricted to the visitor’s gallery on the upper level. Now she walked with Kleet to the front of the lower level. Kelfer was there and Lefair was seated next to him in Kleet’s usual seat. The guards faded to the edges of the room as Kleet continued on to his father.

They halted in front of Kelfer, in full view of what appeared to be, to Sheleigh’s nervous

eyes, the entire council. She recognized a few people from last night.

"Avatier, I have taken a mate." Kleet's voice projected clearly through the hall in a confident tone. These must be traditional words, since his parents already knew they were mated.

"Who is your mate?" Kelfer asked in the same tone.

"Sheleigh O'Brien, from the planet Earth."

"You flew the mating flight with this woman?"

"Yes."

"Bring forth your witnesses."

The guards from this morning came forward and identified themselves to Kelfer.

"Did you witness the takeoff from the cliff edge?" Kelfer asked.

"No, Avatier. My lord Kleet had requested complete privacy." There was a mutter of voices that died out when Kelfer spoke again.

"Was this woman proudly by the heir's side afterwards as a proper mate should be?"

The guards fidgeted nervously and looked at Kleet. He showed no sign that he was disturbed. But Sheleigh now realized why he'd wanted her to be seen with him this morning. Had she known then what difficulty it would cause ... she still wouldn't have appeared naked in front of the guards.

"No, Avatier, she was not." There were gasps and numerous murmurs around the room.

Kelfer held up his hand for silence. His face had flushed a ruddy color, but whether it was from anger or something else, Sheleigh couldn't tell. "Kleet, you will explain this omission."

"My mate is clearly alien and her world has different customs. Her society does not expose naked women to males who are not their mates." Again there were murmurs from the council. Sheleigh wondered that Kleet could so calmly describe the modesty that had frustrated him this morning. It seemed too fast an about-face to her.

"Was the mating flight recorded?"

She gasped in horror. They had made some kind of video record of her and Kleet having sex? She tugged violently at Kleet's arm. She would be more than mortified if anyone else saw that recording. She was mortified that someone had watched what they were doing through a lens. *Oh God!*

"Kleet!" she hissed. He gave her arm a reassuring squeeze.

"A recording was made of the flight, as tradition decrees. But I must refuse its viewing. It would be another form of exposing a naked woman to males who are not her mate."

Kelfer's face darkened further. "As the heir, you know three pieces of proof are required to confirm a person's status as mate. These are *our* traditions held on *our* planet. Your mate is a guest on our planet, her very presence a concession granted by me and the council. That approval can be withdrawn at any time if we decide that our traditions are at risk."

Sheleigh met her father-in-law's threat with fire of her own. "Recording equipment is a recent advancement on your planet, *not* tradition. It dates back no further than eight generations. I feel these recordings allow illicit viewing of the mate's nude form by persons not otherwise authorized to see him or her that way. I question the reason for such titillation. There's a word on my planet for people who get a thrill from seeing other people's sexual habits ..." Kleet's fierce grip on her arm stopped her next words in her throat.

"Not another one of *those* words," he hissed.

"You people make some strange traditions," she hissed back, forgetting everything she'd been taught by USP regarding species tolerance.

Apparently she hadn't kept her voice low enough, because nearby council members

gasped. Other voices spoke in the council chamber, commenting on the proceedings and she heard a rumbling of unease. She gritted her teeth together. This confirmation of her status was supposed to have been quick and easy. Things had certainly turned out differently than she expected.

Kelfer looked angry now. "What about the proof of pregnancy?"

"Our family physician will testify to the fertility of the flight."

Dr. Rotairn stepped forward to face Kelfer and the council. "I examined this woman and found her to be pregnant with multiple fertilized eggs." The audience gasped. "The exact number of fertilized eggs will be confirmed in four days' time."

"And was this woman a maiden prior to the mating flight?"

"Yes. There was maiden blood present." Sheleigh cringed at being discussed like this.

"So you have one out of three proofs ..."

"You have my word about it," Kleet added in a cold voice.

That seemed to stop Kelfer, and father and son stared at one another. Sheleigh imagined she could feel the pull of the genome between them.

One of the council members spoke up loudly. "The heir must have a bonded mate. Any other relationship is unacceptable. A bonding can only occur in a mating flight. A pregnancy isn't proof that a mating flight took place."

"Maybe he can't bind her. She's an alien, after all," another voice argued.

Kleet faced his accuser. "You doubt my word?"

"Your word cannot take the place of two forms of proof. Maybe if you'd provided two proofs we could allow an exception. But it would set a precedent we don't want. The status of mate is an honor and holds legal connotations. The mating flight is the only way to bind a mate for life. Persons acting dishonorably could claim their word as the only proof when they weren't telling the truth at all. Then couples would be certified as mates who weren't. No, there must be witnesses to the flight, either live witnesses or a video recording."

"Then we'll find the recorder. Kleet, who did you use?" Kelfer demanded.

"Voray Gallicus. He's the best recorder."

Kelfer signaled an assistant to him. "Contact Voray Gallicus and tell him to present himself here at once." The young woman ran off to do his bidding. Sheleigh knew that a human wedding was always witnessed to make it legal. She wondered if this was the point of contention now, and she whispered her question to Kleet. He showed surprise before answering quietly.

"Long ago, before recordings," this was said sardonically, "one witness stood at the cliff top and another was in the canyon. They testified to the flight and the joining. It's necessary, Sheleigh. Our society used to be fragile, so the mate bond was needed to bind the core of each family together. We're less fragile now, but we can't lose the mate bond. If only you'd allow them to show the recording, the council would accept you as my mate and we could get on with the day's work."

So Kleet didn't understand her aversion to the recording, even though he'd supported her refusal. She wondered on how many other issues they disagreed, perhaps important issues. She'd made a mistake in giving her virginity to a man she barely knew just because she'd experienced passion for the first time in her life. She had held onto her chastity for thirty years, hoping for her soul mate to come along. Then she'd blown it. She hadn't been on the planet long enough to learn all the inhabitants' customs and ideals. She was a trained scientist who knew how long it took for the natives to trust her enough to let her into the intimate details of their lives and society.

Now she was tied into the soul of the man standing next to her, but she didn't know how he felt about fatherhood and family and living with a wife. She was trapped in this alien society, but she didn't know the first thing about their rituals and the reasons for them. She was grounded on the planet and now she saw things that would have made her think long and hard before offering herself to Kleet, had she known them in advance.

"I can't agree to allow anyone other than you and me to review the recording of what happened this morning. I'm not even sure I can view it myself."

"There's nothing wrong with viewing a mating flight."

"You've seen records of other flights?" Well, of course he had. She scolded herself for her dumb question.

"Of course," he echoed her thoughts. "I've seen hundreds. The council has confirmed many mates and each pair have provided this proof."

She couldn't stop her recoil from him before she thought of the repercussions of her actions. Then it was too late. Her withdrawal from Kleet had been noted and the nervous rumblings in the crowd began again.

Apparently Kelfer had seen her movement, too. He signaled Kleet forward to him and Sheleigh, per force, went with him. Up close she could see that he was angry. "I believed you this morning when you said you were mated, Kleet. But this assembly doesn't believe you. They won't confirm her as your mate and I don't blame them. If I wasn't your father, I wouldn't confirm her either. She's clearly unwilling to be here. She acts like she dislikes you. You *must* be confirmed. Or do you want the lack of a mate to force you to be set aside as heir?"

"No," Kleet got out between clenched teeth.

"Then produce the recording now as proof. At this point I don't believe Voray's word that he recorded the flight is going to be enough. Sheleigh's behavior has cast doubt on everything. Give it to me," he ordered and held out his hand.

"No!" she cried in horror. Kleet's strong grip on her arm was so painful it made her gasp.

"Father's right. You're too alien to understand some of our traditions, but they're *our* traditions. We have proof and we're going to use it."

"I won't ..." Another squeeze made her wince.

"You chose to come here to our planet. You chose to mate with me. Accept the consequences of your actions." His words were coldly spoken with authority, and she cringed inwardly. Who was this man really?

Kleet signaled one of the guards from this morning forward and took a small disc from him. Then he handed it to his father. They stepped back from his father's seat and Kelfer handed the disc to someone else.

Sheleigh tugged futilely against Kleet's hold on her arm, but his grip was vise-like. She wouldn't watch it, couldn't watch it, and couldn't stand the thought of everyone else watching it. *Oh, God!*

A large screen in the front wall lit up and in vivid and clear Technicolor, shot from below the cliff edge and a little behind them, she saw her naked self leave the cliff with Kleet behind her. Their limbs spread. The recorder zoomed in to a close-up of her loins and she was mortified to be able to tell, even from this angle, that her vulva had been spread beforehand. Kleet's penis approached her vagina and impaled her forcefully. She could tell that even in the recording. There were murmurs of satisfaction from the crowd and she died inside with shame.

The picture remained close up on their mating loins for a number of minutes, until the thrusting stopped and Kleet's testicles jerked with orgasm. There were more murmurs of

satisfaction as it was clearly proven that he ejaculated into her body during the flight.

The angle panned out slowly to a wider view of first their faces and then Kleet's arms wrapped around her under her breasts. His wings were spread out wide. Both of them were clearly recognizable. They were proven mates now, not that she'd be able to face anyone in this room again. His own father had ... she gulped. Kelfer had seen what no father-in-law should ever see!

There were positive murmurs and someone near Kleet offered him congratulations.

The recording ended, to her intense relief. Kelfer rose. "Kleet has provided two out of three items of proof. Do you confirm Sheleigh O'Brien as his mate? Those who vote yes?"

There was a loud barrage of yes's.

"Those who vote no?"

There were several of those and she felt Kleet stiffen.

"Give your reasons for a refusal to confirm," Kelfer commanded.

She heard someone climb to their feet in the first section of the room and a man spoke up. "She's clearly an alien. How do we know her physiology even allows a mating bond?"

"Our laws say nothing about the mate having to be our species. You cannot vote no on that basis."

"We're a lawmaking body. Clearly this issue of alien physiology is important to the ability or inability to bind a mate. The status of mate is too important not to have an unbreakable physical connection between the male and female. My objection, while not legal, is valid, doubly so in the case of the heir. If you don't allow my vote of no, I'll simply abstain."

"Your objection is duly noted, Morfran. We'll debate this topic at length today. I note your abstention in the voting." The man sat down with a flurry of noise.

A woman close to them stood up next. "I hadn't thought about the issue Morfran raised when I voted no. But now, perhaps, his objection is the reason for mine. I don't believe they are bonded as mates. I saw a mating, yes. She is pregnant, yes. But she doesn't act as though she's bound to him. In all my years of verifying mate status, I've never seen less affection and more hostility in a mate-candidate coming before us. I believe Morfran may be right. The heir did not bind this alien in our rituals."

Kelfer remained silent while the room buzzed with whispers and murmurs. "Your vote of no is duly noted, Salaine."

A burst of comments died out suddenly as another man rose to his feet. His objection was similar to Salaine's and was accepted. Two more people stood and their objections echoed Salaine's. Their negative votes were tallied as well.

"With four voting against and one abstention, Sheleigh O'Brien is confirmed as the heir's mate." Kleet let out his breath. The group was loud and effusive as they rose and surrounded her and Kleet, offering congratulations and comments. She kept her gaze on people's chins, not wanting to see their eyes. She nodded as people made comments to her. She couldn't have spoken a word if she'd tried. She wanted to escape this room and these people, this building and this planet. She wanted to go home, where a bride wore white on her wedding day and was treated with reverence. This had been the worst day of her life.

Finally they were in the hall outside the council room. She tore her arm from Kleet's and stalked away from him. She didn't know where she was going, nor did she care. He roughly grabbed her arm and spun her around.

His face was mottled an angry red. "Where do you think you're going like that?"

"Away from you. How could you do that to me? How could you shame me that way?"

You've degraded and humiliated me."

"I've given you the highest honor our society has."

"No! I'm mortified. I feel dirty. I've never been treated this poorly in all my life."

"Everyone records their mating flights. We used to have witnesses for each flight, but it's hard climbing in the cliffs. Now it's simpler to record the event and play it to witnesses. We all do the flights, view the flights and confirm the mates. That's the way it's done here ..."

"It's obscene."

"No one thought our flight was obscene. They approved my entry into your body and me giving you my seed. They approved seeing us in flight together. That was truly beautiful. I liked seeing my wings spread out above our mating bodies. I'd like to have a frame of that scene enlarged."

"That's sick."

"You say you didn't see anything beautiful in what we did. But you certainly seemed to like it while it was happening. That close-up shot of me thrusting in and out of your tight body was a very pleasant memory for me."

"Shut up."

"It's interesting what you'll let me do to your body as long as I don't talk about it and no one else sees it."

"You're not going to be doing anything to my body ever again."

The smile melted from his face and he became stony with anger. "Rebuffing me again, Sheleigh? I thought we got past that this morning."

Her face contorted with regret. Oh, if only she'd stayed in her apartment this morning. This is where wanting illicit sex got her. "I'm going home. I assume you have work to do here?"

"Yes. You're going to our home, my family's?"

Again her face twisted. She wanted her apartment and the other humans. She wanted her parents' home on Earth. "Yes."

He lowered his face to hers, but she turned her face away. There was a stilted pause, then he moved away from her. "I'll see you later."

She watched him enter the council hall, where those assembled were going to discuss alien physical compatibility and whether aliens could be mates or not. Nobody asked her whether she was compatible because nobody would believe her. Kleet hadn't even wondered about that before he flew her ... or had he? Had he discussed it at length with his father before deciding he would try it and see what happened? If they hadn't become mates, would he have walked away and left her pregnant? She shuddered. Or maybe she wouldn't have gotten pregnant if they hadn't become mates. That made sense. Physical non-compatibility should be across the board.

Everyone in that room had seen how physically compatible she and Kleet were. Her face burned again as she remembered seeing up close and enlarged Kleet's cock thrusting in and out of her body. As she'd watched the recording, she had felt again the sensations she was viewing, hardly able to believe that it was her and Kleet on the screen. He'd had the gall to remind her how good it had been and that she'd enjoyed it. The nerve of him.

She spun, but when she would have taken the exit she always took as a visitor, the guard gently guided her towards the lift for government officials. She didn't look in his face during the ride to the roof, because he had seen the recording too. Lefair had also seen it. There was no one in the household she could face without shame.

Chapter Eight

Sheleigh wavered between anger and shame, her mind seething with potent emotions, as the air transport winged its way toward Kleet's home. Only after they'd been airborne several minutes did she begin to try and find the source of her discomfort. What was this tearing need inside her? Was she hungry? She hadn't had anything to eat today. Was she airsick? That could always be true. Then she remembered it was the mate bond feeling the separation from Kleet. He'd said they could go small distances, but his home was several miles away. Had he forgotten?

She began to pant and sweat. Her hands curled into claws. She didn't want to go back there. She needed privacy for awhile to settle her shattered emotions. She didn't want to spend the day in a strange office somewhere in the government building under the scrutiny of strangers who might have viewed the recording.

She shoved her fist against her mouth and bit her knuckle. She would not be chained to him this way. She closed her eyes and in her mind she began to chant, "I'm biologically different from them," over and over. Soon she felt the tight coil inside her begin to relax. *It's mind over matter.*

"My lady, we're here."

She exited the transport and descended into the warren of the residence. She was relieved to be alone, and more relieved to remember which suite of rooms was Kleet's. She changed into casual clothes, carefully putting away the green silk. She gave the fabric a loving caress. This was a part of Earth--of its history, its industry, its culture and its natural world. There were no silk worms here to make real silk. A synthetic replication was the best this planet could do. This silk was as alien here as she was.

She left the silk in the quiet darkness of the closet and stepped out into the glaring reality that was her new life. She was hungry, but had no idea where the kitchen was or what types of food might be in the kitchen. Since she didn't usually cower, she took the hydrolift to the main floor and began searching. She found a room with long polished flat surfaces that proclaimed "kitchen" in her mind. She looked into glass-covered recessed cubbies and found one where the temperature was much cooler. A refrigeration unit. It had multiple levels and she found glass pitchers of different colored liquids, one of which smelled pleasantly fruity. She opened various containers and tried to identify the contents by smell. She knew the Averans ate meat, fish and fowl. Many humanoids were omnivores. The Averans were part raptor, which were carnivores.

She knew what meat, fish and fowl usually smelled like. One container smelled familiar, so she got it out. She needed bread and then she could make some sort of sandwich. She couldn't remember if she'd ever had bread at an Averan meal. Bread was a grain product, but this planet didn't have a lot of flat space to grow grain. She searched anyway. She found a dark, flat loaf of something that had the consistency of bread. Now for a knife, glass and plate. She knew what those things looked like, but didn't know where they were kept. An intense search located what she needed. Twenty minutes after she arrived in the room she sat down to eat. Living in this house would give a new meaning to the phrase, "scavenging for food."

She huffed a weak laugh, and then sobered. This wasn't what she'd intended when she signed on for this mission. She had two doctorate degrees, she loved the study of emergent

societies and the sociological interactions of other species. Where could she use all that education after her work here was completed? She couldn't follow her team to their next assignment. Neither could new societies be brought to her for study. All those years of school were for nothing. Yet, if she hadn't earned those degrees she wouldn't be sitting here now in her mate's home with a belly full of babies. It was a catch-22 situation. She rubbed her lower abdomen in apology to the babies.

"Bonding to the children, Sheleigh?" Lefair's gentle voice broke into her reverie.

Sheleigh looked up to see her mother-in-law enter the kitchen. "I still can't believe there are babies in my body, even though the doctor confirmed it. Everything happened so fast this morning. Today is the only time I've ever been intimate with Kleet." She blushed.

Lefair sat across from her at the table. "During a mating flight the males are virile and the females are fertile. The percentage of flights that conceive a child is more than ninety percent. I don't remember the exact figure. Even the non-winged flights are usually fertile."

"During the confirmation they brought up the fact that I'm an alien. So since I'm an alien, why would I be fertile like Averans are? I haven't been on your planet long enough for it to have affected me."

"You had a mating on the ground after the flight, didn't you?"

"Yes." Sheleigh's cheeks warmed at the question.

"Did you fly with Kleet in your mind?"

"Yes, I did."

"I don't think you're as dissimilar from us as people would like to think. You're obviously biologically compatible with Kleet."

"Obviously."

"We wondered, Kelfer and I, when Kleet first mentioned that he was considering you as a mate. Kelfer gave permission for Kleet to make overtures to you. Early this morning he reported that you were physically similar to Averans and that you were a virgin. We weren't expecting that at your age."

That rat! He'd initiated intimacies with her last night to see if her body was capable of accepting his. That's why he'd insisted on leaving the lights on and taking her pants all the way off. He'd been performing a scientific assessment of her anatomy. He'd poked, prodded and probed her and she'd thought he was stimulating her. Hah! He was making sure his penis would go in. After he'd decided they were compatible, he'd stopped his intimate explorations and plotted getting her to the cliff for the mating flight. There he could bond her and impregnate her. The conniving rat. Everything he'd done had been premeditated. He claimed to love her, but love didn't connive.

"I've upset you somehow. That wasn't my intention."

"I've been upset quite a few times today."

"Our ways are different than what you're used to, that's all. You're an intelligent woman and strong. You'll adapt to our ways."

"I've lived a long time the way I am. I don't think I can adapt to everything in your society. Lefair, how did you feel when you saw the recording of your mating flight?"

Lefair sighed and smiled. "It was so beautiful. I'd loved Kelfer from the moment I saw him. He was handsome, strong and confident. Kleet's a lot like his father. Anyway, when Kelfer asked me to fly the mating flight with him I was thrilled and I wanted to shout it from the cliff tops so that everyone would know. I was proud to show the recording that let everyone know Kelfer was my mate and father of my child. It's still one of my most treasured memories. Kelfer

and I watch the recording every year on the anniversary of the flight to remind ourselves why we committed to a life together.”

Now there was a perspective Sheleigh had never considered. Of course, Kleet hadn’t asked her to be his mate and hadn’t asked her to fly the mating flight. Those things obviously made a difference in perspective.

“Where’s Kleet?” Lefair asked, looking around.

“At the council hall. They’re discussing whether aliens can be mates.”

“But if he’s there, how can you be here? The council hall is several miles from here. Or doesn’t separation bother you?” Lefair looked alarmed at that thought. She was probably thinking about alien incompatibility.

“It bothers me, but I’m not going to let Kleet dictate where I have to be each day. I got a little panicked on the flight here, but I’m doing better now. How do you think Kleet is handling the separation?”

The com beeped imperiously. “I expect that’s him now.”

“I won’t go running to him.”

“I’m sure he’ll want to discuss it with you himself.” Lefair went to the com unit. “Hello?”

“Mother, is Sheleigh there with you?”

“Hello, Kleet. Yes, she’s here.” She looked at Sheleigh. “He wants to talk to you.”

Sheleigh sighed and moved to the com unit. “Yes, Kleet?”

“What are you doing there? I told you it could only be *small* separations. What are you trying to do to me? Get back here.”

“No.”

“What? You can’t be at our home. You have to be in the council hall building near me.”

“I’m not coming. I’ve got work to do here if I can find my things from my apartment.”

“Bring them here. You can do your work here.”

“I said no. Is there anything else you want?”

“Sheleigh! Don’t you feel the separation? You did this morning.”

“It’s not as bad as it was this morning. I can tolerate being here without you.”

“Well it’s horrible for me,” he snapped. “I need to be able to function. There’s important work to be done today.”

“Yes, like discussing how aliens can’t be mates. Now you can tell them this alien can tolerate separations from her mate. They’ll probably do a recall on the voting this morning and more will vote no.”

He audibly sucked in his breath. “Don’t even joke about something like that. I’m sending the guards to get you. Be ready when they arrive.” He cut the connection.

Sheleigh fumed. That dictatorial rat. She’d show him. She wouldn’t even be here when they came.

“Lefair, I need a transport.”

“Dear, I heard what Kleet said.”

“I’m not going to jump when he snaps his fingers. He wanted me because I have strength. Well, he’s going to see that strength in action.”

“I won’t help you against my own son.”

“At least I know where you’ll stand on any issue.” Sheleigh left the room and took the hydrolift to the lowest level of the residence. She would walk along the river and get as far away as possible.

The barred gates at the river level were secured to keep trespassers out, but no one had

thought about keeping anyone in. She simply walked out onto the river path and kept going. Her anger kept her blood fired for the first half hour, but then the separation began to pull at her and her steps grew less confident. She walked slower and slower, until finally she couldn't go another step. She cursed herself for her weakness in being enslaved to a man. She cursed Kleet for binding her this way. She cursed herself again for being a slave to her hormones. Then she cursed Kleet for being an arrogant beast.

She considered hiding close by. This was obviously as far as she could get from him. But hiding was for weak people. She sat down where she stood and waited for the guards to find her. She didn't have long to wait. Five minutes later Kleet's air transport pulled up next to her.

"Hello boys," she called to them and watched their faces show confusion. One of them was a woman, so Sheleigh corrected her oversight. "And girl."

"My lady, will you come with us please?" Clearly the captain could not decide if he could order her or not.

She rose and dusted off her trousers. "Will you use force on me if I don't?" She was curious about what he would say.

"My lord Kleet told me not to accept no as your answer."

That bastard. "Would you shoot me if I walked away?" Oh, that would be a predicament.

"My lady, please don't make my job impossible."

Why not? They were making her job impossible. "I need something from the residence. I'll meet you there." In an hour.

"We'll fly you there. It'll be quicker."

"You'll understand, captain, if I don't believe you. I think I have a better chance of getting to the residence if I walk there."

"Please, my lady, we'll take you there."

"I understand your orders say otherwise."

There was silence and she thought the captain was probably evaluating the wisdom of tackling her or throwing a net over her. That last visual was sort of funny, allowing her to unbend a little.

"Oh, very well. It's not you who deserves my anger anyway. You're just obeying orders." She climbed into the transport and listened to a collective sigh of relief. "Captain?"

"Yes, my lady?"

"Next time I'll run. Or jump in the river. I'm interested to see what you'll do."

He swallowed. "Thank you for the warning, my lady."

The flight was as wild, probably wilder, than every other flight she'd been on, with the granite walls passing dangerously close. Each minute she felt the separation anxiety lessen, which only served to make her angrier. By the time she stood in the corridor outside the council hall, she was fuming. Kleet came out to face her, stopping in front of her. Without thinking about it, she raised her palm and slapped his face. The sound echoed in the corridor, followed by gasps.

"Bastard!" she flung at him with venom.

"Ah, another Earth word. What does this one mean, I wonder?"

"It means, you're a son of a ..."

She didn't get to finish as Kleet grabbed her and fused his lips to hers.

Chapter Nine

Mate! The word roared through her mind. Her body reacted to the mate recognition of its own volition. One arm snaked up around the back of his neck to hold him firmly in place. Her other arm clutched him desperately around the waist. His arms crushed her to him as he devoured her lips. She couldn't get close enough to him. She clawed at him as she tried to get inside him. Then her hands were on his buttocks. She pulled him tightly to the juncture of her thighs. He lifted her onto her tiptoes into his thrusts. Oh, how she wanted him. Her mate, her mate.

"Kleet, come back into the council hall."

Whose voice was that?

"Kleet, stop that. You can see your mate later."

Kleet broke the kiss and she saw Kelfer beside them. But her mate was pressed to her body and she sought his lips once more. He dipped his head and offered himself, and she took him hungrily. She made greedy noises in her throat. He growled.

"Kleet, that's enough!" Kelfer's angry voice broke through the fog of mate-passion.

Kleet lifted his head and she made a sound of protest. "Father, give me five minutes. I need to fly her."

"We don't have time for that."

"She went home two hours ago. I need to fly her."

"Oh, I didn't know that. Five minutes, then."

Kleet moved quickly across the hall with her still pressed tightly to him.

"Out!" he commanded someone, but before she could see who it was his lips sealed to hers. Mate-passion roared hot through her and she whimpered. She felt a breeze on her bare buttocks, discomfort between her legs and then her mate was with her.

She made hungry, desperate sounds as they merged into one. "Hurry, hurry!"

"I am. Ahh."

"Mmmmm. More. More!"

"Ahh. Harder, Shel!"

"Deeper. I need you in me!"

"I'm trying! Shel!"

They leaped into free fall, flying fast and free into an exploding nova. Kleet caught her scream in his mouth and gave her his shout. It was fabulous and over far too soon. She whimpered.

"Don't ever go away like that again." He kissed her lips. "Don't ever stay away when I tell you to come."

"I came. Twice."

"Shel." A rebuke and a laugh, then another kiss.

"If this is my welcome, I'll stay away more often."

"I'm serious. It may not bother you, but I felt like I was being torn apart. If you feel anything for me, you won't want me to suffer like that."

"Kleet," she protested.

“Our five minutes is up. I have to go back to work.” Another kiss. He started to withdraw from her body, but she clutched his buttocks.

“No, don’t leave me.”

“I have to. We can do this again tonight.” He withdrew and she whimpered with emptiness and pain.

“I’ve hurt you. I’m sorry, I forgot you were sore.”

“Me too.” She kissed him.

There was a knock on the door. “Kleet, time’s up.”

Kleet shut his trousers and adjusted his clothes. “Don’t leave the building, Shel.” When she would have protested, he added. “Please. For me.”

“All right. For you.”

He kissed her once more and slipped out the door. She realized her pants were completely off. How had he done that? She quickly donned them and winced at the soreness between her legs. Kleet was a powerful and vigorous lover. She straightened her hair and clothing the best she could and stepped out into the corridor. The owner of the office leaned patiently against the wall. She was mortified to see it was Harrier, the liaison for her program. She felt her face flame red.

Quickly she blurted, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was your office.” Then she could have kicked herself for saying something so moronic.

“I understand the heir made you his mate this morning. Congratulations.” His voice was smooth and cultured.

“Thank you.”

“I hadn’t realized you two were committed to each other, but it appears to be a fiery union. I understand you carry more than one child in your womb.”

Ignoring the first part of his statement, she responded to the latter part. “The doctor believes it’s twins.”

“They’ll probably be non-winged.”

She thought it was a strange comment for him to make. “It’s likely. Do you know of an empty office in this building that I can use for the next few months.” Or years, however long it took Kleet to become used to separations.

“Ah, the mate bond. It might make more sense for you to share my office since we work together already.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

“There’s plenty of space and you’ll be close to the heir.” She couldn’t control a blush. “I see that interests you. It’s settled then.” He ushered her into his office.

“My computer and all my notes are at Kleet’s home. Today has been so hectic.” She ran a distracted hand through her springy curls. “I don’t know where to start. Is there a recorded history of your society?”

Harrier handed her a bound book, which she took and caressed. It had been a long time since she’d handled a book. They were simply too bulky to travel in space. She opened the book and gazed avidly at the strange symbols that were the Averan language. How she wished they were more than just symbols to her.

She looked up at Harrier. “I can’t read your language. We were only taught to speak and understand it.”

He looked startled, then dismayed. “I’m sorry, my lady,” he stumbled over her new title. “I just assumed ... you’re so fluent.”

She waved away his distress. “It’s no problem. Do you have an oral recorded history?”

Soon she was ensconced in the records room in the bowels of the building listening to an old voice recorder. She let the history of Kleet's people seep into her mind. She'd been correct in her guess that Averans had been a primitive people until approximately ten generations back. They'd lived in open caves, foraged for food, and flown everywhere they needed to go using their own wings as transportation. They were a highly evolved raptor/humanoid hybrid. Because they were raptors, they mated for life.

Families lived together in groups, neither patriarchal nor matriarchal, with a number of bonded mates heading them. Child rearing was shared equally between males and females, as was foraging for food. What grains they ate were found along the river, along with tuberous roots. Eventually they raised their own crops by carving flat levels into the mountainsides. They raised wool-bearing animals in the mountainous peaks. They grew fruits on vines, which liked the rainy mountainsides. Each extended family covered a large area in order to sustain their needs. Each bonded couple provided the cohesiveness to help hold the group together. Without that cohesiveness, the early Averans wouldn't have survived.

Population growth was practically nil in those earlier generations. Many children were killed learning how to fly. Sheleigh swallowed nervously and rubbed her flat stomach. These days Averans didn't need to fly to survive. She tried to be a clinical observer while she listened to the tale of survivalist existence where weaker family units perished and units not headed by a bonded pair disbanded. But this was her children's heritage, revealed to an outsider for the first time.

Shocked, she stopped the recording. This history wouldn't have been provided to her if she didn't have Averan issue in her womb. Everything that mentioned wings was hidden from sight or hearing, the same way Averans hid their wings under their capes. That's why USP's First Contact report didn't mention wings. The Averans were used to hiding the fact that they were winged, but they hadn't started out that way. Their society had revolved around flying.

Something had happened ten generations ago to change them from an open, non-technological, flying society to the secretive, technologically-advanced people they were today. Technology didn't come to a society in a leap such as the one the Averans had made. It didn't come ... it was brought. But no USP member had been to this planet before ... Sheleigh drew in breath. Some species outside of USP had been here and given the Averans technology. But what had caused them to fear outsiders?

She drew only one conclusion: Malchovists. USP's mortal enemy made species afraid. They didn't give things to species, they took things away. They raided and they murdered unprotected civilizations. A visit by two different species would explain the mystery, if one species were benevolent and the other was the Malchovists. Would anyone admit the truth if she asked?

The Averans' secrecy seemed to center on having wings. But why the wings? She knew that societies hid things they considered weaknesses, such as birth deformities. Had the Averan interactions with these other species led them to believe that being winged was a weakness? Before she could pursue that thought there was a scuff behind her. She turned.

Kleet smiled. "Here you are. I've been searching everywhere for you. I knew you hadn't gone too far." This was said sardonically. "Luckily I ran into Harrier and he said you were down here. Are you hungry? It's time for the mid-day meal."

She realized she was hungry. The sandwich she'd had instead of breakfast had been hours ago. "Sure." As she rose his arm slid around her and her senses clamored with mate-recognition. His lips lowered to hers. She should turn away from him on principle, after the way he'd treated

her this morning. But she was in accord with him at the moment, with her mind full of her children's inheritance, so she raised her lips to meet his.

It was a wonderful kiss, full of Kleet's love, strongly possessive, rich in promise and it throbbed with the mate bond. She found herself in his strong arms, up tight against his hard body, affirming his claim on her.

He raised his head a little. His eyes had darkened. "That was a nice welcome."

"If I could be in your arms the rest of my life, I'd be all right."

"I wouldn't mind, but I wouldn't get much work done."

"You don't understand. My species doesn't take mates, not really. Not like yours does. Many of us fall in love for life, and there are people who claim to be soul mates. The soul is the essence of a person, and when people become soul mates they become two halves of a whole. But I don't feel like a soul mate. My body throbs when you touch me and I know you're my mate. But how can it be when humans don't take mates?"

"Why question what's true, Shel? We're mates. A mating flight is powerful in a number of ways, beyond virility for the male and fertility for the female. By entering your body during the flight I became one with you. I was claimed as soon as I filled you."

"But I didn't feel anything. Not then."

"You told me you were thinking of other things. Come on, I'm hungry."

Sheleigh halted him by placing her hand on his arm. "Kleet, why was the information in this room kept secret from me? Why was the fact that your species is winged kept a secret?"

His hand over hers tightened painfully. "You didn't tell anyone that, did you?"

"No. I've been here and at the residence all morning. Why ..."

"We don't tell outsiders about our wings. You must never tell anyone."

"But why?"

"We'll talk about it at home tonight. Come and eat."

Chapter Ten

Sheleigh wondered about the secrecy off and on for the rest of the afternoon. Avera history was fascinating. It kept her absorbed until Kleet came to get her at the end of the day. She didn't argue when he kissed her in greeting, or when he took her hand as they rode the hydrolift to the roof. He was possessive and demonstrative, two qualities desirable in a husband. She would spend the evening doing married things like eating dinner together, talking, comparing their day, making plans for the week, and then they'd go to bed together. Her lower body clenched at that thought and she felt the tenderness from his last possession. Further mating might be painful. She assumed Kleet would want his husbandly rights tonight. She'd have to tell him how tender she was.

Kelfer was waiting for them in the air transport.

"Sheleigh."

"Avatier." She climbed into the transport. Kleet slid into the seat next to her. Once they were airborne she addressed her father-in-law again. "I don't know how a woman addresses her mate's parents. What would you prefer?"

"My name is fine, although I would prefer you address me by my title in public, as Kleet does."

"All right."

"Kleet told me you would like your mother here for the babies' births, but that your mother has never been away from her planet."

"That's true. But I'd feel more comfortable with my mother here. These are my first babies, after all."

"As you know, Avera isn't open to visitors."

"But she's my mother." *Keep calm.*

"You'll want your father, too?"

"He'll probably come with my mother."

"Will they stay with the other humans from your group?"

Sheleigh wondered if her parents could stay at the Kryszan residence. She didn't know Kelfer. She didn't know Avera traditions. "Wouldn't they stay with me?"

"If they were Avera they might. But they're not Avera."

"Neither am I."

"You're Kleet's mate and you're carrying his children. That makes you an honorary Avera."

That's why the secrets could be shown to her. But it still didn't explain why there were secrets at all. Kelfer had the power to block her parents from coming to see her. How adamant could she be with him? She was afraid to give birth in this foreign place without her mother nearby. She refused to entertain thoughts of what else she might fear.

"I'd prefer my parents to stay with me, if at all possible. They'll be nervous enough after a long space journey and being among different species."

Kelfer glanced out the window and back. The transport approached the residence. "We'll discuss this topic more later. Kleet, I'd like to talk with you privately."

The transport landed perfectly on the roof pad and they disembarked. Kleet held her hand again. She was grateful for his support after being summarily dismissed by his father. She hoped Kelfer wasn't going to say something to Kleet like, "Keep your mate in line."

She walked with Kleet to their suite of rooms, where they freshened up for dinner. She debated what to say to him before his talk with his father. They faced enough obstacles already in their marriage without adding discord between her and Kelfer.

"Kleet, I want my mother here. If she travels all the way from Earth, she really should stay with me. She won't interfere with your lifestyle. She'll simply help take care of me and the babies, get to know her grandchildren and see how I'll be living for the rest of my life. She's not a threat to your family or your species."

"And if, by chance, the babies are winged? What then?" His tone was sharp.

She gasped. It was the secret of the wings! They were afraid her parents would find out they had wings. She almost laughed. Her portly father with his nose stuck in books was no threat to them. But Kleet's fierce expression sobered her. His grip on his forearm was painful.

"How could we expose defenseless babies to outsiders?"

Shocked, she wrenched away from him as though he'd struck her, which he had, in a way. "My parents would never hurt any baby, especially not my babies. My parents are no threat to our children. They'll love their grandchildren, I can guarantee it." They might be shocked at the sight of winged grandchildren, but the babies would still be their grandchildren. Sheleigh knew her mother would be ecstatic to hold any type of grandbaby in her arms if it came from Sheleigh's body.

"What would your parents tell others about winged grandchildren? Wouldn't those others want to investigate those winged grandchildren? Wouldn't they guess that one of the parents also had wings?"

"Why are you so afraid of others, knowing you have wings?" Maybe he would tell her now, while they were alone.

"We're too vulnerable to attack in the air if someone knows to look for us there."

There was more to his statement. She sensed the history throbbing through his words. She knew something had happened to the Averans. What was it? She had to know. "Tell me all of it. Who attacked you?"

He hesitated. Was even this bit of their history considered too secret for her to know?

"We don't know who they were. We thought at first they were ..." He trailed off and stared at her. His expression was troubled. Another realization exploded in her mind like an epiphany. He wasn't used to thinking of her as his mate, as an insider. The Averans had kept their secrets so long that he had trouble breaking generations of taboo.

"You thought they were the same as the first visitors," she guessed.

His eyes widened and he gripped both of her arms. He searched her face intently. "Who told you that?" he demanded. His voice was harsh and strained.

"No one told me. I'm trained to observe societies, to look for their historical advancement. Your history contains an anomaly. This morning I learned that your society was primitive. Today you're highly advanced. But you still live in caves, figuratively and literally. You didn't get the technology on your own. Some other species helped you. Who?"

"We don't know what they were called. He never told us. His spaceship became disabled, so he landed here. He taught us about power generation, mining, computers, communication, manufacturing, and mechanical flight. We learned all he could teach us in his lifetime. He always looked for rescue. That's why we thought it was someone from his species coming to rescue him."

“But it was a different race of beings. We couldn’t communicate with them. They took what they could find, which wasn’t much at that time. Then they shot Averans who were in the skies. When they couldn’t find enough people in the skies to kill, they murdered everyone they could find at the government hall, including the Avatier’s family. That’s how my family acquired the rule. Several thousand of us died that day, men, women and children.

“The caves saved us. We burrowed deep into the mountains and hid for days. They finally left, but it took weeks to find out everyone who’d died. Every family lost someone. The Avatier’s family was completely decimated. Many mates were lost, so families were vulnerable without a bonded couple heading them. Children were lost, which put families at risk with no next generation.

“More mating flights were flown that year and the year that followed than ever in our history. New mate bonds had to be forged. New pregnancies had to be started. Old mate bonds had to be strengthened. We grew strong again through the mating flights. But from the day of the massacre we agreed, every one of us, that we would not show our wings to outsiders.”

Sheleigh’s chest and throat were tight with sympathetic grief for what the Averans had suffered. Even though it had happened hundreds of years ago, Kleet talked as though he’d experienced the emotions of that day. He must feel very deeply about what happened.

“Can you describe these killers? Does anyone know what they looked like?” She had to be sure. Avera was in the right part of space to have been victimized by the Malchovists.

“We all learn what they looked like so that we know to prepare to fight if they ever come again,” he said with fierceness. “They were shorter than us, male, no hair on their heads, with burly bodies. They wore blue and brown one-piece suits.”

“Malchovists,” she hissed, horrified for the Averans.

Kleet reared back from her and his expression was accusatory. “You know them? They belong to USP?”

“They’re our mortal enemies. For over a century we’ve protected our member planets from them. As new species come to us for protection, we spread farther into this sector of space. They’ve killed thousands of us, too. We’ve hunted them, with the intention of exterminating them, but without success.”

He looked relieved. His hand clasped hers again so she ventured to ease his mind further. “You have nothing to fear from USP or the species that belong to USP. We celebrate diversity and physical differences. You’ve seen some of our different species already. You can tell your people they can stop hiding their wings now.”

“No, we can’t risk it. It was a huge risk taking you as my mate.”

She gasped, stung by his words. “So much for your proclamation of love. How could you even think you loved me if you thought I was such a risk?” She turned away from him. Didn’t love go hand in hand with trust? She’d thought so.

“I *do* love you, Shel. But that doesn’t mean I’m willing to risk my entire planet for that love.” He slid his hands up her arms to her shoulders and drew her back against his warm firm body. She resisted until her body touched his, then the mate bond encouraged her to press against him. He murmured the next words against her temple. “I thought you’d understand the desire to protect fragile life now that you’re pregnant.”

She shook her head against his chest. “You don’t need to fear USP. We’ll help you. We’ll protect you from that ever happening again.”

“I want to believe you.” He wrapped his arms around her and she slid her arms over his. “We were so afraid when the first of your people came. We hid the children so they would live if

there was more killing. Then we armed ourselves to fight for our families and our lives. I still remember the fear I felt that day. That's not something you can just dismiss."

No, a lifelong fear might take a lifetime to fight. Her lifetime. "I'll teach you and your people that you have nothing to fear from USP. My children will teach you, and their children will teach you."

His arms tightened around her. "You almost give me hope."

She sighed as she further resigned herself to her future here. Kleet had just given her the opportunity USP needed. She would be the only one offered this opportunity. To waste it would be unpardonable.

"I need to tell my superior that your people were attacked by Malchovists." He stiffened behind her, so she hurried on. "I won't mention the wings, but they must know. My group is vulnerable while we're in an area where Malchovists have raided."

"We won't allow more of you to come down. My people are already nervous about your group being here."

That wasn't news to her. "USP may begin to patrol space around this planet." He shuddered. "They don't need to come down to the planet to protect us. They'll do it from space."

"Everyone is in space, both the good and the bad people. We're the only ones who aren't in space."

"In order to enter space, you'd have to give up your isolation. You'd have to risk meeting other species. You'd have to expose your secret."

"If we continue to evolve as we have, in another few thousand years we won't have a secret."

She turned in his arms to face him. "You can't wait that long to enter space. I'm from space and you've adopted me into your species. My children will be taught about USP and humans and space. My children will be USP citizens, as I am." He looked startled and she felt a spurt of satisfaction at surprising him with that bit of knowledge.

"USP isn't going away, Kleet. We know you're here and we want to get to know you. We want to help you. We want to see you in space beside us. The future is coming at you at light speed. It's standing in front of you right now. I brought knowledge with me into your home, and now you can't go back to the way things were before."

She watched his face twist with regret and dismay. He hadn't thought far enough beyond his heart, his loins and his people. He should have thought all the way to the stars. "I didn't lose my ties to my own planet, my own family and my employer just because you bound me. I'm more than just Sheleigh, just as you're more than just Kleet. We both have strong ties to other things and other people. I'm also tied to the future."

"I didn't think ... I didn't know." He looked chagrined.

She raised her palm to his cheek. "How could you have known? You've been pretty insulated on Avera."

"I've explained why we've had to be."

"Yes. But change is coming, Kleet. You won't be able to stop it."

Kleet left her to the tender graces of Lefair while he spoke privately with his father. The Kryszans were well off financially. They could afford to pay others to cook and clean for them. This freed Lefair to attend the duties of the wife of the Avatier, of which there were surprisingly many. She filled Sheleigh in on her day while they waited for their men to finish talking. Sheleigh kept only part of her mind on the discussion in the comfortable sitting room. The other part speculated about the talk between the men. If it involved talk of her parents, she should be

there. If they discussed isolationism, she should be involved in that, too.

She'd found Kleet to be a strong and forceful man, but his father seemed to be stronger. Perhaps it was because Kelfer had held the rule for so long. When Kleet had been ruler that long, he'd be stronger too. But in a contest of wills, she wasn't sure that the younger man could win against the older man.

It was frustrating being tied to a man she barely knew. He didn't understand her needs, so how could he stand up against his father for those needs. That made it harder to wait with Lefair.

"Don't worry so much, dear. I've never known Kelfer to make a decision which wasn't for the best of all concerned."

"He's mortal, that makes him fallible. Besides, he's used to deciding for Averans. I'm not your species. I have different needs."

"Your needs don't seem much different from ours. You want love, a home, a family and happiness. You have all that now. Kelfer will make sure you keep it."

Sheleigh's chest felt tight. Yes, she'd wanted those things for the future. She was blessed with them earlier than she'd planned. But ... "I don't want to be made a prisoner while I enjoy my good fortune. My needs are to remain connected to others in USP, to share ideas with others in my field, to have access to new species and all species in general. I need the freedom I've enjoyed as a USP citizen and the freedom of ideas I've grown used to. That's how I differ from Averans. Kelfer can't possibly know what I need, because he's never lived anywhere else."

Lefair frowned, clearly thinking hard. Sheleigh had found her mother-in-law to be a bright woman. She was sure Lefair would try her best to picture another's point of view. She willed Lefair to understand. Lefair's brow cleared. "I'm sorry, dear. I don't have your experiences away from this planet to understand what your life was like before you came here. I believe what you say, but I can't empathize with what you need."

Sheleigh sagged with disappointment. If this bright woman couldn't understand, there was little hope that others would understand. She didn't want to point out that she was alien. Not when she had so much painful adjusting to do.

Kleet and Kelfer joined them shortly. Their expressions were solemn and resolute. Her stomach clenched with anxiety. Kleet took her hand and led her into dinner. She couldn't read anything in his face, although his jaw was firmly set. She'd seen that expression this morning during her mate confirmation. She didn't want to go up against his will again so soon.

Kelfer broached the subject she hoped for and dreaded in the middle of dinner. "Sheleigh, I understand your desire to have your parents here for the babies' births, but I just don't feel it's prudent or feasible at this time."

She set her utensils down on the table with a small snap. Hurt hit her first, like a fist in the gut. Anger followed immediately afterwards. Her determination fired her with righteous indignation. She attempted to temper her roiling emotions with logic.

"Please explain your reasoning." Despite her attempts at control, her words were clipped.

Kelfer's features hardened. Too late she remembered that he wasn't used to being questioned by people outside of the council. She'd never seen Kleet question him before today.

"There are places where ... outsiders ... are not yet allowed. The medical facility is one such place. Sick people cannot be asked to cover their wings so that outsiders won't see them. So, for your parents to come all this way and not be able to be with you during the birth makes no sense. I won't allow you to jeopardize my grandchildren or yourself by having the babies at home. We don't know if your human physiology will be affected by the births."

She writhed with frustration and anger. He seemed to have her nicely trapped with his

concern for his people and for her. But she couldn't allow herself to be caged bit by bit. What she'd told Kleet earlier was true. She was the future and they had let her in. They couldn't close the door after the fact.

"Then I'll have my babies with my USP group and my parents can stay with them. As I will. And if you won't give my parents permission to be on the planet, I'll go up to a USP ship. Our doctors know how to handle mixed species births."

Kelfer's face mottled with anger. "No! That's unacceptable!"

Kleet grabbed her hand. "I forbid it!"

She looked from her mate to her father-in-law. Kelfer held the power here, so she concentrated on him. "Family is important to you, isn't it?"

"Very. That's why you'll remain with us when my grandchildren are born."

Oh, nicely done. He believed her question underscored his point. "I love my parents and they love me." She addressed Lefair with her next statement. "My mother has wanted grandchildren for years. She's begged me to find a man. She's hinted, she's shown me the grandchildren of her lady friends. There isn't a time when I talk to her now that she doesn't mention grandchildren." Lefair nodded as Sheleigh spoke.

"I have two younger brothers, but she doesn't encourage them to have grandchildren as hard as she encourages me. They're sons. A daughter is different. A daughter's children mean more to a mother. A daughter needs you and needs your advice. Daughters who are your son's mates will ask advice of their own mothers. Even if you're the most wonderful mother of their mate, you still didn't give birth to her. She wants the woman who birthed her when she's ready to birth her own. It's natural. You understand don't you, Lefair?"

"Yes, dear. I wanted my own mother when my children were born."

"And I want mine."

"The circumstances are entirely different," Kelfer blustered.

"No, they're not. We share a societal trait, that women want their mothers during pregnancy and birth. A similarity. Would you deny me what you didn't deny your own mate? What you wouldn't deny your own daughter? If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me."

Kelfer stared intently at her. She decided she'd said enough for the moment. Besides, she was feeling less alien. She wanted to savor the feeling.

She actually enjoyed the rest of dinner. It was educational watching Kelfer and Lefair together in the comfort of their own home. Kelfer was reserved in his role as Avatier, but he melted with Lefair. They touched hands and exchanged gentle glances. They spoke in intimate voices. It was obvious to her that they loved one another and weren't afraid to show it in front of family.

His parents treated Kleet with indulgent affection. He treated them with loving respect. He seemed younger and freer here at home than he was in public. The three of them were comfortable to be with. She slowly relaxed her guard. Despite being an alien, they accepted her into their inner circle because she was Kleet's mate.

Then it was time for her first night of sleeping next to Kleet. She thought there'd probably be mating, too, although she wasn't sure she could. She'd taken him four times already today.

She glanced at him as they walked the hall to their room. He was a stranger in many ways. They'd gone from intimately casual encounters straight to mating. They'd spent little time in one another's company. They hadn't spent very much time discussing ideological differences.

What they'd shared before marriage was a brief prelude to mating. Earth history was full of arranged or mail-order marriages where the couples barely knew one another. Many of those marriages lasted. The participants learned to love one another. Her marriage to Kleet would have to be like that.

She would get to know him, and somewhere down the road she would grow to love him. Their initial and continued attraction to each other would make certain of it. They could have a good marriage.

In the privacy of their room Kleet slid a possessive hand up her arm. She answered the call of their mate bond. She gave herself over to him, her husband, to do with as he wished. It was what she wanted as well.

Chapter Eleven

An insistent buzzing awoke Sheleigh from an exhausted sleep. A heavy arm lifted from around her waist. Kleet learned over her and felt around on the bedside stand. The buzzing stopped.

“Yes, what is it?” he answered in a thick voice.

“It’s Harrier. Sorry to bother you, my lord, but there’s an issue you need to deal with. One of the humans is here searching for Dr. O’Brien.”

“Which human?”

“The head of the group, Dr. Barazi.”

“Put him on the com.”

There was a pause during which she sat up on the side of the bed. Kleet sat up next to her. She had a sinking feeling she knew what the call was about.

“My lord?”

“Dr. Barazi?”

“Yes. One of my group is missing.” Sheleigh groaned. “Dr. O’Brien hasn’t been home since the day before yesterday. I fear something may have happened to her.”

“I’m here, Dr. Barazi,” she spoke without thinking. There was a long pause, during which Kleet’s arm gripped hers to indicate silence.

“I see. You should have notified someone, Sheleigh.”

“Dr. Barazi,” Kleet intoned, “I’m sorry that word wasn’t brought to you. I claimed Sheleigh as my mate yesterday.”

There was another short silence. “Claimed, my lord? What does that mean?”

“It means that she is my mate. She lives with me now. She’ll bear my children. You understand what a mate is?”

“Yes, I do. I’d like to speak to Sheleigh, please.” His voice was strained.

“Yes, Dr. Barazi?” Sheleigh answered.

He dropped into English. “Are you being forced against your will?”

She answered in Averen, because Kleet had stiffened at the sound of English. “I’m here of my own free will. We were married by Averen custom yesterday morning.” The word ‘married’ had to be in English since there was no Averen equivalent. “I forgot to contact you yesterday, the day was so hectic.”

“I don’t understand. I didn’t know you planned to marry the heir.” His voice went up at the end in agitation.

“It’s done, doctor,” Kleet interjected. “It doesn’t matter if it was planned or not. It can’t be undone. Sheleigh lives with me now. She’ll work out of the government center for the next few months. You’ll have access to her there.”

“You’re separating her from our group?”

“She has to remain near me for the next few months. It won’t interfere with her work, I assure you. She worked most of yesterday.”

“I didn’t know. Sheleigh, I’ll stop in later today to see you. Where is your office?”

“I’m sharing Harrier’s office.” At that moment she realized that it was Harrier who’d

initiated the call. Why hadn't he just told Dr. Barazi where she was?

There was another short silence. Perhaps Dr. Barazi was wondering the same thing she just had. "I'll see you later."

"Yes."

When the transmission ended, Kleet turned to her. "What does 'married' mean?"

"It's what the people in USP call the taking of a mate, but without a physical bond like you and I share. It's a commitment a man and woman make to each other to live together and have children. It has legal and often religious meaning."

"Your people take a mate legally, but not with a physical bond." He gave her a piercing look. "The union is held together only by words?"

"Yes." What was he digging for?

"Do these unions hold together?" She groaned inwardly. She didn't want to discuss the principal of divorce with him.

"Many of them do. Many species in USP marry for life: Bonwee, Petrosians, Carisi and Grimari, to name a few."

"You didn't name your own species."

"Kleet, I don't want to discuss this topic."

His look sharpened even more. "Do any humans marry for life?"

"Yes, many do. They marry because they love each other deeply and they stay married all their lives."

"What about the rest?"

She gave an exasperated sigh. "They legally end the union. They go their separate ways. Many of them marry again. Some have better luck the second time. Some don't."

There was a look of distaste on his face. "Each time you tell me about your society I like it less and less."

"That's unfair. We have beauty, love and many wonderful things among humans. We have qualities that make us proud. We try. Humans try over and over to find a marriage that will last. We don't give up just because the first one didn't work out. We try again. Our whole history is full of people struggling and striving and never giving up. We hope and we dream. That keeps us trying."

"Don't disparage my society for failing and trying again. Your society failed once and you never made another attempt."

He stiffened. "What are you talking about?"

"You had a bad experience with aliens hundreds of years ago. Now you hide what you are. You cower in fear. You're afraid to try again with us, even though we're more like the first species who came to you than the second. But you don't want to give us a chance."

"I married you, didn't I?"

"You certainly did. But how much of a chance was it, really? You checked me out thoroughly, including the other night in my apartment."

"I had to make sure I could mate with you."

She gave him a withering look. "You discussed it with your parents before you married me. As I said, not a big chance at all."

"But not unlike your humans who try a second time at marriage."

She sighed. "Yes, it was like that."

He gathered her in his arms and she went eagerly. She tilted her face for a morning kiss. When the kiss ended, his eyes had darkened. "Are you still sore? It wasn't too much for you last

night?”

“No. I like being joined with you. You can do whatever you want to me as long as we’re joined together.”

“I can think of a few things I’d like to do.” He pushed her back on the bed and came over her.

* * * *

Dr. Barazi arrived in Harrier’s office mid morning. “Sheleigh, will you walk with me?” He looked pointedly at Harrier, indicating he wanted privacy.

She went with him to the hydrolift. “The reception hall should be empty right now.”

They stood in the room where she had made her fateful decision only days ago. Now she explained to her superior the permanent repercussions of that decision.

“So you’re confined to Avera for life?”

“I believe so. I’m told the mate bond relinquishes its constricting hold after several months. But I don’t think it will allow space travel or extended separations of time and distance.”

“That’s unfortunate, especially since you didn’t become his mate voluntarily.”

“I’m resigned to it, Dr. Barazi. Kleet’s a good man. He loves me and I care for him. There’s something else you need to know.” Her hand slid to her lower belly. His eyes tracked the movement and widened.

“You’re pregnant?”

“Yes. The family doctor believes it’s twins. I’m to be tested in a few days to verify the number of babies.”

“So soon?”

“I’m told Avera mate-claiming custom is extremely fertile.”

Dr. Barazi’s face grew ruddy. He cleared his throat. “Then it’s irrevocable. I’m sorry to lose you.”

“I’ll still work with you while you’re on Avera. I want to send a message to my parents, but the Avatier hasn’t decided if he’ll allow them to visit for the babies’ birth. Oh, that reminds me. The Averans are afraid of strangers because they were attacked by Malchovists.”

“Malchovists! Here? Are we in danger?” He looked around as though searching for their enemy.

“It was eight to ten generations ago, but thousands of people died. They still teach their children to fear strangers.”

“We need to notify USP.”

“I agree. But the Averans won’t allow anyone else on their planet. Kleet was adamant about that. There’s something else you need to know.” She told him about the lone stranger who taught the Averans about technology.”

“So you were right, Sheleigh.”

“It had to be the answer. It’s too bad the Malchovists came and ruined everything. They froze the Averans in time, in a way.”

There was a step in the room. She turned to see Kleet coming toward them. He looked dashing in his cream shirt and dark brown trousers. Her heart sped up. He came right to her and slid his arm around her. Before she quite realized what he was doing, he had leaned down and kissed her possessively. It was as he was addressing Dr. Barazi afterwards that she realized he’d made a statement to her superior with that kiss.

“Dr. Barazi, are you satisfied that Sheleigh is well? She’s made an excellent match with me.” Kleet appeared much larger than Dr. Barazi to her eyes, but that was only because he was

so much more virile than the studious Amin was.

“Sheleigh says you love her. That doesn’t make up for you claiming her as your mate without asking her first. But it prevents me from calling in USP.”

Kleet stiffened. “Your USP has no say on Avera.”

“We protect our own. If I thought you were trying to hold Sheleigh against her will, I’d call USP for help.”

“So USP will use force against a lesser society to take what it wants?” His tone as he looked at her was accusatory.

“No. That’s not what Dr. Barazi said. USP will use force to reclaim what belongs to it. I belong to USP, Kleet.”

“You’re Avera first now.” He drew her flush against him. “I have to go back to work.” His voice was husky and his eyes had darkened. He leaned down to claim her lips again. It was longer than a customary good-bye kiss. Passion soon coursed through her, making her wish they were alone.

He lifted his head. “Later.” She took it for the promise it was. “Good-bye Dr. Barazi.” He turned and left the hall. His cape flowing out behind him seemed to bounce happily with his stride.

“He’s possessive of you.” Dr. Barazi reclaimed her attention. His gaze was sharply intent.

“Yes. I can’t tell if it’s a result of the newness of the mate bond, the fact that I’m not Avera, or just Kleet’s personality. He pursued me rather single-mindedly before we married.”

“The physical attraction between you is almost palpable. You’re sure it’s more than that?”

Sheleigh explained how the mate bond felt, how it recognized Kleet’s touch, how they didn’t want to be separated. She tried to give a strictly scientific explanation of how she was joined to Kleet, but the wonder of it kept slipping into her words.

What she said must have convinced Amin, because he nodded. “Averans will be the fourth species in USP who bond to permanent mates.”

“If they join USP. They might not,” she cautioned.

“You’re a member of the ruling family now. Use your influence with them.”

“I can’t even get the Avatier to agree to let my parents come for the birth of my babies. The Averans are just too afraid. Allowing us here is an anomaly they don’t wish to repeat.”

“But why? They’re intelligent, technologically advanced beings. Surely they can see we’re not a threat.”

“I don’t think they’re as advanced as they appear. Yes, they know how to use technology, but they’re steeped in their old ways. They wear natural fibers for clothing. They eat natural foods grown in the earth or on trees, and animals cultivated for eating. Their gods are the sun and the moon, even though they know they’re not gods. They walk from wherever their transport sets them down to wherever they’re going because they don’t have wheeled vehicles. They’re like children playing dress-up.”

Dr. Barazi peered at her. “I’m not sure about your analogy, but now that you mention these things, I believe you’re right.”

“They need for something to happen to blow them out of their suspended animation before they agree to join USP. I just wish I knew what that something was.”

* * * *

The medical facility was modern, if she ignored the caves, and pristine. The machines weren’t the latest technology, but the Averans had been cut off from outside influences for ten

generations. It was modern enough for her needs.

The invasive cell count hurt only as much as a hard pinch. The diagnostic scan didn't hurt at all. Then she got dressed and waited with Kleet for the results. He held her hand while they sat side by side.

"Are you feeling more agreeable about the pregnancy, Shel?"

She looked at him. His light eyes were warm gray today, reflecting his shirt. It was hard to be angry with him while the mate-bond surged through their connected hands.

"I'm resigned to it. It doesn't seem real yet anyway because I'm not round in the middle."

"You'll get that way soon enough with multiple babies. I can't wait."

"I don't think I can handle more than two babies at once." Panic fluttered in her like a trapped bird.

"We'll have help if there are more than two." He paused and when he began again he spoke tentatively. "Shel, tomorrow morning will you fly the mating flight with me again?"

Her heart jolted. "But we're already mated."

"I want to fly you again tomorrow. You've already flown it once, so you shouldn't be afraid next time."

She licked her dry lips. "There won't be more babies, will there?"

"No, that part's already done. I just thought it would help to bring us closer."

She frowned. "Closer how?"

His chest expanded on a breath, and then he breathed out. He'd never been hesitant before. "The mating flight is such a powerful bonding. I thought it might help you to love me."

Her breath whooshed out at the unexpected words. "Kleet, love doesn't come from mating flights."

"It can on Avera. Won't you let me try?"

What could it hurt? Their first flight had bound them physically. Maybe the intimacy of the flight could help emotional intimacy to grow between them. "All right. We can try."

He squeezed her hand and leaned over to kiss her. He lingered until they heard the room door open. Dr. Rotairn came into the room bursting with suppressed energy. He smiled.

Sheleigh gripped Kleet's hand. *Please don't let there be more than two babies*, she prayed.

Dr. Rotairn sat in the chair facing them. "It's twins." Sheleigh let out a huge breath. Kleet whooped. "Identical twins--there's almost identical DNA and one egg sac. Congratulations."

Kleet gathered her to him and kissed her hard. She kissed him back. She was lightheaded with relief that there were only two babies. She carried this man's children. It was so unbelievable that this could have happened to her by the simple act of taking this man into her body.

Kleet pulled back from her and just stared at her face. His gray eyes sparkled. "Two babies. Thank you, Shel."

She sputtered. "I didn't have much to do with it. It was you and Avera."

He smiled, making her heart flip over. "Then thank the gods for Avera."

Dr. Rotairn cleared his throat. "I'll send my report to the Avatier. He can take care of the formalities with the council. Sheleigh, I'll see you in a month."

Kleet took her out of the medical center into the hot Averen sun. The heat was something real she could feel. She turned to him as they waited for their transport. "I can't believe it."

"Dr. Rotairn doesn't lie."

"No, I mean it can't be real. This must be a dream. A week ago you and I were separate

people. Now we're part of each other." She spread her hands over her belly. "We've made two lives that are an equal part of each of us. Things just don't happen this fast."

Kleet tucked her face into the curve of his neck and pressed her to him with one arm. "This is the realization of a dream, not the dream itself. I love you, Shel."

She looked up into his face. "I wish I could say the same to you, Kleet."

"You will. Soon."

* * * *

They stood on the cliff at dawn the next morning watching the sun rise. Kleet's naked flesh pressed against her back. His erect penis prodded her buttocks. His arms were around her, allowing his fingers to flick her nipples to hardness. They would jump as soon as the sun warmed the air in the canyon below.

He rubbed his penis against her, and then prodded between her legs. She widened her stance, allowing him access. He rubbed his cock between her legs.

"Ummmm," she moaned. She wanted him inside her.

She felt the air eddying by her bare feet as she rose on tip toes to rub against his body. The pleasure was becoming intense.

"Ready, Shel?" he murmured huskily.

She nodded her head against him.

His hands moved to her waist. She tensed. He tensed, and then tossed her out into the air. She felt him behind her as her stomach plummeted. The air rushed over her tender nipples, puckering them. His hands gripped her shoulders. His cock pushed between her legs, and then he thrust inside her. Her breath exploded out of her.

He thrust vigorously into her widespread body. She clenched on him, wanting, needing. She panted. She needed more, more, more. Their bond tightened and so did her body. She exploded, dragging him with her. And then they were flying in her mind as well as in real life. It was beautiful, it was fantastic, it was fulfilling.

They glided to earth, where Kleet held her tightly. "I love you," he averred.

"Kleet, you're mine." She felt more tightly bound to him, but love hadn't come on this flight.

He sighed. "We'll try again in a few days."

"But Kleet ..."

"It's working. I felt it. We're more tightly bound than we were before. This is the right way to become closer."

"All right. We'll try again."

He kissed her. The kiss soon grew out of control as he lowered them to the ground. Sheleigh heard nothing over the mate-bond roaring through her veins. Then even that sound was consumed in the claiming of her mate.

Chapter Twelve

For the next three and a half weeks, they flew the mating flight at dawn three days a week. Dawn was the time when the sun warmed the air and the thermal currents made for an extended mating flight. Kleet used the additional air time to mercilessly imprint his body on hers. She was sore for hours afterward, but she wouldn't give up their flights for anything. To be naked in the first rays of the rising sun was wonderfully pagan. To be naked with Kleet as he flew her was ecstasy. To be naked and falling weightless was the ultimate freedom, the ultimate high when you added in Kleet's participation.

Sheleigh hoarded these precious hours with Kleet as a miser hoarded gold. He carved the time out of his full schedule knowing how important it was to bind her tightly to him. And it was working. She felt how essential he became to her each time they flew. She felt how tightly he wove himself into the fabric of her being each time they landed. And she felt how much of herself she gave to him each time they were finished.

She couldn't prevent giving little pieces of her heart and soul to him when they flew. At night when they mated in bed she didn't have this problem of giving bits away. But when they flew it was different--it was tradition, biology and animal instinct, and she felt like an Averno now when they flew. Whether it was the planet's influence, the societal influence that drove even non-flyers to fly mating flights, or whether it was Kleet himself, she didn't know. She only knew that she jumped from the cliffs willingly now and sought the air as one born to it.

Kleet's bare body brushed against her naked back and riveted her thoughts on the here and now. She prepared herself for his first violent thrust into her body, the one that fought the wind to join with her and won. There was a soft thudding sound behind her, and then quickly another, like a fist hitting flesh. Kleet grunted in pain. He slammed heavily into her back and she lost her aerodynamic pose. She plummeted a few feet before she righted herself by grabbing him.

"Kleet! What happened?" she screamed at him. His face looked odd.

"Shot," he managed the thick word. His pupils contracted to pinpoints as the color leeched from his face.

"What are you saying?" she demanded, unable to fathom that they might be in peril.

"Can't fly," he murmured in her ear as his left arm clutched at her. "Got my wing."

Sheleigh glanced past his right arm and that's when she saw his right side from mid chest down was covered in blood. "Kleet, you're hurt!" He bled freely from a deep ugly gash in his side and he said his wing was hit. They were plummeting to their deaths for sure if he couldn't slow their descent at the crucial moment.

"Kleet, you've got to slow us down so that the fall doesn't kill us!" She almost laughed at the complete absurdity of that statement. For sure they were going to die.

"Can't move it at all," he groaned. She realized he meant his wing.

What to do? And it had to be done quickly. Without their limbs being spread they were dropping like stones. Kleet had wings but couldn't use them. But she had arms that worked. Could she spread his wings for him? If so, she would have to be behind him. She had to try.

She turned him around forcefully and pushed him face down. He grunted in pain. She wrapped her legs around him and lifted her hands under his wings to spread them. Kleet groaned.

She forced his wings out until they caught the air and with all the strength in her body she held the wings arched against the buffet of the wind. Her muscles burned with the effort, but their descent began to slow. The ground was rushing up to meet them, she noted, but all her energy had to go into saving them.

Five hundred meters, three hundred meters, one hundred meters. The ground grew ever closer. They had more glide than drop now. Fifty meters, twenty, ten, five.

“Hold on Shel!”

His feet hit first but he flexed just as he hit and began running. Sheleigh dropped from his back and they both fell forward onto the ground with a tremendous “oomph.” Kleet took the brunt of their fall.

She just lay on him, breathing in great draughts of air and unable to move for a moment, even though she knew he needed room to breathe. They were alive! Her desperate actions had made the difference that saved them.

Sheleigh choked back a sob, but a second one escaped her, then tears fell freely down her cheeks as she released the terror that had seized her during their fall. What if they had died? What if she had lost what she had with Kleet, the love she hadn’t expected to find, not now and not here? She scrambled off him and dropped to her knees by his side. She grimaced at the pain, for her knees were raw and bloody. Her palms were scraped but not bleeding.

Kleet’s wings were extended so she couldn’t see his bloody side. She grabbed his shoulder and began to roll his big body over, looking him over carefully as he moved. He was unconscious, his body slack, his face white. As his wing moved away from his body a wide, bloody gash appeared on his side, running from his chest to his back. That side, hip and leg were covered with blood and encrusted dirt. There were scattered spatters and streaks of blood on his chest, groin and the front of his legs. It had been a messy flight and an even messier landing. So much blood!

Her hands hovered over the gash, wondering what to do to stop the flow of blood. He wasn’t bleeding profusely to indicate an artery had been hit, just steadily enough to worry her that he might bleed to death if the guards took too long to find them. Surely someone had noticed that their mating flight was irregular. Kleet was the heir, after all, so she assumed the guards didn’t give them complete privacy in the air. This one time she hoped the guards had been watching.

Since they were both naked, she had nothing to stop the bleeding or bind the wound. She had only her hands, which were covered with dirt. Kleet didn’t need any more dirt in the wound. His chest rose and fell with labored breathing, and she found that reassuring. She moved to his outstretched wing and there the damage made her wince in sympathy. There was an eight-millimeter diameter hole torn out of the center of the wing. The hole was bloody, the surrounding feathers were raggedly torn and some were missing. Closer to Kleet’s body was another hole. This must have been the shot that hit his body on the way to his wings.

A killing rage filled her as she hovered over her mate’s mutilated wing and torn body. Some deranged fanatic wanted Kleet dead simply because he had wings. The holes in Kleet’s wings were their own message: “Die because you’re different from us.” If she had the shooter here now, she would strangle him or her with her bare hands. She was that angry. Their death would have the purity of vengeance to justify it, whereas their attack on Kleet had no justification. There was none in thinking to advance a cause by killing the principals of the opposing viewpoint. Fanatics throughout Earth’s history had proven that beyond a doubt.

There was no outlet for her rage, her terror had evaporated, her grief was locked in her

throat and chest, but her love found an outlet. Here her mate lay, torn, battered and suffering, possibly dying. She must comfort him and give him love if this was to be all she had of him. Although she prayed for more time with him.

She moved around near his head and gathered his heavy, lax body up on her knees and into her arms. She felt stronger just touching him. Her mate bond with him always had that effect. She stroked his dark hair back from his wide brow and kissed his forehead.

"You're going to live, Kleet. You *must* live. I need you. I've only just found you and I need more time with you, years more time. I need years of holding your hand, decades of holding you in my arms, a lifetime of flying mating flights with you. Your children need you to be a loving father to them. They don't want to be raised in a fatherless household or with a stepfather who isn't you. Help is coming--you have to hold on until they arrive. Hold onto me, Kleet. Hold on tight."

She continued to murmur to him, words that came to her mind but she paid no attention to their meaning as they passed her lips. She knew only that her mate must live. She kissed what she could of his face, ignoring a pain in her back as she stretched down to him. Her discomforts must be ignored until Kleet was safe.

An unknown increment of time passed while she held him and showered him with affection and willed him to live. Finally she heard the pounding of many boots and the clink of weapons, and she looked up to see four burly guards appear around a boulder. To their credit she saw desperation and deep concern on their faces, and this allayed her fears of an inside conspiracy. They hesitated as they saw their fallen master, and then moved quickly to his aid.

"What happened?" the senior guard demanded, hauling Kleet's shirt out of a duffel to use to clean the wound.

She laid Kleet's head on the ground before answering. "Someone shot him in the wings. Someone wanted him dead because he has wings." The fierce anger was back and the non-winged guard's head snapped up.

"Not me, my lady! I don't begrudge others their wings."

"Someone without wings tried to kill the heir. This person must be found and punished," she insisted heatedly.

One of the guards pulled out a communicator and began rapid-fire instruction to whoever was on the other end. She turned her attention back to the two guards working determinedly over Kleet. They'd found something white to bind the wound and were fastening it around him. Kleet's normally burnished skin was nearly as pale as the bandages.

If she hadn't been paying as close attention as she was, she would have missed the expression of pain that crossed the faces of the guards when they saw the damage to Kleet's wing. At that point, although she knew nothing about wings, she knew it was very serious. They were oddly gentle as they handled the damaged wing. She'd never thought of Kleet's wings as being fragile, but now she realized they were just lightweight feathers over muscles, tendons and a frame considerably lighter than his body. Look what damage the projectile had done to his heavier body.

"Is a doctor coming?" she asked, simply wanting to hear confirmation.

"A medic will be here momentarily. Then we'll fly immediately to the medical facility."

"I thought we were going to die, all four of us." The guards winced. They had failed to protect their charges. "That fanatic might have killed me and the future heirs while he was trying to kill the current heir. Maybe that was his plan, to wipe out Kleet's line. But everyone knows I'm non-winged. We don't know yet if the babies are winged or non-winged. What kind of

fanaticism kills the innocent as well as the one they deem to be guilty?"

She knew the answer to this question from thousands of years of Earth history and the deaths of millions of innocents. Still, she felt compelled to say the words aloud. Maybe she could find some logic in this madness if she tried hard enough. Or maybe she could find just a moment of peace if she understood anything that had happened today.

A whooping sound in the air high above them told of an air transport dropping into the canyon. The sound and the reverberating echo grew louder and louder as it neared them, and the decibel level was almost painful. They all crouched low over Kleet and the transport landed thirty feet in front of them. Three of the guards hoisted Kleet's lax body between them and moved quickly to the vehicle. The fourth guard pulled her to her feet and she was glad of his assistance. She'd stiffened in her crouch next to Kleet and had been having difficulty attempting to rise. Now she welcomed his supporting hand under her elbow.

As she climbed into the transport she noted with satisfaction that the medic was working on Kleet, setting up intravenous products. She folded her body to the floor close to Kleet. The metal floor of the transport was cold against her naked flesh and for the first time she remembered that she was naked in front of all these people. Her breasts with their nipples taut from the cooler air of the canyons had been fully viewed by the male guards, the male medic, the female pilot and male co-pilot. Everyone had seen her thatch, which only her mate should have seen. Her buttocks had been viewed, and there was no telling what else they had seen! She was mortified, even though in the seriousness of the situation she realized these people would be paying little attention to her nudity.

"Where are my clothes?" She was proud of the steadiness of her voice.

A guard handed her a bundle and her movements as she began to dress attracted the medic's attention. "My lady, you're injured. Please don't cover your injuries until I can see to them."

"I'm not injured." She continued to pull on her shirt, controlling her wincing at the painful movement of her bruised and battered body.

"You're bloody. Please wait for me to tend your wounds."

"It's Kleet's blood. I just have scrapes and bruises."

"Your knees need attention. Please don't cover them. You'll drive the dirt in deeper and risk infection."

"I need to cover myself. Don't you understand the desire for modesty?" she flared at him.

"Don't we have a robe on board for our lady?" the medic yelled. Moments later a robe was handed to her and she gratefully pulled it on. Its button front made easy access to her knees.

"You're lucky the heir could land you safely with his wing damaged," the medic observed.

"He couldn't move it at all. I had to hold his wings open," she refuted. A look of incredulity appeared on the faces of the medic and the guards.

"You helped him to fly?"

"It was that or die. I saw no other choice."

There was awe and something else in the medic's eyes before he turned back to Kleet.

"What kind of weapon makes holes that big?" she demanded of the medic.

"Nothing that should be used on living things." His reply was angry. "It looks like it might have been made by one of the pieces of equipment rock climbers use to blast hand and footholds in rock. How they got it to shoot that far ..." he stopped when he looked at her face. Someone had used rock blasting equipment on Kleet's flesh!

“That’s sadistic and savage. That man must be punished.” Her outburst was heated vitriol.

“Yes, my lady,” the head guard replied. Anguish scored his face, while his voice promised vengeance.

She laid her hand on Kleet’s body, needing contact with him, and that helped when the medic began to clean her knees. The bloody gouges would probably leave scars.

“How did this happen?” the medic’s voice was gentle.

“We were still going too fast when we hit the ground,” she said simply. He flinched.

Chapter Thirteen

Sheleigh must have been lulled into a somnolent state from adrenalin drop, tiredness, the retreat of fear and the white noise hum of the engine, because suddenly the door of the transport opened and guards and medical personnel buzzed around her like angry bees. Kleet's body was slid out on its stretcher and someone helped her to rise and follow stiffly after him. The bandages on her knees hindered a fluid stride.

For the first time since coming to this planet she saw weapons being carried openly instead of being holstered. The looks on the guards' faces were menacing and she was grateful for their alertness, although she wished it had come sooner. Much sooner. Their heir had been attacked and in the aftermath they were protecting him from a second attack. She was reminded of the adage of closing the barn door after the horse had escaped. Or *was* the horse gone?

"Is there still a known threat to Kleet?" she demanded of the guard captain.

"The city is restless today. There were three acts of violence so far this morning."

"And yet you allowed us to go to the cliffs where we were the most vulnerable," she exclaimed.

"No one interferes with a mating flight, my lady! You're an alien and it's common knowledge that the heir is having difficulty binding your alien self to him." Sheleigh flinched. "But the heir has chosen you, so if it takes years of mating flights to bind you, we'll take the two of you to the cliffs for as long as it takes, no matter what. And each time we'll hope he succeeds."

She was completely flabbergasted by his view of her relationship with Kleet. Although it was emotional binding that Kleet was building with her, not physical binding, as the guard thought. Still, the guard said it was a commonly held opinion that she and Kleet had separateness between them. She wondered if Kleet had heard this rumor, and then realized that he must have. What a blow to him it must be, like rubbing salt into a wound, to know his people thought he had failed to completely bind his mate. Did his people think him weak that he'd failed? Did they lose confidence in him? Did they question his sanity or mental reasoning in choosing an alien to be his mate? What had she done to him by not loving him, and done to the way his people thought of him? Even though she hadn't chosen him, and had had no say in the choice, she was ashamed that she had brought Kleet to this.

"My lady, if you'll go with this other doctor, she'll see to your injuries." An older, distinguished-looking gentleman--clearly an important man by the aura of confidence surrounding him--tried to pry her from Kleet's side. It was too much for her.

"If you think you're separating me from my mate, you'd better not plan on touching him. Because if you do, you'll be removed from his care so fast your head will spin. I'm staying with him, no matter what. So accept it or get out of my sight." This last was said with a deadly hiss.

The doctor hesitated, clearly rattled. It was probably the first time anyone had ever questioned his authority. "My lady, I understood you weren't bound to him."

"Clearly you were misinformed. Kleet bound me tightly to him in our first flight together. He has some trouble handling a woman with an independent mind, but you seem to have the same trouble, doctor. Perhaps it's a species failing. But if you think I'll move away from Kleet so

that a second attack on him will succeed where the first seems to have failed, you're wrong. The next projectile will have to tear through my flesh to get to his. Had I known what was happening this morning, I would have moved to protect him with my body. I should have moved ..."

"My lady," one of the guards objected.

Sheleigh reigned in her emotions. "Well, doctor? Time is getting away from us. What's your decision?"

His shoulders sagged. "Come with us."

Sheleigh held Kleet's left hand as he lay on his left side. She watched the surgical team repair the damage to Kleet's right side and then work began on his wing. It was tedious and very stressful to the surgeons and staff, most of who were winged. Masks covered their mouths so she couldn't see whether they were frowning. But their foreheads were furrowed and their eyes held concern, resignation and pity. This last emotion told her the horrible, unpalatable, unacceptable truth. The wing was more than likely crippled, unsalvageable, and Kleet would not fly again.

She must have made a sound as her grief for Kleet moved over her and her eyes overflowed with tears that spilled down her cheeks. The chief surgeon looked up at her. "You should go now, my lady. You're imagining the worst."

"If it can be reality for Kleet, then I can stand here and accept the truth head on. I won't hide from what all of you know to be true."

He didn't deny her words, just went back to his work. Sheleigh felt a pain deep in her abdomen, but she forced knowledge of it from her mind. Nothing else could happen to her and Kleet today.

Finally the wing was bandaged and bound to Kleet's body. The staff then went to work on his numerous scrapes and abrasions. One of the female staff washed Kleet while checking for damage. Sheleigh watched the hands touching her mate's naked body and noticed they were slightly less clinical in their perusal. When they moved to his genitals she knew a violent jealousy. The woman stayed too long in what was Sheleigh's legal territory. Sheleigh stepped forward to grip the offending arm in a painful vise.

"Get your hands off my mate," she hissed lethally for the woman's ears alone. She gave the woman a killing look and she shriveled under Sheleigh's glare. Quickly the woman moved to another part of Kleet's body. Sheleigh made sure the rest of her ministrations were kept strictly clinical. Obviously this woman had heard the same rumor the guards and the doctor had.

One of the doctors had noticed the byplay and his eyes widened. Well, the word would be out now that she was possessive about her mate. Perhaps the stories that spread from today would do much to restore Kleet in his people's eyes. She moved restlessly under another pain low in her abdomen. *Be calm*, she told the babies in her mind. *Your father will be all right*. She dared not touch her abdomen to comfort the babies while so many observant eyes were watching.

Kleet was transferred to a clean gurney, his lower body covered with a sheet, and she walked with him out of the surgery. In the corridor they met Kelfer and Lefair. She was immediately enveloped in their concern for her and Kleet. Kelfer stared down helplessly at the pale face of his unconscious son. Here was the most powerful man on the planet and the grief on his face told of his frustration at not preventing what happened to Kleet.

"The guards told us what happened. How bad is it, Dr. Nelarn?"

The important doctor now had a name, because he was the one who answered. "The heir will fully recover from the wound to his side. He'll be months rebuilding muscle tone, strength and tendon control again and he'll be in pain, but he'll recover." He took a deep breath. *Here it comes*. "The damage to his right wing was extensive. Several main vanes and muscles were

destroyed. The first bony arch was shattered. I don't think he'll ever be able to fly again."

Lefair's cry tore at Sheleigh's heart. How painful it must be to see your child crippled in some way. She didn't think of Kleet as being crippled, because to her, flight was an unnatural addition to being alive and able to walk, talk and function. But to these people the loss of flight was like losing an arm or leg, or an eye. They mourned the evolution to flightlessness. They thought of those without the ability to fly as lesser, as without something fundamental. Therein lay the conflict that had exploded and wounded Kleet today.

Kleet would be just as devastated as his parents clearly were now. Sheleigh would have to understand something she had been unable to grasp for the four weeks she had been mated. They thought of themselves as ordinary, while she thought of them as extraordinary. If she failed to understand Kleet's grief, she could lose him. After she had discovered her heart's desire today, she couldn't risk losing him.

Another pain stabbed her and she turned her gasp of pain into an offer of sympathy for Lefair. She hugged the older woman and accepted the comfort of caring arms around her. If not her mate, then her mate's mother would have to do.

"Were you injured, Sheleigh?" Lefair wiped her eyes as she inquired.

"Scrapes and bruises mostly. My knees took the brunt of it." She chose her words carefully to minimize the danger in the story and edit out the word "wings." She caught Kelfer's sharp, incisive look over his wife's head and knew that he knew there was more she wasn't telling. He probably had the entire story from the guards anyway. "I need to shower and dress. I'm filthy with dirt and blood and I'm tired of wearing this robe. I don't even have anything on my feet."

Here was something Lefair could take care of. She took charge immediately. "Those things are easily remedied. Dr. Nelarn, I assume Sheleigh can use the facilities in Kleet's private room?"

"Of course. We need to get the heir out of the corridor. His room is just down the hall."

The entourage of guards, ruling family and medical staff moved down the hall, gathering stares as the family was recognized. Sheleigh was glad to see the concern on people's faces as they looked at Kleet. His family had been fairly good rulers for generations. Except for the unhappy radical fringe, the populace as a whole had been happy and prosperous. Now things might change.

Kleet was carefully transferred to the bed and the doctor fussed with IV lines until he was satisfied. Kelfer took him by the arm and the two older men went out in the corridor, undoubtedly to discuss the grislier aspects of Kleet's medical procedures and condition. Fortunately none of the medical staff remembered to treat her. She didn't think she could pass intense medical scrutiny right now, what with the pains coming more frequently. She feared a miscarriage almost as much as she feared being examined for it. To lose Kleet's babies when he might never be able to fly again might mean they would remain childless their entire marriage. Logically she knew that babies were created by the act of sexual intercourse, no matter how it was performed. But the mystical part of her that had been born the first time Kleet flew her told her that fertility would only happen for her and Kleet during a mating flight.

Now was not the time for another loss. When Kleet awoke he would be told of his condition. Were he also to be told that his children were dead he might not survive the double blow. The platitudes pronounced by unthinking people, like, "You'll have other children," did not take into account the love and connection parents already felt for the baby that had died. Kleet loved his babies and wanted them very much. She had every intention of giving them to

him in eight months' time.

A guard brought her clothes from the air transport. She closed herself in the bathing room of Kleet's room, away from her mother-in-law's prying eyes. She stripped off the hated robe and stepped under the heated water of the shower. The heat felt good on her bruises and her back, but stung her abrasions. She scrubbed several times with soap, until she felt clean and human again.

But no amount of scrubbing would make the pains stop coming. She doubled over finally and cried her despair out into the wall. Despite their unorthodox and painful conception, she now wanted her babies. They were the physical manifestation of Kleet's love for her, part of both him and her. She wrapped her arms tightly around her belly, trying to comfort the babies and keep them in her body.

"Don't leave me," she begged them.

"Sheleigh, what's the matter?" Lefair's voice came to her through the shower glass.

No! Kleet's mother couldn't handle this. "Nothing." She tried to sound carefree, but the words came out through her clenched teeth.

"Sheleigh, I'm coming in there."

"No! I just need to cry a little. I need privacy."

The water snapped off and Lefair placed a towel around her shaking body. "Is it the babies?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with the babies. Please, I just need to be alone."

"The doctor might be able to stop what's happening if he has enough time." Sheleigh looked at her mother-in-law with grudging hope. "You're not bleeding yet, are you?"

"No. Just pain."

"Then let the doctor help you. He can stop the contractions."

"All right."

Lefair no sooner left the bathing room than what seemed like an army of medical personnel invaded the room and surrounded her. Her towel was stripped away. The female doctor demanded, "How long have you been having pains?"

"Since Kleet's surgery."

"A couple of hours. How often are the pains coming?"

"Every few minutes."

"No bleeding?"

"No."

"Did you strike your abdomen when you hit the ground?"

"No. I fell on my knees and on Kleet."

"I need to examine you, my lady. Please come with me now."

"I don't want a miscarriage." Sheleigh allowed them to lay her onto a stretcher. Outside the bathing room they placed the stretcher onto a gurney. Kelfer was standing with his arm around Lefair, his face white. She had a moment to realize she was naked in front of her in-laws. "I don't want to be naked!"

A blanket was thrown over her and she welcomed its warmth. She felt strangely chilled. "I don't feel well ..." It was the last coherent thought she had for a very long time.

Chapter Fourteen

Through a murky nightmarish hell, huge raptors came out of the sky to tear at her flesh while she fell from the cliff. They tried to cut Kleet's babies from her belly. They screamed at her, "Non wingeds must die! Non wingeds must die!" while their sharp claws scored painfully across her abdomen. She screamed and screamed for help, for Kleet, but he didn't come. No one helped her fight off the raptors. Over and over they attacked her, until she lay shredded and bleeding on the canyon floor. She cried pitifully for Kleet.

"Shhh, he's sleeping, dear," a female voice soothed.

"Why won't anyone help me? It hurts!"

"They can't give you a lot of painkiller because of the babies."

"The babies are gone! They took them!" Sheleigh began to cry huge wrenching sobs that tore painfully at her abdomen. The pain made her cry all the harder.

"No one took your babies. Stop crying like that before you rip out the sutures." Kelfer's stern voice made her subside to gulping sobs. "You had an aneurism that burst. You hemorrhaged. A result of hitting the ground this morning. The doctors had to do surgery to save your life, but you and the babies are fine. Do you understand?"

"The babies are still inside me? Then why does it hurt so much?"

"I told you. You had surgery to stop the hemorrhage. You've been ranting and screaming about being attacked by something, but none of that was real. You were having a nightmare. Anesthesia has that affect on some people."

"Where's Kleet? I need him. Please help me."

"You can't be moved right now and neither can Kleet."

"Where is he?" She looked around wildly, but didn't recognize the room. This wasn't Kleet's room. Remnants of the nightmare and whatever drug they'd given her remained to muddle her thinking, making her doubt what was real and what wasn't. "What aren't you telling me? Is Kleet dead? Tell me!" Her voice edged toward hysteria.

"Calm down and be reasonable. Kleet is asleep in his room. You're reacting to the anesthesia. As soon as you're stable, you'll be moved into Kleet's room. Then you'll be able to see him."

"You're lying. He's dead. Dead, because he had wings. My babies are dead. Dead because they didn't have wings. Now I have nothing. No mate, no babies!" She sobbed harshly, her heart breaking.

She heard Kelfer's harsh voice barking commands to someone. "Get the doctor. Have her bring a sedative."

She felt Lefair's smooth hand in hers and she tried to beg her forgiveness. "I didn't kill the babies. It wasn't my fault. I wanted Kleet's babies. I wanted Kleet. What they're saying isn't true--don't believe them. He bound me before he died, he did. I was his. But he'll never fly me again." Sheleigh broke down completely, sobbing in despair. She would never be happy again. There would be only loneliness and emptiness in her future without Kleet. A prick on her arm sent her spiraling down into oblivion, hoping to find her mate there.

When she awoke the room was dim and she was confused. There was a jumble of strange

dreams in her mind. She'd dreamed she'd married a man with wings. A dark-haired woman was sitting in a chair beside her bed.

"Momma?"

"No dear, it's me." Lefair's gentle voice soothed across her mind and the smooth hand took hers in a warm grip. "Is that what you call your mother?"

"Yes. I thought you were her for a moment. Your coloring is similar to hers. I had the strangest dreams and I feel all fuzzyheaded. Where am I?"

"You've been ill, dear. Now stay calm. Do you remember what happened this morning?"

"Kleet was almost killed. So was I." She wouldn't hide the truth from Lefair any more. Her mother-in-law was stronger than she looked.

"Yes. You must have hit the ground harder than you thought. You ruptured one of the blood vessels surrounding your womb and you hemorrhaged. That's why you thought you were having a miscarriage. The surgeons had to open you up and drain the internal bleeding and repair the blood vessel. The pain in your abdomen is where they cut you open to save your life. You'll have pain there for several weeks and you'll be confined to bed for at least a month. You won't be allowed to stress that area of your body. It must have taken a tremendous shock when you landed."

"It didn't seem that hard a landing, but I know we were going far too fast. So the babies are safe?"

"Quite safe now. You frightened us nearly to death. Don't ever try to hide something as important as a possible miscarriage ever again."

"I knew we couldn't handle losing the babies today, not after Kleet ... anyway, I couldn't face a miscarriage, so I tried to will it away."

"It was the wrong thing to do, especially in your case. You could have bled to death from the hemorrhage."

Sheleigh swallowed hard. Death had stalked her twice today, eager to claim her life. Was it still stalking her? "I'm going to be well, though?"

"Yes. The babies are well, and Kleet is resting comfortably."

"Has he been awake at all?"

"For a few minutes a while ago. He was very disoriented. His father spoke to him but isn't sure if Kleet understood or not. He asked for you. Kelfer told him you were asleep, which was true enough at the time."

"I'd like to see him."

"The doctors won't let you be moved until tomorrow. They're taking no chances after all that's happened to you today."

Sheleigh was disappointed. She would have to lie here alone until tomorrow. She was used to being active, although she didn't have the energy to do anything right now. She'd been used to sleeping alone, but a month being in Kleet's arms every night had changed her permanently.

"What time is it, Lefair?"

Lefair looked at her wrist chrono. "It's after eight in the evening. Kelfer wanted to see you when you woke up. I'll go sit with Kleet and relieve him." She rose and came to the bed. "I'm glad you're going to be all right, Sheleigh."

"Thank you."

In a few minutes Kelfer entered the room and walked up to her bed. "Are you feeling better, Sheleigh?"

"Yes. I guess I acted strangely earlier today. All I remember is really bad nightmares."

"We don't know yet all the native chemicals that might affect you adversely. The anesthesia is obviously one of those we need to be careful of in the future." He patted her hand. "I need to ask you questions about this morning, if you're up to it."

"I'm up to it. Did they catch the man who shot Kleet?"

"Not yet. Those canyons are a warren of escape routes. We've posted a million credit reward, though. Someone will sell him out for the reward money."

"Sheleigh, did you see him? Did you see anything that could help identify him?"

"I didn't know anything was happening until Kleet hit me in the back. I didn't even know he'd been shot until minutes after it happened. After that I was too busy worrying about dying to notice anything but the ground rushing up at us."

"Has anyone approached you, sent you communications, followed you, or shown undue interest in your life or your daily schedule?"

"No, but I haven't paid attention to things like that. I didn't know I had to. No one notified us that there was impending violence on this planet."

"I didn't take the rumblings of discontent seriously enough. Now I'm deadly serious about these radicals. Do the other humans know your schedule?"

Sheleigh looked at Kelfer in shock. "They didn't have anything to do with what happened today! I resent your implication that they did." She pulled her hand away from him.

"Perhaps indirectly one of them mentioned something to someone they didn't realize was a radical, or who works with the radical faction. It's hard to tell who's in league with whom. One of your group may have spoken about you and not understood what information they were giving away. We're going to have to question your entire group."

"Sure, begin your hunt with the aliens. You didn't have any problems before we came, did you?" she asked bitterly. Because of her connection to Kleet, her group would be interrogated and suspected, possibly victimized. It was like the history of Earth repeating itself on Avera.

"It's a logical place to begin, Sheleigh ..."

"Kleet and I have been flying mating flights three days a week for a month. We use almost the same three days each week, go the same time each day, fly the same way there and the same way back, use the same cliff. We fly a similar flight each time and spend a similar number of minutes in the air. We've developed a pattern. We're predictable. And I was told it's common knowledge that the heir was having difficulty binding my alien self to him. Even the doctor had heard the story. The whole planet surely knows the heir has not bound me and that he flies me regularly to accomplish this goal." Her words were bitter. "Look to your own species for suspects."

"I ... wasn't aware the story was that widespread or that you'd heard it."

"I heard it for the first time today. I assume Kleet has heard it?"

"Yes. I asked him about it and he assured me you were physically bound to him."

"I am, and I have been since the first mating flight. He's been trying to make me love him."

Kelfer sputtered, "By flying you?" Then his eyes grew crafty. "Will he succeed?"

"The shooting today accomplished that goal. When I knelt in the dirt with Kleet's bloody body in my arms I realized that I can't live without him. I gave myself completely to him at that moment."

He sighed. "Then there is one good thing to come out of this horrible mess. Lefair told

you that you're to be confined to your bed for the next month?"

"Yes. I'll go crazy being stuck in bed. I'll want my work. I must have something to do."

"I'll have a medical bed installed in the common area of the house before you're released from here. Someone can carry you downstairs each day so that you won't be all alone. But if I find out you're overexerting, I'll order you to your bedroom and there you'll stay."

"And that brings up another topic I must address. With you and Kleet both injured, you won't be able to share the same bed without causing one another pain. I'll move your things to the bedroom across the hall from Kleet's room."

"Kleet won't agree to that."

"I'll make it an order. You've had serious surgery and mustn't be jolted too much. He'll be restless with pain while he heals. He'll make the sacrifice for you because he loves you. And you'll do the same for him because you love him."

"I think Kleet will need me, don't you?"

"You'll have a week together here in the medical center, then a week, maybe two at home. You'll have plenty of time together."

But not physical time together. If they were both in physical pain they would be wary of touching one another in case they made the pain worse. Kleet wouldn't get the support he needed if he and she had to hold back. His father had watched Kleet be an independent man for most of his thirty-five years. He must have forgotten what it was like to be newly mated and to yearn for your mate with all of your being, to feel incomplete without your mate. Because he'd forgotten, he didn't realize that this was the stage of Kleet's relationship with her. Kleet wasn't as independent as he'd been before they mated. Now he was a half of a whole. But how could she tell Kleet's father that Kleet was needy. His father wouldn't believe it. She couldn't think of any argument that Kelfer would hear and she wasn't physically able to make demands right now. But she felt strongly that Kelfer was making a serious mistake.

"Tell me how you helped Kleet to fly." His voice was tinged with awe. "I couldn't believe it when the guard told me."

She relayed the events of that morning from her perspective and relived again in her mind the terrifying descent and the desperation that drove her to act as she did for their survival. She was amazed at her own actions, now that she could see them from a distance of time and with clear-headedness. Having nothing else to consume her thoughts, she could tell from her memories that they had hit the ground much harder than she thought they had when it happened. Her adrenalin must have been sky high for her not to have felt the impact more.

"The wonder is that you and Kleet weren't hurt more seriously than you were."

"I was just thinking a similar thought. I was pumped full of adrenalin. Kleet must have been, too."

"Your actions averted a terrible tragedy. I thank you for saving my son's life. And your own, and my grandchildren's, of course."

"I know this is painful for you, but I need to know how Kleet will react to being flightless."

"We don't know that for a certainty. As long as he has wings, there's still hope."

"I saw the doctors' faces in the surgery. The damage was extensive. They don't believe he'll ever fly again."

"We can buy the best reconstructionists on the planet to fix Kleet's wing. It might take awhile, but he'll fly again. You'll see. We're very stubborn, we Kryszans. Kleet comes from a long line of strong men. This is just a temporary setback for him."

So it was going to be denied instead of faced head on. She sighed. Denial would make it harder on everyone in the long run. She would have to research the stages of grief, because she remembered something about denial being one of the stages. She would have to drop the subject for now. Lethargy pulled at her and her eyes grew heavy.

“I’ve tired you, my dear. You need to sleep to regain your strength. Rest now.”

“I don’t want to be alone.” Her voice was plaintive.

“Lefair will come and sit with you awhile until the medical center tells us it’s time to leave.”

“Kleet,” her last conscious thought was to want her mate.

Chapter Fifteen

The moment Sheleigh saw Kleet didn't come fast, but after she saw him she forgot all about the wait.

"Shel, you're hurt!" he exclaimed.

She couldn't answer for a moment as she breathed through the pain of being moved into the bed next to Kleet's. Even though they were gentle, the jostling to the incision stole her breath. Kelfer stepped agilely into the silence.

"Sheleigh had surgery. The fall caused an aneurism that ruptured. She's fine now, but she's confined to bed for a month."

"But I remember my feet being on the ground. We didn't fall." Kleet's voice was harried.

"How hard did you touch down?"

"I don't remember. But my feet were on the ground."

"You were running," Sheleigh managed to say at last.

Kleet looked at her with apology written on his face and she realized suddenly that no one had told him about his wing. *Oh, damn.* Obviously they wanted her presence before they talked to Kleet.

"How do you feel?" he asked her, his voice intimate and loving, and she was warmed clear through. She wished his bed was closer so that she could hold his hand.

"It hurts to move. A lot. I've never had abdominal surgery before ..."

"Abdominal surgery! The babies, are they all right?" He tried to rise from the bed.

Kelfer placed a restraining hand on his agitated son. "Calm down. The babies are just fine. The medical staff has monitored Sheleigh and the babies very closely for the past day." That was news to *her*. "Dr. Rotairn has been here overseeing both of your care. In fact, he'll be here soon to check on both of you again."

Oh, double damn. The news was about to be presented and she didn't think she was ready for it. "Kleet, how do you feel?"

"I also hurt to move. I wish someone would help me turn over on my stomach. It hurts terribly to lie on my wing. It hurts more now than when I was shot."

"Oh, Kleet. If only I'd known, I would have thrown my body in front of you to protect you."

"No! No, Shel. You would've been killed."

"I thought you were dying yesterday. All that blood and then you lay so still after we landed. I would rather have given my own life than to see you killed."

There was a strange light in Kleet's eyes and a question was clearly forming on his lips, but it went unasked as Dr. Rotairn entered the room. He must have been waiting until she got settled in her bed.

"Kleet, I'm glad you're awake. We need to discuss your condition." Clearly the man was unhappy about having to break his news, because his smile kept slipping. He walked up to Kleet's bedside, on the side closest to her so that she was behind him where Kleet could see her. Kleet's parents stood on the opposite side of his bed.

"Kleet, you received some terrible wounds yesterday. The wound to your side will heal

eventually. The wounds to your wing ... well, we're just not sure. If they heal as they are now, you won't be able to use that wing. Your father has mentioned reconstructionists to me. Now I'm not sure what they can do for you, but I think we should try one and see what he or she recommends."

Kleet had paled. "What are you trying to say? You said I can't use the wing the way it is. You mean I can't fly, at all, until a reconstructionist works on it? What would a reconstructionist do?"

"Well, I'm not a reconstructionist, but there was damage to the major vanes, to the muscles, and structural damage. That would all have to be repaired, rebuilt."

"You can't rebuild wings." Kleet's voice was hoarse. "We don't have the technology and knowledge to do that."

Kelfer tried to calm his son. "We don't know exactly what needs to be done yet, Kleet. Wait until the reconstructionist examines you."

Kleet's expression was strained. "How long would these repairs take, if they could be done?"

Dr. Rotairn answered him. "I'm just making a guess, you understand. But I think we're talking several months soonest and perhaps several years if multiple corrective procedures are required."

"Months. Years. And you're making guesses because at this point I don't think you're sure they can even repair the damage, are you doctor?"

"Everything I say is speculation, because I'm not a reconstructionist."

"If I wasn't the heir, what would you be telling me?"

Dr. Rotairn looked towards Kelfer, but Kleet recaptured his attention. "Tell *me*, the boy you helped bring into this world. Don't look at my father."

Dr. Rotairn looked down at Kleet, and whatever Kleet saw in the doctor's face made him pale further. "Kleet, it's my personal medical opinion that you'll never fly with that wing again." Sheleigh saw Kleet swallow and her heart hurt for him. "But I think you should see the reconstructionists and hear what they have to say. We live in a modern age now. We have technological advances we never had before. We have visitors from other planets among us." The doctor gestured her way. "Perhaps they have knowledge we don't ..."

"We don't show our wings to outsiders," Kleet snapped, and she flinched.

"If what they know can heal you ..." the doctor let the sentence trail.

Kleet's face twisted in agony. "Because what we know can't."

"I told you ..."

"Yes, I heard you. May. Might. Possibly. You have no guarantees for me. And you can give me no hope." His words were bitter.

Sheleigh tried to give him hope. "Kleet, I hadn't thought about what USP knows, but surely ten species must know something that can help you."

"You don't think they'll guess from seeing me that the population of this planet is winged?" It was said sarcastically. "And what one of them knows they'll all know."

Sheleigh mentally reared back from his words. Here was an intolerance of others who were different from him that he'd never shown her before. The condescension he put into the words "them" and "they'll" was chilling. Was he truly prejudiced against other species, or was this his anger at his plight lashing out? Was how she felt now the way the non-wingeds felt?

"Then they must know already." She couldn't help a little lashing out of her own, now that he made her wonder what he really thought of her as a non-Averan.

But immediately she knew it had been the wrong thing to say. Her heart told her so, and the four faces who turned horrified eyes to her confirmed it.

Kelfer, as the ruler of the planet, spoke first. "You told them we have wings?"

"No."

"Then why did you say they know already? We let you into our trust, Sheleigh. Now you tell us you've broken it?"

"No! I didn't tell anyone." She had to do something to remove the look of betrayal from Kleet's face. "I didn't like what you said," she directed this part to Kleet. "About 'what one of them knows they'll all know.' It sounds biased against non-Averans. It smacks of intolerance and prejudice. Since I'm one of 'them,' I took affront for all of USP."

"You're Kleet's mate, Sheleigh. You're not one of them." Kelfer tried to split hairs. "Anyway, we've gotten away from what's important. Kleet, it might not hurt to let our top reconstructionists talk to the visitors in a general way. No one has to mention wings or let visitors look at you. They can discuss aerodynamics from a scientific viewpoint and no one will be the wiser."

"But I need to be able to fly *now*, not in months or years! I have to fly Sheleigh. It can't wait! She has to be flown until ..." He broke off and she knew he tried not to admit why he flew her three times a week.

"But Kleet, you don't have to fly me anymore. I love you." She admitted the truth she'd discovered only yesterday, glad to be able to offer this lifeline in his moment of need.

But instead of glorious wonder on his face, his features twisted with derision and revulsion. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. "I don't need your pity, Sheleigh."

"Pity!" she sputtered. "It's not pity. It's what you wanted. I love you."

"Don't lie to me because I'm crippled," he shouted, anger and distaste dripping from his words.

She recoiled from the verbal blow. He didn't believe her! He was throwing her love back in her face.

Kelfer stepped into the reverberating silence. "Kleet, listen to your mate. She admitted it to me yesterday ..."

"I didn't fly her yesterday. I was shot down from the sky," he refuted his father's words bitterly. "So there's no way it could have happened yesterday. Do you pity the cripple, too?"

Kelfer's face twisted with grief. "You might be able to fly again. We haven't even tried the reconstructionists yet."

"You didn't answer my question, Father. Do you pity the cripple?"

Kelfer's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Lefair's grip on his arm was white knuckled and her face was strained as she glanced between her mate and son. Finally he said heavily, "You're my son, my first born child, my heir. I didn't want something like this to happen to you."

Kleet's face leached of all color. "Thank you for the truth at last." He spoke quietly and tonelessly. "I'd like to be alone now. Dr. Rotairn, would you have the staff turn me over onto my stomach. And would you get Sheleigh her own room, please."

"No, Kleet! I want to stay here with you." She watched his face twist again.

"Doctor, please do as I ask."

"Kleet, your mate ..." Kelfer began, only to be interrupted by his son.

"I've been wounded. I need to heal. To do that I need peace and quiet. Sheleigh needs peace and quiet, too. She needs her own room. Don't you want me to get better, Father?"

Kelfer shut his mouth with a snap, but Sheleigh needed to fight before it was too late. “Kleet, I need to be close to you so that I can get well. Don’t you want me to heal?”

He at least looked at her this time, but his eyes held disillusionment and pain. “You’re mistaken, Sheleigh. We all make mistakes.”

A chill went through her. He couldn’t mean ... no. He’d said that he loved her.

“Doctor, please do as I asked.” Dr. Rotairn left the room.

“Kleet,” Lefair cried, “this is terrible. Please reconsider.” Her expression was stricken.

“Mother, please go with father now. I’m tired and I need to rest.”

Kelfer pulled Lefair with him out the door. Each of them gave their son a last painful look.

Sheleigh grabbed the precious moments alone with her mate. “Kleet, I didn’t lie. I love you. I found out yesterday when I held your bloody body in my arms. You’ve got to believe me.”

“Please stop it, Sheleigh,” he said in a tired voice. “What you’re saying isn’t possible. You didn’t love me when we left home yesterday morning. Then I didn’t fly you. So I couldn’t have made you love me.”

“You loved me before you flew me,” she argued.

“That’s different. I wanted you for a long time. I knew you were right for me. You don’t have that knowledge.”

“I held out for thirty years before I met you. Don’t tell me I didn’t know you were different from other men. Besides, love grows. It’s what you wanted to happen. A man and woman share their home and their life. They mate and they give each other parts of their hearts. That’s what we’ve done. That’s what I did little by little. I gave you my heart.”

His face twisted with hope, but then it hardened. “It’s too late. I’m crippled. I can’t be a mate to you anymore.”

Her heart clenched. No! “Your ability to fly doesn’t have anything to do with your ability to love. I can’t fly, but I can love.”

“You’re not Avera. Flying is part of who I am. I’m only half alive now. What good am I? I’m as bad as the non-winged.”

She sucked in her breath at his intolerance of the non-winged. His attitude was why Avera had a growing problem on its hands. “I’m non-winged.”

“You’re human. There’s a difference. You’re the way you’re supposed to be, you’re complete. The non-winged are incomplete.”

“According to you, wings are being phased out of your species by a process of natural selection. Theirs is the preferred state. Evolution says so.”

“What has that got to do with us?” he demanded.

Obviously, she had scored a point in their argument, but at what cost? “What will you tell our non-winged children? Will you tell them they’re less than whole? If they have two eyes, two ears, two hands and two feet will you tell them they’re incomplete because they can’t fly? Will you love them less?” His face contorted in emotional pain, but this was too important to stop because it hurt him. “Will they love their father less, even if he loves them with all his heart, simply because he can’t fly?”

“Sheleigh ...”

She bulled on determinedly. “Should I stop loving you because you can’t fly? Would you stop loving me if I was hurt and couldn’t walk, or lost an arm or an eye? Would you love me less if I wasn’t perfect in your eyes?”

“I’m crippled!”

“Only in your own mind.” Dr. Rotairn returned with a number of staff. She had only moments left. “Kleet, don’t send me away.”

There was pain in his eyes as he stared at her. She hoped she’d reached him. Then he looked down and she knew she’d failed. “I need to be alone, Shel.”

As they wheeled her bed out of the room she had one last look at her mate. It was a heart-wrenching look at a strong man felled by a terrible blow. He was a pitiable, hopeless wretch. But she loved him. She began to cry as they turned the corner and he was lost from her sight.

She cried most of the day and would not be comforted. Her hormones were changing with pregnancy and she still felt the lingering aftereffects of the fight with the anesthetic. She was lonely for her mate, she was in pain and her emotions ricocheted from despair to anger to bewilderment. Why would Kleet go to the extreme of tearing her world apart in order to make her his mate, only to discard her a month later? Now they were bonded and in love, so discarding her would be almost impossible. Why would he do this to her?

Her mate was in physical and emotional pain. She needed to be with him to give him love, support and strength. But he’d rebuffed her, refused her, relegated her to the status of expendable. She railed at her physical condition, that at a time when she needed to fight for her man she couldn’t. She would be helpless for weeks, important weeks during which Kleet would withdraw from her and grow used to living without her. No! She couldn’t let that happen.

Kleet had dragged her kicking and screaming into Averan society, where she hadn’t wanted to be. But by God, she was here and used to the idea, and she was staying!

That thought stopped the tears finally, giving her the strength to face the week alone in the medical center. Lefair was with her and Kleet most of each day. Kelfer came in the evenings. Still, she felt very much alone.

On the second day she called Dr. Barazi and asked for work to do. He was relieved to hear from her, since no one had bothered to give him updates on her condition after her ‘accident.’ He was appalled to hear that she and Kleet had been attacked by radicals. She encouraged him to warn their group to be extra careful. She promised to keep him updated and to see if her group could visit her in the Kryszan residence.

The week dragged by until she was released to go home. On the landing pad she saw her mate for the first time in a week. Her heart lurched, and then sped up. He was on his feet, unlike her. His right arm was in a sling bound to his chest, probably to protect the wound in his side. He had color in his face once again. He looked much better than the last time she’d seen him.

She held out her hand to him and he took it. His touch was thrilling and mate-bond recognition roared through her. It was almost painful, it had been so long.

“How do you feel, Shel?” His eyes flickered as emotions raced through him.

“If you hadn’t sent me away, you’d know. Don’t I get a kiss hello?”

He hesitated, while she held her breath. Then he leaned down, giving her no more than an obligatory peck. She tried to curb her disappointment in order to enjoy the small crumb he’d given her.

“I’ve missed you. I was lonely in my exile.”

“Shel,” he cautioned.

“Don’t think you can silence me. You’re not going to be the first Averan to set aside an unbreakable mate bond. So get it through your thick head. I’m your mate and I’m always going to be your mate.”

His face grew stony and she felt him retreat behind a wall of anger. He released her hand, severing all connection to him, and she was bereft once more.

Then her stretcher was loaded into the transport, and all her concentration became focused on breathing. Her surgical scar was healing beautifully, the doctors told her, but it had only been a week. The incision was still painful and the jostling it had just received shot new daggers into her belly. She closed her eyes.

"Be careful with her!" Kleet's harsh demand broke through the haze of pain. At least he cared what happened to her on some level, if only as a living being.

The flight home was swift and smooth, but then came being moved from the transport into her bedroom. At some point as she wallowed in pain she felt Kleet's hand hold hers. She clutched it, wanting the mate-bond to drive the pain from her mind. Then she felt the soft bed beneath her back and blessed the lack of movement. Lefair stood beside the bed as she dabbed Sheleigh's face with a cool, damp cloth.

"It was too soon for you to be released from the medical center," Kleet accused. "You're in no condition to be home. We can't take care of you here. As soon as you're ready, I'll have you transported back there. They'll hear my opinion about letting you come home."

Sheleigh finally caught her breath. "I'm not going back there."

"You will if I say so."

"There's nothing they can do for me at the medical center that can't be done here. I just need to lie in bed until I heal. It won't hurt this bad much longer."

Kleet gestured to her prone figure. "You're helpless right now. You can't even move. There's no one here to take care of you during the day. I can't help you right now. No, you can't stay here."

Lefair turned to him. "I can take care of Sheleigh."

"You have your own life, Mother. I don't expect you to cancel your appointments to wait on us. Besides, Sheleigh is too heavy for you to move or carry. No, she's going back to the medical center until she can at least walk on her own."

Sheleigh's temper flared. She pointed at Kleet. "You're trying to get me out of your home, not for my sake but for your own. You don't want to have to look at me. You might realize you've made a mistake if you see me once too often, that the separation between us is wrong."

His face became stony. He crossed his arms on his chest. "I won't change my mind."

"I won't either. I'm staying where I am. If you try to exert authority over me, I'll demand my rights as your mate." Kleet flinched. "Ah, I thought that might persuade you. Your authority over me is all or nothing. You'd better keep that in mind."

Kleet's cheeks reddened. "I'll do that." He gave a stiff bow and stalked away. The room seemed less colorful after he left.

"Why did you push him away, Sheleigh?" Lefair asked.

"I didn't. He set the boundaries. I just reminded him what those boundaries were." She looked at her mother-in-law's concerned face and reached for her hand. Lefair squeezed it. "Don't worry, Lefair. I'll give Kleet the space he needs to be angry about his condition. But when I'm well I'm going to fight for him."

"I hope so. You haven't been mated very long. Kelfer and I are worried this hardship has come too soon."

"I think both of us need time to heal. Love isn't something you can turn off, like a water faucet. When Kleet's less angry he'll remember that he loves me. I'll be on my feet by then. There's nothing more I can do right now." She yawned, feeling drained of energy from the transfer home.

Lefair patted her arm. "Go to sleep, dear."

Sheleigh closed her eyes and snuggled into the thick mattress. She felt Lefair cover her with a soft blanket. She had to get well to fight for Kleet.

Chapter Sixteen

Ten days later Kleet went back to work, taking his dark coldness with him. Sheleigh was riddled with guilt at the relief she felt over his absence, but in those ten days his anger and gloom had permeated the residence. When he spoke to her, if at all, his words were short and curt. Gone was the tender loving husband, the ardent amour, the dedicated pursuer. In his place was a shell of a man consumed by grief.

Sheleigh slept alone every night in her lonely bed. Her recovery eliminated any sexual desire she might have felt for Kleet, but her heart writhed with the need just to be held in loving arms. Having a husband had occurred so suddenly, like a surprise storm that drenched a person to the skin. This pseudo widowhood had happened just as suddenly and with just as devastating an effect. On the day Kleet returned to work, it occurred to her that this must be what shell-shock felt like.

At dinner two nights later, Sheleigh got her first indication that the atmosphere outside the residence was just as unsettled as it was inside. Kleet ate his meal quietly, being his usual uncommunicative self, and didn't look at her.

Kelfer took hold of Lefair's hand. "There's been another attack. On Councilman Jaundar. A metal projectile crippled the engine of his transport. Luckily the pilot is a seasoned one and she was able to land the transport. Jaundar's bruised and shaken up. He's also demanding to know what I plan to do about these radicals."

He caressed Lefair's hand. "I want you to use caution when you go out. Have your guard with you at all times."

Sheleigh spoke up. "It sounds like you expect more violence. Are we safe here in the residence?"

Kelfer turned to her. "So far the attacks have been on airborne targets." His eyes slid to Kleet and back. Kleet stopped eating but remained stonily silent. "You know that Averans have historically been vulnerable in flight. The radicals are using our own history against us."

Sheleigh frowned. "It may only be a single individual, because there have been only two attacks in two months."

Kelfer shook his head. "I didn't want to frighten you while you were recovering, but this is the third attack on a council member this week."

Sheleigh jerked. Fear and unpleasant surprise ran circles through her body. "So many. How many last week?"

Kelfer looked at Kleet. "One last week. Sabotage to Councilwoman Bereau's transport."

"They're targeting the power structure," Sheleigh mused. "Do you think they'll target you and Kleet? They've already tried to kill Kleet once and failed." Her heart clenched at the reminder.

Kelfer squeezed Lefair's hand and she placed her other hand over his. "If they're targeting the power structure, as you say, then Kleet and I would be the likeliest targets. I've more than doubled security. But the council members who've been attacked haven't been the most powerful."

"Maybe they've been the most vulnerable," Sheleigh guessed. "Like Kleet and I were."

Kleet's face darkened at the reminder of his wounding.

"We have too many points of vulnerability," Kelfer agreed. "As soon as you're well, you'll have a squad of guards assigned to you."

Sheleigh squawked. "I don't need to be surrounded by armed guards. I'm not Averan."

"You're the heir's mate and you carry the future heirs. You're a point of vulnerability."

"I disagree. We've all heard the rumors that I'm not bound to Kleet. He's left me here every day this week, which surely enhanced that rumor. When I return to work I'll go back to my old office, then no one will doubt the rumor. I won't attract attention from the radicals."

"But the heirs you carry ..." Kelfer argued.

"Are non-winged. As I am."

The Kryszans were silent, perhaps regretting their son's choice of mate. Kelfer and Lefair had never said a word about non-winged grandchildren. They were too gracious to do something like that. But it had to be in their minds--how could it not be? Thousands of years of Kryszans made from the same mold would come to an end with the babies she carried. Even if her babies married Averans, her children and their descendants would still carry her genes, genes that contained the potential for red hair, green eyes and flightlessness.

"I don't think I'm at risk," she reiterated.

* * * *

Sheleigh returned to work two weeks later. It was poignant to return to the office she'd left two months ago, and to the people she hadn't seen in a month. Because of tightened security, the Kryszan residence was off limits to many people, including the humans.

Sarnia Dorf was the first member of her team to greet her, enveloping her in a motherly hug. Sarnia held Sheleigh at arm's length. "You've lost weight. Don't they feed you in that big home?"

Sheleigh smiled weakly. "I haven't felt like eating much. I have morning sickness on top of everything else."

Sarnia's face took on a maternal, knowing look and she clucked. "Crackers and tea. I'll bring some to you later. Are you really all right?"

"I'm physically recovered. The surgical incision is healed. I don't move fast yet, and the pregnancy hormones make me tired. But I'm alive."

"Thank God for that. Here, I'm hogging you to myself and Amin wants his turn." Sarnia handed Sheleigh off to the head of their team.

Dr. Barazi's hair and attire looked perfectly in place, as usual. He hesitated, as though unsure what action was proper for the director to take.

"You can hug me if you wish, or shake my hand," Sheleigh prompted.

Dr. Barazi placed his arms around her and patted her back. Sheleigh almost laughed at the stiffness in his body. The man was not a natural hugger.

"I'm glad you're well, Sheleigh. We hear accounts of the violence from the guards. That one yesterday was a tragedy. I wonder how long we'll stay here if it continues to escalate." He released her and stepped back.

"What happened yesterday?" she asked.

His swarthy face paled. He looked quickly at Sarnia and the others. Sheleigh's gut went cold with dread. "I thought you'd know because of where you live."

"I don't know. Tell me."

Dr. Barazi swallowed. "One of the council members was attacked. He was making a routine visit to a toy manufacturer in his district. A projectile hit his transport as he left the

factory and the transport exploded. He was injured. His little daughter, who'd come with him unexpectedly, was hit in the head by flying debris and killed. I believe she was four. A tragedy."

"Oh, God." Sheleigh felt cold all over. Sarnia grabbed her right arm, Dr. Barazi her left.

"Amin," Sarnia hissed. "Why'd you have to be so graphic?"

Sheleigh moaned. "Why are they doing this to each other?"

"What are they fighting over?" Dr. Barazi asked.

Sheleigh shook her head. She was sworn to secrecy about the wings. "Some of the young people want change. They don't like the way things are."

"But that doesn't explain the violence," he argued.

"It does. Look at Earth's history. How many times did unrest and violence begin with the young people?"

"What do they want changed?" Rahwen Suresh's voice came from behind Dr. Barazi.

Sheleigh took a deep breath and shook off the supporting arms of her colleagues. The initial horror of the child's death subsided. "I can't tell you what they're fighting about. It's an internal matter right now. The Averans don't want others interfering in their internal politics. I do believe that none of you are at risk, because you're not Averans."

Sarnia touched Sheleigh's arm. "Are you at risk?"

"I don't believe so. There's a rumor that my marriage isn't real, that I'm not Kleet's mate. Because of that rumor, I'm not a target."

"What?" Sarnia gasped.

"Is there any truth to the rumor?" Amin demanded.

"No," Sheleigh assured him. "There are certain ... rituals here," her cheeks warmed, "attached to being a mate. When the rituals cease, a mate bond is publicized to others. My mate bond was publicized, but the rituals continued between me and Kleet. A number of people assumed that because I'm human the mate bond wouldn't attach to me. It's a widespread rumor and widely thought to be true. Remember, Averans don't have positive thoughts about aliens."

A grating voice jeered from behind Rahwen. "So your reputation among the natives isn't sterling, Sheleigh. Surprise, surprise. What'd you expect when you married their golden boy?"

"Marne!" Sarnia snapped.

Dr. Barazi turned around. "Dr. Vorndran, that's uncalled for."

"I've got a right to my opinion. Why don't you ask her what kind of 'rituals' she and the heir are performing that make her face turn red. Perversions, I'd say."

"Shut up, Marne!" Sarnia's words flew past Sheleigh like well aimed stilettos.

Marne's face darkened and he huffed. He glared at Sheleigh, then turned on his heel and stalked down the hall towards his office.

"He's gotten worse since I've been gone," Sheleigh mused.

"He took your marriage badly," Sarnia soothed.

Dr. Barazi moved aside and Rahwen came forward. He was horribly rumpled today and his hair stood up all over. "Dr. O'Brien, maybe we'll get more work done now that you're back."

Sheleigh laughed and pressed his arm. His eyes already darted looks toward his office.

"I'm glad to be back, Dr. Suresh, and eager to get to work."

Rahwen nodded and with only that acknowledgement he moved across the hall into his office.

Sheleigh, Sarnia and Amin walked down the hall towards Sheleigh's office. On the way they met their assistant Deveria.

The young woman sized up Sheleigh curiously. "Welcome back, Dr. O'Brien. Does this

mean we'll be seeing your dishy husband like we used to?"

There was an odd note in Deveria's voice that Sheleigh couldn't identify. She shook off the oddness and answered the question. "No, Kleet won't be visiting here for awhile. He's very busy in the council."

The girl lidded her eyes. "That's too bad. I liked looking at him." Deveria brushed past them.

Sarnia turned into her office, leaving Dr. Barazi to go with Sheleigh to her office. Sheleigh moved into the room, touching her shelves and her desk.

"We tried to put everything back where you had it, but some things might be misplaced. Harrier said he thought he packed everything from his office. I'm sure if something was missed he can send it over." Dr. Barazi tugged at his collar and looked around. "Sheleigh, what's going on?"

She turned to look at him. The color in his face was heightened. "What do you mean?"

"I thought you had to be near your husband, yet here you are."

"I'm human. The mate-bond has already released me from Kleet's presence." She rounded her desk and forced a smile. "I'm glad to be back here with the group."

His brow furrowed. "Your husband is well?"

"He went back to work weeks ago." Sheleigh controlled the fluttering of her hands.

"Sheleigh ..."

"Dr. Barazi, please, let it lie. We've got a lot of work to do."

He stared at her and she could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. The fact that they were colleagues instead of friends and of different genders stopped him more than her words did. He nodded, turned and left her office.

Sheleigh pulled out her chair and sank into it. She dropped her head in her hands. Damn the radicals and their hatred. Damn the winged and their intolerance. Would there be anything left when the violence was done?

* * * *

Kelfer came into Kleet's office and closed the door. "We found the radical who killed Councilman Circae's daughter. He's dead. Killed himself in remorse with a laser to the head. He left a note." Kelfer held out a personal com unit. Kleet threw down his stylus and took the com. He scrolled through the message:

"I didn't know the child was there.
I can never atone for her loss,
except with my life. We don't
make war on innocents, but on those
who subjugate the non-winged."

Kleet handed the com unit back to his father. "Inflammatory rhetoric with his last breath. Who was he?"

"A nobody. No family. He lived in the sandstone apartments on the west side of the city."

Kleet nodded. The poorer element lived in the sandstone cliffs. Sandstone was cheaper to excavate, so complex owners had less invested and could rent apartments cheaper. Sometimes a couple just starting their life together would rent a sandstone apartment, but they would move to a limestone as soon as they bettered their circumstances.

"How'd we find him?" Kleet asked.

Kelfer snorted. "Anonymous tip, untraceable. We're searching for his associates. Blast him for taking the easy way out. If he wanted to atone, he should have allowed a trial and execution."

"Have you told the councilman yet?"

"I'm going to the medical center now. The funeral pyre is tomorrow, by the way."

Kleet nodded. "I'll be there"

Kelfer hesitated. "I don't think you should bring Sheleigh. It might upset her. I don't know how humans treat their dead."

"We never discussed it." Or much else that was human. "I won't tell her about the ceremony."

His father's gaze was intent. "Do you talk to Sheleigh at all?"

Kleet looked away. His left fist clenched. "No."

"You were so happy with her. I've never seen you so animated as you were with her."

"It was a mistake to take a mate."

"There's nothing you can do about it now. You'll have to work things out with her."

"I'm going to break the bond," Kleet said quietly.

He heard his father's indrawn breath. "It can't be done."

"She's human. It can be done."

"Why would you do such a thing?" Kelfer demanded. "Sheleigh didn't hurt you, radicals did. Why would you punish her?"

"It's not to punish her--it's to free her. I'm crippled. I have nothing to offer her."

"You're the heir. You have everything to offer her. You're her mate, the father of her children."

"Not for long." Kleet took a deep breath. "I think you should choose another heir."

"No!" Kelfer thundered. He slammed his fist on Kleet's desk, rattling the items on the top. His eyes were infernos, as Kleet had never seen them directed at him before. "You're my son, my first born. I chose *you* to be the heir, not your brother or sister. I could have chosen any of my children, as is my right as Avatier. But you showed the most promise to be a good leader. You were the most like me. You're a good man, Kleet."

"Father, I'm non-winged." Kleet felt like he was once again a little boy seeking his father's help. Only this was a man-sized hurt, an adult problem.

Kelfer came around the desk and placed his hand on Kleet's shoulder. Dark eyes looked into pale ones. Kleet knew all the desolation and pain he felt were there for his father to see.

"You're not non-winged." It was the rumbling voice that had guided Kleet for thirty-five years. "You have the wings you were born with, although you can't fly now. The reconstructionists know of your need, and even now they're looking for the answer. I believe you'll fly again some day."

"But the technology and knowledge we have now we got from aliens a long time ago. We haven't changed that much since then."

"We have great Averan minds, too, Kleet. Not everything we have came from aliens. Some things our own scientists invented. What you need will be a new and great invention of an Averan mind. But it may take awhile. You have to be patient and not despair."

"I never really thought about flying before. I didn't even fly that often. Now it's all I think about. I hate being crippled." His last words dripped with bitterness.

Kelfer drew Kleet against his chest. Kleet's arm wrapped around his father's waist. "I love you, son. Nothing's ever going to change that."

Kleet swallowed the lump in his throat. “I love you too, Father.”

Chapter Seventeen

Kleet sat at his desk poring over the reports of the search for the radicals when his com unit spit to life. His father's voice on the other end was terse. "The Brucyron forest is burning!"

All other thoughts fled from Kleet's brain. "It's not the storm season. Is the cause natural or radical?"

"It's not natural. Gods, the hardwoods are burning. Those trees are priceless. Will you go supervise, Kleet?"

"Yes, I'll leave immediately. Did you send out the alarm? How many guard units can we spare?"

"I sent the alarm before I called you. The water tankers should be filling right now. Every person who knows how to fight a fire should arrive at Brucyron in the next few hours. Take every guard unit except one. Kleet, be careful. Keep a guard with you at all times. I don't want a radical getting to you in all that chaos."

"I will, Father. I'll send you reports from Brucyron."

Kleet strapped on his wrist com and laser pistol, and grabbed his computer. On the way out of his office he gathered Captain Steller and his squad.

There were running boot heels in the corridor and a man yelled at his back, "My Lord Kleet! Is it true the hardwoods are burning?"

Kleet turned to see one of the younger councilmen looking wild. "Yes. Can you spare workers from your district?"

"Yes, my lord. Anything you need. The hardwoods!" The young man turned and fled in the other direction where Kleet knew his office was located.

Kleet was accosted four more times on his way to the roof by council members confirming the rumor and offering support. Two of his age mates rode up in the hydrolift with him. They spent the ride calling for their transports on their wrist coms.

As Kleet turned toward the landing area where his large transport was just setting down, one councilman grasped his arm. "Kleet, be careful. The radicals are growing bolder."

Kleet grasped his friend's arm. "I will. Thanks for your concern and your help."

His friend nodded and ran off to his transport. He gathered people to him as he ran.

Kleet turned and hurried to his transport. There were half a dozen guards already on board. He and his squad climbed in. Kleet sat beside Captain Steller to plan strategy during the twenty-minute flight.

Kleet called up the topography maps of the hardwood forest on his computer. The location of the fire showed as an angry red blot on the map.

"It's in an easily accessible area." Steller scanned the notes. "Luckily the radicals had to get in and out quickly, so we can get in just as fast."

Kleet's wrist com beeped, but he couldn't hear the speaker because of the distance. He unhooked the com from his wrist and handed it to Steller. "Have the co-pilot patch the message through the transport's communications."

Steller tapped on the co-pilot's shoulder and relayed the message and the wrist com. When he turned back Kleet pointed to a number of spots on the map. "It's going to be tight for so

many transports to unload personnel and equipment on the flats. We'll have to use the flats on the terraces above and below the terrace where the fire is."

"At least they have flats. At the price of hardwood I heard they wanted to plant trees on all the flats."

"Greedy," Kleet scorned. He looked at Steller. "Where'd you hear that, by the way?"

"My mate's brother knows somebody who works there."

Kleet snorted. "There are no secrets anywhere." He sobered. "I wonder how much of the Avatier's movements are known by the radicals simply because one friend told another something."

Steller stiffened in his seat. "The guards are loyal. Captain Clanga is highly respected as head of the Avatier's guards. We would never betray the Avatier or you, my lord."

"I didn't think you would, not intentionally. But if you know what's going on inside Brucyron, don't you think someone in Brucyron knows what's going on in the Avatier's office?"

Steller looked thoughtful. "I see what you mean. I'll talk with Captain Clanga about security awareness."

"My lord," the co-pilot interrupted, "Brucyron reports the first water drop is complete."

The knot in Kleet's chest relaxed a little. "Good. They should get at least one more drop in before we land."

As they neared Brucyron, the pilot drew his attention forward. The sky was black over Brucyron. "It's a big fire," Steller remarked. "We're going to lose a lot of trees."

"Not if I can prevent it," Kleet averred.

Kleet's transport was allowed to land on the flat level with the burning trees. He and the guards exited the transport quickly and it practically jumped into the air again. In moments another transport landed to disgorge personnel prepared to fight the fire.

A stocky man wearing Brucyron insignia ran to Kleet. His face was sooty on the left side and his left shirt sleeve was burned jaggedly. "My lord, it's a disaster! My hardwoods!"

"Give me your name and what you know," Kleet demanded.

The man swallowed, took several deep breaths and ran a sooty hand through his brown hair, leaving disorder behind. "I'm Cooley, my lord. Caretaker for the hardwoods. My family has raised the hardwoods for Councilman Berrara for ten generations. Nothing like this has ever happened before. What *aquila mancer* would destroy trees?" He wrung his hands and wailed, "The hardwoods take *generations* to grow!"

"How many personnel are responding to your call for aid? Give me numbers, Cooley."

Cooley scrubbed his face, leaving finger tracks in the soot. "Twenty from Vrook Vineyard, fifty from Kennard mine, seventy from various council members."

"You're getting six guard units from the Avatier."

Cooley bowed his head. "Thank you, my lord."

"Tell me what you've done so far and what you plan to do." As Cooley pulled Kleet towards the command station, the thunder of a huge water tanker roared overhead, blocking out the sun. It moved beyond their sight to dump its precious cargo.

* * * *

Three days later Kleet sat gingerly on a transport co-pilot seat. He nodded his head to the pilot. "This is Kleet. Go ahead Avatier."

His father's voice was like the balm the medic had smeared on the burn across the back of Kleet's hand. "What's the status there now?"

"The fire's under control. Sector six is still burning, but the next two water drops will

douse most of it. Personnel on the ground will put out what's left."

"How much burned, Kleet?"

Kleet sighed. "Sixteen pictars."

He heard his father's indrawn breath. "So much."

"The wind blew hard from the south yesterday and fanned the flames. It took a lot longer to get the fire under control than we thought."

"You sound tired, son."

Kleet clamped down on a yawn. "I am. It's been hard work. Yesterday I thought we were going to lose more pictars than we did. We had the luck of the gods with us, though." He ran a hand through his soot-filled hair.

"Avatier, we've got to find these radicals. Brucyron lost millions in revenue that they'll be generations recouping. This isn't just a loss to councilman Berrara, it's a loss to Avera itself."

"I know. The council, what there is of it right now, and I have been working hard on a plan to catch those responsible. They'll be made to pay for their crimes."

"I hope so. We can't afford many more losses like this." Kleet did yawn then and scrubbed his face.

"When will you be finished there?" the Avatier asked.

"I should stay until the last fire is out. Maybe tomorrow?"

"We'll see you then. Sheleigh's been asking about you."

Kleet's gut clenched. He hadn't thought of Sheleigh in days and his conscience hadn't bothered him a bit. What a state they were in: mated only a few months and already their relationship had deteriorated. It was what he'd hope for in order to set her free to find a whole man.

He answered his father. "Tell her I'm fine and I'll be home tomorrow."

"Don't you want to call her yourself?"

"No. I don't want to encourage her. Nothing's changed."

"I'd hoped being at Brucyron would make you change your mind about things."

"I'm no different than I was before I left, you know that."

"But you sound different," his father disagreed. "You sound tired but more alive than you have since you were hurt."

Kleet was astonished to tell his father, "I feel more alive."

"Then I was right to send you."

"Father ..."

"We'll talk about it when you get home. Will you call Sheleigh?"

Kleet heard his name shouted from the command center. "No. Father, they're calling for me. I'll see you tomorrow."

"All right."

"Kleet out." Kleet stepped down from the transport and stretched his sore muscles as Cooley approached him. It would be another day of hard work by the look on Cooley's face.

* * * *

Kleet exited the hydrolift onto the floor where his bedroom was located. He just wanted to lie down on something soft after a hot shower. The door to Sheleigh's room was open and she called to him as he passed by.

"Kleet!"

He stopped, stiffening as though preparing for a blow.

"Kleet." Her musical voice grated against nerves raw from three days of waging war

against fire. She rounded to stand in front of him. She wore a silky cream-colored two piece and looked good enough to eat. Her warm body could comfort a weary warrior. He stiffened again. Sheleigh was not for him to sate his lusts. She was mate material, nothing less.

"Your father said you'd be home tomorrow," she said.

"One of the councilmen took over for me. The fire's almost out."

"You didn't call me while you were away."

"I was busy saving valuable raw material."

"Kleet." She lifted a hand to him.

"Don't, Shel."

"It's been so long. When are you going to talk to me again? Spend time with me? When are you going to be my mate again?"

He gritted his teeth. "I'm not. That's over."

She flinched and her green eyes opened wide. "How can you say that? We just got married."

"Yes, that human word describes our situation exactly. You said humans dissolve marriage legally when they want to be free. It's time for you to be free, Sheleigh. Free of me. I release you."

"No. That's not what I want at all."

"It's what I want. It's for the best. I won't hold you here any longer."

Her face set mutinously. "I won't leave you."

"Stay until the babies are born if you want. I'll raise them and you can go wherever you like."

"You don't know anything about what I want. You can't see beyond being crippled."

He snapped. "Yes, I'm crippled. I can't be a man to you any more. I can't fly and I can't do anything else with you. I sever you from me."

"Kleet, no!"

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed." He walked away from her even though her pleading was palpable. He could direct hundreds of people to put out a fire, but he couldn't be the other half of the woman behind him.

He turned into his room and closed the door, then leaned against it. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him and he had to let her go. He'd loved her before he was crippled, and because he had, he couldn't keep her. He couldn't tie her to him, not as he was now. No, she should go away. Then he could begin to forget during his long, lonely life alone.

His shoulders drooped as he placed his heavy feet one before the other towards the bathing room. He feared what he needed to rid himself of couldn't be washed away in a shower.

Chapter Eighteen

Sheleigh heard the hurried clomping of many boots in the corridor outside her office. There was a startled exclamation from someone, probably one of her team. Quickly she rose from her desk, her heart pounding with fear. There'd been too many acts of violence lately for her peace of mind.

Several of the Kryszan household guards burst into the room with weapons drawn. Her heart almost leaped from her chest.

"My lady! Come with us now. Hurry." While she tried to calm her heart rate she noticed their faces were pale with widened eyes. Her heart began to race again.

"What happened?" she demanded through a constricted throat. Had something happened to Kleet?

"The Avatier was murdered!" one of them growled. She staggered under the blow. Kelfer! The warmth left her face and body.

"You must come with us now."

"Yes." Her hands fluttered, but there was no work for them to do. Kelfer couldn't be dead. She moved into their protective custody, unable to budge her mind past the news.

In the hall Dr. Barazi looked concerned. "What's going on, Sheleigh? Where are you going?"

She looked at his human face. Amin was always logical, so she found a scrap of logic for him. "The Avatier's been killed. I think I'm going to my family." She looked to the highest-ranking guard. "Is that right?"

"Yes, my lady. Please come along."

"How was he killed?" Dr. Barazi looked shocked.

"Betrayal," one of the guards growled.

"Radicals," the head guard added. He tugged gently on Sheleigh's arm. She went with them to the hydrolift. The human faces of her team flashed by her. They were pressed against the rock walls as the guards passed. She could hear the rise and fall of voices behind her. It acted as a counterpoint to the beat of the words 'betrayal' and 'radicals' in her mind.

How had the radicals gotten to Kelfer? He was the most highly protected man on the planet. Did betrayal mean someone had gotten him away from his guards? God! She swallowed a sour taste. Was he betrayed by someone she knew? The world tipped dizzily for a moment. Someone had hold of her arm, helping her into the transport.

"Be careful with her. She's carrying the heirs."

She reeled again. With Kelfer's death, Kleet became Avatier and her babies became the heirs. No! It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Kelfer was supposed to lead Avera for another twenty years. He was supposed to play with his grandchildren. Her eyes welled and overflowed.

"It's all right, my lady. We'll have you there soon."

The guard's image was watery as she looked at him. "Where are we going?"

"To the council hall. The new Avatier must be confirmed."

Right. The planet couldn't be leaderless with the radical threat so strong. It didn't matter that Kleet's father was dead. Kleet had important work to do. Would they even allow him to

grieve? Several more tears fell.

“Lefair?” she queried the guard.

He lowered his head. “Other guards were sent for her. She’ll arrive after us.” Sheleigh read between the lines. They expected Lefair to need time for grief before she could be brought to the council hall. Poor Lefair! More tears fell. How did it feel to accept the news that your mate had been murdered? How did it feel to be sundered from the mate bond? A sound of pain escaped her chilled lips.

Sheleigh would be wounded for years if she lost what she’d shared with Kleet for only a few months. Lefair had shared thirty-five years with Kelfer. Thirty-five years together and they still loved each other. For them, love was transcendent. Love endured. Love gave strength and purpose, joy and meaning. Love was the building block that held the Kryszan family together, just as the mate-bonds held Averen society together. Love gave Lefair a reason to go on living each day. Sheleigh choked on a sob.

“I want to be on the landing pad when Lefair arrives.”

“It’s too dangerous, my lady. You can’t remain in the open.”

“I most certainly can. You’ll have to shoot me if you think otherwise. Try explaining that to the council. I’ll be there to receive the old Avatier’s mate.” She said it fiercely, ready to fight to Lefair’s side if need be. Lefair needed her family.

“Yes, my lady.”

The transport set down gently on the pad, as though even it didn’t want to disturb her mood. They alighted, moving to a safe distance so the transport could lift again. In the strained silence after the transport had receded from sight, the guards circled her protectively. Their watchful eyes darted nervously around. She tried not to catch their anxiety. She strained her ears for the sound of Lefair’s transport.

One guard’s wrist com beeped, making them all jump. The guard explained why they were still on the landing pad. Mid-explanation her attention was torn away at the sound of an approaching transport. For the first time, she noticed that there was no other transport traffic. The council must have halted all flights temporarily.

A transport bearing the Kryszan seal on the door hove into view from the direction of the residence. As it set down on the pad with not the tiniest jostle, Sheleigh saw Lefair’s stiff profile through the glass. Her heart drew her to the transport door. The guards handed out Lefair like she was fragile porcelain. She looked fragile, even as she looked regal. This careful handling wasn’t what Lefair needed.

Lefair’s eyes captured hers. In them Sheleigh saw the maelstrom of dying Lefair was experiencing. Sheleigh reached out and drew the vessel of pain into her arms, gathering the flesh-and-blood woman tightly against her warm flesh. She pressed Lefair against the burgeoning swell of Kelfer’s grandchildren. She brought Lefair close to the love Sheleigh felt for her mother-in-law. It was a poor substitute for what Lefair had lost, but Sheleigh offered what she could. Lefair’s hands clutched her back tightly, while she made choking noises in her throat. Sheleigh’s tears burst loose anew. She didn’t try to hold them back.

She held the damaged woman to her breast, letting Lefair feel the heartbeat of another person, letting her know that life continued on. The heart continued to beat even though it was torn asunder. It didn’t know it should lie down and die with its mate.

Sheleigh tried to imbue Lefair with her strength. She tried to show Lefair that grief knew no species boundaries. She tried to siphon off a little of the pain so that Lefair could go on.

Her awareness expanded to include the guards surrounding them. Several had looked

away. Lefair's private guards looked troubled and sad. Her captain had wet trails down his cheeks while he stood at attention for his lady. Lefair had earned her guards' respect during their years of service to her, the same way she'd earned Sheleigh's love in the short time she'd been a daughter-in-law. Sheleigh might wish to own such respect one day, but she hadn't yet learned to live a guarded life.

Lefair quieted. Sheleigh watched her dab her eyes with a pretty square of cloth.

"I'm sorry about Kelfer."

"Me too." Lefair's lower lip trembled, then she took a deep breath and it firmed. She stepped out of Sheleigh's embrace, but looped her arm through Sheleigh's. They moved into the hydrolift bay. The guards seemed relieved to move with them.

"Kelfer's father ruled until he was nearly eighty. He died just a few years ago."

"Kleet will rule for a long time. The children will help him when they get older."

"It used to be easy to rule Avera. We've only had violence like this once before. Each of us has so much to do usually. We don't have time to cause trouble. These radicals ..." Lefair's voice broke. She straightened, seeming to grow strong again as Sheleigh watched. "These radicals have too much time to cause trouble. They need to work harder for Avera and not so hard against it."

"Yes. There's a saying on my planet, something about idleness breeding trouble."

Lefair looked vaguely curious. "Really? I didn't think humans had trouble on their planet."

"Sometimes we do. My species' history is very troubled. Nowadays our discontented members go into space to find someplace where they'll be happier."

"We couldn't send the radicals into space."

"If they had a choice to live with other non-wingeds away from Avera, don't you think they'd choose to leave?"

"Leave Avera?" Lefair said it just like a human would say, 'plunge into the depths of hell?' "No, Averans don't leave Avera."

The hydrolift door opened, spilling their group into the corridor. There were quite a few people standing in the corridor. Slowly she and Lefair became the focal point of all eyes. Most of the faces were strained, some were pale, some bore eyes red from weeping. There was a shocked silence. What does one say to a widow, and not just any widow, but the widow of the ruler?

One brave man stepped forward and gave a slight bow to Lefair. "My deepest sympathy is with you, my lady."

Another person voiced similar condolences. Sheleigh moved Lefair forward. Their progress seemed to break the floodgate, because each person in the corridor moved to Lefair to express their sorrow.

Sheleigh was glad no one expressed more than sorrow, because Lefair was shaking beside her. It was too much stimuli for the damaged Lefair, too many reminders of her loss. But this was just the first gauntlet to be run. There was still the council to face inside the hall. There would be mourners at the funeral service. Then every social situation for the next few years would remind Lefair that she was half of a pair. Sheleigh had never personalized widowhood before. Now she thought it was the worst state a woman could experience.

Lefair hesitated at the council room door. One of the guards was opening it; the room beyond was coming into view. Lefair turned a panicked face to her. "He's not in there. I can't go in there and not see him. His chair is empty!" Of all the things Lefair could have chosen to exemplify the hole in her life, the empty Avatier's chair was the greatest.

Sheleigh shook her gently. "Don't look at his chair. Look at Kleet. Look at your son. You're here for him. Let the people come to you. Let them tell you how they feel. I know it hurts you." Lefair's lip trembled, so Sheleigh gentled her voice. "I know it hurts you. The people are in shock. The people hurt. Let them tell you they're sorry. Let them show you they hurt, too. I'll take you home afterwards. It won't take too long. You can do this."

Lefair nodded. Years of breeding lifted her chin up and straightened her spine. The council faced them through the open door. Sheleigh started forward into the room, looking immediately for Kleet. He was pale, his jaw was clenched tightly and for once his dark hair was slightly mussed. He stood in front of the heir's chair, alone at the front of the room for the first time in her memory.

She tried to keep him in sight, but they were soon surrounded by council members expressing their sorrow to Lefair. A few also expressed sympathy to Sheleigh, but for the most part she was overlooked.

Finally they reached the front of the hall, where Kleet was once again in sight. There was pain in his eyes as he looked at his mother. She kept her eyes trained on him. There were chairs placed in front of the council members. Sheleigh and Lefair sat in the closest two. Kleet's siblings sat in the farther chairs. His sister Ciarri rose and hugged her mother tightly. She looked more like Kelfer with the dark brown Kryszan hair cut stylishly short to show off her stunning cheekbones. But her trim frame and ladylike movements were clearly her mother's legacy.

Kleet's brother Berkesch moved to hug Lefair next. He was clearly Lefair's child, with his lighter brown hair that matched hers, his slender frame and Lefair's quieter gentility. When he and Kleet stood together, Kleet was darker, more intense, bigger and more vibrant. It was almost like comparing night and day to look at the two of them.

Sheleigh wondered if the presence of Kleet's siblings meant the Avatier's position would be contested. There was a glimmer of hope that Kleet could live life as a normal man. He wasn't trained for anything except the rule of the planet, but he was intelligent enough to learn some other occupation. He could travel with her to other worlds.

She stopped breathing for the few seconds it took reality to come crashing down on her. Because he had wings, he wouldn't leave Avera.

As soon as Berkesch moved to his seat, Kleet stood up. The hall hushed. "Mother, where is your mate?"

Sheleigh's breath left her in a whoosh. What cruelty was this?

Lefair rose next to her. "My mate is dead." There was no quaver in her voice, which surprised Sheleigh. Was this ritual, then?

"Council, do you witness the Avatier's mate is alone?"

The council rumbled muted assent.

"I am ready to wear the Avatier's wings now. Will you confirm me?" Kleet's voice carried to the edges of the room.

There was loud affirmation, but when the noise died down there were several opposing votes. "Give your reasons for your opposition."

Someone rose behind her. Sheleigh turned to see an elder councilman, white-haired and gnarled with age. He spoke in a dusty voice. "Can you fly, young Kryszan?"

Sheleigh hurt for Kleet. What a blow to his unhealed wound.

"The laws of succession say nothing about flight." It was said as a challenge. Kleet was fencing with words, not admitting anything.

"That's true, but as leader of Avera you should represent what Averans are."

“If you feel someone else better represents Avera, then perhaps you’d like to nominate my brother or sister. They are Kryszans. Ciarri, Berkesch, would you stand up so that Councilman Gallicus can choose who should represent Avera.”

His siblings rose and faced the councilman. There were quiet murmurings as the siblings were compared. There was no comparison. Kleet was dark strength, sharp intelligence, dynamic energy, focused intensity. He was more, his presence was larger. He was cut from the same cloth as Kelfer had been. The choice was crystal clear.

“Councilman, what is your choice?” Kleet demanded.

“The old Avatier chose you. I will stand by his choice.” Gallicus sat down noisily, looking disgruntled.

“There was another opposing vote?” Kleet prompted.

Someone stood on the other side of the hall. A woman spoke. “I do not want an Avatier with an alien mate.” Sheleigh jerked. She should have expected an attack on herself next. It hurt that Kleet would be judged on what she was, rather than what he could do.

“Then why didn’t you object at the mate confirmation?” Kleet demanded.

“I wasn’t here. I was with my daughter at the birth of her first child.”

Kleet nodded. “The laws of succession do not mention the species of the Avatier’s mate, only that he or she must have a mate or obtain one soon after confirmation. I already have a mate and she carries my heirs.”

“I still object. An alien has no place in the line of succession.”

“Your objection is noted, but the confirmation will pass over it.”

The councilwoman sat down amidst cheers and clapping. Lefair rose and Sheleigh rose with her. His mother went to him, kissed him on the cheek, and then stepped back still gripping his hand. The atmosphere between them was thick with shared grief, pride and the passing of power to the next generation. Kleet’s love for his mother shown on his face.

“Congratulations, Avatier. Kelfer would be proud.” Lefair choked on the last words.

“Mother.” Kleet’s throat worked, but no other words came out. He straightened, then breathed out. “I’ll see you at home later. Sheleigh will go with you. Don’t worry about the arrangements for the funeral pyre. I’ll take care of everything.” His voice and face hardened. “Including father’s murderers.”

Lefair stepped aside, allowing Sheleigh to move to Kleet. She held out her hand and he grasped it. “Congratulations, Avatier.” She was four months wed to this man who was now ruler of the planet. He had never seemed more a stranger than he did at this moment. There was no love on his face for her as there’d been for his mother. Long gone was the heated interest he’d shown her for the first three months of her stay on Avera. The mate bond barely resonated when they touched. If he stayed aloof much longer, she feared he’d be able to break the connection between them.

“Take Mother home and stay with her. I have urgent work to do today.”

“All right.” She hesitated, but he made no husbandly move towards her. “I’m sorry about your father.”

He nodded, nothing more. Disappointed, she turned and gathered Lefair’s arm. They made their way toward the door through more offers of condolence. Sheleigh held onto her impatience with both hands. These people didn’t know that she wanted her husband’s love. They knew she and Kleet were separate entities, which no Avera would be at this early stage of being mated. Maybe they made their own judgments from that.

Finally they were free of the last well-wisher. As the council room doors began to shut

behind them, Sheleigh heard Kleet's voice addressing the council. "We must hunt down these murderers..." The door shut on the new Avatier.

Lefair looked peaked. There were strain lines around her mouth and translucence to her skin. Sheleigh felt rather wilted, with a deep sense of anti-climax. Her energy flagged, even though she hadn't done anything.

When they were on the transport heading homeward, she sighed with relief. She and Lefair didn't have to be brave or proud in front of the guards. Soon they'd have complete privacy to mourn the early passing of a good man.

It was then Sheleigh realized she didn't know how Kelfer had died. No one had told her the details. She didn't know if Lefair knew, but she assumed Lefair would have demanded proof that her husband was dead. Sheleigh didn't want to ask in front of Lefair, but she needed to know.

She gathered Lefair against her body. "How did it happen?"

The head guard looked pained. He glanced at Lefair before answering. "It was an ambush, my lady. In the lower level archives room. Radicals shot him."

"Why didn't his guards protect him? Did they let him go alone during this time of unrest?"

"They were killed, too. Even Captain Clanga."

Sheleigh bowed her head as sadness and shock washed over her. Even the courageous Captain Clanga was dead. A tear fell. She held Lefair's quivering body tight. Poor Lefair had jerked at each piece of sorry news, like she was the one being shot.

"I'm sorry," Sheleigh murmured to Lefair. "I had to know." Lefair nodded slightly.

Sheleigh saw the outline of their residence through the transport glass. She sighed, feeling the tension inside her unwind a little.

Once they were home, she directed Lefair into the kitchen. She didn't believe either of them would feel like eating, but she had to eat to sustain her pregnancy. Perhaps she could entice Lefair to at least drink something warm.

Lefair leaned heavily against her. It slowed their pace, but Sheleigh didn't mind. She was tired. She felt like she carried huge blocks of melancholy and desolation. They pulled at her like heavier gravity, making her want to lie down. She had no compelling purpose today other than to see to Lefair's comfort.

Sheleigh seated Lefair at the shiny kitchen table. She noted the pristine cleanliness in the kitchen. The cleaning staff had been here today.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked Lefair.

Lefair looked up with wounded eyes. "No, thank you."

"I think you'll feel better with something warm in your stomach."

"That won't help. It won't bring Kelfer back." Lefair's eyes welled. The tears quivered, waiting to fall.

"No, nothing will do that. Will you drink a little juice and do it for me?" As Lefair stared at her through wasteland eyes in a strained face, Sheleigh begged. "Please." Lefair nodded.

Sheleigh gave her a glass of juice, not too sweet or sour. She made herself a light meal with foods easily swallowed. The lump in her throat was growing. If it grew much more she wouldn't be able to swallow at all.

Coaxing Lefair to drink helped Sheleigh manage her own meal. But when the dam inside her mother-in-law broke, she gave up all attempts at eating. She moved to Lefair's side of the table, gathering Lefair to her. Lefair's anguished sobs allowed her own to break free.

There would never again be the dark, intense presence of her father-in-law in this home. He'd been stern but loving, powerful yet fair. He'd loved Lefair deeply. He'd loved his children almost as much. She'd hardly gotten to know him; she'd been robbed.

Lefair's hands clawed at Sheleigh's back. Her weeping clawed at Sheleigh's heart like the raking talons of a raptor. The razor-sharp pain echoed her own grief.

When Lefair's weeping lessened, Sheleigh walked them to her mother-in-law's bedroom. Sleep would help, if not sleep, lying down would help. But at the doorway Lefair balked.

"I can't sleep here. He's not in there. He won't ever sleep there again." Fresh tears poured down her already wet cheeks.

"Your memories are in there. Good memories. Loving memories. Why don't we try to find some of those?"

Lefair looked startled, and then she glanced quickly into the room. She allowed Sheleigh to move her toward the bed, docilely allowed herself to be tucked in. Her tears dripped slowly down her cheeks and were absorbed into the pillow.

"Cry all you want. I'll be in my room if you need me. Just call out my name and I'll come to you."

Lefair nodded. Sheleigh moved slowly down the hall to her empty room. She stared at the bed she slept alone in every night. If Kleet died next, she wouldn't have as much as Lefair had. This room was barren of Kleet's presence: no memories, no scent, no belongings, no indentation in the pillow on the other side of the bed. A harsh sob stole from her lips. She had memories of two months of limited courtship and one month of marriage. She had no marriage now. Kleet had killed it just like the radicals had killed his father.

Another sob escaped around the knuckle she stuffed against her mouth. Slowly she was losing what she'd gained. First Kleet's regard, then her father-in-law. She couldn't lose anything else, she couldn't stand it. Another sob broke loose, followed by a torrent of tears.

Sheleigh climbed onto her lonely bed. She pulled the soft wool-like blanket around her shaking body. It didn't help ease the chill she felt inside her heart where she was lonely and sad.

Bad things came in threes, the Earth saying went. A chill of fear ran through her. Not Kleet! Not Lefair. Not the babies! No, this agony was bad enough. Things had to get better on Avera. Kleet would make things better, wouldn't he?

Chapter Nineteen

The Kryszan family stood beside the funeral pyre before sunset the next day. Avern tradition said sunsets were for endings, sunrises for beginnings. It had been another gloriously sunny day, as most were, despite the gloomy atmosphere in the Kryszan home.

Kleet spent the day at work, spearheading the search for the radicals, or so Sheleigh assumed. She hadn't heard him come home the night before, and he'd been gone again by the time she awoke. He'd left a note about the time and place for the pyre, nothing else. The note wasn't even addressed to her.

He stood on the other side of Lefair, as was proper. The widow was to be buffered by the new Avatier and his mate. But Sheleigh wished Kleet could have stood by her. She glanced at him again, savoring his dark looks. He was paler than usual with brackets around his mouth. He stood erect, his back ramrod straight. Strangers might mistake his posture for pride, but she knew better. He hadn't grieved yet. He still hadn't grieved for the loss of the ability to fly. What must he feel like with all that grief bottled up inside? Was he like a pressure cooker ready to explode? Was that why he had to stand so straight?

Humans would not expect a man to grieve outwardly. They would expect him to be strong. She didn't know what Avern expectations were for a man, and this one was now Avatier. It wasn't right that anyone should think less of him if he showed how he felt over the loss of a beloved father.

She was constrained from offering him comfort because he'd made himself unapproachable. She should have done something to end their estrangement before this tragedy happened. Then she could have offered her support in his time of need. Damn it, why had she just accepted the division between them? Why had she thought he'd work through it on his own?

The director of the ceremony, an older, austere gentleman, presented the burning torch to Lefair. She moved forward to the pyre as the white Avern sun sank to the horizon. The sky turned the roseate red of dying twilight while the sun's long fingers tried to hold on to the sky. Lefair laid the torch to the bier. She was outlined against the red sky as the fire flamed up to create a different fiery backdrop.

The sun slowly withdrew from the world, dragging the deepening violet hues behind it. The fire leaped up, ravenous to consume its precious tinder in time for him to follow the sun into another realm. The sparks danced high above the flames, highlighting the wetness on Lefair's face as she returned to her family.

The inferno rose higher, buffeting the onlookers with heat. Sheleigh's face felt feverish and tight. Beads of perspiration formed at her hairline.

Night crept over the sky, sweeping the last vestiges of sunlight down over the edge of the world. The era of Kelfer went with it. Superheated flames had lost their ferocity. Thus muted, Sheleigh saw the stars shining through the firmament above. Life went on. There was nothing left of the old Avatier and a lifetime of rule but ashes. His plans and his ideals might live on, but they'd have Kleet's focus now.

When only red embers remained, Kleet escorted her and Lefair to the family transport. Sheleigh could not help one look back as she climbed in. The pyre was empty. Kelfer's spirit had

gone to be with the sun. She sat down facing forward, because that was the only direction Avera could go from here.

In the morning she dressed for work. Ciarri would spend the day with Lefair, freeing Sheleigh to seek a return to normalcy. She was surprised to see Kleet in the kitchen with a cup of hot stimulant. There was a slight darkening, like bruising, under his eyes.

"I thought you'd have left by now." She chose her tone carefully as she selected something light to eat. She poured a cup of the steaming stimulant.

"I waited for you. I need to speak to you."

Her heart raced. Maybe he thought it was time for reconciliation, too. "What about?" She slid onto the padded bench across from him.

"Not here. Come to my office with me."

Her heart plummeted. The bread in her mouth tasted like sawdust. He wanted to discuss business or government. "All right." She washed down her mouthful. It was the only way she could swallow it. "Did you sleep?"

"Some. What about you?"

"More than that." She crumbled her bread. "Have you made progress in finding the people responsible?"

"I can't discuss that here." He looked over her shoulder towards the doorway and back. He meant where Lefair might overhear.

"Your mother is still able to fulfill the duties of an Avatier's mate. I don't know if I can."

"I don't think very many people expect you to. Although few will expect mother to, either."

She was stung by his comment. "What do people expect me to do?"

"Go to the human research group, I suppose. You're a human. You spend your day with humans."

"I'm researching Averans, not spending time with humans. If Averans want to help us do the research, I'll be glad to spend my day with both species."

"That would surprise a lot of people," he murmured into his cup.

"What?" Her blood heated with anger. It was the first real warmth she'd felt inside in two days. "The work I'm doing is important. It's going to be invaluable someday when Avera joins the rest of USP to help other species understand you. But you must not think it's important. You said I could continue my work after you claimed me as your mate. That must have been a lie, too." He jerked, his eyes widening, but she didn't care. "Just another lie." She heard the bitterness in her tone.

"Things change ..."

Sheleigh interrupted. "I'm finished eating if you're ready to go."

He looked from her crumbled breakfast to her set face, and then nodded. She rose and cleared away her breakfast things, fuming as she did it. Would every promise he'd ever made to her be broken? Would every dream she'd built about the two of them become a mirage easily dispelled? Would every hope become another disillusionment?

She rode silently in the transport. She didn't look at him or the passing landmarks on the short trip. She kept her head lowered and stared at the hands clenched over her rounding abdomen. Regrets roiled like snakes in her belly, making her fear that breakfast would not stay down. Could any relationship be a worse failure than hers and Kleet's?

It was one of the guards who helped her alight from the transport, not Kleet. Kleet was the aloof, untouchable Avatier at the moment. She followed him down to the Avatier's office,

noting the attentiveness of the guards as they moved. Their actions rubbed on her like sandpaper across nerve endings. Weapons everywhere. Weapons to maim and kill. Bullyboys to isolate the Avatier from the people. If Kleet was separated from common people, what kind of decisions would come out of that vacuum? Surely not good ones.

If the radicals couldn't affect change the way they wanted to, would they redouble their efforts? Would Avera become a police state or worse, a war zone? She wouldn't stay here if it came to that. She'd take her children and run back to Earth. She'd take Lefair ... No, Lefair wouldn't leave. Sheleigh didn't really want to leave Kleet, either. It was the violence she wanted to escape. She wasn't afraid so much for herself, but of losing more of the people she loved.

Kleet closed the door of Kelfer's old office. He reached into his shirt and withdrew a scrap of paper, which he handed to her. She raised an eyebrow questioningly before looking at it.

"What do you make of it, Shel?"

Her eyes dropped to the paper. She grew cold inside as she read the words. She could read Avera's writing now. *Meet me in the archive room at 11:30. I need to speak to you privately about Kleet. Sheleigh.* Her heart thudded heavily. Did he think ...?

"I didn't write this."

"I know. The handwriting is different from yours."

Rage and disappointment roared through her. "You checked? You actually believed I would be party to murdering Kelfer? That's what you think of me?" Her voice had risen to nearly a shout at the end.

"It appeared quite damning ..."

"I'm alien, too. Therefore, I must be capable of such foul acts of treachery." Her voice dripped venom.

"I said I know you're innocent."

"Now. You know it now after someone else proved me innocent. You couldn't just believe that the woman who's your mate is innocent." Bitter disillusionment came crashing down on her. The room grew colorless. It seemed to take more effort to breathe. Her chest hurt. She stepped away from the source of her disillusionment, letting the cursed paper drop between them.

Kleet stooped to pick it up. It was more important to him than she was. "I have work to do." She reached for the door handle.

"Someone wanted to blame you for the Avatier's death." The words sounded like they were wrenched from his throat. "Someone wanted doubt cast on you."

"They succeeded wildly."

He overrode her comment. "Someone who doesn't know that we're mate-bound."

"Then someone is correct," she flung at him like a dart. "What you thought was unbreakable is no longer so. That bond was built on love and the potential for love. It wasn't meant to withstand separation and mistrust. It'll be gone soon, then so will I. Who will you accuse when I'm gone? Will you look to the troublemakers who were here long before I arrived? Or will you think the guilty parties left when the humans did?"

"You're right, Kleet. Outsiders don't belong on Avera. They can't possibly fit in when they're the focus of accusation and mistrust. You Averans are pitiful, crouching in fear. How many more people will die before you learn not to fear what's different?"

Kleet's face was stony and had lost some of its color. "You're not Avera. You don't know how we feel. We have every right to be afraid." He snarled his words through clenched teeth.

"The massacre happened hundreds of years ago. What have you done lately?" She hurled

her words at him to hurt him like he'd hurt her. He counted her with the Averans when it was convenient, otherwise, she was alien.

His eyes sparked. A muscle worked in his cheek. "You can return to your work. I'll find out who tried to blame you, even though you don't care."

It was another slap and dismissal. She could barely see the door through the red haze, but she didn't stop until she stood on the landing pad. The hot Avera sun didn't begin to compare to the volcanic rage she felt inside. That swine. That pigheaded swine.

During the short flight to the human offices, she seethed inside like heaving seas in a hurricane. When she departed the transport the guards began to disembark too.

"Don't get out," she ordered.

The captain looked confused. "My lady?"

"I don't want you here today. Go guard the Avatier."

"We have orders ..."

"I'm countermanding those orders. I'm not going to be imprisoned in a fortress today."

"But the radicals haven't been caught yet."

"Screw the radicals. If they want to come here and kill me, let them try. I welcome the fight."

"You could be hurt, or worse."

"In your opinion, would that really be a loss to Avera?"

His face worked, while he was caught off guard without a ready answer. The squad was silent, one looked away. Finally he had an answer. "You carry the heirs."

She let out her breath. "That's my only value. The health of the heirs depends on my health. Well, my health depends on having peace for a day. I need you to go."

He looked to his fellows, who shrugged and shook their heads. They climbed back into the transport. It lifted and flew away. Her last view of the captain showed a troubled face.

Her sudden freedom was actually a letdown. Her anger evaporated in the deafening silence that followed the transport's departure. In the vacuum the anger left was a cold nothingness. She shivered in the hot sun. She raised her face to the clear blue sky, looking for home and the warmth that was love. She couldn't see home from here, not through the opaque blueness of this alien sky. She felt desolate inside, except for the pain in her heart that throbbed with its beating. Unloved, unloved, unloved, it thudded its tattoo. She tried to reach out to her parents to feel their love, to her siblings, relatives and friends. But the distance was too great to feel those types of love. There was another love supposedly closer, but she didn't feel capable of turning to it now.

The sound of a step behind her frightened her. She spun to face the possible threat. Sarnia moved to her side while she attempted to calm her racing heart.

"I knew you'd arrived. I wondered why you didn't come downstairs. I was concerned. Are you all right?"

Sheleigh looked up at the sky once again. "Do you think God can reach us here?"

"They say He's everywhere."

"I don't think He's here. This is a place even time forgot."

"You're melancholy today. Perhaps it's too soon to return to work. Maybe you should go back home."

"I have no home. I built pipedreams here. Now reality's intruded. I can't see my parent's home. I can't see my home on Earth. Nothing exists for me."

"What about your husband?"

Sheleigh looked at Sarnia to see concern on the other woman's face. "He no longer exists. The Avatier took his place."

"Things will get better. The old Avatier's only been dead a few days. You and your husband need time to adjust."

"My mate bond is unraveling. There's not much left."

Sarnia gasped. "Mates don't become unbonded!"

"They do on Avera when two species are involved."

"You've got to fight for your marriage, Sheleigh. You love him. Do whatever you have to do to keep him."

"I have no marriage. I haven't had one since the accident."

Sarnia's indrawn breath was audible. "No, it can't be true. I saw the two of you together. That man wanted you for his mate."

"Things change. I think I'll be returning to Earth with you when you go home."

"What about the children?" Sarnia nodded to Sheleigh's belly.

"They're part human. Maybe it's best if they come with me. They don't tolerate differences here."

"Don't make rash decisions, Sheleigh. Wait for things to return to normal before you make any moves. Have you eaten yet?"

"I tried. Kleet was at breakfast."

Sarnia peered into her face. "You still love him."

"I forget what love feels like. It seems like it happened a lifetime ago to someone else."

"You'll have it again. Let's go find you something to eat before you begin working."

Sarnia took her by the arm and led her down into the building. Her concerned mothering enabled Sheleigh to eat a small meal.

As they were exiting the kitchenette, Marne entered the room. His eyes lit on Sheleigh and his lip curled. "Your husband's promotion to Avatier happened pretty fast. I heard treachery was involved. What'd you do to get hubby to off his old man? Tell him you wouldn't settle for second best?"

"Marne!" Sarnia exclaimed.

His lip curled further and his nostrils flared. "Maybe you arranged something. It wouldn't be hard to get the old man off alone where paid thugs could kill him. If I were the Averans, I'd be looking pretty closely at you."

"That's enough!" Sarnia's reprimand was like a clap of thunder.

Sheleigh stood mutely, filled with a cold suspicion. Had Marne played a part in Kelfer's death? His accusation so closely following on the scene with the note this morning resounded like an echo. Marne hated Kleet. Did he hate him enough to throw in with the radicals in the murder of the Avatier? Was he capable of something so heinous? Was he angry enough at her for spurning him that he'd frame her?

Her stomach rebelled. "Oh my God!" She fled past Marne to the facilities, where she lost both breakfasts. Her stomach turned inside out, continuing to heave even after it was empty.

The painful spasms passed, but the disillusionments of the past few days came crashing down on her unprotected head. She lay on the floor of the bathroom and sobbed. Her weeping grew into a storm as she cried for everything she'd lost and might still lose. She felt Sarnia's arms around her and heard the soothing sounds that held no meaning to her ears.

Finally she was emptied of all the bad things. Sarnia helped her to her feet and washed her face. She saw in the mirror a blotchy face, puffy eyes, red nose, and cheeks leached of all

other color. She was a mess. She'd also made an unprofessional scene in front of her colleagues. But she couldn't muster the energy to care. It felt almost good to be empty right now. She'd do as much as she could before painful reality came back again.

"Shall I have a transport take you home?" Sarnia asked.

"No." Sheleigh's voice was husky in the aftermath of weeping. "I'll work."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Sheleigh moved a little unsteadily past Sarnia out into the adjoining room. She barely registered Marne standing frozen and white-faced outside the bathroom. She drifted past him like a wraith, feeling light and unconnected to the planet. Work would be her salvation now. She would think about Marne's ties to the note later.

Chapter Twenty

That evening Sheleigh sought her bedroom early. She felt drained of energy even though it was only nine o'clock. It was the dispiritedness weighing her down. Lefair had gone to bed over an hour ago. Her mother-in-law seemed to be fading before her eyes. Sheleigh didn't know how to help her. She could barely take care of herself right now.

She knocked softly on Lefair's bedroom door. If Lefair was already asleep Sheleigh wouldn't wake her. She saw light through the crack under the door, so she quietly turned the handle and opened the door. She'd just peek on Lefair and turn off the light.

Lefair sat in a comfortable chair, still dressed, watching something on the vid screen.

"Lefair?"

Lefair didn't respond in any way, so Sheleigh moved all the way into the room. "Lefair?"

Very slowly Lefair turned to her. Only then did Sheleigh see the tears which leaked down Lefair's cheeks. Sheleigh went to her mother-in-law's side. She caught a glimpse of the recording on the screen, and turned abruptly away. A mating flight was private.

"Why are you watching that?" she asked as gently as she could.

"He looked so young then. I was so young. He bonded me fiercely that day. I thought I would burst with my love for him and my pride in belonging to him. I miss him." A harsh sob tore from her throat. "I miss him. Every day is so long and so empty. I keep looking for him, but he's never there. I need him. I'm so lonely. I feel like I'm dying. I need him!" Lefair's tears were now a torrent of heart-wrenching despair, of pain unendurable, of a meaningless existence, of love gone away.

Sheleigh pulled her out of the chair into her arms. Lefair's bones had grown prominent in the week without her mate. Sheleigh tried to contain Lefair's violent sobs, but they poured forth over her like acid, making painful runnels in her heart.

She thought the racking sobs would tear Lefair apart. They were tearing her apart just listening to them. Her own tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks. She'd cried a lot the past week.

The sobs subsided a little, replaced by words desperate to be said. "I miss holding his hand. I want to sit by him at dinner. I miss him in my bed. His scent is fading from the room. What will I do when it's gone? I can't keep coming into this room and not see him here. I don't want to leave my home, but I can't stay here either. I have things to tell him, things to ask him. I need him to be here. Why did he leave me? Why did he go away?" It was a wail of terrible pain. The weeping began again, worse than before.

Sheleigh cried with her. There was nothing else she could do. A week wasn't enough time to numb the loss of a long-time mate. She feared there wouldn't be enough time to numb the loss for Lefair. Already Lefair was fading. At this rate she'd be dead within the year. Sheleigh clutched her tightly, wondering how she could keep Lefair alive. Nothing she knew of could replace the loss of a mate.

Some sense alerted her and she turned to see Kleet in the doorway. His form shimmered through her tears, but she thought she saw pain on his face. He moved into the room, crouched beside them and gathered his mother into his arms.

“Kelfer?” The question came out quivery and thin.

“It’s me, Mother.” His voice sounded thick.

His words triggered another storm of weeping. “I thought ... (sob) ... I wanted it to be ...” Nothing else was understandable.

Kleet murmured to his mother while she cried out her pain on his shoulder. Finally this spate of weeping ended and she sagged against him.

He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. Sheleigh removed Lefair’s shoes and loosened her clothes. She wouldn’t disturb what appeared to be exhausted slumber by undressing Lefair for bed. She covered the fragile woman with the soft blankets. When she turned, Kleet was gone. She shut off the recording without looking at it. She turned off the lights and closed the bedroom door, then went down the hall to her room.

Kleet’s bedroom door wasn’t closed all the way and she heard choking sounds coming from inside. Alarmed, she threw open the door and burst inside. Kleet was on his knees in the middle of the room, his face covered with his hands, his shoulders heaving. The choking sounds were coming from him. He was weeping!

She didn’t know what to do. She was his wife in name only. He hadn’t asked for her comfort. But her heart cried out to comfort him.

Moving to his side, she placed a hand carefully on his shoulder. He jerked and his head came up. His face was wild and ravaged by grief. His eyes were pools of pain and misery. He dashed away the offending tears but more took their place.

“Get out of here,” he snarled.

“No.” She didn’t know where she got the strength, but she stayed in the room. She dropped to her knees in front of him.

He pushed her away. “I said get out.”

She returned to her original position in front of him.

He was savage in his grief. “I don’t want you here.” He pushed her again.

She pushed him back. “I’m not leaving you.”

“That’s not what you said a few days ago,” he lashed out.

“You need me. Let me hold you.”

“I’m not a child. I don’t need you.” He wiped more tears away.

She got her arms around him, but he struggled to be free. They teetered and fell. She pulled him over her. “Put your head on my shoulder. I’ll hold you while you weep.”

He pulled against her. “Women weep. Men don’t need to.”

“You do. Your father was a good man.”

“My father ...” he choked. “My father ...” A sob escaped his control, then another. The storm broke over him. He collapsed against her, gripping her arms so tight she knew she would bruise. She held him fiercely, riding the storm that he was helpless to control. He’d held it in check too long, denied it, ignored it. Now it was loose and there was no stopping it.

She held him while love fluttered in her heart, wanting out to be with him. Her husband. The fluttering grew, as did the spark that was mate-recognition. It clamored with want and need. She found her hands caressing his warm familiar body as he shook. She rubbed her cheek against his silky hair.

He quieted. He raised his face at last, wet with tears. His eyes were darkened with pain. They looked like Kelfer’s eyes at that moment. “I miss him.”

“We all do. He was very much loved.”

“I wasn’t ready for him to go.”

“No.”

“I still need his counsel, his advice, his wisdom. It was easy being the heir, because he was there to guide me. But I’m all alone now. I have to make all the decisions for the planet.”

“You have a good council. They can help you.”

“I’d rather have him.”

“I know.”

“He was so happy I’d finally taken a mate. He couldn’t wait for the babies to be born. Now he’ll never see them.”

She drew his head down to her breast and let him weep some more. A father like his left a huge hole when he died. Kleet and Kelfer had been together all day long for seventeen years. Not just father and son, but teacher and student, ruler and heir, role model and impressionable young man. Their relationship had been complex. Was it any wonder that he felt his father’s loss almost as much as his mother did?

She stroked his hair as he calmed. She was sure this wouldn’t be the last of his weeping, but he had admitted his grief. That was a step in the right direction.

“I got your shirt wet.” He brushed the wet spot. It was close enough to her breast that he brushed that, too. Her nipple peaked. His body stilled. He returned to brush the taut nub again.

“That’s not wet,” she got out through her tight throat. Her hormones clamored. Her nipple felt electrified by just those two brushes. It had been so long.

“Do you want it to be wet?” His voice was husky.

Torrid pictures of the night in the rain and his mouth over the wet silk of her blouse filled her mind. She wriggled under him.

“Yes. Make it wet.”

Instead of sucking her flesh through her shirt, he raised up over her. He unbuttoned her shirt slowly, and then spilled the eager breast from her bra. His head lowered. She drew in breath in anticipation. His warm, wet mouth closed over her breast. She groaned. He sucked the whole breast, then just the nipple. He bit it lightly. She arched into his mouth. He repeated the procedure. Her hand came up around the back of his head to hold him in place. She wanted him to feast. He savored, suckling greedily. She groaned again. She applied pressure to the back of his head. He applied suction to her breast until she was panting with pleasure.

He moved between her legs, which hugged his hips. How she wished she was naked so he could fill her body.

“Are you offering your body to me for comfort?” he murmured.

“If that’s what you need. I don’t care why you take me, just so long as you do.”

“I feel savage. I think that was all the gentleness I had tonight.”

“I can take it. I can take you. I want to.”

“You’ll hate me for using you.” He worked his way down the remaining buttons on her shirt.

“No, I won’t.”

He pushed savagely at her shirt. She rescued her bra from sure destruction. He pulled off her pants in one yank. She couldn’t save the panties, wincing at the sound of them tearing. He spread her legs. She got his trousers partially unfastened. He pushed his pants off.

She was reaching for his shirt when his good wing mantled. She knew her time was up. He thrust his heavily aroused cock inside her, driving for her core. Even though she was wet she felt the discomfort of two month’s celibacy. She arched, trying to accommodate him, but he grabbed her hips to hold her still. He plundered the depths of her body. She shivered with

pleasure. It had been so long. He drove deep. She screamed. He convulsed. So did she. He groaned deeply. It was a mournful howl of pleasure and pain. Afterwards he was still erect.

"Again," he gritted. He thrust into her once more. The mate bonds lately tattered and torn began to knit together again. It was a painful process tying two hurt people together. He grew violent in his possession, fighting the pain, fighting the bond. She arched like a bow under the power of his thrusts. She knew as long as they mated the bonds would grow between them. He knew it, too. But he fought it while he mated with energy and force. She hoped his love for her lurked somewhere under the hurt.

He made animal noises as the bonds grew tight. He arched his neck until the cords stood out. His hands moved to her breasts to rub hard on her nipples. She planted her feet on the rug and arched her hips up. He pounded into her. She clenched, then clenched again. He pinched both nipples. She rocketed to satisfaction. Suddenly she was falling with him through the air. He gripped her hard, almost painfully, as they flew spread-eagled in the thermals. He emptied his seed into her with a shout of satisfaction. Then he was heavy on her as they lay on the floor of his bedroom.

One of her arms wrapped around his heaving back. His wings were spread out on the floor on both sides of them. She didn't know how he'd gotten the crippled one fully extended. She throbbed from his possession. She throbbed with the renewed mate bond, so grateful to have it restored once again.

"You're mine again, Shel." His words were tinged with regret.

"Yes." She wouldn't make it easy for him.

"I want you all night."

"I'm yours. Do what you want."

"I won't be gentle. I can't be right now."

"I don't care."

"Roll over. I'm ready again."

Eventually they moved to Kleet's bed where he used her long and hard. He brought her to screaming climax over and over. He poured his anger, grief, frustration and seed into her willing body. She wondered if he was releasing the grief at the loss of flight as well as the loss of his father. God knew that grief had to come out. He bound her tightly to him. He made up for two months of abstinence in one night, using up all of their energy, pushing them beyond exhaustion to complete satiation.

Finally the storm blew itself out. Kleet lay heavy on her, his sweaty body sticking to hers. His musky scent was familiar, and so was the feel of him. Sheleigh was content for the first time in months.

"Thank you." His voice was rough, the aftereffect of his strong passion.

"You're welcome." She waited to see what he would say next.

He shifted until he was facing her on the pillow. His hair was darkened by sweat. His hand rose to brush back the curls from her face and she leaned into his touch.

"You deserve someone who's whole."

"I don't want someone else. I want you."

"I can't fly." The words sounded like they were torn from him.

"That doesn't matter to me."

He sighed and closed his eyes. His fist crushed a loose curl. "It matters to me. It matters a great deal. Because it does, I can't give all of myself to you."

"You just gave me everything."

“No, I gave you my body.”

“You bonded me to you.”

“I couldn’t prevent it from happening. But I’m not able to give you more right now.”

“You mean your love.” Her languor evaporated like bubbles bursting.

He sighed again. “Yes. I’m not the same man anymore.”

“You’re only different in *your* mind, Kleet.”

“You can’t imagine how I feel, Shel. I’m the Avatier. I should be able to fly.” He pounded his fist into the mattress. His anger slowly leached from his face, leaving the prominent planes of his cheekbones and shadowed eyes behind. “Will you sleep with me tonight? I don’t want to be alone.”

“What about tomorrow? What then?”

“This is all I can give you now.”

She sighed, deeply disappointed. “I’ll stay with you tonight.” It was a place to start.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kleet tossed his stylus onto the papers on his desk. He dropped his head into his hands, trying to rub the tension away with his fingertips. Where were the radicals hiding? Why hadn't someone given information on them yet? Strangely, they'd been quiet in the month since they'd murdered his father. He felt the unnatural peace like the edginess in the air before one of Avera's fierce lightning storms. He ran his fingers up through his hair.

The radicals should have been caught by now. Kelfer's death cried out for justice. He couldn't let his father's murderers go unpunished. His father would have found the guilty ones by now. Kleet's fist clenched. No, his father hadn't even located the person responsible for Kleet's crippling before he'd been murdered. His father hadn't been infallible.

He rubbed his fingers over his heart, where there was a hollow ache. He felt disloyal for thinking his father was fallible. His father was ... had been ... a great man. Why wouldn't this ache stop? A dozen times a day he thought of things he wanted his father's advice on, but he was alone in his father's office now. The heir's office was empty as well, and would be for a long time. He'd never understood before the real role the heir played. The council looked to him for advice and guidance, not the other way around.

That situation would have to change. He'd started change in motion by asking for the council members' help identifying the murderers. A lead on their whereabouts had to come any day now, it had to.

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter," Kleet called.

His brother Berkesch stepped in, pulling the door closed behind him. There was an odd diffidence in the way Berkesch moved. Kleet braced himself to talk about their father. He hadn't spoken about his feelings to either his brother or sister. He should have expected one of them to visit sooner.

"I need to discuss something with you, Avatier."

It felt strange for his brother not to call him by name. "What?"

"You have no heir ..."

"I have heirs."

Berkesch shook his head and a lock of light brown hair fell forward onto his forehead. "You have no one now."

Kleet swallowed his pain. "That's true."

"I am your flesh and blood, son of my father, although I was not chosen heir. Let me help you."

Kleet straightened, surprise stealing his ability to speak for a moment. He'd never thought to ask his family for help. Berkesch might have more of their mother's DNA, but he was a Kryszan. And his mother had been his father's left hand while Kleet had been his right. Maybe Berkesch could fill that role for him until his own children came of age.

He stood and held out his hand. Berkesch took hold of it. "Thank you, brother. I would be honored."

* * * *

Sheleigh looked up at a step in her doorway. Deveria was there, looking happy. Sheleigh hadn't seen much of the young woman lately. "What is it Deveria?"

Deveria came into the room and a young male Avera followed her. "My friend wants to meet you. Do you remember me mentioning the young man in the next canyon?"

Sheleigh didn't remember. Too much had happened in the last few months. But she indicated the young woman should continue.

"This is my friend Sipos Pallas." There was a ring of possession in the words 'my friend.' "Sipos, this is Dr. Sheleigh O'Brien Kryszan."

"Messer Pallas." Sheleigh acknowledged him the in USP way.

He came forward, a too-slender man with dark spiky hair and gleaming eyes. Her internal alarms went off and she rose to her feet to face him from a position of strength.

"So you're the Avatier's mate. Deveria has told us so much about you."

"Has she?" Sheleigh kept her gaze on Pallas.

"Yes. She says you want Avera in USP. We want that, too."

Her stomach clenched, but she remained outwardly calm. Something about him was scary. His eyes were too bright, his manner too intense, and his way of speaking reminded her of a snake. "Who's 'we'?" she prompted.

"My friends and I. The disenchanters. The disadvantaged. The reformers. We want change and we feel that joining USP is the way to get it. Deveria's been telling us about the species who belong to USP. None of them have wings, and yet they're accepted and treated as equals. It shouldn't matter if someone has wings or not. Deveria says USP practices tolerance of everyone."

Oh God, he was a non-winged radical and he was mentioning wings in front of Deveria! Sheleigh moved out from behind her desk towards the door. He moved to block her path.

"So what are you doing to reform Avera, since joining USP isn't an option?" she prompted.

"Oh, it's becoming more of an option every day. The old Avatier would never have considered it. He was too afraid. All the old people are afraid. But we're not afraid. Deveria told us what it's like for young people and we want to be a part of it. We're tired of being put down and disparaged for not having wings. That's old history. It's our time now. The time for the non-winged.

"The new Avatier, he can't fly anymore."

God, this one had helped cripple Kleet! His very tone was smug with satisfaction. Anger burned its way up from the depths of her being and she stepped towards him.

"And that makes you happy, doesn't it?" There was a sharp edge to her voice, but he didn't appear to notice it.

"Yeah. Having him flightless suits our purpose just as well."

Wait for it, she cautioned herself. She needed him to confess what he knew. "Just as well as what?"

"As having him dead. His children will be flightless and they'll be more understanding of our cause. But we couldn't wait until they were grown and became Avatier. With the old Avatier out of the way, the new Avatier and his descendants are flightless, so the time for non-wingeds is here."

"So you removed the old Avatier because he was in the way?"

"Had to. He would have ruled another twenty to thirty years. USP wants us now. We couldn't wait until then."

"You overlooked several things." She was burning with rage inside. Fiery vengeance needed a target and this young man provided a focal point. He cloaked his evil with pretty words. He was the mark of a true fanatic.

"What things? We didn't overlook anything."

"First, USP doesn't sanction the murder of rulers to change planetary policy. Second, USP investigates all prospective new members. Your militant group would have been unearthed quickly and ruined Avera's chance for admission. Third, your policies have made your group worse than the policies you're trying to overthrow. And fourth, well, you told *me*."

She launched herself at him, with all the grief she'd experienced during the last few months coalesced into a white hot rage. She would stop this monster and his kind if it was the last thing she did. She knocked him to the rock floor and they began to grapple. She had the strength of rage, but he had the power of fanaticism behind him.

This young man would kill everything that got between him and what he wanted. He would kill every Avera if he had to, and every human on the planet, and then everyone he could reach in USP. She knew about fanatics. She knew eons of history of fanatics. She struck a blow against his face for the innocents who had died because of him.

He struck back, a blow that would have stunned her if her mind hadn't been filled with a picture of Lefair sobbing with tearing pain after the death of her mate. She blocked a second blow and reared back her fist to strike him. A weapon appeared in his hand.

"That's enough!" His voice was cold. His young face was the face of hatred and death. He cared for no living thing but his own cause. When she subsided, his lip curled. It wiped the look of youthfulness from his face. "So, even you know fear, Dr. O'Brien."

She kept her thoughts to herself, hoping to delay him or to come up with a plan to disarm him.

"Sipos! What are you doing?" Deveria, who'd been strangely silent during the scuffle, spoke with disbelief dripping from her words. Sheleigh dared not take her eyes from the fanatic.

"I'm thinking of using Dr. O'Brien as a hostage. The new Avatier will give in to our demands if we have her."

"No, Sipos! You said you wanted change. You told me it would be for the good of all Averans!"

"He's not interested in the good of all, Deveria, just in what's good for him. Haven't you heard, Sipos? The Avatier and I are estranged--we have been since he was crippled. He won't value my life over the good of the planet. He told me so." It had been said in another context, but Sipos needn't know that.

Doubt flashed across his face, too quickly replaced by hardened resolve. "He's your mate ..."

"I'm an alien," she thrust into his words. He flinched.

"You carry his heirs. He values them."

"You robbed him of the power to love when you crippled him. He'll step aside for his sister's children to inherit the rule if he has none of his own." She allowed her bitterness of the past months to tinge her words. Let him wonder about what was true. This devil wouldn't be allowed to hurt her babies.

"But they're Avera ..." He had begun to doubt at last.

"They're half alien, perhaps more than half." She said it proudly and watched the distaste on his face.

The sudden look of revulsion, and then hatred, warned her too late that she had chosen

her argument unthinkingly.

"Then Avera is better off without you." He raised his weapon to be level with her heart. Regrets crowded her mind. She didn't want to leave Kleet. She was sorry she'd met him so late in her life. She wished she'd reconciled with him. She would have liked her babies to have lived. She wished she'd brought the Averans into USP.

As her body clenched to receive the killing blow, a blur moved between her and Sipos. She heard the weapon discharge, a heavy thud, and two grunts of pain. Then there was another thud and silence. She moved and saw the blur resolve into Marne Vorndran. He was clutching his lower abdomen with one hand, while the other hand clutched a metal rod.

She looked at Sipos and found him flaccid and bleeding from the temple. She swung back to Marne. "You saved me!"

"I'm not the monster you think I am. I wanted you and I handled your rejection badly. This...cretin...he's a radical?" His last words were gasped.

Sheleigh moved to his side. "Lie down, Marne. Deveria, go get Dr. Barazi." She looked up at the girl's frozen white face. "Deveria!" she snapped.

The girl looked at her with dismay and shame. "I didn't know! I swear. He said ..."

"Now's not the time. Go get Dr. Barazi. Now!"

The young woman fled. Marne was pale and she assessed his injury. There was blood on his shirt. She pulled it from his pants and exposed the wound.

"I don't think you've got any organs in this area. Marne, what were you thinking?"

He gave her a twisted smile. "I couldn't let him hurt you. He was obviously a fanatic. What are they fighting about?"

"Shh, don't talk. Dr. Barazi's coming. He'll know what to do for you."

She heard the fast pounding of booted feet against rock in the hall and she turned toward the doorway. Dr. Barazi appeared, looking disbelieving. He took in the tableau in an instant and dropped to his knees beside Marne. He checked the wound thoroughly.

"It didn't hit anything important, Marne. You do need a medical facility. Sheleigh ..."

"No," Marne's hoarse voice and grasping fingers riveted their attention. "Things are going to explode here. Call USP."

"I don't know all that went on here. Deveria didn't make much sense. But I do know you need a medic."

"I didn't know!" Deveria wailed. "I'm so sorry! He said they were oppressed. They wanted change and I wanted to help them. We're supposed to fight for equality. It's what USP teaches us."

"You don't understand the issues here," Sheleigh admonished their assistant.

"But he said their rights were being denied!"

"You aided the radicals?" Dr. Barazi demanded.

"I didn't know they were radicals! They said they needed my help."

"And you gave it to them." Kleet's voice from the doorway was cold and hard. Sheleigh would have been ecstatic to see him under any other circumstances. But the look on his face was chilling. "You aided them in the death of my father."

Deveria backed farther from him. Sheleigh rose, fearing what Kleet might do in the name of vengeance.

"She didn't kill your father, Avatier," Dr. Barazi corrected. "She's young and she made a bad error in judgment."

"An error that resulted in a man's death. My father made a similar error in judgment that

I'm about to correct. You've got four hours to gather your things and get off this planet."

"Kleet, no," Sheleigh protested.

He looked at her and she quailed for an instant. He was in a killing rage. "Once again, strangers have shown they can't be trusted. We won't make that mistake again."

"That's not true!" she cried and heard Dr. Barazi's protest echoing hers. "You're judging us unfairly."

"It's my right to hold this one," he pointed to Deveria, "for judgment by the council on charges of conspiring with the radicals to murder the Avatier."

Deveria gasped loudly.

"Since I heard her confession, I already know she'll be found guilty. We've never had such a heinous crime on Avera. I'm sure the judgment will be for execution."

"No!" Deveria screamed. "I didn't kill anyone!"

"Avatier, we can't allow such a thing to happen!" Dr. Barazi exclaimed.

"No, I'm sure you won't. I'm sure you'll call your USP to come and protect this conspirator. Then more Averans will die while you make sure we've learned our lesson about strangers. And I'll be killed in order to leave Avera leaderless."

"No, Kleet!" Sheleigh moved towards him. "USP isn't like that."

"The only way I can protect Avera and its people from USP retaliation is to send all of you and this conspirator away. She'll go unpunished so that my people and I will live." His face twisted with bitterness. "She'll be free to kill other leaders of other planets. But she won't kill any more Averans."

"Kleet, you've got to listen ..." Sheleigh began, reaching him and grabbing his arm.

He shook her off. "The sun is setting on your four hours. Start packing. If you're still here in four hours, guards will be sent to collect the conspirator."

Dr. Barazi gestured to Marne. "This man needs medical help."

"Take him to your shuttle. We won't help him. If he dies, his life will be weighed against my father's."

"He saved Sheleigh's life. He was wounded defending her from this radical." Dr. Barazi waved towards Sipos' still lax form.

Kleet closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them there was pain in them. "The guards will transport this man to your shuttle. A medic will treat him while you pack."

Kleet turned and signaled behind him. Two guards moved past a white-faced Sarnia and Rahwen to enter the room. "This radical is to be bound and taken to the council hall for questioning. Call for a medical transport to take the wounded human to the human shuttle. Make cargo transports available to take the rest of the humans to the shuttle. The humans are restricted to this building. If any of them try to set foot elsewhere, shoot them." There was a group protest from the humans. "Shoot to wound, and then deliver their wounded bodies to their shuttle."

"Allow them no contact with anyone other than the guards. If they try to use the com unit or speak to anyone else, use whatever force you deem necessary to silence them. And arrest anyone they speak to. You have your orders."

One guard stepped into the hall and Sheleigh could hear him relaying orders rapidly into his com unit. The other guard rolled Sipos over and began to bind his hands. Kleet moved to the doorway and only then did Sheleigh realize she didn't know if she was supposed to stay or go.

"Kleet?"

He didn't turn. "Yes?"

"Do you want me to leave, too?"

There was no sound in the room, as though its occupants held their breaths to hear the outcome. "Do as you wish." His voice was toneless and gave her no clue as to his wishes. He left with a swirl of cape. There was a gaping hole where he'd been. The sigh in the room as breaths were released was almost audible.

Sarnia and Rahwen entered the room. Deveria collapsed into a sobbing heap. Amin, Sarnia and Rahwen babbled alternately about unfairness and what to do first. In the cacophony Sheleigh was attracted to the one spot of silence in the room. Marne lay quietly, looking up at her, and in his pale face she saw understanding. He knew. This man, whom she had doubted as a xenophobe because of his personal jealousy towards Kleet, knew she had no choice. Her place was with Kleet.

"You'll stay," he spoke softly, but it sounded like a shot in the room. The others stopped speaking and turned to her. Amin's face was concerned, Rahwen's confused and Sarnia's was maternally benevolent.

"He's my mate. My place is here now. I'll be the USP presence. I'll be the liaison. He's angry and hurt and he has every right to be. Someone murdered the father he loved. People," she looked pointedly at Deveria, "are trying to start a war here. I have to stand with him now and save what I can for my children." Her hand dropped to her distended belly.

"But Sheleigh, you'll be all alone with Averans," Dr. Barazi protested.

"I have my mate and my children. And I hope to have USP again soon. I'll help you pack and load the shuttle."

"We should stay and try to talk to the Avatier," Dr. Barazi argued.

Sheleigh shook her head. "He won't listen to any of you. I'll try to talk to him, but I don't know if he'll listen to me either."

"My lady," the second guard called from the doorway. "The medical transport is here."

Sarnia and Rahwen spoke quickly to Marne, then moved off down the hall. Sheleigh knelt beside him next. "Thank you for saving my life."

"It wasn't as much fun as I thought it would be," he joked, his voice breathy.

"No, it looks like it hurts a lot."

"It does. The Avatier cares for you." He said it wonderingly.

"He's loved me since long before he married me. And I love him. Not the Avatier, but the man, with all his faults. The father of my babies."

Dr. Barazi pressed her arm. "I'm going to the shuttle with Marne. When he's settled, I'll come back. Don't leave until I speak with you."

"All right."

A stretcher was brought into the room and Dr. Barazi left with Marne. The radical had already been taken away. Sheleigh was alone with Deveria. There were some things she had to tell the young woman.

"Deveria?"

Her face lifted. It was a picture of misery. Sheleigh hardened herself against being sympathetic. "Deveria, what Sipos said here today is not to be repeated to anyone. You've already assisted in the death of the Avatier and his guards, the injury of scores of others, the destruction of property and the attempted assassination of the heir and his mate."

Deveria's eyes widened and she paled further. "What attempted assassination?" she squeaked.

"When Kleet and I were hurt, it was because someone tried to kill us."

"I didn't..." Deveria stopped. It looked like she was swallowing words as well as

distasteful truths. Sheleigh hoped the young woman was beginning to realize the enormity of what helping fanatics meant.

"The knowledge you learned in this room today could kill more people, thousands more people."

"About the wings?" Deveria whispered.

"Yes. That knowledge is a death sentence for the Averans." Deveria winced, but Sheleigh pressed onward. "You owe it to the dead Avatier. You owe it to the grieving widow of the dead Avatier. You owe it to my husband, who misses his father. You owe it to me, because I could have died today. Me and my babies."

Deveria hung her head. "I won't tell."

"Not anyone, not for any reason. Swear on the dead Avatier."

"I swear," Deveria whispered.

"When the Averans are ready, they'll tell their own secret. When they feel safe. They have to feel safe. Go pack your things, and then help the others."

When Deveria left, Sheleigh sighed. She needed just a moment by herself before she joined the others. When would she and Kleet share a time without grief? They'd been through months of tumultuous events, months and events that had placed them on opposite sides. She wanted to stand on the same side as him, like they'd done when they were first married.

She gave herself a few precious minutes and then she went to help her friends pack.

While she was packing Marne's office, Dr. Barazi came inside and closed the door.

"You'll make the guards antsy, Dr. Barazi."

"I need to speak to you privately." He held out his hand with something in it and she took it. It was the more powerful hand-held com unit from the space shuttle. She looked questioningly at him.

"I don't want you completely alone down here. I want you to be able to call for help, if you need it. And I want you to be able to communicate with USP if and when the Avatier changes his mind."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Amin, it's exactly what I needed."

"I thought it might be. Are you sure about what you're doing, Sheleigh?"

"Yes. He's my husband."

"Then I wish you the best."

"Thank you. There's one more thing. You'll need to report Deveria's actions to USP. I want to add my own recommendation that she be restricted from interaction with other species until she can prove indisputably that she understands not to interfere. Some of her behavior can be blamed on youth, but some of it can't be. Right now she's almost as bad as a xenophobe would be. Avera's history made her actions even more destructive."

"I'll take care of it. She won't be allowed to make mistakes like these again."

"Good." Although it was too late for Kelfer, hopefully it wasn't too late for Avera.

* * * *

Sheleigh stood next to Kleet and watched the shuttle door close. "It's a mistake sending them away. We need USP now more than ever."

"We need to find the radicals and conspirators and eliminate them. We've made a start today."

"Not everyone on that shuttle is guilty."

"Your species is easily swayed by the lies of dissidents. I can't risk another human becoming aligned with the radicals. Besides, the man who saved your life needs medical care."

It's best that he receive it from his own doctors."

"USP has non-human species."

"No more strangers."

The shuttle thrusters fired. She took an involuntary step forward.

"You don't have to stay, Shel."

"Shut up," she whispered around her tightening throat. She was losing control of her emotions, feeling a deep homesickness, feeling anxiety about staying. She felt like a child having her first sleepover. It was like her parents were in the shuttle and were leaving her here. The shuttle lifted. Her eyes welled. It rose smoothly into the air. Her eyes overflowed. She watched it rise quickly into the sky and her heart soared with it for a few minutes.

A hand slipped into hers and she gripped it fiercely. More tears fell. She lifted her free hand to shield her eyes from the Avera sun. She watched until the shuttle was a blip in the sky, and then it winked out as it left Avera's atmosphere. She sent a silent good-bye to them.

"You could have gone with them."

"No, I couldn't. My life is with you."

He tugged on her hand and she walked with him to their transport.

"Shel...may I come to your bed tonight?"

She inhaled, looking around at Avera. Her home. "Yes. You can have me now if you want. I need it."

"I need more than a fast mating. I have much to do in council today. Can you wait until tonight?"

She tugged him to a stop. He raised an eyebrow quizzically. Other than that eyebrow, his face was still closed and cold. "Is tonight a reward for staying with you?"

"No. Too many bad things have happened lately. I need the comfort only you can give."

"How long will it be until you need me again? Days, weeks, months? I don't want to live like that."

He looked up at the sky, perhaps to where the shuttle had disappeared. "You can move back into my room."

"And?" Her heart thudded.

"We'll see how it goes."

It was progress at least. She walked with him to the transport and went back to work.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Three days later the arrests began. The conspiracy at first seemed to be small and centered in the young, lower income non-wingeds. Sheleigh sat in the council hall and typed notes into her computer as each trial was held. Those people directly linked to the death of the old Avatier and his guards were sentenced to death. There were six of those, including Sipos Pallas.

When Sheleigh saw him in the council hall she was shocked at his appearance. His face was bruised and swollen. It was now obvious to her how the other conspirators were named. Getting those names was necessary, but she swallowed bile when she thought about how it had been accomplished. She wondered if Kleet had taken a swing or two at Sipos. Her stomach lurched at that thought and she feared she might be ill. But she breathed through her nose and forced herself to sit through his trial and sentencing. When it was her turn to testify against him, he looked at her with burning hatred, and she knew he was irredeemable. He was more dangerous now that he was thwarted. If he ever got loose, the body count would probably surpass that of the Malchovist attack.

Sipos was the most fanatical of the group, but the other five principals shared a hatred of the Avera power structure and upper class. They all told a similar story of feeling shunned. Others treated them as though they were defective. Opportunities were denied them. They felt discriminated against. Women did not consider them mate material.

She tried not to let their stories of prejudice affect her, because that was no justification for murder. Besides, she'd met other non-wingeds who didn't feel as these radicals did. She'd interviewed their non-winged guard and found that he was happily mated with two small children. He liked being a guard for the Avatier. He said he felt people looked up to him for protecting the Avatier.

She knew prejudice against non-wingeds existed on Avera. Even Kleet was guilty of it. And given sufficient practice of prejudice, it wasn't unusual for the young people to say, "Enough!" and rebel. The practice of prejudice had to stop. But it was tied in to their practice of isolationism. And that had to stop too. When Averans got used to being a part of the non-winged species of USP, they would accept their own non-winged people.

This rebellion might be halted, but in the natural course of cultural evolution, another would rear its head. Averans didn't have the luxury to wait until they felt safe enough to join USP. The time was right, even though they weren't ready. The population was aware of non-winged unrest. The testimonies about prejudice had been heard by the law-making body. USP was aware of Avera. The Avatier was flightless and the Avatier's mate was non-winged. That cretin Sipos had been right about these last two things. There would never be a better time to join USP than now. But how could she convince the council when she couldn't convince her own husband?

After the six fanatical leaders were sentenced to be executed, the trials of their followers began. They, too, had felt prejudice, but not to the extent their leaders had. Mostly they just wanted equality. Sheleigh could barely remain seated as they testified. As a USP citizen she'd been taught her rights and learned about equality since she was a little girl. These people wanted

what she'd been granted from the cradle. Averans were decent, caring people. Why couldn't they see that how they were treating their own was wrong?

Over and over during the testimonies her heart and soul cried out for justice. She ceased taking notes because her fingers were gripped together to prevent her outcry. It wasn't her human sentimentality at work, as Kleet might accuse. It was human dignity and USP ideals at work. *This* was what USP wanted to eradicate!

Finally she couldn't listen to any more and she left the council hall in the middle of an interrogation. There was an abrupt cessation of noise as she moved, and she saw Kleet look her way, but she didn't stop. She allowed the hall door to slam and got a small satisfaction from that. She paced the corridor down to her office, then back to the assembly hall and back again. "What can I do?" canted in her mind as she paced. "I have to do something!" was the descant.

She noticed Harrier standing quietly in the doorway to their office, watching her pace. He seemed to be waiting for something. On her third pass she lifted an eyebrow to him in invitation.

"We need to change."

She stopped in front of him. "In what way?"

"You know what way, my lady. Arresting the radicals won't stop people from wanting change. You can't stop thought. Even when you kill the thinker, the thought is born in someone else."

"You're not non-winged!" she breathed.

"More than the non-winged want change."

She stared at him. He wasn't a fanatic. He was wealthy, educated, open minded ... he was open minded. She kicked herself mentally. She was as bad as Deveria in divulging information about USP ideals. And this man understood fully what she was saying. This man had volunteered to be the liaison to strangers. He had motive, opportunity ... someone had written the note. No, her heart cried, not him! But her mind had to know the truth.

"Kelfer was your friend."

"Yes, but he couldn't change. And we have to change. At some point the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. I'm a student of history and culture, like you. I can see where the unrest is leading. There will be war on Avera, bloody and destructive. We'll lose people and material possessions, maybe industry and agriculture, whole crops and flocks, maybe resources. And we'll lose a society too fragile to survive a war.

"I know what happened the day of the massacre all those years ago. Avera society almost collapsed, and that was with the loss of only two thousand people. In a war with explosives, more people than that would die. Many more. Without intervention, we'll have that war. I might be dead before it begins, but it's coming. We need change to prevent it. I think you know that."

She was still reeling from his betrayal. She had trouble catching her breath. She knew her face had lost all color. "Not like this! Not by sacrificing Kelfer!"

"The needs of the many. I expect to be punished for my part. I'll be named any day now. I don't expect my death to be pleasant, nor do I expect any joy in the afterlife. I'll have my say at my trial and hope I can convince the council that change is mandatory. Because if I can't, and if change doesn't begin soon, this may be the best Avera society ever is. If we don't change, our days are numbered. If I fail, we'll face extinction one day. Do you understand, my lady?"

Her breath whooshed out of her. This man felt he carried a huge burden on his shoulders, the burden of a future which might never be. His version might never happen. But his version *might* happen, and then there would be no future for Avera. No future for her children, or for her

children's children.

"Sacrificing Kelfer wasn't the way."

"We have to change. I don't have the knowledge you have about how other species have changed. You can see some of what I see, yet you do nothing. You're clearly agitated about the trials, but you do nothing. Your children will be born into this world soon, will in fact be Averans. If you care nothing for the rest of us, will you at least do something for your own children?"

She rocked back on her feet at his thought echoing her own. "I don't approve of killing people to effect change." His face fell and all his years of living showed in the lines on his face. "I won't turn you in because you say someone else will. I need time." His face was hopeful suddenly. "I won't save you, but maybe I can save Avera."

"My lady ..."

"Please don't speak to me any more. I loved Kelfer. My mate loved Kelfer. What you did is unpardonable."

"Yes, my lady."

* * * *

That evening Kleet demanded to know why she'd left the council hall. He accused her of allowing her human feelings to sympathize with the radicals. The argument became heated and shouting ensued. Lefair fled the room. Their passionate argument because a violently passionate possession.

Afterwards Sheleigh lay beneath Kleet on the rug, aching in numerous places, too weak to move. But her mind could think, and she realized two things. First, she would find it easier to convince the council than to convince Kleet. It was too soon after his father's death for him to listen to reason. And second, as they'd flown the mating flight in her mind, she'd seen the desolate wasteland beneath her of a post-apocalypse Avera. She was convinced it was a prophetic vision.

* * * *

Two days later the guards arrested Harrier. Sheleigh stood silently as he was bound and taken away. He offered no resistance. Kleet watched coldly from the doorway, his stony face giving nothing away of how he felt towards this latest betrayal. She saw how hard he clenched his jaw and knew he must be suffering badly. She went to him and placed her hand in his. As the guards moved Harrier down the hall, Kleet turned his laser gaze on her. It was sharp like his father's, at last.

"You don't seem surprised," he gritted.

"He admitted his guilt to me two days ago."

"And you did nothing?" His face was suffused with rage and his fists clenched.

"He said his name would be revealed, and it was. He said he'd be arrested, and he was. Did two days difference matter?"

"He could have been planning further betrayals!"

"He was putting his affairs in order. He doesn't expect to survive this."

Kleet reared back as though struck, and his face paled. "He killed my father?"

"I believe he wrote the note. He didn't tell me exactly what he'd done."

"He was my father's friend!"

She touched his arm, and he jerked away from her. She stepped closer and touched him again. This time he didn't pull away. He looked down at her and his eyes were full of pain and accusation. "Betrayals everywhere."

“Not from me,” she said quietly. “Harrier wanted his punishment. He just wanted me to know in advance.”

“Why? Because of your human sentimentality?”

“No. Because I’m an anthropologist.”

He stared at her, confusion clear on his face, and she could see him trying to figure out the connection. She offered him enlightenment.

“In my head and in my computer I have recorded histories of thousands of societies. In any given situation I can guess at the future outcome. I can tell you which societies failed and why...”

“Our society won’t fail.”

“I can tell you why races died out ...”

“We’re thriving.”

“I can tell you where the leaders of failed societies made their biggest mistakes.”

He pulled away from her. “I don’t have to listen to this.”

She was disappointed, but she let him go. He wasn’t ready yet.

“Are you coming into the council hall today?”

“No, I have work to do.” He gave her a sharp look, probably wondering what kind of work. He nodded and walked away.

She returned to her computer, but didn’t restart her research. Every night since her talk with Harrier she’d been haunted by visions of Avera after a nuclear war. She saw it during her mating flights with Kleet and she dreamed of it during the night. She was amazed that Kleet couldn’t see it too, it was so starkly real. Maybe he didn’t want to see it.

She was so tired. She’d had the nightmare three times last night. Each time she woke gasping and sweating, hoping it wouldn’t return when she fell asleep again. It was a dream of complete hopelessness, of no life of any kind. It was a dream of the end, and a look at the aftermath of the end. It was horrible and sad and frightening.

It called her to action. It begged her to intercede. It demanded her attention. It cried out for help. She had to save these people! Harrier had plopped this dying child in her lap and she had to resuscitate it and save it. Before it was her own children dying. She turned on her computer and dug deep into its memory.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sheleigh sat in the gallery on the day Harrier was tried for his crime. She knew she looked haggard from lack of sleep. She'd had the apocalypse dream every night for a week and had begun to dread the night. Some of the council members looked haggard as well. It must be disturbing for them to try friends and neighbors for heinous crimes.

She listened as Harrier admitted his part in the conspiracy. He described being approached by the radicals and writing the note that drew Kelfer to his death. The hall echoed with murmurs of disbelief and anger, of accusation and dismay. Then someone asked him why he'd done it. As Harrier explained his fears in horrifyingly gripping detail, the hall grew silent. There were bursts of denial quickly silenced. Heads shook while other members clutched their heads between their hands. Kleet gripped the arms of his chair with white knuckles.

At the end of his explanation, Kleet spoke up. "So you helped lure your friend to his death to prevent a future that might never be?" His tone was disbelieving.

But instead of answering Kleet, Harrier looked straight at her. "My lady?" Somehow his action didn't surprise her.

She pulled her clenched hands apart and rose to her feet. The council members turned shocked and stunned faces to her. She didn't look at Kleet because the council was who she needed to convince.

"I've been many places and seen many things. I've heard many things. I know many things. I study societies and people and species, as I've studied Averans these past months. Despite what you think, Averans are more like the other species of the universe than you know. Many species are alike in ways. Many societies are alike in ways. Many histories are alike.

"The tale Harrier tells has been told before, more than once. It's been told by the cold evidence and records left after planet-wide war left no survivors to tell the tale. It's been told by survivors who wished they'd perished with the rest of their kind. It's been told by neighboring countries who watched their neighbor tear itself apart while they accepted refugees fleeing the destruction.

"The tale's been told by dead bodies too numerous to burn or bury. It's been told by planet-wide wastelands, by mutilated survivors, by grieving widows, childless parents and orphans. By water too foul to drink, by air too clogged with dust and burning ash to breathe, by land too scorched to grow crops, by herds decimated.

"There's a planet near USP territory where nobody lives. Nobody's lived there for hundreds of years. Nobody can live there. They destroyed themselves and their planet. It's a smoking hulk with no life forms. No people, no animals, no plants. USP wanted them to join us, but they only wanted to fight each other. We left them alone, and one day we found that they'd fought one another to death.

"War is ugly and it kills. War destroys the innocent as well as the guilty. War leaves horrible scars on people and places. Eons of history of ten living species in USP are littered with the dead bodies from wars. Sometimes wars are fought over the littlest things, like a dispute over property. But sometimes war begins with civil unrest over prejudice and it doesn't stop until there are dead bodies on both sides of the issue.

“Prejudice is an ugly word. It means hating someone for being different from you, either in the way they look or the way they think. In the majority of cases of prejudice the objects of prejudice rise up to violently end their subjugation. Avera has had its first rising. History indicates there will be another, and another, and another, until you destroy the non-winged, or they destroy you. But you can’t destroy them, can you? They are what you’re becoming through evolution. In ten thousand years there won’t be a winged person on Avera. But war might wipe out the winged before then. It may wipe out the non-winged, too. And the planet.

“You have a bad thing on Avera. An ugly thing. You hate your own people because they’re physically different from you. You hate your own sons and daughters, your own grandchildren. You hate your neighbors. They hate you for hating them. Hate leads to war. It’s imminent here on Avera. You can’t avoid it because you won’t do anything to stop the hate.”

She had their unbroken attention. “There’s a bird on my planet. When faced with danger it hides its head in the sand. The danger doesn’t go away, but the bird doesn’t see danger, so it feels safer. Averans are such birds.” There were protests, but she continued on.

“It’s time to pull your heads out of the sand and admit the truth to yourselves. There are bad things happening on Avera. There are ugly thoughts in people’s minds. The winged think ugly, prejudiced thoughts about the non-winged. The non-winged think ugly, violent thoughts about the winged. Avera is ripe for war. Avera won’t survive a war.

“I have babies in my belly. Non-winged babies.” There were gasps and small outcries. “My non-winged babies are the next Avatiers. Will they be hated for being non-winged? I’m going to teach them what my mother and father taught me—that I’m wonderful and can do anything I want to do. Will you tell my children differently?” She looked several people in the eyes and they looked down or away.

“My mother loves me. She says I’m wonderful. But I don’t have wings. I love my mother. But she doesn’t have wings. There are ten species in USP—billions of people—and *none* of them have wings. We have healers and teachers, engineers, great politicians, people who give their lives for peace, simple farmers, people who cook and clean and work hard. None of them have wings.

“Yes, some of them hate. Yes, some of them have prejudice. Averans are just like some of them in that respect. They have prejudice against people who are old.” She looked at a white-haired man. “Or people with dark skin, or people who have a different ideology than they have. No matter how hard USP works, there always seems to be someone who wants to hate. Just like all of you.

“If nothing is done to stop the prejudice and the hate, will I live to be old? Will I watch my mate killed? Will I see my children killed? Will I watch the destruction of this planet? Because history says it will happen. You’re following the path of the rest of the dead societies in history. You’re just like them.”

Through a smattering of denials she continued. “How many of us will be killed next year, or the year after that, or within ten years? In fifty years, will everyone in this room be dead and Avera a smoking ruin? You hold the power in your hands, each of you. Stop cowering in fear and stand up. *Stand up!* The time to hide is over. You continue to hide and you’re dead. *Dead!*

“You’ve had your heads in the sand for a thousand years. You can’t breathe in the sand! Stand up! There are people in the universe just like you.” Heads shook below and rage made her next words snap with anger. “Yes, just like you! They get out of bed in the morning. They have a morning meal. They go to work. They eat a mid-day meal. They come home from work. They kiss their mates. They play with their children. They have an evening meal. They love. They go

to sleep. They're just like you! And you're just like them. The non-wingeds look more like them, but Averans are just like them. They cry, they laugh, they celebrate, they dance, they die. Just like you.

"It's time you joined me and the rest of USP. We're your salvation, you see? We want you to live! We don't want you to fight each other any more. We don't want you to kill each other any more. Because you're just like us, inside where your hearts live. Inside your heads where you think and dream.

"Call USP. Call my mother. She'll tell you I'm wonderful. I'm just like you."

Her chest heaved. She felt lightheaded and drained. She'd put every ounce of energy into her plea and still didn't know the outcome.

She heard someone clapping. Her head snapped to the left to see Lefair standing there with tears streaming down her face. Lefair with her face shining with pride and love. Lefair showing her approval by clapping so that everyone could see and hear.

She was overcome with love for this woman who would give to another while steeped deeply in grief. She stumbled to her mother-in-law and gathered her into her arms to hold her tightly.

"I love you, Lefair," she murmured into the scented hair. No one could ask for a better mother-in-law than Lefair. No one could be as surprised to be rewarded by a mother-in-law as generous in heart as Lefair.

Sheleigh drew back and only then did she hear other applause from down below. She kissed Lefair's cheek and wiped the tears from her own face before turning to face the council and her husband.

The majority of the council were on their feet, clapping. It was a greater response than she had expected. Kleet was on his feet, but stood quietly. At least he wasn't angry.

When the applause ended, Lefair surprised her yet again. "I speak in Sheleigh's mother's stead. She is wonderful. She's like me, and like the rest of you. She's very much like the best of us in what we want for our children and our world. Kleet, I want you to call USP."

"Mother ..."

"I'm tired of the violence. I don't want to see you die. I want to live to see my grandchildren grow up." She took a deep breath. "I want to be the first Averan ambassador to USP."

There were loud exclamations of shock. Sheleigh jerked in surprise. Would her mother-in-law never cease to amaze her?

"Mother, you would leave us?" Kleet's face was a mixture of alarm and astonishment.

"I represent what's good about Avera. I'm intelligent, cultured, well-spoken. I've been surrounded by politics all my adult life. I want to see these others who think like us. I want to show them I think like them. I was born to do this."

Sheleigh squeezed Lefair's hand. It was perfect to send a bright woman out to meet the rest of USP.

"Kleet, do it for me."

The ruler of the world bowed to his mother's plea. When the vote was taken, the majority wanted to establish contact with USP. By then Sheleigh had moved to Kleet's side and when the vote was positive she handed him the hand-held com unit.

He looked from it to her. "You were that sure?"

"No. Averans surprised me today." She glanced at Lefair and back again. "But the future of the planet and its people depend on this. I couldn't fail."

Kleet made the call from a circle of his supporters. Sheleigh stood on one side of him and Lefair stood on the other. Sheleigh didn't recognize the voice of whoever answered, so it wasn't the human shuttle they reached.

"What did he say? How am I supposed to communicate with these people?" Kleet demanded, his voice ripe with frustration.

"He said to stand by. He's getting a translator."

"What language was he speaking?"

"It's called Basic. It's the universal language of USP."

"Hello? Who's speaking?" asked a tenor voice in Averan.

"This is the Avatier of the planet Avera. My name is Kleet Kryszan. I wish to speak with an official of Unified Sentient Planets."

"Avatier, I'm the USP translator. I'm authorized to act as a USP official until an ambassador can reach us. My name is Mikesh Akelee. How may I help you?"

"We need help ... to avert a war."

"I'm skilled in making peace, Avatier. My whole species believes in peace. May I come down to the planet?"

"You're above us now?" There were murmurs of unrest from some of the people around them.

"No, but we're in your solar system. We're keeping your planet safe. I can be there in an hour. May I come down?"

"How many will come with you?"

"Just my partner. You've met a Bonwee partner before."

"Yes. Do you know the coordinates of where the human shuttle landed?"

"Yes, Avatier."

"A transport will meet you when you arrive."

Sheleigh tugged on Kleet's arm and he turned to her. "Avatier," she whispered. "May I speak to him, please?"

He looked puzzled, but handed her the com unit.

Sheleigh spoke in fluent Basic. "Messer Akelee, this is Dr. Sheleigh O'Brien Kryszan. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, doctor. How can I help you?"

"If there is a choice of USP ambassador, I believe the Averans might do better with a Carisi or a Petrosian. A Carisi would impress them with Carisi culture, manners and logic. A Petrosian would exemplify the differences in physiology of USP species. Oh, and it would help if the ambassador spoke Averan."

"I'll notify USP immediately."

"Is the Earth expedition with you?"

"We refueled and resupplied them before sending them on their way. Our medic treated their wounded member and he was recovering well when they left. Under the circumstances, we felt it imperative to stay within this solar system."

"Thank you, Messer Akelee. Here's the Avatier." She handed the com unit to Kleet. "Thank you, Avatier."

"Messer Akelee, I'll see you soon after you arrive." Sheleigh noted Kleet's use of the USP male designation 'messer' with surprise.

"Yes, Avatier."

As Kleet gathered the council together, Sheleigh looped her arm through Lefair's and

moved towards the nearest exit. She looked up and there sat Harrier in the seat he'd been in when this all began. One armed guard stood next to him. He'd clearly been forgotten in the course of more urgent events. Then she remembered whose arm she held and she stiffened.

Harrier stood and his guard tensed. Sheleigh felt Lefair quivering beside her.

Harrier bowed to Lefair. "My lady. I'm sorry."

Lefair's quivering eased. "I can't forgive you, if that's what you're looking for." There was a small wobble in her voice. Sheleigh cursed herself for coming in this direction and causing Lefair more pain.

"I don't expect to be forgiven for what I've done. I just wanted you to know that I'm sorry."

It was the most intricate hair-splitting Sheleigh had ever heard. She stared at Harrier, trying to read his face. Despite his premeditated act of treason, he had acted honorably since he'd admitted his complicity to her. He'd acted to secure the future of his family. He'd accepted the consequences of his actions with quiet resignation. She couldn't match the man with his actions. Here again his actions defied her knowledge of his previous actions. What was true?

Before she could decide, he turned to her. "Thank you for that stirring speech, Dr. O'Brien."

"I didn't do it for you."

"I know. I have a new grandson. You did it for him."

Shock rang through her, like the vibration of a large bell after it tolls. Harrier's grandchild would be her children's age mate. What would the children learn about the events of the past few months? Would they eventually taunt Harrier's grandchild with epithets like, "Your grandfather killed my grandfather"? Harrier's treason had further reaching repercussions than just to him.

Lefair tugged on Sheleigh's arm, forcing her to go where she was being pulled. She continued to stare at Harrier until he was no longer in sight. Lefair closed the assembly room door with a soft 'snick.'

Sheleigh turned to her mother-in-law. "His grandson will go to school with my children. Why didn't he consider that child's life when he acted as he did? The boy is innocent, but he will carry the stigma of Harrier's actions all his life. You and I have just done our best to avert a civil war. We've tried to better the lives of Averans. But who will stand up for that child? Does Harrier think it will be me? Is that why he told me?"

"I don't know why he's done anything, dear. I thought you understood him better than anyone." They walked along the corridor in the direction of Kleet's office.

"I think I've been dreaming his dreams this week."

Lefair looked at her with curious eyes. "Is that a human expression? If so, what does it mean?"

"It's not an expression. Harrier told me his fears about the future. My planet has a violent history, much of which is documented on freeze frames and visual recordings. I know what Avera would look like after a war, so Harrier's fears became a picture in my mind. I've been dreaming about it for a week. I'm exhausted. I wonder what Harrier's dreams look like, and how long he's been dreaming them. He doesn't look as tired as I feel."

"You have a passion he doesn't have. You put all your energy into what you do. He didn't know the right way to make a difference in the future." Lefair's voice wobbled. "But you do."

They entered Kleet's old office and Lefair shut the door. Sheleigh looked around her at

the office generations of heirs had used. There were pieces of ore and metal, bone and wood, books and data discs. The office contained old and new, raw and finished, history and the future. Her children would work here when they were old enough. She ran her hand over the marble desk top, feeling its ancient coolness.

Something Lefair said tickled her mind. Harrier hadn't known the right way to make a difference in the future. But he'd known Avera's future needed USP. How had he known? Because she'd told him. What she'd briefly realized the day Harrier confessed to her hit her fully in the face now. She staggered under the blow.

"Sheleigh! What's wrong?" Lefair was at her side in an instant, supporting her.

"I started all of this. It was me. I was the catalyst."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Stunned, Sheleigh turned to Lefair. "I was the catalyst. What I said to Harrier when I arrived on Avera started everything happening. I gave the radicals a focus. I gave Harrier a purpose. Kleet taking me as his mate triggered the violence. My being on Avera caused Kelfer's death. I'm just as guilty as Harrier."

Lefair's face paled. "No, Sheleigh. You didn't cause Kelfer's death. You didn't have anything to do with it."

Sheleigh grabbed Lefair's arms with her hands. "Knowledge is powerful. I brought knowledge with me to Avera. I told Kleet the day he made me his mate that he'd brought the future into his home. He had. Harrier and the radicals took my knowledge, took that power and used it to kill Kelfer. What I did was like bringing a weapon into this world. That weapon was used to end a man's life." Her voice dropped to a whisper. Self-loathing writhed like snakes in her belly. "Everything was my fault. Kelfer's death. Kleet being crippled. All my fault."

"No! None if it was your fault. No one can know how information will be used, especially by hateful people. Some people will twist beautiful things and make them ugly. You can't control that. You didn't kill Kelfer. You didn't cripple Kleet. Don't think like that."

"Kleet will never love me again when he finds out." Her tone was fatalistic and flat.

"You're tired. You need to sleep. Let me find someplace for you to lie down for awhile. Sit down here and rest." Lefair pushed her into a chair. Sheleigh felt shell-shocked. Lefair's caress on her hair was a balm on the pain she felt. "You're wonderful, Sheleigh. Don't think otherwise. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The little eddy of air containing Lefair's light perfume marked her passing out of the room. Sheleigh sat with her hands in her lap, not daring to touch her babies. She didn't want to taint them with her touch. They were innocent while she was a betrayer. She believed deeply that every person had the power to make a difference. She'd made a difference, all right. Her father-in-law was dead. Her husband was crippled. She couldn't bring Kelfer back to life, but maybe she could help Kleet to fly again. She owed him. More than the power of flight, she owed him for taking away his father. She needed to atone for the violence she'd sparked in Avera society.

USP doctors might be able to heal Kleet. She had to convince him to let the doctors look at his wing. She owed him. Perhaps if he could fly again his grief over his father could be put to rest. Then maybe their relationship could be repaired. They mated every night, but there was still separateness about them. She owed him. The words were a mantra in her mind.

Lefair bustled back into the room. There was vitality to her movements. She had a purpose that invigorated her again. She would infuse the position of ambassador with the same vitality. Something good would come out of this affair.

Sheleigh allowed herself to be led down the hall to another room where she gratefully lay down on a couch. It had become difficult to think through the morass in her mind. Her thoughts slowed. She murmured a contented sound when Lefair covered her with a soft blanket. She snuggled down into the cushions, gave a long sigh, and slid into sleep.

She didn't want to wake up when a hand shook her shoulder. She'd just fallen asleep.

Didn't the person understand that?

"Sheleigh, it's time to wake up." Lefair's melodic voice held a mother's firmness. Sheleigh opened her eyes. Her mother-in-law looked fresh. Excitement made her eyes shine. "USP is here. Kleet's been asking for you. I explained that you needed to rest. But you need to get up now."

Lefair helped her sit up. Sheleigh felt fuzzy-minded. Her mouth felt cottony. When she brushed back her hair she felt a line on her cheek from the material of the sofa. She was sure she looked like she'd slept in her clothes. She dreaded looking at the mess her hair must be. She had to face USP looking like this? What had she been thinking to sleep before an important meeting?

She rose unsteadily to her feet, still a little groggy with sleep. "I need to freshen up."

"I'll help you."

When Sheleigh entered the council hall, she looked as fresh as two women could make her. She felt marginally more refreshed. At least the nap made her feel less drained. Her eyes went first to Kleet in the Avatier's seat at the front of the hall. He rose when he saw her. He was darkly forbidding in his black clothes and cape. His expression was closed, giving nothing away. She wondered if he was nervous about what was to come. After all, he'd been forced into this action.

He held out his hand to her. She was surprised, but tried not to show it as she went to him. As she took his hand, mate-recognition roared through her. For a moment she thought he'd kiss her. But his hand simply tightened on hers. She turned to face the USP envoy.

She'd seen Bonwee partners many times. The Bonwee were part of the glue that helped USP members stay together. They were very similar to average height humans, although much more slender. Their pale skin and light brown hair made them seem colorless compared to their partners. But what they lacked in physical size and coloring, they made up for in the size of their hearts. They epitomized tolerance, with their desire to facilitate communication between species. They were living embodiments of the desire for peace. Their species would die to preserve peace. She hoped that sacrifice would not be necessary on Avera.

Messer Akelee's Grimari partner towered over him. Sheleigh estimated him to be two and a half meters in height. If Kleet was darkly forbidding, this Grimari was darkly menacing. Black hair, black eyes, dark expression. He was heavily armed, as all Grimari partners were. His stance was warily protective of his partner. She knew he wouldn't hesitate to use fatal force if his partner was threatened. The Grimari were the warriors of USP. Only when they were harnessed in a symbiotic partnership with a Bonwee was that deadly violence tempered.

"This is my mate Sheleigh. Sheleigh, Messer Akelee and his partner Kirgesner." Kleet enunciated slowly the unfamiliar syllables of the Grimari's name.

Sheleigh stepped forward and shook the partners' hands in greeting. "Thank you for coming. I hope you can help Averans."

"I'll do my best," Mikeshe answered.

Sheleigh returned to Kleet's side. "Shel, I was just telling Messer Akelee about the problems we face. I told him about the radicals." He looked into her eyes. She had the strongest sensation that he was trying to tell her something. There was beseeching in his eyes, but his jaw was firmly clenched. His hands went to his throat. She held her breath while hope and fear for him clashed in her chest.

The cape fell. There was an audible gasp from the council. She dared not take her eyes from his. What he was doing needed her strength to accomplish.

"We have physical differences on Avera, Messer Akelee. I've been told USP welcomes

physical differences.”

“That’s true, Avatier,” Mikesh replied. “My partner and I are examples of such differences.”

“Averans have a greater difference.” Slowly his wings opened. The undamaged wing opened fully. The effect was marred only slightly by the crippled wing remaining furled. Although Sheleigh wanted to cry out her distress at his crippled state, the medium of the message was powerful enough. Clearly Averans were winged. She nodded to Kleet, then turned to Mikesh. He was smiling.

“Did you think we’d object to wings, Avatier? Did you think we’d recoil? Yes, I’m surprised and curious. I’ve never seen a winged species before. But USP has a feline species with cat eyes, mane and spotted skin. We have a reptilian species with scaly skin. We have a species that stands three meters tall and every millimeter of that height is covered with hair. We have a species short and ugly. There are other differences not visible to the eyes, as well. We won’t object to wings.”

There was the sound of many breaths being let out. Several of the younger council members--Kleet’s age mates--stood up and removed their capes. Kleet squeezed her hand painfully tight. Many of the council were still afraid. She could see it in the whites of their eyes.

“Do you know what evolution is?” Kleet asked the envoy.

“Yes.”

“It’s happening to Averans. Each year there are children born without wings.”

“You’re sure it’s evolution?”

“Yes. We rarely fly any more. We have machines that fly for us now.”

“Ah. These radicals you mentioned. They don’t have wings, do they?”

“No. They say we treat them differently.”

“Your language differentiates them from you. You said ‘they’ and ‘we.’ I think that’s the place to start talking.”

“We’ve arrested many of the radicals. A number of them are awaiting execution for the murder of the last Avatier.”

“May I speak to them?”

“Not to the condemned.”

After a pause, Mikesh nodded. “All right, to the other radicals, then.”

“The council and I must have assurances. Will you try to interfere in the government on Avera? Will you impose your USP will upon us?”

“You asked for my help, Avatier. I’ll give it the best I can. I may say things you don’t want to hear, but I’ll say what I think will help you work towards a peaceful future. If you decide not to follow any recommendations I make, then USP will take no further steps towards intervention.”

Kleet let out his breath. “Good. There’s something else you need to know.” He swallowed visibly. “I have wings, but I’m flightless now. The radicals will mention this fact to you. They crippled me.” He indicated the damaged wing. It was the first time he’d admitted it in public. Sheleigh’s heart hurt for him. What must it be like for a strong man to admit to an imperfection in front of the people he ruled? She further resolved to help him fly again.

“I’m sorry, Avatier,” Mikesh said.

“The guards will take you to where the radicals are being held. Contact me if you need anything. I’ll have apartments readied for you where the humans stayed.”

“I share quarters with my partner,” Mikesh reminded him. “We’ll need something with

two bedrooms.”

“It will be arranged.” Kleet looked at Sheleigh, then back at the partners. “My mate and I would like the two of you to join us for dinner.”

“My partner and I will look forward to it.”

* * * *

Dinner was a successful though slightly strained affair. Mikesh looked pleased to learn Lefair would be the first Avera ambassador. To her credit, Lefair uncovered her wings in his presence. He seemed to comprehend the enormity of what she did, because he was very gentle with her afterwards. Sheleigh realized that Lefair would need a guard or companion for the first few years of her ambassadorship. She’d never really lived alone and she hadn’t been unprotected since she became Kelfer’s mate. She was nervous about being un-caped. Sheleigh mentioned her concerns after dinner.

“But Madam Kryszan won’t be alone at first,” Mikesh corrected. He turned to Lefair, concern etched into his features. “It would be cruel to send you off to USP by yourself, unable to communicate with others. No, you’ll be assigned assistants like my partner and I. I believe you’ll feel more comfortable with female partners, is that right Madam Kryszan?”

She blazed a grateful smile at him. “Yes, I believe I would. They’d help me learn the other languages?”

“If that’s what you want. Many ambassadors only know their own language and Basic. They use translators like me.”

“I’d like to learn Basic and,” she turned a shy smile to Sheleigh, “the human language.”

Sheleigh jerked, so surprised she didn’t have words for a moment. Lefair wanted to speak to her in Sheleigh’s own tongue. She reached for Lefair’s hand and squeezed it, acknowledging a love that seemed to grow more each day. “Thank you,” she told Lefair. “I speak the human language called English.”

“Ing-glish,” Lefair repeated, savoring the syllables. There was a light in her eyes that Sheleigh realized was curiosity. Lefair was the right person to be ambassador.

“We have a teaching machine that will help you learn a language quickly. That’s how the humans learned Avera,” Mikesh explained.

Lefair leaned forward, her face alight. “Where is this machine?”

“It’s part of our ship.”

Lefair looked at the ceiling and swallowed. “Oh,” she said in a small voice.

“Madame Kryszan, I understand all of this is new to you. You’ve never been away from Avera. You have every right to be nervous.” She gave him a grateful smile. “I think my job here will take awhile, so you have time to grow accustomed to your new role as future ambassador. If I have time, I’ll teach you Basic. Dr. O’Brien Kryszan can teach you some of her language, when she has the opportunity.”

“I’ll do what I can, Lefair, but I’m not a very good teacher. I’m more of a doer,” Sheleigh explained.

* * * *

After dinner, everyone moved into the sitting room. Kleet sat next to Sheleigh on one sofa while the partners sat across from them. Lefair was ensconced in a chair to the side, enjoying a cup of tea while she listened.

Kleet found the change in his mother amazing. He hadn’t paid as much attention to her as he should have since his father died. In his defense, he’d been busy ruling the planet and rooting out radicals. He’d noted Lefair grieving, but more as an afterthought. He’d labeled her grief as

‘normal’ and put her from his mind. Now, as he looked at her, he saw the prominent bones in her face. He also saw much of her former spark returned. She must have been desperately unhappy. She must have foundered worse than he had when Kelfer died. But whereas he had a purpose to keep him going, Lefair had had none.

This ambassadorship, unfathomable as it was to him, was a lifesaver to her. She would be doing important work, setting up Avera as a member of USP. Through her, he and other Averans would know what was expected of them as USP citizens. They would find safety at last under the protection of USP. Lefair would finish her grieving away from Avera and the constant reminders of her mate. She would begin a new life away from her children and her new grandchildren. They probably wouldn’t see her for years, and when they did, would she be the same person? Or would being a part of the larger universe change her?

He’d lost his father. He didn’t want to lose his mother, even temporarily. But how could he stop what was happening? He couldn’t envision the destruction Sheleigh had described to the council today, but her words had rung with a passionate truth. This Bonwee said he could help prevent what Sheleigh described from happening. So for the welfare of Averans, he had to shepherd in a new era. It was an era none of them could have foreseen. Even he, who’d taken an alien into his heart, home and bed, didn’t dream this would be the result. She’d said she was the future. How right she’d been.

He looked at her now, this alien who was his mate. She leaned toward the Bonwee as she talked, her face alight but her manner serious. She was telling Messer Akelee about class structure in Avera society. He didn’t often get to see her in her ‘doctor’ mode. She was so sexy and pretty that he forgot she was a highly educated woman. She was strong and independent. She spent the majority of each day functioning completely separate from him as a mate and as the Avatier. In fact, the only time she wasn’t independent was when she was under him in bed. There was no separation between them then, literally or figuratively.

No matter how hard, how often or how long he tried, he couldn’t sate his desire for her. She was the best lover he’d ever had, giving herself completely during mating. In her arms and her body he felt like a man again. A whole man. It was the only time he forgot he was crippled. It was the only way he could fly now.

His fist clenched out of sight of the visitors. Sheleigh gave him the greatest pleasure, but it was always followed by the greatest pain. Reality intruded grotesquely into their bed after they mated. If he could stop wanting her, he’d stop feeling the pain, too.

He watched the animation in her gestures, feeling a skirl of jealousy in his guts. The Bonwee was USP, so was Sheleigh. Those two understood one another. They spoke the same language, literally.

“What do you think, Avatier?” Belatedly he realized Sheleigh had addressed her question to him.

“I’m sorry. I was considering another problem. What was the question?”

Sheleigh’s brows drew down. Perhaps she thought him rude for entertaining other thoughts while USP was present. “Messer Akelee should have a liaison during his stay on Avera. Someone to show him around, introduce him to groups, classes and industries. I think it might be easier if it was me.”

“What about your work?”

“It’s been interrupted, what with Harrier’s arrest.” He tried not to flinch at the reminder of that betrayal.

“You’re still considered an alien, Shel. Averans might be more open to another Avera as

the liaison.”

“But who is willing to do the job besides me? Perhaps one of the younger council members, but can you spare one right now? I don’t think the general population will feel comfortable in that role.”

“Mother is perfectly capable.”

Sheleigh looked at Lefair. He followed her gaze to his mother. The animation had drained from Lefair’s face. No, she wasn’t ready to go among her own people so soon after Kelfer’s death.

“It’s all right, mother. I won’t ask you to do this.” He turned back to Sheleigh. “Very well, you may be the liaison.” Would she always prefer the company of non-Averans?

Chapter Twenty-Five

At her first opportunity, Sheleigh took one of the Kryszan guards aside where the others couldn't hear their conversation. The Bonwee was busy listening to a group of farmers explain tiered farming and their standard of living.

"Bateleur, I need to meet some engineers."

"Engineers, my lady?"

"Flight engineers. Perhaps someone who knows about transports."

He frowned and the action pulled on the scar through one eyebrow. Otherwise, his face would have been too perfect. Sheleigh thought the scar made him more average and approachable. He was in his late twenties and not yet mated. "Is there something wrong with your transport, my lady?"

"No. I have a special project in mind. I need to consult with an engineer. I prefer secrecy until the project is deemed feasible."

"Then the transport manufacturing plant is not the place to start. There are several private design firms, plenty of maintenance and repair facilities, the school of engineering..."

"The school sounds like a logical place to start. Would you approach them quietly? Don't mention my name. Tell them you have a special project for two or three students. There must be absolute secrecy. I prefer engineers who specialize in flight, who are bright and innovative. I'll pay them for their time."

"They'll ask questions. Can you be more specific than what you've told me, my lady?"

"No. I won't even tell you until we meet with the engineers. I can't risk word getting out about this."

"Does the Avatier know?"

"No! And I don't want him to know until it's finished."

Doubt spread across his almost perfect face. He leaned away from her. "A secret from the Avatier?" He must be thinking of possible betrayal.

She dared to lay her hand on his forearm. He stared at it, and then looked into her face. "I love Kleet. I would give my life for him."

His face lightened and he nodded.

"You'll understand everything when we meet with the engineers. I release you from guarding me to seek them out."

"My lady?" Again his face clouded with doubt.

"It's that important to me. Go. I need the project started as soon as possible."

He stared hard at her face, then spun on his booted heel and was soon out of sight. She moved to join the others.

Her guard captain soon moved to her side. "Where is Bateleur? Why did he leave you unguarded?"

"I needed him to find out something for me. I wasn't in any danger when he left."

"Not all the radicals have been caught, my lady." His voice was tinged with frustration.

"Captain, you know I won't be caged or cowed by these radicals. I don't like having armed guards around me. Captain Clanga knew that. He gave me the freedom I needed."

“Captain Clanga is dead.”

She flinched. “That doesn’t stop me from wanting freedom.”

“I’ll try, my lady, but it goes against my training.”

“Why don’t you just think of me as an alien? Maybe that will help.” He visibly flinched and she regretted her sarcasm. She wasn’t averse to using her alien status just like Kleet did. But she needed to set the precedent for time to work on the project she hoped would save Kleet.

That afternoon Bateleur returned and drew her aside. “There are three young engineers willing to work in secret. They’ll meet with you tomorrow. I just need to let them know where and when.”

“Are they winged?” Belatedly she realized she had to be free of the taint of consorting with possible radicals.

He looked smug. “Yes, my lady. I did ask.”

“Thank you. I didn’t think of it until now. Let’s see, where would a neutral place be? My old office on the top floor of the human residence. Have them meet me at eight in the morning. The envoy won’t need me tomorrow while he interviews the arrested radicals.” She placed her hand on his arm. “You’ll be the only guard allowed to stay.”

“Yes, my lady.”

That night, during her mating flight with Kleet, she imagined herself with wings. She didn’t know if Kleet caught the wisp of imagery because it was so faint. She hoped not. He couldn’t know what she was doing until she was sure it could work.

Captain Steller gave her a frustrated look when she asked him to leave her the next morning. His look became quizzical when she told him Bateleur would stay behind with her. She was almost frantic to get the guards away before the engineers arrived. Already she felt too many people were aware that something was going on. She had to maintain secrecy as long as possible.

Finally the transport departed with an intense Captain Steller peering at her through the glass. She dismissed him from her mind, darting down to her old office. It was bare except for the portable computer on the metal desk. She opened the computer and turned it on.

Five minutes later Bateleur appeared in the doorway. Sheleigh’s heart sped up. She felt hope soar in her. Bateleur’s face held suppressed excitement along with some apprehension. He stepped aside.

The first engineer’s mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. “My lady!” she exclaimed.

Sheleigh stood up, smiling. “Come in.”

The black-haired young woman entered the office. Her hair was cut very short to her head, like a cap, with sharply defined locks fringing her cheeks and forehead. Her sharp nose gave her a falcon-like appearance. Her black eyes sparkled with curiosity.

The second engineer was a wiry young man with disorderly wavy brown hair and rumpled clothes. He moved quickly, while his eyes darted around the room. He nodded his head to her.

The third engineer was another young woman with wide gray eyes and blond-tipped brown hair down to her waist. “My lady.” She gave a bow of her head, making the multi-colored hair shimmer. As she straightened it became clear that she was with child. Sheleigh was startled. The girl looked barely eighteen.

“When is your baby due to be born?”

“In three months. It’s my first child.” Her face glowed as she spoke.

“You’re so young. I thought Averans waited until they were older to have children.”

“My father’s best friend lost his mate several years ago. I’ve been giving him comfort for over a year. When I turned eighteen, he asked me to be his mate and I flew the mating flight with him. We had no reason to wait. I’ve known him all my life.”

Sheleigh kept her facial features smoothed. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, my lady. I’m Tera. Tera Thopius from north of here.”

Sheleigh stepped forward and shook the young woman’s hand. Sheleigh’s belly was bigger than the other woman’s.

The young man jerked forward. Sheleigh saw Bateleur take a step forward as well. The young man held out his hand and she shook it. “Ecau. My family is the Datus family from the southern hemisphere. If it has to do with flying, people come to us.” His words were rapid-fire staccato.

The third woman held out her hand. “I’m Pithe Cophaga, but I just go by Pithe.” She cocked her head and peered at Sheleigh. “What does the Avatier’s mate want with engineers who specialize in flight?”

Sheleigh drew in her breath and let it out again. “I need you to design and build something for me. I’ve sketched it on my computer.” She turned the computer to them. “I want to be able to fly.”

Ecau burst out laughing, short bursts like a donkey braying. Pithe covered her mouth with her hand, but her eyes sparkled with laughter. Guardsman Bateleur’s mouth hung open as he looked from her to the computer and back to her again.

It was Tera who remained serious and asked the first question. “Is it because the Avatier can’t fly?”

Before she could answer, Ecau interrupted. “You can’t fly with that.” He jabbed his finger at the computer screen. “It’s ridiculous. Don’t you know anything about aerodynamics?”

Sheleigh advanced on him and poked him in the chest. “It *will* fly. I drew it from memory, so it may not be drawn accurately. It’s called a hang glider because the pilot hangs beneath it. Humans fly them for sport. A very famous engineer named Rogallo designed it for the space program. It’s also called a delta wing because of its shape. For hundreds of years humans have soared with them off cliffs.”

She had their rapt attention now. Their eyes shone and even Ecau looked intent, as though calculating aerodynamic equations using her crude drawing.

“It only glides, using thermals. It’s made of lightweight metal tubing, lightweight windproof cloth and metal wires. I don’t have any actual specs, but you get the idea from my drawing. The pilot sits on a short flat piece of wood or metal beneath it or lies in a cloth sack beneath it. I prefer to lie flat. It’s meant to carry one person.” She took a deep breath. “I want it to be able to carry two.”

“The Avatier,” Tera breathed, her eyes wide.

“He won’t use this to fly,” Ecau scoffed.

“He’ll learn!” Sheleigh snapped. “All Averans will have to learn that just because you’re not born with wings doesn’t mean you’re not as good or that you can’t fly.”

Pithe gasped audibly. “You’re making a statement.”

“That’s right. I’m also helping the Avatier to fly again. He needs to fly. You all understand that, don’t you?”

Three heads nodded. She saw Bateleur nodding in her peripheral vision.

“I understand what it’s like when a man has lost something important to him,” Tera added. Her eyes seemed to look inward. “He needs to replace it with something else.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Sheleigh exclaimed.

“But he’ll fight it,” Tera argued. “My mate did.”

“The Avatier is a stubborn man, too.”

“How will you get him to try this glider?” Ecau asked, looking at the drawing.

“I don’t know yet, but that’s my job to worry about. Your job is to make it, test it for flight worthiness and teach me to fly it. I’ll buy all the material, provide you with whatever you need and pay you for your time. But before we do anything you each must agree not to tell anyone what we’re doing. Not your mate,” she looked at Tera, “not your mother, father, brothers, sisters or your friends. Not your teachers or anyone at your school. Not the Avatier’s guards except this one,” she gestured to Bateleur. “Not the Avatier’s mother, no one in the council, not the Avatier himself. Do you agree?”

Two heads nodded.

Tera looked troubled. “Not even the Avatier?”

“The Avatier is a proud man. He’s suffered greatly in the past few months. He doesn’t need humiliation or pity. He’s going to be a great man like his father was. In order to attain that greatness, he needs to fly again. But he needs to make his choice to fly this way in private. He must not know until the glider is finished and he has a viable choice in front of him. He’s your Avatier. Show your respect to him with your silence.”

“All right,” Tera agreed. Her hands lay on top of her baby, where the future of Avera resided.

“You can use these offices. I’ll have to tell the USP envoy something about your presence here. He and his partner are staying in the human apartments downstairs. His partner is heavily armed. Don’t be afraid if you see him. He’s extremely tall, black hair and eyes. Don’t interfere with him if he comes to see what you’re doing. He’s just protecting the envoy. He won’t understand you, so just go about your work.

“I don’t know how often I can get away to be with you here. You have the general idea of the design. You know more about flight than I do.

“All communication should go through guardsman Bateleur if you can’t reach me directly. Let me know what materials you need and I’ll see you get them immediately.

“I’ll want to be there when you start making test flights. Hmm, we’ll need to find a secluded spot for that. I don’t know if you can rig a sample glider in one of the offices for me to practice on. Does anyone have any questions?”

There were many in fact. When she finally got away, she’d been there for nearly two hours. Bateleur had ordered material that would be delivered to her office the next day. It was going to be hard keeping a secret from Kleet, especially knowing that this secret could make him whole again.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sheleigh received a call the next day after the material arrived. The engineers wanted her opinion on the cloth. She detected a note of strain in Tera's voice. When prompted, she got an earful from Ecau about Pithe's idiocy in figuring the length of the metal tubes. She rolled her eyes heavenward. With three intelligent young people, she should have expected conflict.

She broke away from the envoy as soon as she was able. She pleaded an urgent errand and left him deep in discussion at a secondary school. He had asked what the children were taught about non-wingeds. At first the teachers and administrators were reluctant to mention anything negative, but Messer Akelee was a skillful questioner. He made the educators feel comfortable and soon they freely answered his open-ended questions. He was right to begin at the youngest ages to trace how prejudice grew on Avera.

Sheleigh felt guilty for leaving the envoy, if only for a little while. But her project was almost as important to Avera's future as the envoy's was. Her thoughts splintered as the transport sped towards her office. The hang glider had to come to fruition so that Kleet could become whole again. The planet's population had to be educated about bigotry and tolerance so that Avera could become a peaceful society again. So much healing was needed by a man and a place she had thought were strong and beautiful. There was so much pain hidden underneath their beautiful facades.

"We're here, my lady," Bateleur's voice riveted her to the more immediate problem.

She heard Pithe and Ecau arguing as soon as she stepped out of the hydrolift. She strode into her old office to find a war zone. Pithe and Ecau stood face to face, toe to toe. Pithe's finger prodded Ecau's chest. Her cape was off, allowing her wings to mantle with her agitation. She looked even more like a falcon now. Her cheeks were mottled red.

Ecau's face was darkened, his disorderly hair stood up in tufts around his head. He flung Pithe's hand away from his chest.

The two combatants noticed Sheleigh at the same time.

"My lady, you're just in time."

"My lady, you can tell her she's wrong."

Their simultaneous complaints clashed against her ear drums. She held up her hand for silence.

"Please explain the problem to me."

"She's measured the tubing for fourteen lengths. It won't fly that way."

"He's making it too heavy. The longer length will be too heavy to maneuver."

They glared at each other again. Sheleigh's chest muscles tightened. She breathed out slowly to ease the tightness. "The glider has to be big enough to carry two adults, yet light enough to be handled by the pilot and still fly on the thermals."

"Fourteen lengths is too short."

"Eighteen lengths is far too heavy."

"Stop it!" Sheleigh snapped. Pithe and Ecau turned surprised faces to her. "This is only the first day. If the two of you intend to argue this project to a standstill, one of you will be dismissed."

“But my lady, she ...” Ecau began, gesturing at Pithe.

“I said stop it,” Sheleigh reminded him in her sternest voice. “We don’t have time for an argument like this. The Avatier hasn’t flown in months. We need to get him airborne again. This isn’t a transport we’re building. It’s a fabric-covered frame to catch wind and heat. The frame holds the fabric in place so the wind and heat is trapped underneath. Is that so hard to imagine?”

Ecau stiffened. “I can design anything to fly, my lady. After all, I’m a Datus.”

“The Datus family is traditional. This hang glider isn’t traditional. What we need here is untraditional thinking. I need you to think outside of the box.”

Ecau’s brows came together. “What box?”

“It’s a human saying. You know what a box is, right?” Ecau and Pithe nodded. “Traditional thinking is shaped like a box with your thinking confined to the space inside the box. We need you to think of possibilities that are not inside the box. Ask yourself ‘what if’ and follow the question through to an unconventional answer. This hang glider is new so it requires new thinking.”

Tera spoke up from where she sat quietly behind the desk. “It’s like your speech to the council about taking a new look at what’s happening with the non-winged on Avera.”

Sheleigh felt hope soar in her chest. Someone outside of Lefair and the council understood what she’d said. She stared at Tera, seeing a content young woman with hands laid lovingly over a pregnant belly. Here was a woman who’d recognized a man’s need to live again and gave herself unstintingly to him. A woman who loved unconditionally like that would understand much.

“Yes, Tera. It’s just like my speech. I’m glad you understand.”

“I think unconventionally,” Pithe offered.

Sheleigh turned to Ecau. The boy looked harried. “Will you be the forward thinking Datus who linked Avera with the future? Or will being a Datus hold you back and leave you behind? Averans are going into space soon, during your lifetime. Will a Datus be at the forefront of spaceflight, or will it be another family who leads the way?”

He straightened his lanky frame and she saw in his face the man he would become someday. The fire of creativity burned in his eyes.

“I will lead the way into space.” His words rang with pride and certainty.

Sheleigh nodded. “Then you know what I need of you. Show me the cloth before I go.”

Pithe led the way two doors down. The office contained a number of bolts of white cloth laid across the bare desk top. Sheleigh felt the coarse, lightweight material and frowned. It was tightly woven, but not airtight.

“This won’t work.” She looked at Pithe and Bateleur. How did she describe nylon to them? “Have you no cloth on Avera that can trap the wind?” She sifted through her memories of Avera life, trying to find a simile. “Not coarse like this,” she fingered the material, “but silky smooth. Very tightly woven, very lightweight.”

“Daness!” Pithe and Bateleur exclaimed together.

“You have such a material?” Excitement bubbled in her veins.

“Daness is a byproduct of the ore smelting operation. Averans don’t like it because it doesn’t breathe. We become overheated when we wear anything made from it. They use it in industry, my lady.”

“I’d like to see a sample and make sure it’s what we need. How soon can we obtain a sample?”

“Within the hour,” Bateleur answered.

“Good. Have it delivered to me. If it’s the right material I’ll order a quantity delivered here.” She looked at Pithe for confirmation and the girl nodded.

Sheleigh reached out to touch Pithe’s arm. “Don’t argue with Ecau. Use your energy to let your imagination soar.”

“I will, my lady.”

“Thank you.” Sheleigh turned and followed Bateleur out of the room. She paused at the doorway of the room where Ecau and Tera were hard at work at their computers. Ecau’s stylus made a rapid tattoo on the computer screen. Sheleigh let out a sigh and continued down the hall to the hydrolift.

* * * *

Bateleur slipped her a small cloth-wrapped package less than an hour later, then moved to stand slightly in front of her. He scanned the secondary school auditorium while she opened the package. Inside was a tan material. She rubbed it between her fingers, and then she sucked in her breath. It didn’t have the rougher texture of a natural fiber, or the slipperiness of her raw silk. It felt heavier than nylon, yet it did have the man-made feel of nylon. She pulled it between her hands, feeling its tensile strength. Her heart pounded. She wanted to be alone in a room with yards of this material so she could envision it stretched across a hang glider frame.

She tried to calm her racing heart and wipe the excitement from her face before she looked up at Bateleur. She feared she hadn’t succeeded when his eyes widened. He gave an imperceptible nod and moved past her and out of her sight. She trusted him to order the material, freeing her to concentrate once more on the envoy.

Messer Akelee was finding it more difficult to get forthright answers to his probing questions here. These teachers and administrators were used to dealing with teenagers and near-adults. They weren’t easily cowed, although to Sheleigh’s eye they showed the skittishness of aliens she hadn’t seen very much recently. Messer Akelee was fairly innocuous...her eyes traveled to his partner. The Grimari had his hand on his weapon.

Sheleigh straightened. *What the hell?* “What’s going on?” she hissed to Captain Steller.

“I don’t know, my lady. But something made the Grimari uneasy.”

Sheleigh moved forward, but Captain Steller stepped in front of her.

“Stay behind us, my lady.”

“Get out of my way, Captain. I won’t allow anything to stand in the way of peace.”

He gestured her forward and she walked down to the front of the room. Frightened eyes turned to her as she moved, locking on her like she was a lodestone. She stopped close to the Grimari, but not between him and his partner or blocking the Grimari’s line of sight.

Slowly she scanned the auditorium. All eyes were focused on her, which was what she wanted. Messer Akelee stood quietly watching her. When she sensed calm had been restored she addressed the head of the school, looking her in the eyes as she spoke.

“Administrator, do you harbor radicals here?”

The woman’s eyes widened. She glanced at the Grimari before she rose to her feet. She shook her head. “No, my lady!”

“Is there a reason your subordinates are afraid? Are they afraid of the radicals or afraid of the Avatier? Do they have a reason to fear the Avatier?”

The administrator stretched her hand out to Sheleigh. “My lady.” Her eyes clouded and she swallowed. “My lady, some of those who are to be executed were students here. We thought that’s why you came.”

Sheleigh couldn’t breathe. She fancied she heard a collective sigh escape the group. Oh,

what a secret these people held so fearfully to their chests. She opened her mouth to ask the next logical question, but a hand pressed her arm.

Messer Akelee asked the question instead. "How long ago was this, madam?" His voice gently probed.

The administrator swallowed. "Four years ago, envoy."

"Were they the only non-wingeds you've ever had at this school?"

"No, envoy." Her brows furrowed, her mouth twisted. "Envoy." She choked and turned to Sheleigh. "My lady, they were trouble! Trouble. They fought other students, they disobeyed rules, they misbehaved. But we didn't know they were radicals. We don't teach things like that here! We teach students to respect and obey the Avatier. We don't teach murder!"

Messer Akelee's hand pressed Sheleigh's arm for silence. She didn't think she could speak if she tried. She suspected the school might have played a bigger role in making the radicals desperate than they thought. These people were innocent of wrongdoing, yet they feared reprisal because they'd come into contact with the radicals.

Again the envoy asked the question. "Were they the only students who caused trouble during the time they were here?"

The administrator kept her eyes on Sheleigh, pleading. "No," she said in a low tone.

"Were the other trouble students worse, the same, or less trouble than the radicals?"

The administrator turned to Mikeshe then. Her brows furrowed. "Similar."

"What types of punishment do you employ here to deter troublemakers?"

"First, a stern talk from a teacher or administrator. Second, a dirty task to complete, like cleaning steps. Next, time away from school to think about reform. Last, expulsion from the school."

"And were all of your trouble students punished that year?"

"Yes."

"Did the punishment deter them from trouble?"

"Not *them*. Not at first."

"What do you mean?"

"We knew they were trouble before they got here because they were trouble in primary school. When all the punishments except expulsion failed, we devised a new punishment. They were chronic offenders, you see. And it worked. They were quiet for awhile afterwards. We hoped it would last, but it didn't."

"What punishment did you devise for the radicals?" Messer Akelee's voice contained no inflection and no emotion. Sheleigh held her breath, wondering what misdeed the school had inadvertently committed.

"We refused to allow them to wear their capes in school for a week."

Sheleigh's breath escaped in a rush. Oh no, not that!

"Did they object?" Mikeshe's steady questioning continued.

"Oh yes, but it was the only way to stop the trouble."

"Was this punishment used on anyone else?"

"No."

"Why not?" he probed.

"They were the worst. They were incorrigible."

"You said they were the same as others that year."

"They were non ..." The administrator clamped her mouth on the damning words. Her face flushed, and then paled in horror.

"Please complete your sentence. They were non ..."

"Non-winged." The words were a sigh.

"Did everyone at the school know they were non-winged before you prevented them from wearing their capes?"

"Most people did."

"How did people treat them before you punished them this way?"

"They didn't socialize much. The other students didn't want to be involved in trouble."

"Did the other troublemakers associate with them?"

"No."

"How were they treated after a week without their capes?"

Her eyes dropped from the envoy's face. "They were shunned," the administrator admitted. Her white hands gripped each other across her waist.

"Was it your intention that they be shunned?"

She looked up at him. "I just wanted to stop the trouble."

"But you chose the punishment to fit the fact that they were non-winged."

"Yes. They were more trouble than the winged."

"That's not what you said earlier." Mikesh addressed the group. "Who here taught the radicals?"

Heads turned as they looked at each other. Slowly a gray-haired man in the first row stood. "I did." A woman four rows over stood. "I did, too." One by one twenty-six people stood up.

Mikesh began with the man in the front row. "How was their behavior in class?"

"They were troublemakers, envoy. I had both of them one year. They were rebellious, didn't listen, spoke to me disrespectfully, disrupted class, were argumentative and a general nuisance."

"Were they worse than other trouble students you've had?"

The man's eyes sought the administrator's eyes. His shoulders sagged. He looked at Sheleigh and for a moment she saw pain in his eyes. He looked away quickly, facing the envoy instead.

"They were bad, but not the worst."

"What made them different in your mind?"

"They were non-winged," the man stated bluntly, then tried to explain further. "Their DNA is different, you see. We don't know how different. They're not like us."

Sheleigh felt her temples throb as her blood pressure skyrocketed. Her breathing quickened. Her cheeks grew warm. Such ignorance in educators was unpardonable.

She glanced at Mikesh. His look was sympathetic before he turned to question the next teacher. Each teacher, save one, gave a similar story of unruly boys pushing beyond the limits of acceptable behavior. The one exception was the language teacher. The future radicals were studious in her class, although she said what they wrote for homework was inflammatory and shocking.

Sheleigh felt sick inside, cold in her belly. The majority of the teachers made reference to the students being non-winged when they talked about the boys. None of them mentioned hair or eye color, facial features or any other descriptor besides 'non-winged.' Did they label her the same way, as 'non-winged?'

After the last educator spoke, Mikesh thanked them and dismissed them. They seemed relieved to go and melted from the room. Sheleigh waited until the last one left before she

stalked to the exit at the back of the room. She needed air not tainted by bigotry. Bateleur held the odor open for her. Captain Steller followed behind her.

"To the roof," she commanded.

The hydrolift ride seemed interminable. Sheleigh would explode if it took much longer. This little space couldn't contain what she felt. She needed the wide open space outside.

The hydrolift arrived at the roof, the doors opened and Sheleigh burst outside into freedom. She gulped in lungfuls of untainted air. She was aware of voices talking around her, cadences rising and falling, but she moved about without actually listening to anyone.

Bateleur's face appeared before her. His brows were puckered. "My lady, are you unwell?"

"I need air. Please, just let me breathe."

He bowed slightly and moved aside.

She ceased pacing finally facing north and the great snow-capped peaks just visible in the distance. She breathed in coolness, freshness, purity. How she wished she could be there now, feeling the cold air on her face.

"Dr. O'Brien?" Messer Akelee's patient voice penetrated her absorption.

She turned to see his bucolic face. His Grimari partner stood guard at his back. "Yes?"

He spoke in English. "You're upset about the way these people treated the radicals."

"You don't need to soothe me," she said more sharply than she intended. She modified her tone. "Even you can't soothe me over this. Ignorance. Intolerance," she spat the words out. "Averans are so advanced." Her out flung arm indicated a passing transport. "But they're so backward." Her arm drew in to her chest where her hand closed into a fist.

"My father-in-law died because of this," her arm swept out towards the school. "My husband is crippled because of this. My family has suffered much because of this. These people broke a sacred trust!" Her voice broke.

She drew in several breaths and dropped into Basic, looking at the Grimari. "A sacred trust. Children were entrusted into their care to mold into productive citizens. They molded monsters." The Grimari nodded and she looked back at Mikesh.

"They're not the only ones who molded monsters." She laid her hands on her belly. "My children will be born soon. Too soon, I fear. They'll be non-winged in a society that distrusts and despises what is different. I'll be forced to entrust them to people like these to educate them. I don't want my children to be molded into monsters too."

"I'll work very hard to make changes so that won't happen," Mikesh assured her.

"You're just one man, and there's so much that needs changed."

"You're just one woman. Look what you've accomplished so far. The people in there confessed to you, not to me."

She gave a bitter laugh. "Everyone confesses to me." She shook her head. "I'm as guilty as they are. I brought progressive ideas to Avera, ideas the radicals wanted badly enough to kill for. So you see, I have sins of my own to atone for."

"You didn't cause the bigotry, doctor."

"No, that's been festering a long time. Has it been going on too long? Is it beyond hope of repair?"

He shook his head. "No. Every day that we draw breath there's hope. Averans have a problem. The first step in solving that problem is admitting it out loud and recognizing it as a problem. It's beginning to happen, but it will be a slow process. Don't lose hope just because it goes slowly. Avera needs your help to bring healing to its people."

She stared into his eyes as his words echoed her own earlier thoughts. Yes, healing people was her responsibility. She held out her hand to Mikesh and he took it in his warm, slender fingers. His eyes were a warm gray. Someone might think with his pale coloring that he was cold, but he wasn't. In a way, Mikesh was a healer, too.

"Thank you for being here, Messer Akelee."

His brows came together. "Something I said upset you."

She let go of his hand, remembering that his race was empathic. "It was nothing you did. Shall we go?"

He followed her cue and looked at the chrono on his wrist. "Yes. We're only an hour off our schedule."

Sheleigh walked over to Captain Steller. "We're ready to go on to the college."

Captain Steller spoke into his wrist com, calling for the transport. Then he turned his attention to her. "Are you feeling better, my lady?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I worried you."

"It was the teachers, wasn't it? You were angry at them."

She looked around the landing pad at the guards assigned to her. They watched her more than they watched their surroundings. They were loyal men and women given the uncomfortable task of guarding a non-winged. But to them, she was an alien first, a non-winged second. They judged their own species more harshly than they judged others.

She turned back to the Captain. "You heard what the administrator said about the punishment with the capes?"

"Yes."

"How would you have felt if you'd been punished that way?"

He frowned and pursed his lips. He looked up and away. Sheleigh waited patiently. Mikesh moved to stand beside her, looking curious.

Finally Captain Steller spoke. "I would be very uncomfortable without my cape." He looked at Sheleigh then. "I would feel like everyone was looking at me. I wouldn't feel safe."

"Not safe?" she asked.

Steller nodded towards Mikesh. "Until the envoy came, we hid our wings so that outsiders wouldn't kill us. Without my cape I would feel exposed. I would keep my back against the wall so that death couldn't sneak up on me."

Sheleigh looked at Mikesh. "And this is what they did to young boys. Made them feel defenseless and vulnerable."

She turned back to Steller as the thwop-thwop-thwop of the approaching transport grew louder. "Thank you for that insight, Captain."

* * * *

Through his lashes Kleet watched Sheleigh eat her fish. This was one of the few times they'd been alone together at dinner. Lefair and the envoy had gone to see Lefair's aunt, who was quite old, in hopes of getting a historical perspective on non-winged prejudice. So he was alone with Sheleigh. They ate in the kitchen to save time.

She seemed distracted, so he took the opportunity to study her. There were signs of strain on her face, in the shadows under her green eyes and the furrow between her coppery brows. There was a slump to her shoulders, as though they were weighed down by a heavy burden. Had she taken on too much responsibility aiding the envoy?

He looked her fully in the face. "How did it go with the envoy today?" It was a safe topic that didn't impinge on their damaged relationship.

She halted the forkful of braised vegetables on its way to her mouth and put her silverware back on her plate. Her eyes flickered as emotions passed too quickly through them like clouds across the sun in a fast-moving storm. To his surprise pain looked like one of the emotions.

"Some of the radicals had been students at the secondary school," she stated baldly, laying it between them like a gauntlet.

He sat up straighter. "Tell me everything." He listened to her account, wincing at her anger and at the punishment the boys had endured when she told that part of the story. At that point her eyes flashed and snapped green fire. At another time her voice grew harsh with frustration.

"The prejudice is so widespread. Even the people who are decent and law abiding are prejudiced. They don't recognize that it's wrong to treat non-wingeds that way. I don't know if it's possible to change the way an entire planet thinks." Her hands clenched on either side of her plate.

Guilt twisted inside him. Until recently he'd been prejudiced, too. It was still hard to think of the non-wingeds as normal Averans. And if it was hard for the Avatier, how much harder must it be for regular people. He was saved from replying when Sheleigh spoke again.

"I don't want my children going to that school until I'm sure that tolerance is being practiced there. We might have to import a tutor from off planet."

"Avera is off limits to outsiders," he reminded her.

"I won't have my children subjected to mistreatment by people in authority. I can't be with the children every day of their education, either. I've got to know they're safe when they're away from me."

"The children won't be ready for school for five or six years. A lot can change in that time."

"The children will be here soon enough. I'll be alone with them while you're at work. What happens when I get tired or I want to return to work? Who will I turn to then to take care of them? Lefair is leaving us. Who can I trust not to damage the children emotionally?"

"No one would dare hurt the heirs."

"I don't even know how you're going to react to non-winged children," she flung at him. He flinched at the note of desperation in her voice. "Up to now you've disparaged the non-winged."

"They're my children. I'm going to love them. They're my own flesh. My heirs. They'll be my contribution to peace with the non-winged."

Sheleigh looked at him with incipient hope in her face, and longing. He fought the pull she exerted on him. He was tied deeply to her, but she wanted more than that. She wanted the part of him that had died with his ability to fly. But he couldn't give that part, he couldn't even feel that part of his emotions any more. All he could give her was his body. And if that was all he could give ...

He stood and held out his hand to her. "Let's go to bed."

She remained seated. "I thought we could talk. Don't you think it's time?"

He shook his head. "Nothing's changed. I can still only fly one way. If you want to help me, come to bed and help me to fly."

Pain flickered across her face as the light of hope faded. She rose slowly and slid her hand into his. The mate-bond flared. He closed his fingers around hers and led her out of the kitchen. He would be one with her in the only way possible now.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ecau removed his hands from Sheleigh's eyes and she blinked in the bright light. In front of her was the sample glider. No wings, because there wasn't space in the room, but the triangular frame and the fabric sling in which she would lay were there. The glider was mounted in a tripod frame. She stepped forward and caressed the metal. It gleamed brightly, like her hopes. Soon it would be ready to test in a real flight, and then Kleet would be made whole again. She hefted the frame and felt its light weight. So little to carry such a heavy hope.

She turned back to the engineers. Her three conspirators, four counting Bateleur who stood behind them. The engineers beamed with the pride of accomplishment. They'd grown confident in the weeks they'd been working for her. They stood tall with their faces bright and smiling.

"Show me how it works," she begged.

They surrounded her. Pithe and Ecau talked simultaneously as they explained the features of the glider.

"One at a time," she laughed. Their enthusiasm was contagious.

"Climb in," Pithe urged.

They helped her climb into the fabric sling. Almost at once the difficulties became apparent. Sheleigh was almost seven months pregnant and huge with twins. She couldn't comfortably lie down on her stomach in the sling. She grunted with discomfort.

"This won't work. Help me up." She reached out her hand to Tera.

"Wait," Ecau commanded. He slipped a drawing stylus from his pocket and dropped to his knees. Sheleigh felt him draw a circle around her belly. She waited as patiently as she could.

Ecau slipped the stylus back in his pocket. "All right, help her up."

Bateleur, Pithe and Tera pulled her up from the sling while Ecau got back on his feet.

Sheleigh wiped sweat from her brow and pushed her hair back from her face. Movement was difficult now that she was so big.

Ecau pointed to the sling. "If we cut a circle where I've drawn one, the pregnancy will hang through. The rest of the sling will support her body."

"It might work," Pithe agreed.

"It'll have to be reinforced around the hole," Bateleur put in from his post at the doorway once again.

Several heads nodded. They all stared at the sling. Sheleigh pictured how ungainly and ungraceful she would look with her belly poking through the hole.

"What about when the Avatier flies with her?" Tera asked. Of course, Tera would consider the mate's needs.

They turned to Sheleigh and she felt her cheeks grow warm. They weren't asking about mating, yet, just about where Kleet would be physically in the glider.

"In theory, Kleet should be next to me. But I don't know which side he'll be on." She cleared her throat. "Perhaps we should make several wide bands of cloth, or two swings, one in front to lay my chest on." She placed both hands below her breasts and spread them straight out to her side to show them where the first support should be. "Then the second one should be

across my thighs.” She made a sweeping motion across mid-thigh. “Does that sound like enough support?”

“A variation on the swing idea,” Tera murmured. She cocked her head while she stared at the glider.

“It might work,” Pithe agreed.

“Too dangerous,” Bateleur objected. “What about some sort of body harness connected to the frame? I’ve seen them used in industry.”

“That would work,” Ecau exclaimed.

“Dr. O’Brien,” a deep bass voice rumbled in Basic from the doorway.

Sheleigh and several of the others jumped. She turned to see the Grimari Kirgesner looming in the doorway, his presence dark and dangerous. Her heart rate slowed once she saw who it was.

“What is it, Kirgesner?” she responded in Basic.

“Dr. O’Brien, you must not take chances. Safety must be the dominant feature for this...machine.”

“It flies safely on my planet.”

“From a human design. These young people are designing from the ground up.”

“They won’t risk me and I won’t risk the Avatier. Don’t worry. Did the envoy need me for something?”

“No, the envoy is studying old records at the moment.” He looked past her, his eyes alight.

Sheleigh saw a dark head in her peripheral vision and then Pithe came forward to slide her hand into the Grimari’s. Pithe looked up at him with dark hunger. The air became charged with electricity.

Kirgesner looked at Sheleigh with deeply black eyes. “Please excuse us, Dr. O’Brien.” He pulled Pithe past Bateleur, whose mouth hung open. The couple moved out of sight.

Sheleigh stared mutely after them. Bateleur turned to her and his face showed the surprise she felt. She knew Grimari were promiscuous, but Averans weren’t. “How long has that been going on?” she asked the room at large.

“Several weeks. They meet here almost every night,” Tera said matter-of-factly from behind her.

“They don’t even speak the same language,” she murmured inanely.

“They’re not talking,” Ecau pointedly reminded her.

She turned around to face him and Tera. “Please forgive my question, but I thought Averans kept their virginity for the mating flight.” She looked at Tera and tacked on, “Usually.”

Ecau scoffed. “Who told you that?”

She felt her face flame. “Um, the Avatier.”

Tera’s eyes were full of laughter. “My lady, surely you didn’t wait? But you’re so old!”

Sheleigh knew her face was scarlet. She couldn’t help it. “Kleet was the only man I ever wanted to be with.”

Tera’s eyes grew serious. Ecau cocked his head, staring intently at her, but it was Tera who spoke. “We give ourselves with love or with intense feeling. We don’t give ourselves lightly, because of the potential for a mating bond. But many of us give ourselves several times before we take a mate.”

“What about Pithe?”

“Pithe wanted the Grimari the first time she saw him. She likes him a lot,” Tera

answered.

“Grimari take permanent mates,” Sheleigh mused, concerned about the outcome of Pithe and Kirgesner’s affair. What if they claimed one another as mates? Then Pithe would have to leave Avera and go wherever the Grimari went. Did the girl understand the repercussions? Did Kirgesner? And who was she to ask those questions? Look what she’d done by having sex with Kleet!

The others stared open-mouthed at her. What had she said?

Ecau enlightened her. “Will he take Pithe as his mate? Without flying her in a mating flight?” His eyes were wide open.

“I don’t know. I’m just telling you that Grimari mate for life, just like Averans do. It’s possible for them to become mates.”

“I don’t think that’s Pithe’s intention,” Tera remarked. There was a note of uncertainty in her voice before she turned back to the glider.

Within the hour a new design was sketched and an industrial body harness was secured. By the time they were done trying out ideas on her, Sheleigh felt as mused as Pithe looked when the girl returned. Pithe looked well loved with red, bee-stung lips, a love bite on her neck and dreamy eyes. Sheleigh hoped the lovers had used some form of birth control.

Their affair bothered her from a diplomatic perspective. She’d never before thought to interfere between two adults enjoying mutual pleasure. But the situation on Avera was already explosive. Why would the envoy’s bodyguard risk jeopardizing what the envoy was trying to accomplish?

When she finished with the engineers, with them promising to have everything ready the next day, she took the hydrolift down to the residence level. Bateleur raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She pressed the com unit outside the envoy’s door.

Kirgesner answered, as a Grimari bodyguard was trained to do. “Yes?”

“It’s Dr. O’Brien Kryszan. May I speak with you please?”

The door opened immediately. Kirgesner wasn’t mused as Pithe had been, but his lips were still slightly red and swollen. The envoy came to stand beside him.

“Dr. O’Brien. What can we do for you?” He looked at his wrist chrono. “I’m not late for something, am I?”

“No, Messer Akelee. I need to speak privately with your partner, if I may.”

He looked puzzled. “Certainly. There’s no threat I need to be aware of?”

“No. The radicals want you here. This won’t take long. We’ll be in the corridor.” She stepped back into the hall and Kirgesner followed her. He gave Bateleur a sweeping look.

Sheleigh turned to her guard. “Would you walk down the hall a ways, please?”

“I don’t understand the language you speak with him, so I won’t overhear.”

“I know, but it gives the perception of privacy.”

Bateleur looked up at Kirgesner, and then walked down the hall.

Kirgesner raised an eyebrow at her.

“This is awkward,” Sheleigh began in Basic. He smiled. “I’m not judging you or Pithe, not me or all people. Please tell me you thought about the instability of this planet’s people before you began your relationship with her?”

He’d sobered during her question. His bass voice rumbled. “I did. My partner’s job here is of the utmost importance. I would never do anything to jeopardize him or his mission. Pithe approached me, Dr. O’Brien, not the other way around. She made it quite clear what she wanted and I thought it through carefully before I gave her what she wanted. What we both want. We’ve

been very happy together these past few weeks.”

“You’re being careful?”

He cocked a black eyebrow and his lip tugged up on one side. “She has an implant, if that’s what you’re asking. She showed me.”

Sheleigh let out her breath. That was one less worry. “Averans bond for life with their chosen mate,” she informed him.

The smile melted from his face. “I sensed it in her, the ability to bond. I just didn’t know what it was. Thanks for telling me.”

Sheleigh swallowed. “Is it just an affair with her?”

He cocked his head. His eyes were unfathomable black pools. “I don’t know yet. She likes me a lot and I feel the same way about her. She exerts a very strong pull on me.”

Oh, God. “Please be very careful with her. She knows nothing of the world beyond Avera. She’s never been un-caped to the world.”

He nodded. “If the feeling between us deepens, I’ll ask my partner to translate for us. Or you.”

Sheleigh gulped. “All right.” Now she would be a go between for lovers. What else? “Thanks for talking to me about this.”

She started to turn away, but his voice stopped her. “I know how important USP’s presence here is, Dr. O’Brien. Believe me, it’s never far from my mind, or Mikeshe’s.”

She looked all the way up his tall frame to his dark eyes. This man was bonded, like her. He was part of the fabric of someone else’s life, in his case, that someone was his bonded partner Mikeshe. He was entrusted by USP with Mikeshe’s life, safety and health. He’d spent years in the service of USP. She could trust this man.

“Thank you, Kirgesner.”

She turned and walked back to Bateleur, who fell in beside her. As they waited for the hydrolift he asked her, “You spoke to him about the girl?”

“Yes. They’re being careful.”

The lift came and they stepped inside. “Bateleur, how do you feel about the Grimari having sex with her?”

“What do you mean? I’m not jealous. I’m not even attracted to her.”

“I mean seeing an alien having an affair with an Avera.”

“Oh.” He was silent while they exited onto the rooftop. He called for the transport to pick them up. Then he looked at her. “It makes me uncomfortable. He’s not Avera, he’s alien.” His eyes widened. “Your pardon, my lady. I didn’t mean ...”

“It’s all right. I know how Averans see me.”

“I’ve grown used to you,” he offered.

Resigned to me, more likely. The transport motor grew louder as it approached. “Good. Our transport’s here,” she said aloud.

* * * *

“Push to the left, Sheleigh. To the left,” Ecau ordered her.

“I’m trying,” she gritted through her clenched teeth. “It’s not as easy as it looks.” She pushed the triangular control bar to the left.

“Too far,” Ecau admonished.

She stopped pushing and lay suspended in her harness. Even the padding stuffed in the harness didn’t prevent her from becoming uncomfortable after hanging in it for an hour. She was just too pregnant to practice in the glider for this long.

"I don't understand why you can't master this," Pithe complained.

"There's skill to it, obviously," Sheleigh sighed. "And just as obviously I lack that skill. Help me up. I can't hang here any longer. My side hurts."

Immediately Bateleur was beside her to help her up. Pithe took her other arm while she peeled off the body harness. Sheleigh was much relieved to be free of the glider and the harness. She leaned over, panting, and rubbed her stomach muscles. If she wasn't pregnant, the harness wouldn't put such a strain on her abdomen.

"Are you all right, my lady?" Tera asked.

"I will be. I just have a cramp."

Bateleur moved closer to her. "A cramp? Is it labor pain?"

"Stop fussing. It's not labor. You lie in that thing for an hour and tell me you don't feel even a twinge of discomfort." Wait, maybe that was the answer!

"Bateleur?"

"Yes, my lady?"

"Put on the harness and climb into the glider. Show me how well you can work it."

His face twisted. "Is this a punishment?"

She laughed. She couldn't help it. "No. I want to see if it's just me who has trouble with the controls." She straightened slowly as Bateleur donned the harness and climbed into the glider frame. He took the control bar in his hands. Pithe and Ecau gave him instructions.

"Are you ready?" Ecau asked.

"Yes."

"Pull to the right to rise on the right side," Pithe ordered.

Bateleur did as he was ordered.

"Too much," Ecau warned.

Bateleur made adjustments.

"Push to the left to descend on that side," Pithe continued.

Bateleur pushed the bar forward.

"A little more," Ecau said. He sounded pleased.

Within a few minutes it was clear that Bateleur had mastered what Sheleigh couldn't in the three days she'd been trying. Was it his avian senses that allowed him to be one with the glider?

"What am I doing wrong?" she lamented.

Bateleur turned his head towards her. "Your center of gravity goes downward and away from the control bar, my lady. I'm perfectly balanced right now. The controls are made for someone balanced, which you're not. I suggest tightening the control response while you're pregnant. Make it less responsive to touch."

"Of course," Tera exclaimed. "We should have tried it with me first. That makes perfect sense, Bateleur."

"But it's perfect right now," Ecau protested.

"It's not for you, crow," Pithe reminded him. "It's for Sheleigh."

"Can we try the adjustments now?" Tera suggested. "Can you try again, my lady?" Her face was radiant with excitement.

Sheleigh sighed. She didn't want to put the harness on again, but the others expected it of her. After Ecau and Tera made adjustments Sheleigh allowed them to help her back into the glider.

On her first try at turning she found it easier to achieve the desired result. "It works," she

exclaimed.

Ecau puffed his chest and lifted his chin. "Of course it does."

"Try the other direction," Pithe ordered. She bounced on the balls of her feet.

The control bar worked just as well in the other direction. "I can fly." Sheleigh laughed. She felt joy bubble in her veins like effervescence. It was going to work. Kleet would fly again.

"Once more, Sheleigh," Tera directed. "This time push instead of pull."

Sheleigh quickly followed Tera's directions, eager to verify the glider's success. The new adjustment made the controls a dream to use.

She turned to the engineers. "When can we test it outside? How long until we can assemble it for a full test?" Now that the controls worked she felt urgency to complete the project.

Tera laughed. She, Ecau and Bateleur helped Sheleigh from the glider once again. Tera hugged her. "This is the first time it's worked for you. You need to practice more before we go outside."

Pithe's stylus tapped rapidly on her computer screen. Ecau's low tenor provided a counterpoint to the tapping as he addressed Sheleigh. "You'll have to practice every day for at least a week. Then we can find some low hills to jump from. That will take another week. I'll do feasibility computations for an unmanned flight. If it's possible, perhaps a week of those before a real flight takes place."

"That's almost a month away!" Sheleigh protested. "I'll be huge with pregnancy unless the twins decide to come early, which twins sometimes do. I can't risk the heirs that late in pregnancy. You'll have to move up your timetable, Ecau."

Pithe argued, "We have to proceed logically and carefully. We can't just throw this design into the air to see if it flies."

Bateleur threw in his protest. "My lady, you can't be put at risk."

Sheleigh turned to Tera, who she felt would understand her rush. "The time near the end of my pregnancy is completely uncertain. I could be confined to bed like I was in my second month. I can't risk losing this window of opportunity. Surely you see that, Tera."

"There's time to do things with safety in mind," Tera replied.

"We don't have to wait until I'm available to test it. One of you could do test flights in my stead." She swept them with her eyes.

Ecau responded, "We could do test flights. That's an excellent idea. But you're forgetting, my lady, that we're also training you to fly."

"Oh." Sheleigh rubbed the top of her belly. She tried to think of an argument that would sway them.

"We'll speed up the timetable as much as we safely can," Pithe promised. "But you're still looking at several weeks before you can fly solo."

"Think of the Avatier's safety if you won't think of your own," Tera said with poignant appeal. Sheleigh's heart clenched. This was for Kleet, after all. If the glider failed in flight, it might damage him beyond repair.

Sheleigh hung her head and her shoulders slumped. "I won't risk the Avatier."

Pithe placed her hand on Sheleigh's arm. "We'll work on the schedule today and show it to you tomorrow. Since this is all new, the schedule we work out will be just a guess. Everything might go much faster than we think."

Sheleigh looked at each of them. "I know you'll do your best. I haven't told you lately how much I appreciate what you're doing. I'm very grateful."

“It’s been fun,” Tera enthused.

“It’s been a personal challenge, worthy of Datus involvement,” Ecau proclaimed.

Pithe smiled like a cat with cream. “It’s been most fulfilling,” she purred the double entendre.

Sheleigh cleared her throat. “I’ll see all of you tomorrow.” As she headed for the hydrolift with Bateleur at her side, she thought it would be an agonizingly slow few weeks.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ecau and Pithe made last minute adjustments to the hang glider. The triangular control bar was attached to the frame and hung below the wing. Sheleigh's harness would also attach to the frame. It was a little awkward holding the glider balanced for the first time, but Sheleigh's adrenalin gave her the strength to hold it off the ground.

It was only a few more minutes until the engineers gave her the go-ahead for her first jump with the glider. She was to take the few steps to the cliff edge and let herself fall to an inflatable surface at the bottom. It was a vertical drop of twenty feet, not far, but far enough for air to catch the canopy and create drag.

Her stomach was full of butterflies, her chest muscles were tight, her throat was dry. This was the little test, the one to see if the glider worked at all. The bigger test to see if it flew was still a week or so away.

But they had the glider outside under the hot Averen sun. Pithe and Ecau had practiced running with it that morning and reported to Sheleigh that its propensity for lift seemed remarkable. Sheleigh was eager to test that propensity herself. Her mind understood the short delay as safety lines were checked one last time, but her spirit wanted to make that leap of faith, literally and figuratively.

It was hot in this dry little canyon, with very little breeze. It was too narrow for mating flights, which was why they had chosen it for the tests. A transport would have to hover directly above their location to see what they were doing, so they felt assured of privacy. Sheleigh had cleared a large block of time to practice jumping. Tera would make a video recording of the jump for later study of design flaws, if any. It seemed everything was in readiness except for the extreme caution of her engineers. Sheleigh shifted the glider. Sweat ran down the side of her neck where her hair clung in dampened ringlets.

"Well," she prodded them.

Ecau gave the wing one last tug. "Everything looks all right. Remember, Sheleigh, three steps to the edge, push out ..."

"And lean forward," Sheleigh finished for him. "I know. Can I go now?"

"Go ahead," Pithe encouraged.

Suddenly there were no more barriers, no holding back. Sheleigh planted her feet, then pushed off with her toes. One, two, three ... she pressed outward on the control bar, leaning her weight into it. The bottom dropped out of her stomach as empty air opened beneath her still dangling feet. The glider plummeted the first few feet. Then she was almost whiplashed as the wing caught air under it. Her descent slowed. She saw the inflatable air cushion below her, but heated air billowed in the canopy making the nylon taut.

The glider moved forward, not down, and a moment later the air cushion had passed behind her and out of sight. Sheleigh was filled with a thrill like she'd never experienced before. She was one with the air, light and free. She was a huge bird. She could fly.

"Wheeeeeeee!" she squealed, unable to contain her joy.

"My lady! Put your feet down!" Bateleur's voice came from a slight distance below and behind her.

The glider dropped lower and lower as it lost the uplift of the thermal. Although she hated to give up the marvelous freedom of wings, she put her feet down. It was a sudden drop that spilled her to her knees, laughing madly. She let the control bar ease to the ground and the back of the glider settled to the earth, effectively enclosing her inside the triangular space. She felt so high she could have flown without wings at that moment.

Sheleigh heard the quick crunch of boots on dirt, a slide of pebbles and then Bateleur swung around the edge of the wing. "My lady, are you injured?"

She gave him what felt like a drunken smile. "Not at all. I feel marvelous. Did you see me? I flew. I flew!"

He unhooked her harness from the glider frame. "I saw it with my own eyes, yet I still can't believe what I saw. It was like a huge bird. If I hadn't been so worried for your safety, I would have been amazed."

She let him help her to her feet in front of the glider. She was the teensiest bit wobbly on her feet. "You should have seen it from my angle. It was so incredible, the feeling of freedom."

She heard more pounding footsteps, and then Ecau and Pithe hove into view around the metal edge of the glider.

Ecau's face was red and his eyes were huge and bright. "It flies! It actually flies!" He looked from Sheleigh to the glider and back to Sheleigh, almost like he didn't know which to praise for the feat, pilot or machine.

"My lady," Pithe gasped. Her hair was blown back from her face, displaying her chiseled cheekbones. "It took the wind like a bird!"

Bateleur helped Sheleigh out of the harness. Pithe held out her arm so Sheleigh could use it as a support.

Sheleigh gave each of them a meaningful look. "I told you there was more than one way to fly. Now I can fly just like an Averen, and so can any non-winged."

"So can the Avatier," Tera spoke from behind them. Sheleigh turned to the girl. Tera couldn't run in her advanced state of pregnancy, but she was breathing hard as though she'd hurried. She hung on the metal edge of the glider. Sheleigh moved to her side to give the girl support. Tera clutched Sheleigh's arm and gave her a grateful smile.

Sheleigh addressed the engineers. "Now that we know the glider works, can we practice from the cliff top?"

Ecau brayed his horsy laugh. "You only flew once. You were probably as surprised as we were."

"But the twenty-foot drop was too easy. I think we should try something higher," she argued.

"Sheleigh." Pithe's voice was calm. "Were you in control of the glider or did you just go where it was headed?"

Sheleigh smiled sheepishly and ducked her head. "I didn't even think about directing the flight."

Pithe continued. "Let's practice jumping from this height and concentrate on learning control. Tera will stand at a different location each time and you'll fly to her."

"Good idea," Ecau seconded.

Sheleigh halted, remembering something. "How did you and Pithe get down here so quickly?"

Ecau exchanged a look with Pithe. The air grew charged. Pithe straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. "We flew down."

They flew. In the presence of a non-winged alien who was not their mate. What courage that must have taken. "Will you fly with me as I practice?" This would be the real test.

Ecau's Adam's apple bobbed several times as he tugged on a disobedient lock of hair. Pithe looked away, chewing her lip. She was again the first to speak. Perhaps her affair with an alien had made her braver. "I will."

Ecau scowled. "I will, too."

Sheleigh swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thank you."

Everyone except Tera climbed back up the twenty-foot rise. Pithe dragged a tow rope attached to the hang glider. When they were on the cliff top the four of them pulled the glider up the face. It was less time consuming than disassembling and reassembling it higher up.

Sheleigh got into her harness while the others positioned the glider for take-off. Then Bateleur hooked her harness to the glider frame.

Ecau and Pithe stood on either side of her, and for the first time she saw someone other than Kleet with their wings spread. Pithe's resemblance to a hawk was dramatic with her wings arrayed for flight. Ecau looked somehow less gangly with his wings visible.

Sheleigh jumped first, feeling her stomach drop once again before the exhilaration of flight took over. She looked to the left and saw Ecau just past and slightly below the glider's edge. He had a rapt expression on his face and for once his movements weren't jerky. His wingtips were fully extended to harvest the thermals underneath.

To her right was Pithe, the very picture of a hunting falcon circling its domain in search of prey. Pithe glanced over at her and gave Sheleigh a brilliant, happy smile. *This* was what Averans were born to do, would still be doing--every one of them--if mechanical flight hadn't been introduced into their society. Their wings grew less useful the more Averans failed to use them, until their genes decided future generations no longer needed to fly. Ecau and Pithe clearly loved to fly. How awful, then, that they had so few opportunities to do so.

Sheleigh scanned the ground ahead until she saw Tera over to the left. She leaned to the left, but the glider turned more quickly than she expected. Ecau's eyes widened, but he averted a collision by dropping below her, out of sight. Sheleigh quickly leaned to the right, but overcompensated. Damn. It had seemed much easier on the test setup.

Several small adjustments helped her line up in Tera's vicinity, but with far from pinpoint accuracy.

After she landed, she sighed. Clearly steering required more practice.

Tera approached her and disconnected Sheleigh's harness from the frame. "I see you had some trouble directing the glider." Tera's voice was laced with humor.

"Yes." Sheleigh's reply was sardonic. "I need more practice."

Pithe and Ecau walked around the sides of the glider. Pithe glowed with happiness. "That was fun. Let's try it again."

Ecau's clothes were very dusty and he scowled. "Sheleigh didn't almost collide with you and cause a stall."

Pithe elbowed him in the ribs. "Did you fall out of the sky?" Her eyes glittered with merriment.

He glared at her, and then turned to Sheleigh. "You need to work on maneuvering."

"I know. But I thought I'd mastered that much in the simulations."

"The glider wings and the movement of the air across the wings change the response you get." He grabbed hold of the glider frame and lifted it. Pithe took hold of the other side. He looked back at Sheleigh as she raised an edge of the wing past Pithe. "You'll get better with

practice.”

Hours later Sheleigh had mastered navigation sufficiently so that she could head first one direction and then another. After landing, she knelt in the dust on the hard ground and arched her shoulders. The muscles ached there. She had other aches, but her shoulders were the worst.

Bateleur finished unhooking her harness from the frame. “Are you hurt, my lady? Your landing didn’t look that hard.”

“No. My shoulders aren’t used to these types of movements. I’m going to be stiff tomorrow.”

He helped her to her feet. She was surprised to find how much effort it took to rise and how much weight she leaned on him.

Ecau walked up to them. “Much better, Sheleigh. I believe you’ve mastered this bird.”

“God, I hope so,” she avowed. She wiped her sleeve over the sweat on her forehead. The sleeve left grit behind.

“It’s getting late,” Tera said, looking up at the sky. “I need to get home.”

“What time is it?” Sheleigh asked. She turned her wrist so she could see her chrono. “My God! Kleet got home an hour ago.” She looked up into their tired faces. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize the time was passing so quickly.”

Pithe gave a tired laugh. “We enjoyed it, my lady.”

Sheleigh studied the glider. “Can we leave the glider here and cover it?”

“No. Tomorrow’s our off day, remember?” Ecau reminded her. “I don’t want to leave it here for someone to find.”

“Come on,” Tera urged. “The faster we break it down, the faster we can all get home.”

* * * *

Any hope that Kleet wouldn’t notice what time Sheleigh arrived home was dashed when he met her at the hydrolift on the bedroom level. His expression was stormy.

“Do you know what time ... what happened to you?” he demanded.

She had no excuse made up. She hadn’t thought that far ahead. She looked down at herself, then back up at him. His dark brows had drawn together in a V. “It’s dirt. And dust.”

“I can see it’s dirt and dust. How did it get on you?”

“It was dusty where we were today.” *That* sounded inane.

“And where was that?”

Sheleigh couldn’t and wouldn’t lie. “I can’t tell you yet. I’m working on something confidential right now. I’ll tell you as soon as I can.”

His face grew cold. “Is it something for USP? Do they have their own plans for Avera?”

“No, it’s not something like that.”

He grabbed her arm. “You’re one of us, not one of them. When will you begin to act like it?”

Stung, after all she’d done for him today, she lashed back. “It’s always ‘us’ and ‘them’ isn’t it? No matter how big or small the difference.” She wrenched her arm free, her good mood evaporated. She turned and took two steps down the hall.

“Where are you going?” His voice was harsh.

“I need a bath.”

In the shower she pounded the wall with her fist, then hung her head and let the warm water pound on her head and shoulders. For every two steps forward she thought Averans took, they took another step backward. Today she’d flown with Ecau and Pithe. Then Kleet accused her of conspiring with USP against Avera. Why were things so hard?

She stayed under the warm water for a long time, letting the heat rob her muscles of stiffness. Unfortunately, once the stiffness was gone, so was the strength to remain upright. It had been a long, physically challenging day.

She dried herself, got much of the moisture out of her hair, staggered into the bedroom and dropped down on the bed. She had enough energy to wriggle onto her side into a more comfortable position and cover herself with the soft blanket. Her stomach rumbled, but her eyes were already shut. Sleep won out.

She barely woke when Kleet joined her in bed, only enough to identify him. A formless thought nagged at her that there was a reason she shouldn't snuggle against him, but it faded as sleep reclaimed her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Sheleigh stood on the cliff edge, poised on the brink of discovery. If the hang glider worked from this thousand-meter drop as it was designed to, the project would be an unequivocal success.

She breathed in the air of the early morning, crisp with a bit of coolness left over from the night. Rising air currents swirled around her bare calves, brushing lightly. It was time.

“Ready you two?” she asked Pithe and Ecau.

“Ready,” they chorused.

She grabbed the control bar and pushed out into the air currents. The bottom dropped out of her stomach as solid ground disappeared from beneath her feet. The hang glider plummeted and she had a sickening moment where she thought she would need the air cushion a thousand meters below her. But the canopy filled with warm air and she began to soar.

She laughed as tension was released, feeling as light as the air under her. It was so beautiful to soar like this. The quiet was broken only by the ruffling of the canopy, the clink of the metal guide wires and the hook that connected her harness to the metal frame, and the whoosh of the wind over the canopy. What freedom!

The flight spiraled out and gradually she lost altitude. She circled, choosing the best spot for a landing, but hating to end the flight. There were no troubles up here, no malcontent, no irresolvable differences. Averans should fly every day to remind themselves what was good about their world. Now the non-winged could fly, too. She and these three young people had proven it.

She landed perfectly, the ending to a perfect flight. There were two thumps to the left and right of her, followed by the appearance of Pithe and Ecau. Their faces were flushed, their eyes bright and their hair was mussed by the wind. In that moment, they had never looked fairer to her.

When Pithe unhooked the harness, Sheleigh dragged her and Ecau into her arms. Tears of joy threatened, but she hugged the engineers tightly. “You’ve built the answer to my prayer. You’ve made my dream come to life. You’ve designed the salvation of this planet.” She had to swallow then. “Do you understand the magnitude of what you’ve done?”

She released them from her hard embrace and looked them over. Pithe grinned and was the first to speak. “I thought we were just having fun.” There was a catch in her voice at the end and her eyes were suspiciously moist.

Sheleigh turned to Ecau, whose cheeks were ruddy. He ducked his head, the gangly young man once again, but then he straightened. “I’m a Datus.” He choked, cleared his throat and began again. “If there was history being made in aeronautics, it was right that I was involved in it.” Despite his words, there was no real arrogance in what he said, just a statement of what he knew to be the facts.

Sheleigh nodded. “Yes, it was right.” She looked around the wide canyon. “How long do you think it will take the others to reach us? I’d like to try that flight at least once more.”

Pithe pulled tools from her belt pack and began to work on the left side of the glider. “I estimate we flew eight hundred meters. It will take longer to start the transport than to fly here.”

Ecau barked a laugh. He had a tool in his hand and moved to the right side of the glider. "It will take even longer to disassemble the glider and reassemble it again at the top. There has to be a more efficient way." His words trailed off and he chewed his lip while curiosity gleamed in his eyes. The glider didn't stand a chance of resisting efficiency against the power of Ecau's intellect. Sheleigh took the tool Pithe handed her and started to work disassembling the glider.

The transport arrived minutes later and Bateleur helped Tera down from her seat. Tera beamed at them. "My lady, that was a wonderful flight. I was amazed at how similar in movement to Ecau and Pithe the glider was."

When Tera reached the glider, Sheleigh gathered the girl in for a hug. Their pregnant bellies made it more of a sidewise hug than face on. They both laughed. Sheleigh held Tera at arm's length. "I told Ecau and Pithe, now I'm telling you. You brought my dream to life and my vision to fruition. I'm so grateful."

Tera smiled, flashing white teeth and making her eyes crinkle at the corners. "We should thank you for the opportunity to use our intelligence in a stimulatingly creative way. We don't have freedom like this at school."

"Bateleur chose well when he chose the three of you." Sheleigh included her guard in her smile. "Bateleur, what did you think of the flight?"

"It was beautiful, much like a mating flight would be." He took Sheleigh's hand, a rare liberty for him. "My lady, I think Avera is lucky to have someone like you who can create beauty out of the air."

Sheleigh's throat tightened, making it difficult to speak. "Thank you. It was these three who did the creating, though." She gestured to the engineers.

Bateleur released her hand and stepped back. "It was you who showed them the way, my lady." He took the spare tool Ecau handed him. "Let's get this bird broken down."

* * * *

When they finished reassembling the glider on the cliff top, Bateleur halted them. "We need another kind of test flight."

Sheleigh raised an eyebrow. "What kind?"

"A mating flight."

She flinched. She couldn't stop the feeling of revulsion that washed over her, making her cold inside. "No!"

The engineers echoed her protest.

Pithe jabbed Bateleur in the chest with her finger. "That's foul. Sheleigh is the Avatier's mate."

Bateleur raised his hands in front of him. "You misunderstand. I meant that two people should fly the glider, like there would be in a mating flight. The glider was built for two, yet it hasn't been tested for two and my lady doesn't know how to handle it with the added weight and mass of a second person. In all reasonableness and for her safety, we must have such a flight."

Ecau nodded his head vigorously, making his tufts of dark hair dance. "He's right, of course."

Sheleigh sized up the males. "Bateleur, you're the closest to Kleet's weight and mass."

Bateleur held his palm up. "No, my lady. I can't fly a mating flight with you."

"It's not a real mating flight."

"It looked like one from where I stood. No, I can't do it. I'm the Avatier's guard. I can't fly with his mate."

She turned to Ecau. "Ecau?"

He paled. "I can't fly in the glider with you. I can fly it alone, but not with you."

"But that's absurd! It's not a mating flight."

Tera stepped forward. "I'll do it, my lady. I don't have the mass of a man, but I'm near the weight of one right now. I want to fly the glider."

Sheleigh gripped the girl's shoulder. "Thank you, Tera."

There was only the one harness, and since Tera had wings it was decided that Sheleigh should retain it. They tied a rope around Tera anyway. They stood together at the cliff edge, both gripping the control bar. Ecau and Pithe would fly beside them, as usual. Bateleur would watch from the cliff until he knew they were safely aloft, and then follow in the transport to pick them up. This would be the last flight today.

"Ready?" Sheleigh asked Tera.

"Yes."

"Remember to keep your wings furled so they don't interfere with lift."

"I won't forget."

The glider had been set back a few steps from the cliff so that they could get a running start. "Let's go," Sheleigh ordered. They pushed the bar with all their might. The hang glider surged forward off the cliff. It dropped further than it had when Sheleigh flew solo. But the canopy soon caught the warm air and they began to glide.

It was much harder to maneuver with Tera's added weight. "It turns like a dirigible," Sheleigh murmured, although it wasn't as bad as that.

"What's a dir-gi-ble?" Tera asked.

"I'll tell you on the ground. Lean to the right." It proved easier when they both put their weight into a turn. "That's better."

"It's such a smooth flight," Tera marveled.

"Yes, it's very peaceful."

"Flying feels a lot like this. You feel one with the air. You had the right idea to help people who can't fly attain the air." Then she laughed. "The males are surely jealous that they couldn't fly the glider."

"There wouldn't have been anything wrong with them flying with me if we kept our clothes on."

"It's not done. Only the male mate flies with the female. It's our way."

That was it in a nutshell. Sheleigh couldn't understand because it was an Averen taboo, and she wasn't Averen.

Chapter Thirty

“Avatier, may I speak with you?” Captain Tinae’s deep voice rumbled in Kleet’s office. Captain Clanga’s replacement was a solidly thick man with a single bushy eyebrow covering both eyes.

Kleet put down his stylus as the Captain entered. “Yes, what is it, Captain?”

“May I close the door? It’s a private matter.”

Kleet cocked an eyebrow. “Certainly.” Tinae shut the door and came forward to Kleet’s desk. “Please sit down.” He gestured to the chairs in front of the desk.

“No, I’d prefer to stand.” Tinae cleared his throat and adjusted his tunic. “It regards my lady.”

Kleet stilled. “Yes?”

“Something odd is going on. Captain Steller reports that almost every day she send her guards away.”

Kleet studied his finger nails. “She told me she’s working on a special project.”

“She keeps one guard with her. Always the same guard. His name is Bateleur. He’s young and good-looking.”

Kleet surged to his feet. “What are you suggesting, Captain? She’s mated to me.”

“Captain Steller reports that lately when they rejoin her both she and Bateleur are disheveled. He doesn’t know how they get that way. Steller is concerned for your situation, concerned about disloyalty and worse.”

Kleet ran a hand through his hair. Without his cape to hold them down, his wings mantled. There was very little worse than disloyalty to a mate. It wasn’t done, couldn’t be done in most cases. He sucked in breath that tangled in his throat and lungs. His and Sheleigh’s relationship wasn’t most cases. Even before he was crippled, their partnership defied Avera’s rules. Now Sheleigh wanted more than he could give ...

“Captain Tinae, you say this happens frequently?”

“Yes, Avatier, almost every day.”

“Tell Captain Steller to contact me the next time it happens. Then be ready to go with me, no matter what time of day it is.”

“Yes, Avatier.” Tinae turned to leave.

“Captain?” Tinae turned back and raised an eyebrow. “Say nothing to anyone except Captain Steller about this.”

“Yes, Avatier.”

When Kleet was alone again, he stood for a moment searching his office. He moved to the shelves where pieces of Avera’s history were displayed. He took down a small chunk of black granite, generations old and gaining a patina with age and handling. He weighed it in one hand, then rubbed his other hand over its smooth, cool surface. His father had held this chunk whenever he’d had to make a hard decision. Kleet pictured his father in his mind rubbing the granite just as he was doing now.

This chunk was from when Averans first blasted caves out of the mountainsides using their new alien technology. More Averans could obtain housing in a shorter period of time. And

residences could be bigger. The Avatier of that time period had thought enough of the advancement to save a memento.

Kleet's fist clenched around it. If it were limestone, he would be able to feel the satisfying crunch in his hand. But granite was hard. *Like my heart*. Only it didn't feel hard at the moment. Sheleigh wouldn't betray him. Only the statement lacked conviction. How could he know what a woman who wanted more than he could give would do?

He was going to find out the truth soon enough.

* * * *

That night at dinner Sheleigh drooped like a wilted flower. There were lines of fatigue around her eyes and mouth. Why was she so tired?

"Sheleigh, what did you do today?" She started when he said her name.

"The envoy visited a farm cooperative, a mine and the transport manufacturing facility. We learned a lot about hiring practices and which industries employ more non-winged. Some of the employers come right out and ask if applicants are non-winged. That sort of discrimination is illegal in USP."

Always the comparison to USP, where Averans came out looking bad. And the more she saw of Avera civilization, the unhappier she became with it. Maybe it had been wrong to assign her as liaison. Someone else wouldn't be affected as deeply as she was.

His mother spoke up, looking no worse for her outing yesterday with the envoy. "Sheleigh, they don't know that what they're doing is wrong. We have to teach them."

Sheleigh laid her silverware beside her plate and looked at Lefair. "That's a massive undertaking, Lefair. Avera's population is smaller than many planets, but we're still talking about educating millions of people. It will take years for every Avera to understand what they're doing is wrong. It will probably take generations to effect a change in behavior, and even then some people will refuse to change."

"Averans *will* change. I talked to the envoy yesterday about Avera's future. Strangers will come here if the Avatier allows it. They'll want to trade with us and we have to know what products we have that can be trade goods."

Kleet's eyes narrowed. "Mother, is it not the Avatier's responsibility to discuss trade options? Did the envoy initiate this conversation?"

"Kleet," Sheleigh protested.

Lefair straightened in her seat. "I initiated it. As Avera's ambassador, I represent your wishes in talks with foreigners. I have a vested interest in this planet and seeing it advance."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I'm not used to thinking of you as a politician."

Lefair's face gentled. She picked up her fork. "We all face changes in the months and years ahead."

Kleet faced a change when he went to bed that night. For the second night in a row, Sheleigh was sound asleep. His body ached with unfulfilled needs. She was the one who'd insisted on continuing their physical relationship. Now even that was denied him.

He would find out the truth of what she was doing and make it stop. There were changes in his life he would *not* accept.

* * * *

Kleet feigned sleep when Sheleigh slid from his arms the next morning at 0500. When she slipped from the room he contacted Tinae.

"Yes, Avatier?"

"Come get me. Watch for whoever picks up Sheleigh."

“Yes, Avatier. I’ll be there soon.”

Kleet dressed hurriedly, and then strode down the hall to the stairs. He didn’t choose the hydrolift because that would alert her to his presence. He stood in the shadow of the hydrolift alcove and glanced over the rooftop. Sheleigh stood in the pool of light from the landing pad.

Kleet’s chest burned. There was only one activity he knew of that took place before dawn. His fist clenched as he fought the impulse to confront her now. He had to have proof.

In minutes a transport touched down. When Sheleigh opened the co-pilot’s door, Kleet saw the pilot was Bateleur. He’d gone through the guard’s file and seen his picture. Sheleigh laughed as she closed the door and the sound blazed through Kleet like the day he’d been shot. Betrayal.

The transport lifted and was swallowed into the inky dark of the night. He thought it turned west. His private transport dropped onto the landing pad and he sprinted to it. He opened the co-pilot’s door to see Tinae looking soberly fierce. The dark unibrow was drawn down in a frown. No sooner had Kleet closed the door than the transport lifted off and banked in a westerly direction.

“You won’t lose track of them?” he asked Tinae.

“No. There’s very little traffic, especially on this heading, and I’ve got them pinpointed on the scope.”

“We run the greatest risk of exposure when we land.”

“I’ll land as quietly as I can, as far away as I safely can. You should have let me put the guards on stand-by. We may need them.”

“I prefer privacy for what I think we’re going to find. But if I’m wrong, you’ll be there to back me up.”

Tinae’s lips compressed, but if Kleet was flying to a romantic rendezvous, then the fewer witnesses the better. Acid burned in his empty stomach. He didn’t want to prove Sheleigh’s personal betrayal. He’d prefer she was a radical sympathizer. Gods, yes, even that was preferable to being disloyal to a crippled mate.

In twenty minutes, Tinae spoke again. “They’ve landed. I’ll get as close as I dare.”

Kleet’s body stiffened as though in readiness for a blow. In moments he would know.

The transport hovered as Tinae studied his instruments. The Captain maneuvered a little to the left and down, then the engine stopped and the transport sat with a thump.

Kleet took his hand off the co-pilot’s control panel. “They probably heard our landing,” he accused.

“Felt it, maybe. Heard it, no. Once the engine was off there was no sound.” Tinae gave Kleet a hand light.

Kleet turned on the light and climbed out of the transport. Tinae came around the nose of the transport and pointed ahead of them with his hand light.

“That way,” Tinae said.

Kleet led in that direction. In half a minute they reached the other transport. They doused their hand lights and listened. When Kleet heard nothing, they moved forward. Tinae shined his light into the transport. It was empty.

Kleet continued forward along a curving path where the cliff rose steeply on his right side. He kept a hand on the smooth rock face as he walked. In a few minutes he heard voices rising and falling in the cadence of speech. One voice was male, one female, but he couldn’t understand what they were saying. He inched forward cautiously, ready to douse the light if they came upon Sheleigh and the guard.

He rounded a bend and suddenly the words became distinguishable.

Sheleigh was talking. "This is so much easier in the daylight."

"Yeah, but in the daylight up this high we run the risk of being sighted." It was a young man's voice.

"I hate all this secrecy. Kleet suspects something."

That sounded like the perfect opening to Kleet. He stepped around the bend, shining his light on the speakers. He didn't know who was more surprised, them or him.

The young guard flung up his weapon to defend Sheleigh and just as quickly dropped it with a horrified expression on his face.

"Avatier!"

"Kleet!"

Kleet took another step forward, unable to fathom what his and the other lights displayed. For there were a number of lights and three unfamiliar young people. They were working on a contraption made of fabric and metal.

"What's going on here?" he thundered.

"What are you doing here?" Sheleigh cried. Her eyes were huge.

"I thought I was finding answers, but instead there are only questions." He moved forward and looked more closely at the people on the cliff. There was a black-haired young woman; a skinny, dark-haired young man; and amazingly, a very young woman almost as pregnant as Sheleigh. Their expressions were fearful, eager and proud, depending on whom he looked at. The young guard stood stiffly at attention, all respectful and professional. This was not a sordid betrayal, but what was it? He'd never seen the contraption before and it reminded him of nothing he knew, so he dismissed it.

"I want to know what's going on here," he demanded again.

Sheleigh pointed her finger at him. "You followed me." Her cheeks were ruddy with anger.

"Of course I did. I needed to know what you were doing."

"You didn't trust me," she accused.

He felt his face flush. "You have no right to keep secrets from me as a man or as Avatier."

Her eyes narrowed. "What did you think I was doing here?"

He flushed again, which only made him angrier. "My actions aren't the ones in question." He was unable to control a glance at Bateleur.

Sheleigh's glance followed his to Bateleur. When she looked back at Kleet he recognized the look of burning anger in her eyes. "You thought I was meeting a man?" Her words scored across him like sharp glass.

Bateleur paled, apparently realizing he was the subject of a dreadful accusation. "No, Avatier, it's not true!"

Sheleigh advanced on Kleet, her red hair bristling. "How dare you accuse me? How dare you think such foul thoughts about me? How dare you disparage me and this man in front of witnesses? That's despicable."

"What was I to think when you send all the guards except one away, and that one young and good-looking? What could I think when you sneak off in the pre-dawn to meet him ..."

She shrieked, "Bastard!" She flung the word at him like a knife. He was glad he was the only one present who knew the meaning of that word. Her anger blasted him like the heat of a glass forge. "I'm your mate. Your wife. I sleep with you every night ..."

“Not for two days.”

“And *that* was your proof?” Her voice scaled the soprano heights. “I was tired.”

“From doing what? You still haven’t told me what’s going on here.”

She stepped to the side and gestured to the contraption. “We’re testing a hang glider. It’s for you to help you fly again.” Her words were terse.

His body jerked and went cold all over. “That’s not funny, Sheleigh.”

“It’s not supposed to be a joke. It’s the truth. You want to fly again and we’ve made the glider to help you.”

“You got these people to help you humiliate me? Now whose actions are despicable?” His lips twisted.

“Humiliate you? No. One can’t humiliate a man who feels nothing, and you don’t. Not since you lost the ability to fly. You’re a shell of the vital man you were before you were shot. You breathe and your heart beats, but you’re not truly alive. In your mind your life ended with the loss of flight.

“I’m surprised you cared enough to come here and confront me. But even if you don’t care, I do. I cared enough to think that if you could fly again you’d come alive again. I cared enough to ask these loyal people to work for weeks on a project to get you airborne again. I cared enough to squeeze extra hours out of my already crowded schedule to oversee the project personally so that it would succeed and you would regain the power to fly. I cared ...” She choked and couldn’t go on.

“You don’t love me, Sheleigh. You never did.” The words contained months of emotional loneliness.

“I’ve loved you since the day you were wounded! I loved you while you lay broken and bleeding in my arms. But you don’t believe me, won’t believe me. All my actions since then have been to make your home, your life, and your planet a better place for you to live. Sure, some of my motives had nothing to do with you but with helping all Averans. But isn’t the end result of bettering their lives to better yours? Isn’t it easier to lead in a time of peace and prosperity than to lead in a time of war and hatred?

“Do you like being surrounded by guards whose vigilance is the only thing standing between you and death? Hasn’t your own body already suffered in this undeclared war?”

He took a deep breath. “What’s that got to do with love?”

She threw up her hands. “Everything! I did it for you. You made it clear you wouldn’t accept my word that I loved you. So I saw what you needed and I worked hard so you’d have it.”

He flung his hand in the direction of the hang glider. “I don’t need *that*.”

“You damn well do! You’re such a stubborn man. Is it only you who throws away love when he receives it?” He stiffened at the remembered words from the day they were mated. “Or is it just *my* love you reject, because I’m non-winged. Because I’m not Averan?”

A shock shook through him like an earthquake. It wasn’t true, couldn’t be true.

“When you reject my gift you also reject the love of your people.” She gestured to the goggling young people and his eyes followed the movement of her hand. The black-haired girl’s face was flushed with anger directed at him. The young man looked crestfallen. The pregnant girl beamed with hope, like a flower to the sun. Even the guard seemed to be pleading. His people.

“If you keep rejecting their love, how long do you think they’ll keep giving it? If and when you ever accept that you’re not diminished just because you can’t fly and you turn to your people again, will you expect them to still love you? You’re a bitter man, wallowing in your loss.

And yet we love you.

“We loved you enough to work hard to give you the gift of flight again ...”

Kleet made a disparaging noise.

Sheleigh’s hair almost bristled. He could feel the heat of her anger. “Would you reject the mechanical means to walk if you lost a leg? Would you reject hearing assistance if you became deaf?” Again his body felt a jolt like it had on the day he was shot. “This glider is a labor of love to make you a better man, instead of a bitter man. Why do you reject it? Are you that selfish, that small a man?” Her voice was disdainful and he winced.

“You’re blessed with so many things, Kleet. You have money, possessions, a mate, children on the way, relatives who love you, a population who honors your leadership, your health. Why do you concentrate on the one thing you don’t have? If the doctors could heal you, you’d do whatever they asked no matter how painful.

“We offer you the same opportunity, to fly again. A great man would take a great gift like that and thank the givers. Only a small man would reject the gift and the givers. Are you a small man, Kleet?”

Kleet’s chest was too tight. Was he that petty and selfish? He’d lost what Averans treasured most, so he had every right to feel cheated. Sheleigh’s flushed face was in front of him, challenging him and offering him something unbelievable. The others were on his left, accusing, hoping and urging him towards faith.

He was crippled. What they’d done mocked him. Yet they wanted him to be whole again. This contraption was their offering to make him whole. He couldn’t do it—it was humiliating, absurd, ridiculous. It couldn’t possibly work.

Sheleigh walked over to the metal thing and slid between the metal and the cloth. The black-haired girl moved to Sheleigh’s side, still giving him an accusatory look. She snapped a hook to the frame, squeezed Sheleigh’s arm, then stepped back. Sheleigh gripped the metal triangle, lifted it and began to move forward.

Frustration burned in him. “Sheleigh, what are you doing?”

“I can fly, Kleet. Can you?”

His cheeks heated. How dare she insult him in front of witnesses? The rising sun glinted off the metal frame. The fabric made a flapping sound. She took another step. She wouldn’t!

As he took a step towards her, she ran forward and plunged from the cliff. His breath stalled in his throat. He raced to the edge as she dropped from sight.

“Sheleigh!” His stomach plummeted as the contraption dropped. He sensed people standing beside him and whirled. His gaze riveted on the guard while murderous rage filled him. “You! Why aren’t you doing anything?”

Bateleur looked over the cliff and back to him. “There’s no need to do anything, Avatier.”

Kleet gritted his teeth and turned to the others. The pregnant young woman spoke before he could.

“You’d better jump if you want to catch her, Avatier.”

“What are you talking about?” His voice cracked over her like a whip.

“Look.” The young man pointed out into the canyon.

Kleet whirled. The rays of the rising sun sprayed out over the canyon. Fully arrayed in its fiery glory was a metal bird in flight. Its variegated-colored wings were the hues of the orange-red of Sheleigh’s curls coalescing into the dark brown of his own hair. Sheleigh hung suspended from the wings. She could fly!

At that moment, when his heart could hold no more emotion, she banked gently to the right, into the heart of the morning. The metal gleamed, the orange color burned like fire, as did Sheleigh's curls. She was the goddess of the sun. She was his mate.

"Go to her, Avatier," the young mother-to-be said.

"I can't fly!" It was a cry of torment. It was a cry to the sun god and to his people.

"Let us help you," the black-haired girl offered.

He stared at his mate. She was as beautiful in flight as any bird. Sheleigh banked right again and now he could see her with the great artificial wings arched above her filled with thermals. His heart pounded like it had when they were newly mated. If she could fly ...

"Avatier?" Tinae queried.

"I have to do this on my own. I still have one wing that works." He took a deep breath and jumped out into the air, arms spread out to the sides and feet together. A scream sounded behind him on the cliff.

He'd done this a thousand times ... but that had been with two wings. His undamaged wing opened and caught the air. He gritted his teeth against the strength it took to keep upright with drag on only one side.

His heart raced, his lungs burned. Where was she? There was a glimpse of orange to his right. He could hear nothing over the wind rushing past as he fell. Then there was a strange hollowness to the air around him, and Sheleigh dropped into the space beside him on the right. He grabbed the triangular bar, placing his right hand between both of hers.

"What took you so long?" she asked. Her voice sounded strained.

He spared a look at her. Her face was white, her pupils contracted. He'd frightened her. He was overcome by tenderness. "I'm stubborn," he huffed.

Sheleigh gave a little laugh. "That you are. Do you have a good hold? I want to show you what I've been practicing."

He moved further onto the bar. "Show me."

Sheleigh leaned to the left and the hang glider banked left. They raced along the canyon until it intersected another canyon. There the glider caught a thermal and Sheleigh leaned right to circle in the warm air. When she leaned right again, he leaned with her, earning a smile from her.

It was much better than being in a transport. The wind brushed his face and hands like when he flew. His breath stilled. He was flying!

A laugh escaped from his throat. Sheleigh looked at him. "I'm flying," he told her.

She smiled. "I told you that you could."

"Let's go over there, to the left." He nodded the direction with his head.

They leaned left into another canyon. The air here was colder and the hang glider rapidly lost altitude, but Kleet didn't care. Darkness had dropped from his mind and heart. That hard coldness had been like a blanket suffocating him. Now he was free ... to do a lot of things.

His feet touched the ground and then Sheleigh's did too. They placed the control bar lightly on the ground. He reached up to unhook Sheleigh from the glider, and then drew her out in front of it. He caressed her upper arms.

"I flew and it felt good," he admitted.

Her eyes were deep pools of green. "I love to fly. I wish I could have told you ..."

He placed two fingers on her lips to stop the words. "It's all right. I understand now."

"I would never betray you, Kleet. I love you."

His heart swelled. He took her warm, ripe body into his arms and rested his head on her windblown curls. "I know that now, too."

“Do you?” Her voice came muffled from his shirt front.

“Yes. Only someone who loved me would go to the lengths you have to show me. It’s quite an invention. Who made it?”

“It’s a human invention, but the engineers made it. Kleet, non-wingeds can use it to fly.”

He laughed and squeezed her body tightly. She would spend her life helping others. It was the right quality for the Avatier’s mate.

He held her away from him and looked into her luminous eyes. “I love you. I’m sorry for all I’ve put you through.”

Her eyes grew moist. “You were hurt. You needed to heal.”

“You healed me.”

She swallowed. “I had to.”

He took her lips then in a passionate reaffirmation of their partnership. Her sweet lips tasted of wind and passion. The mate-bond roared and swelled through him, firming the old connection and layering new ones over it.

In the shadow of the man-made wings he held her tight. This woman had come millions of miles to give him strength and courage and to lift him up on the wings of love.

Epilogue

The boys raced ahead to the cliff edge, shrieking as they ran. Kleet followed behind his sons at a more sedate pace holding Sheleigh's hand. They walked like mature adults, even though they were as eager as the boys. Kleet would give her another child today, and he was bursting with satisfaction at the thought of getting her pregnant again. They both wanted a daughter and he wanted one with orange curls. The boys wanted a baby brother--they had no use for girls. They hadn't much use for anyone or anything that wasn't flying.

"Wait until I check the harnesses," Kleet yelled to his sons. Their hang gliders were as safe as the engineers could make them, but the little rascals didn't like to wait to fly.

His sons were non-winged. They flew as Sheleigh did--using a hang glider. But from the moment they were born they had had the Avera love of flying. From the time they were little more than babies they had leaped avidly off the cliff. And since they'd learned to walk, and then to run, there was no stopping them from flying solo. Their flights with their man-made wings were heart stopping for him to see. They were meant to fly, any way they could.

He wanted another child of Sheleigh's body. Those human genes were a marvelous addition to the Avera ones.

They rounded the final corner and he spotted his sons stamping the ground impatiently with their tiny feet.

"Hurry, Papa!" they chorused together as they often did.

The sun had just risen and a streamer of light showed the russet in the boys' hair. More of Sheleigh's DNA, he thought with satisfaction.

He checked their harnesses and gave a nod to each small boy. "Be careful. Your mother and I will be above you."

He watched them race for the edge with their man-made wings, squealing with joy. Their small gliders caught the thermals and they soared in the rosy haze of the dawn.

"It's time, Shel." He stripped off his clothes. Sheleigh stripped from the waist down. She quickly strapped herself into her hang glider and took a running leap from the cliff. For a moment he possessively watched his mate soar. She loved to fly, and he was proud to watch her do it.

He leaped after her, making the fast dive to her. Her legs were free of the harness and spread wide to receive him. He reached her and grabbed her shoulders. He aligned himself at her entrance and thrust hard against the wind. She squealed and he thrust hard again. She grunted as he seated himself against the mouth of her womb. He could feel the primal virility of the mating flight burning in his loins. He pumped several hard strokes against her womb, until he exploded and saturated her womb with his seed. He heard Sheleigh gasp, and then her loins convulsed heavily as her body accepted his seed.

He knew they wouldn't need a second mating, although he would take the opportunity to do so. He felt the resonance of pregnancy in her womb and knew the doctor would find another set of twins. He hugged his mate tightly to him. She was generous in giving him children.

Since his mother was at USP for the next year, he'd allow Sheleigh's parents to be with her for the birth of this set of twins. Avera was speeding into the future with Sheleigh leading the

way.

Love overwhelmed him. “Once more, love. This one’s just for us.”

It was a hard, fast mating, as most mating flights were, and he enjoyed hearing her gasps and moans. They’d been mated almost four years now and he could barely remember the time before she was his. There couldn’t have been happiness and fulfillment before she came. There certainly hadn’t been love. She was his heart and the best part of him.

As he flew with her, deep in her body, his one good wing spread to catch the wind. He was safe in the canopy of Sheleigh’s man-made wings. His first set of children were flying out in front of him, his second set were in his mate’s womb. His heart almost burst, it was so full. It was true that love lifted you up and gave you wings to soar. He was living proof of it.

The End