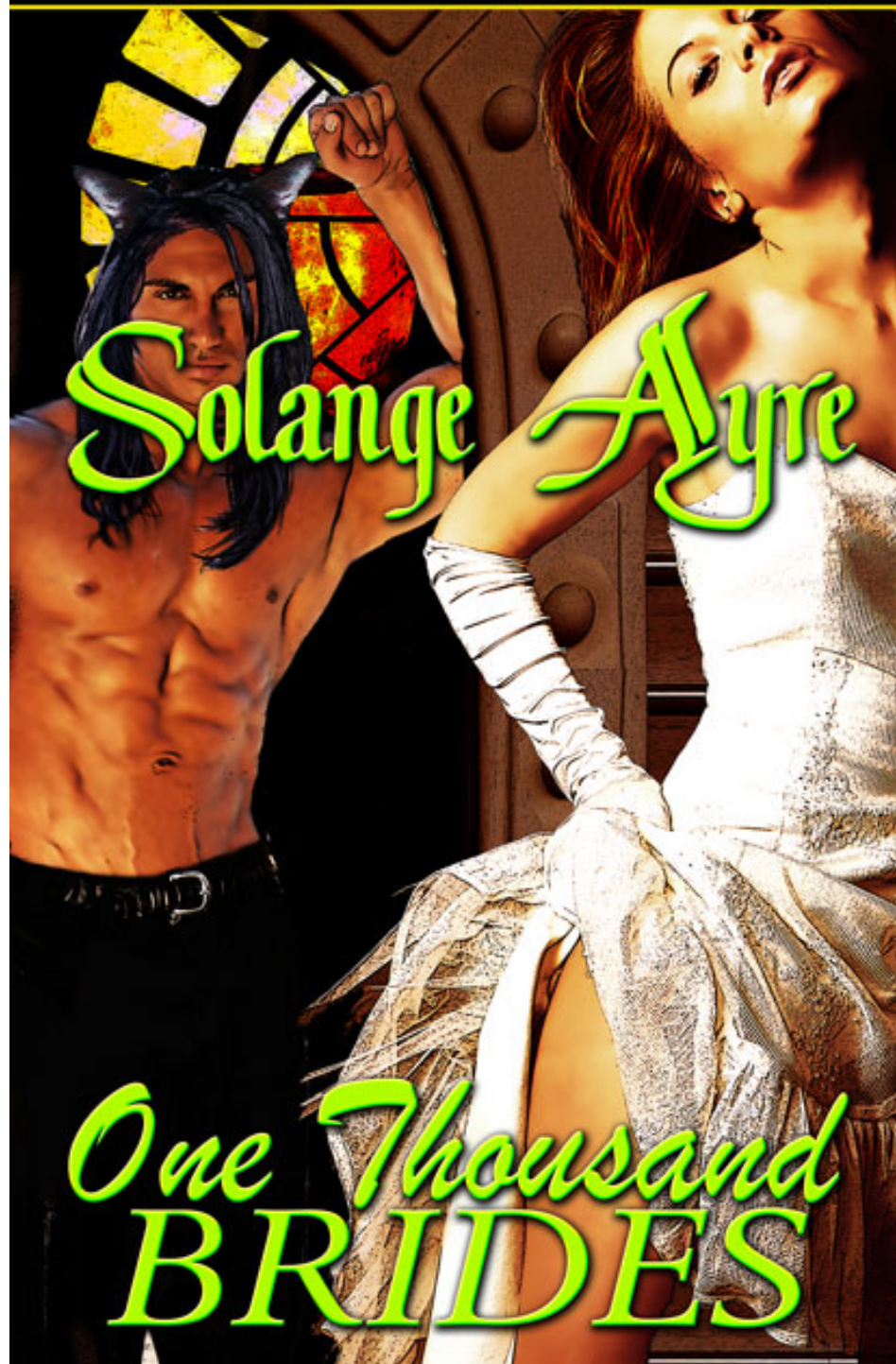


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One Thousand Brides

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# *ONE THOUSAND BRIDES*

Solange Ayre

### *Dedication*

Dedicated to my wonderful critique partners (in alphabetical order by last name): Christy C., Edwina C., Ellen D., Dianne H., Chris N., and Nancy S. Thank you, darlings! I promise we'll have a lovely house party on Ayriana as soon as I get back to Earth.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

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## Chapter One

*What sadist put a bakery next to a bridal shop?* Jan tried to ignore the enticing aroma of fresh bread as she hurried into Bev's Bridal Boutique. Her rumbling stomach reminded her that she'd had nothing but soup for lunch.

"I'm Janis Stone," she said, approaching the counter. "I'd like to try my dress on, please."

In the dressing room, the smiling attendant helped her into the longline corset with its built-in bra. Through strenuous exercise and dieting, Jan had managed to lose thirty-two pounds over the last three months. She said a little prayer as the attendant lowered the clouds of white satin over her head. *Please God, make it fit this time.*

"I'm sorry," the attendant said. "I just can't get the last two buttons done—the ones at your waist. I wish you'd let me order the size sixteen."

Jan shook her head, thinking of the day when she and Gary had chosen the dress. "All that white makes you look enormous," he'd said, frowning. "My God, Jan, my mother had five children and still wears a size six."

She'd come close to calling off the wedding. He'd apologized—but the remark still rankled. She'd decided to go on a diet.

After all, she was thirty-nine years old, ordinary looking and a little too heavy. No wonder she'd never been married. Gary was her last chance.

She'd pictured herself married since age ten. When she finally received an engagement ring, it had been such a pleasure to show it to the other women at work, to e-mail her old college roommates, to call her mother—who'd cried with joy.

For years she'd brought gifts to her friends' wedding showers. Exclaimed over their dresses. Danced at their weddings while keeping a sharp eye out for the Mr. Right who always seemed to be partnering younger, more petite women.

Finally, after all these years, it was her turn. She could hardly wait for her big day. The candle-lit ceremony, the friends and family from out of town, her attendants in their pale pink. She was looking forward to every wonderfully mundane detail.

Even The Chicken Dance.

Jan hummed along with the music being piped through the store. Surely those last two buttons would close if she went on a liquid diet for the next week...

A harsh burst of static came over the speaker. The sound hurt Janis' ears and she winced.

"People of Earth." The arrogant voice sounded much like a BBC announcer. "I am Primus Taddus of the Black-Striped Pelt, a council member of the colonization ship *Ecstasy of Generations*."

Jan turned to the attendant, who looked every bit as puzzled as Jan felt. "It's got to be a joke," Jan whispered.

The voice continued, "Necessity has compelled us to seek your help. In the fourth year of our seven-year journey, a short stay on a planetary satellite exposed us to an unknown virus. To our great sorrow, every one of our females perished.

"We require wives. A review of the populated planets in your region revealed that Earth females are the closest genetically to our species. Thus we have decided to take one thousand human females with us.

"We carefully chose fertile females under age forty, childless and not presently pair-bonded. Do not be concerned for your compatriots—they will have rich and rewarding lives in a far more enlightened society than your own.

"We regret the necessity for our actions and thank you most sincerely for your time and trouble."

As soon as the voice cut off, dizziness flooded Janis' senses. She tried to catch hold of the chair in the dressing room as she fell to her knees. As everything went dark, she thought, *If I tear this dress, I'll shoot myself.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Pleasure danced down every nerve, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. Jan moaned deep in her throat. She wanted to stretch luxuriously, like a cat basking in sunlight but sleep held her immobile. A tingling sensation pulsed through her, arousing her nipples. They grew heavy and engorged, as though a lover had suckled them for an hour. The sensual awakening flew down to her pelvis, which suffused with heat as delight rippled through her. Her clit swelled and her pussy ached to be filled.

*Please, she begged, please don't stop. I'll die if you stop.*

The wonderful titillation went on and on, varying in intensity, increasing the thrill. The teasing concentrated on her clit. She was about to explode when the stimulation switched to her hot, slick channel. Moving hard, like a vigorous lover, the sensation then muted to the tentative touch of one finger. Every nerve spiked to attention, starving for more.

Suddenly a thousand tiny tongues lapped at her, stimulating her nether lips, her clit and the tight rosebud of her ass.

A headlong rush toward orgasm, like speeding down the world's longest, smoothest roller coaster. Everything opened at once, her pussy welcoming all sensations, drowning in them, overflowing. She tumbled through huge waves of pleasure that left her shuddering and swooning as they receded. She drew in a great gasp of air and her eyes flew open.

She'd just had an incredibly intense orgasm...from her mind alone. No one was close enough to touch her, yet her pussy pulsed as though the world's greatest lover had given her the world's most intense fucking.

*Where am I? What's happening to me?* She shivered, her heart pounding with fear.

The narrow bed, the bright, recessed lights, the smell of antiseptic were all familiar.

*Is it a hospital? That guy looks a little strange, though. Am I on some weird hallucinogen?*

A man lounged against the doorway, studying what looked like a handheld electronic device. He glanced up. "Janis Stone. You're awake." Smiling, he approached with catlike grace.

He was slender and tall, well over six feet in height. His long hair, hanging slightly past his shoulders, was a mass of dark brown varied with lighter patches of tan.

Two furry peaks poked through his hair at the top of his head. *Bad hair day?* she wondered. *No, those are his ears. He's not a man. He's an alien.*

The fog began to clear from her brain. She strained to remember the last thing she'd heard. Her breathing quickened.

"Secondus Delos of the Tawny-Spotted Pelt. Your physician." His pale blue eyes studied her. Jan focused on them, noting they were rounder than human eyes, with long, narrow pupils. Still, they held a kindly expression. "How are you feeling?" His deep, rich voice flowed over her like warm cream, calming and soothing her.

*How am I feeling? After having the best orgasm of my life? But I doubt he's asking about my sexual health.*

"Disoriented," she said at last. Her voice was hoarse, as though she hadn't spoken in a long time.

"Not surprising. Some of that's the pain medication. Rest assured, you're going to be feeling much better soon."

The doctor wore a sleeveless blue tunic that revealed the powerful muscles of his shoulders and arms. Sturdy legs were encased in dark blue tights.

He sat casually on the side of her bed and took her wrist in his large hand.

*He's an alien and he's touching me.* Her trembling increased.

"Don't worry, I'm just taking your pulse." His smile gave her a warm feeling, until she noticed his fang-shaped incisors.



In spite of the fact that he had two eyes, a nose and a mouth, something about his face didn't quite add up to "human". Maybe it was his small nose. Or the stiff hairs under his nose that were more like a cat's whiskers than a man's mustache.

"I've been worried about you," he continued. "You took the Transition hard. Most of the other Brides have been awake for two or three days."

*Other Brides?* "How long have I been here?" she asked, her alarm growing.

"Seven weeks." He grasped her shoulder with a comforting hand. "Do you remember the broadcast? Do you know why you're here?"

In the back of her mind she'd been aware of the knowledge but hadn't wanted to face it. "So it's all true then?" She wasn't sure whether she should scream hysterically or break into sobs.

*None of that will do any good. Just stay calm.* She took deep breaths and tried to relax.

"It's true." His eyes contained attractive little flecks of darker blue. He leaned closer and she received an enticing whiff of his scent. Some of it was clean, healthy male but there was an underlying addition...cocoa, maybe? Whatever the scent, she wanted to lick him all over. *Lick him? That's got to be the drugs.*

"I'm sure you have questions. Go ahead and ask. I've been appointed Official Liaison to the Brides."

*Official liaison or kidnapping conspirator?* "How nice for you. Did you get a pay raise?"

A twitch of Dr. Delos' mouth showed that he'd caught her sarcasm. "Our economic incentives don't work quite the same way as in your culture. Anyway the answer is no. I volunteered solely for the pleasure of working with beautiful females."

*Too bad you got stuck with me, then.* "The person who spoke on the broadcast said you wanted wives." Was she really expected to marry an alien? Someone like the doctor, with furry ears?

To her shock she realized the idea intrigued her. *Maybe it has something to do with that unusual wake-up call.*

"Yes, you were all brought here to marry us." Was there an apologetic note in his voice?

Jan strove to remember everything from the announcement. "He said your females died."

"All of us were ill after the landing on Rinora-3. Two-thirds of our males recovered but our females..." He closed his eyes briefly. "I'm sorry. It's difficult to talk about."

In spite of his nonhuman features, she was able to read the pain in his expression. "Were *you* married?" she asked.

"In our culture, all adults are married. I understand humans are different. We were shocked to find a thousand lovely females who were not yet pair-bonded."

"How did you know we weren't pair-bonded?"

"In choosing our Brides, we uploaded data on many females from the most technologically advanced areas of Earth. You're the result of an extensive selection process. One of a thousand, chosen out of millions."

*Just like hitting the lottery.* "You know what? That makes me feel *so much better* about being brought here against my will."

He didn't respond to her jibe but answered seriously. "I know this is hard for you. You'll understand more tomorrow."

*There's got to be a way to escape. I'll think about it when I'm not so tired.* "What's happening tomorrow?"

"The council's planning a meeting with all the Brides. I'd like to get you walking around before that. Are you ready to sit up?"

She almost answered that she wanted to go to sleep and never wake up again. But she didn't want to look weak in front of him, so she nodded.

"Good. I'll help you." He put his arm around her shoulders. A strand of his long hair brushed against her cheek. His wonderful scent drew her like catnip attracting a feline.

A sudden vision came to her of cuddling against his chest. What would he do? Hold her, murmur soothing words? The idea was so intriguing that she almost cast herself into his arms.

*More likely he'd give me a tranquilizer. Better behave myself.*

"Here we go." He raised her to a sitting position. Her head swam and the room spun like rows of fruit whirling in a slot machine.

"Dizzy!" she gasped.

"Don't worry, I've got you. Take deep breaths."

Gradually the room steadied. In spite of herself, she drew comfort from Dr. Delos' steady grip. Although he was an alien he also seemed to be a caring doctor.

She wore a plain yellow tunic that was embarrassingly sheer, considering her nipples were still peaking. Couldn't he have provided a decent hospital gown?

"Bed – raise back to support patient," he commanded. The bed obeyed him and the doctor released her. Jan suppressed an instant feeling of loss.

A twinge in her midriff brought her hand to her stomach.

"I took the feeding tube out yesterday," the doctor explained.

"Feeding tube!"

"My examinations revealed that you were malnourished." His voice filled with pride as he added, "You've gained ten pounds while you've been under my care."

"Thanks a whole hell of a lot," she muttered. Another question surfaced in her mind. "How is it we're able to understand each other?"

"My team and I implanted brain chips when you first arrived. We're actually speaking Terilian. Your brain's translating it into English."

If this wasn't some horribly fantastic dream, she was in deep shit. Unless she and the other women could convince the aliens otherwise, none of them would see Earth again. She'd never see her mother or brothers again, never see her girlfriends.

Or Gary. She wondered why the thought of never seeing Gary again didn't cause more than a tiny pang.

*Stay tough, Jan.* Folding her arms across her chest, she said, "So the mass kidnapping was successful. When does the mass rape take place?"

Concern filled his eyes. "Rape is impossible in our culture. When the Spring Running takes place, you Earthian females will joyfully accept your new husbands."

*Don't count on it.* "What is this Spring Running?"

He stood. "Don't concern yourself with that now. We'll speak more tomorrow." As he turned to go, he added, "Just tell the bed to return to the sleep position when you want to lie down again. And don't worry—you'll attract one of our high-status males with your great beauty."

\* \* \* \* \*

Delos frowned as he rode the shuttle back to his quarters. Two years without a mate had been difficult. Worse than difficult. Almost impossible.

Still, that didn't excuse his unprofessional behavior with Janis Stone. He hoped none of the council had been monitoring Sick Bay when he'd sat on her bed.

He'd been overwhelmingly tempted, determined to breathe in more of her aroma. The multi-layered scents of the new Brides had made it difficult to treat them. He remembered how Hannus, one of the orderlies, had fainted during Janis' brain-chip operation, overwhelmed by his hormonal response to her.

Delos sighed. He'd been fascinated by Janis' scent from his first day of studying her chemistry, administering the proper drugs to guide her through the Transition. She'd been an enticing medley of interesting aromas. Her hair had smelled different from her skin. Some of it was her, some an artificial overlay.

As the weeks passed, her natural scent predominated, a deep, woodsy smell that belonged to her alone. It brought back memories of his home planet, Teril. He recalled running through the forest as a youth, the sun dim through the mists and the green and red fronds brushing against his legs as he chased his brothers.

But most intoxicating of all was the distinctive aroma of her sex. He shivered, recalling how greatly her scent had intensified when he'd tested her orgasmic strength with the electronic stimulator. If he licked her, would that lovely skin between her breasts taste different from that smooth skin just above her female pelt?

His organ had hardened and lengthened while he spoke to her. Had she noticed? Probably not, since his tunic was loose and flowing. If only he could have her for his own, he would ask for nothing else in this life. He imagined her opening herself to him, the sweet, glistening folds ready for him to plunge into. She would scream with delight...

*Don't do this to yourself, Del. You know very well she can never be yours.*

## Chapter Two

The next time Jan woke, a large, gruff orderly named Hannus helped her out of bed. Leaning on his arm, she took tentative steps around the small room. Her legs felt rubbery, as though her muscles had disappeared.

Hannus brought her a meal on a tray—ten miniscule bowls, each filled with a different delicious food. Most of them tasted meaty, although one had a cornmeal consistency.

“Secondus Delos says to eat all you can. If you want more of anything, you have only to ask,” the orderly told her.

Thoughts of her diet flitted through her mind. *Hell, what does it matter now?* She finished everything on the tray.

Hannus gave her a clean tunic to wear. Much like Delos’, it was sleeveless, except that it was bright red and reached to her knees. Accompanying it were soft red shoes, somewhat like ballet slippers. “I don’t get tights?”

Hannus looked shocked. “Females never wear tights.”

He held up a mirror so that she could see herself. Jan blushed. Her large breasts were clearly visible through the sheer top, as well as the dark triangle of curls at the juncture of her thighs. She felt naked and exposed and her embarrassment was enhanced by the aide’s frankly appreciative glance.

“What happened to the clothes I had when I was brought here?” *Not that I want to run around in white satin...*

“In storage. Besides, Secondus Delos was right.” Hannus’ eyes glowed with enthusiasm. “This color enhances your unique beauty.” She felt as though he were standing too close as he took a deep breath. *Is he...smelling me?*

“The council is addressing the Brides in a few minutes,” he continued. “If I help you, can you walk fifty feet to the Great Hall?”

Excitement ran through her at the thought of seeing other women again. She held out her arm and he took it reverently, as though she were a queen.

They moved slowly through a long corridor. Jan narrowed her eyes to look at the walls, which showed twisted trees with red leaves and green and aqua ferns. If the illusion hadn’t ended with a plain violet ceiling, she would have almost imagined herself in a forest.

Most of the other Brides were already seated in the Great Hall when Jan came in. She stared at hundreds of faces, noting that all races of Earth were represented. The women wore sheer tunics in a glad rainbow of colors, from deepest blue to sunshine yellow to pale pink.

None of them were slender. Everyone she looked at was her size or slightly bigger. Could this possibly mean that the aliens prized large women?

The shrill sound of a thousand women chattering to each other filled the cavernous room and for a moment Jan had the impulse to put her hands over her ears.

Funny, she’d never noticed before that each woman in a crowd had her own particular scent.

Jan dropped gratefully onto a padded stool and looked up at the front of the room, where a row of aliens knelt on similar stools, murmuring to each other. Five of them wore gray. Their bodies were decorated with copper or silver—arm bracelets, ankle bracelets. Several of them wore necklaces.

At the far left, a little apart from the rest, Secundus Delos looked out toward the Brides. Clad only in a dark-green tunic and tights, he seemed younger than the other aliens. He caught her eye and smiled. Relieved to see a familiar face, Jan smiled back.

An earsplitting whistle sounded and one of the males in gray came to his feet. He was a tall, big-shouldered fellow with long black hair streaked with gray at the temples.

"Welcome, Brides. I am Primus Taddus of the Black-Striped Pelt. We're so glad you've joined us on the *Ecstasy of Generations* colonization ship."

*Like we had a choice?* Jan thought wryly.

"While I realize it's a shock for you to part from your families and friends, I'm sure that leaving your primitive, polluted planet will soon be seen as a blessing. In another year, we'll make planetfall. You'll be a vital part of our exciting colonization venture."

*Exciting – or dangerous?*

"We chose you as our Brides because you come from the same Forerunner race as our ancestors. We already share ninety-eight percent of the same genetics. In addition, we find you almost as beautiful as our own females.

"Most of you have already received explanations from your doctors but let me quickly review what's been done to you. The doctors have administered drugs designed to give you a complete cellular overhaul."

*What the hell?* Jan tensed.

"The changes are subtle but you are now much more like Terilian females." His cocky voice implied they'd been given a wonderful gift. "Your sense of smell is enhanced, as is your hearing. You'll find, in the weeks to come, greater muscular strength. Most importantly, you'll be able to bear healthy young for your destined husbands."

Ignoring the angry murmuring that swelled through the hall, Primus Taddus continued, "A little thought, a little reflection, will soon show you how lucky you are to be lifted out of your primitive lives and allowed to share our glorious Terilian heritage—"

Jan couldn't stand it any longer. Shooting to her feet, she ignored the dizziness that assailed her. "How dare you? How dare you speak as though we should be grateful? You kidnapped us! On Earth, that's considered a *crime*."



As if her outburst had set off a Roman candle, a hundred other women jumped to their feet.

"We don't want to bear your young!"

"Take us home, you bastards!"

"We'll never marry you!"

Delos rose lithely and went to speak to Taddus. The two males' conversation seemed to grow more angry by the second. Rising, Taddus stared threateningly into Delos' eyes. Delos leaned forward and made a chopping motion with his right hand.

Delos must have won the argument, for when the whistle sounded again, he stepped closer to the Brides to speak.

"Primus Taddus has made an inspiring speech but he left one thing out—how very badly we need you." Delos' voice, in contrast to Taddus', was filled with sorrow. "Without wives, our mission is doomed. We can't colonize a planet by ourselves, with males only."

"Then go back to your home planet!" a furious blonde shouted.

Delos turned his head slowly, his glance taking in all the Brides. "The council didn't want to reveal this to you but I'll tell you anyway. Humans can go for years without mating. Terilian males can't.

"We've been without wives for two years. We're at the end of our endurance. We cannot survive the four-year journey back to Teril. We'd all be dead before we arrived."

The furious whispers in the room ceased.

"Janis Stone said we committed a crime. We did—but only because our very survival is at stake. People will do almost anything to survive. This is true on Earth and true on Teril. Someday, perhaps you'll forgive us."

Jan was still angry but Delos' apologetic tone stirred something within her. Yes, she understood that they'd wanted to survive.

But forgive them? She wasn't so sure of that.

Delos continued, "In the meantime, we hope you'll find happiness in mating with us at the Spring Running. The cellular overhaul has made you respond to Terilian male pheromones. The Running is a joyous event in Terilian lives, a great pleasure that all anticipate."

Taddus stood again. "Enough, Delos! No more talk of sacred things."

Delos inclined his head and changed the subject. "I've heard questions as I tended you Brides in Sick Bay. Many asked if they could return to Earth. Although it would take only a year in space, forty years will have passed on Earth. So while it's possible, I don't think this is what any of you truly want."

A dismayed murmur broke out following his words.

*Forty years?* Her mother would be dead. Everyone she knew would be old.

Jan bit her lip to hold back the tears.

There would be no place for her or the rest of the Brides. Gary would have married someone else. No one would want her or need her.

"We need you," Delos concluded, "and we will cherish you as our wives, our dear partners. Brides, we'll leave you now to talk among yourselves. The oldest among you will act as the Brides' liaison to the Terilians." Turning his head, he gave Jan a significant look. "I'll meet with the Brides' liaison later."

Silently, Delos and the council filed out of the room. The women were left staring at each other. Many looked expectantly at Jan.

She needed to say the right thing. If she broke down, most of them would be sobbing in minutes.

Businesslike, that was it. "Okay, who's the oldest here?" Jan asked and called out her birthday. "Anyone older than that?"

No one was older than Jan's thirty-nine. As soon as that was determined, a thousand questions broke out. Waving her arms and raising her voice, Jan suggested

that the women form a line and ask their questions. Later, she would share their questions with Delos.

A tall black woman spoke first. "Are we going to do what they want? Or are we going to resist?"

"How can we resist?" someone else called out.

The black woman glared fiercely. "Kill ourselves!"

"We need a lot more information before we make that decision," Jan said. *And I for one am not ready to die.*

"They messed with our bodies!" a young woman with curly brown hair exclaimed. "My sense of smell's on overdrive! Have they told us everything about this 'cellular overhaul'?"

The third woman in line spoke. "Ladies, where's your sense of adventure? A new planet? What a trip!"

A murmur of approval rolled through the Hall, indicating that a large number of the Brides agreed with her comment.

Wishing she had a notepad, Jan tried to memorize everyone's questions. Hours passed as almost everyone in the room spoke. What were the Terilians' bodies like?

"I'm not fucking some guy with a tail," one of the Brides called out.

"Yeah and I want to get a look at their cocks," someone else commented.

"If they even *have* cocks!" a third chimed in. Many of the women had been awakened the same way as Jan.

"It was wonderful!" one woman declared, blushing. "That's the first time I've ever had an orgasm."

The women asked about the Transition, the new planet and what "marriage" meant to the Terilians. And what was the Spring Running?

A young woman with short hair said, "I don't have a question. I just want to say that I had breast cancer back on Earth. Doctor Delos says it's gone now."

Another woman spoke eagerly. "He cured my diabetes too! No more insulin shots!" So the aliens had done some good for them.

One of the women behind Jan began to sob.

Jan hesitated. *I don't know how to deal with people. I'm just a computer programmer, damn it.* Moving to the redhead, Jan awkwardly tried to comfort her by patting her shoulder. "I know it's hard," Jan said. "It's hard for everyone."

"But I was just about to get married!" The woman wiped tears with the back of her hand. "My wedding was all planned. I had the most beautiful white dress and...and the cake was ordered...and we'd put the deposit down for the band!"

"I know, honey, I'm in the same boat."

Another woman took over the comforting. "At least you were engaged," she told the redhead. "I never found a guy to marry. I worked as a wedding planner—but I never got to plan my own wedding!"

That gave Jan an idea. Perhaps she would mention it to Delos. A tiny shock of arousal went through her at the thought of him.

*What's wrong with me? He's an alien!*

The double doors slid open. Delos walked through with Taddus. The big primus touched the redhead's cheek. "Don't cry, pretty female. You'll soon have a husband who will love you dearly."

The redhead stared up at him, sniffing back her tears. Jan gazed at the young woman, startled. Was there desire in her eyes?

Jan's pulse quickened as Delos joined her. Why did his presence spark an instant awareness in her?

Perhaps because he'd been nearby when she experienced that superb orgasm. Her mind had somehow associated him with sexual pleasure. Maybe that was why she wanted to nestle closer to him. Close enough to feel his smooth skin rub against hers.

"Are you now the official liaison of the Brides?" he asked.

"Yes. Rigged that election, didn't you?"

"I knew you were the oldest," he said.

The impulse to touch him, to press her body against his, almost overwhelmed her.

His extraordinary blue eyes studied her face. "But I could have said, *Choose the wisest. Or the loveliest.* The result would have been the same."

Jan couldn't help herself. She took a step nearer. What would he do if she touched his hair?

Taddus gestured and the whistle for silence sounded. "Brides, I invite you to return to your cabins. You'll be called for another meeting in the Great Hall tomorrow. And let me just say how pleased and proud I am to have you all with us."

Jan thought, *Pompous ass.*

As the women left the Hall, Taddus came to Jan's side. "So you're the new liaison," he commented, taking her hand. He had a deep, dark odor that was faintly attractive but didn't stir her the same way Delos' scent did.

He raised her hand to his mouth and turned it palm upward. Was he going to kiss it?

His pink tongue darted out and he licked her palm. Jan gasped at the sensation, which reminded her of wet sandpaper. Despite herself, she trembled at the unusual feelings the gesture evoked within her.

The big male said, "Let me show you to your new cabin, my dear."

Delos took a step forward. "I believe that's *my* duty, Primus."

A low noise rumbled through the air. Jan blinked. Was the council member *growling* at the doctor?

The two males locked glances. Delos stood his ground.

"Go ahead, young Secundus," Taddus said at last. Turning back to Jan, his voice lowered. "Lovely One—be assured I'll find you at the Spring Running."

## Chapter Three

Jan's new quarters were small, eight by eight feet and seemed empty. Delos demonstrated the voice command that brought a computer console-table out of the wall. Drawers pulled out as well, containing several bright tunics. Another command and a large round bed opened above their heads. Jan frowned, wondering how she was supposed to get into it.

"Will I share this cabin with my husband, once I have one?"

Delos' eyes widened. "Live in the same room together, you mean? Of course not. People require privacy."

She tilted her head, looking at him. She kept picturing him naked on the bed, his eyes half-closed while she touched every inch of him. She'd never felt this way before—certainly not with Gary. "Why do I feel an irresistible urge to touch you?"

His startled eyes met hers for a moment, then he glanced away. "I thought you understood. The Transition has made you susceptible to Terilian male pheromones. All of us are exuding them to a great degree, this close to the Spring Running."

He was trying so hard to be scientific. Couldn't there be a simpler explanation—that she was attracted to him?

"But I didn't feel the urge when Taddus licked me." The memory gave her a nerve-jangling sensation unrelated to pleasure.

"What did you think of him?" She heard jealousy in his voice.

"Taddus made a speech. *You* spoke from your heart."

Delos seemed pleased. Gazing at him, she was distracted by the way the ends of his hair fell softly to his shoulders. "May I touch your hair?" *Your face, your body...*

"Go ahead."

As she drew near, the cocoa smell intensified. She wanted to rub her nipples against his chest. Lie beside him and entangle their legs.

She reached upward, running her palm down his hair. It was soft, like the fur of her tabby cat, back home. She wanted to stroke it again and again. She moved her hand slowly from the crown of his head all the way down, ending at his bare shoulder. Her palm caressed his shoulder and moved down his arm.

His eyes widened with apprehension and he took a step back. "When you touch me, I want to mate. Immediately."

"Why is that a problem? I thought we were brought here to become wives to males like you."

He turned away, breathing hard. The spicy odor in the room increased. She knew, with her newly enhanced senses, that he was struggling with intense desire.

"Yes." He spoke with difficulty. "But we swore—all of us—that no one would have intercourse until the Spring Running."

Disappointment shot through her, even as the impulse to touch him increased. She desperately needed to think about something else.

She looked around, searching for a more neutral subject. "How am I supposed to reach the bed?"

"Most of us like our beds near the ceiling. But you probably can't jump that high yet."

Before she realized what he intended, he scooped her into his arms. She shivered at the sudden intimacy, even as she wondered how a slender male like him could lift her so effortlessly. He crouched, then sprang into the air. In another moment, she was lying on the bed, Delos beside her.

Her heart raced from the leap. Even more disturbing was his proximity. She had to keep fighting the need to stroke her palms over his body.

"Can you all leap like that?" she asked.

"Yes. And you will too, once the cellular uptake is complete."

Jan raised her eyebrows. Now that she'd lived through it, she realized she'd enjoyed the sensational leap through the air.

There was a downside, though. Suppose the Brides decided to resist? If they eventually convinced the Terilians to take them back to Earth, they'd be freaks.

Her mind shying away from the disturbing thought, she bounced lightly on the bed. Unlike the hard hospital bed, this mattress felt malleable, almost as though there was jelly under the woven cover.

What would he do if she parted her thighs and stroked herself? Would he be shocked, or would he watch eagerly? She wondered why she felt such a strange need to tease him, to provoke him.

She'd better start working through the Brides' list of questions. "We're all curious about what you males look like naked."

His brow creased. "We're much like humans."

"Have you seen any of the Brides without clothing?" *Not that our tunics conceal much.*

"That's different—I'm a doctor."

"Well then, doctor, you shouldn't be embarrassed about bodies." She didn't want to reveal how interested she was in seeing his most private features, so she threw a challenge into her voice. "Or are you afraid to reveal what Terilian male anatomy looks like?"

Raising his chin, he knelt facing her and lifted his tunic over his head. Although Delos was slender, his body was muscular, from his shoulders and sculpted biceps to his firm abdomen and tapered waist.

"Your muscles are well developed." She fought the urge to run her hands over his contours. What would he do if she caressed his smooth chest? Licked his dark nipples? "How do you maintain that physique in space?"



"We're required to log in five hours of exercise out of every forty. Life will be difficult on our new planet for the first few years. It's essential to maintain our physical strength."

He turned. A two-inch width of fur, brown like his hair with variegated tawny spots, ran down the middle of his back and disappeared into his tights.

"Is that fur what you call your 'pelt'?" she asked.

"That's right." Remaining with his back to her, he raised up on his knees and pulled down his tights. His slightly rounded buttocks were firm and taut. The fur narrowed, ending at the crack of his ass.

No tail. Aside from his line of fur, his backside looked much like a human man's. One with a particularly attractive butt. She drew a quick breath as she imagined herself caressing those muscular cheeks.

He discarded his tights and turned. Her eyes were drawn to his cock, which stood long and straight against his stomach, much darker than his pale brown skin.

Instantly, her pussy went wet at the sight.

She stared at the head of his cock. Instead of the familiar mushroom-shape of humans, his cock had a long, cylindrical head that extended several inches back.

She strove for a detached tone. "I assume you're sexually aroused right now?"

"Yes. Most of us struggle with constant arousal, this close to the Spring Running." His tone, precise and scientific, was belied by his huge erection. Like her, he was trying to sound detached but Jan wasn't fooled.

"Isn't it painful to walk around like that?"

"It's been two years since our females died. Terilians weren't meant to go without mating for so long. The drugs help but only temporarily." He moved closer on the bed and put his hands on her shoulders. She shivered at his sensual touch. "And when I'm with you, your presence overrides the drugs."

She couldn't take her eyes off that fascinating cock. She wanted to touch it, feel the skin under her palm. Lick him and taste him as though she were starving and he was her first meal in days.

Delos moved his palms in circles, leaving a trail of tingling wildfire wherever he touched. Gary's hands had never thrilled her like this. Never before had she felt such intense desire, such a desperate need for coupling that transcended all common sense.

"I could spend days touching you," he said, his voice suddenly husky.

She forced herself to speak, when all she wanted to do was throw her head back and drink in his caresses. "Tell me about the Spring Running. The Brides are curious."

He frowned, momentarily pressing his hand to her lips. She was tempted to kiss his hand and suck his fingers into her mouth.

"I'm forbidden to speak of it. You'll be told what to do on the day itself."

She persisted, "But what happens that day will pair off Brides and husbands?"

"Yes."

"If you can—will you choose me?"

He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her against his chest. She sighed and put her arms around his waist. Somehow she'd known this was coming. And now that it had, it felt completely right.

His voice lowered. "My sole desire is to find you that day, then mate with you over and over until you scream with the pleasure I give you."

Arousal washed over her at his words. "And if that happens, does that make me your wife?" She pulled back, looking up into his face.

Sorrow darkened his expression and she turned cold inside.

"Taddus marked you for his own today. He will claim you as his Bride, don't doubt it. I'm a secundus, he is a primus. I must yield to him."

"And I have no choice in the matter?"

"That's not our way."

"Then how is that different from rape?" Jan demanded.

"Because on that day, your body won't resist him. During the Spring Running, our bodies crave sex the way our lungs crave air. He'll mate with you and you'll find great pleasure in it." Jan sensed that Delos was telling the truth but he looked down as though the words pained him.

"You can't know that for sure," she argued. "Maybe that's how it works with your females. But I'm from Earth. And if I don't like a guy, I don't mate with him. I kick him to the curb."

"The genetic overhaul is making you more like our females every day. Don't you have a saying on Earth, 'biology is destiny'?"

"Not in modern times it isn't," she retorted.

He frowned. "Are you always this sarcastic? Our females never spoke like this."

"Too bad you didn't kidnap some other species."

For a moment their gazes locked. Then Delos' mouth quirked up in a smile. "No, I'm happy with the way things worked out. Earth females are fascinating creatures. We're all counting the days until the Spring Running."

Jan took a deep breath. It didn't help to clear her head. His proximity made her feel dizzy and intoxicated. The longer he sat close to her, the more her arousal increased. Tempted to grasp him around the waist and pull him down on top of her, she dug her nails into her palm.

*Don't get carried away. He's an alien and a kidnapper. Even if he says they had to do it, even if you like him, what they did was wrong.*

*If you have to, let him give you pleasure. But don't get emotionally involved.*

"The Brides have questions about what you Terilians are like when you mate. You said intercourse is forbidden. But on Earth, we do many things to please each other aside from intercourse."

He gently cupped the side of her face. "I could talk about these matters for hours. But I'd rather show you." He gazed into her eyes, waiting for her answer.

"Then show me." Her voice shook with fear and anticipation.

"Lie on your back. If you think you'll enjoy it, I'll demonstrate a loving pleasure that husbands do for their wives."

Trembling, Jan stretched out on the bed. *I'm the guinea pig here. I'm going to let this stranger touch my body. He's not even a human man. He's an alien.*

*And I can hardly wait.*

Every breath flooded her with the scent of him, a scent that made her nipples tighten and her pussy swell with arousal. But she didn't want him to know. She didn't want to give him that much power over her.

With a mocking note in her voice, she said, "I guess you people don't believe in pillows."

Delos smiled. "Bed!" he commanded. "Make a pillow. And incline the female's back at a twenty degree angle."

The bed shifted, the mattress forming up underneath her so that her back was raised and a "pillow" form elevated her head.

"Much better." She licked her lips. Her heart pounded.

He leaned over her, passion blazing in those pale-blue eyes. "What have you done to me, Janis?" His voice was husky with emotion. "No matter how hard I try, I can't stop thinking about you. Even my dreams are filled with your scent."

"It's just biology, Delos."

"You think so?"

"You said it yourself."

He brought his face closer. She wondered if he would kiss her but instead he rubbed his cheek against hers. His scent filled her nostrils. She gasped as her pussy throbbed with sudden, desperate need.

His hand stroked slowly through her hair.

“Your ears are unusual,” he murmured. “So funny and round and hairless.” He took her right earlobe in his mouth and ran his tongue over it. Her stomach quivered as she enjoyed the slightly wet roughness. It wasn’t enough to hurt but enough to provide a pleasurable contrast as he sucked on her earlobe and then licked around the whorl of her ear. She threw her head back, breathing hard, positioning herself to give him easy access. She’d had lovers who’d kissed her ear before—she’d always adored the sensation—but no one had ever taken such leisurely time to lick, to suck, to taste.

He brushed her hair back from her face, his fingers tangling in the long strands. “Black hair like yours is highly prized by us. It’s partly what makes you so very beautiful.”

Would she ever have the nerve to tell him she wasn’t considered beautiful on Earth?

He buried his face against her chin and again his tongue caressed her as he licked his way down her neck. His tongue was soft and slow, taking long licks as though he savored a particularly delectable dessert. She closed her eyes in enjoyment, stretching her neck. A soft “Oh!” escaped her as he explored her right shoulder with his warm mouth and tongue. His hands moved sensually down her back.

She wanted to lie there for hours, melting under his fingers, thrilling to the gentle, teasing scrape of his tongue on her sensitized skin.

He switched to captivating soft nibbles, letting her feel just a hint of his teeth. Her pussy felt heavy, slick with liquid. Would he touch her there?

He’d talked about demonstrating loving pleasure. What did that mean to a Terilian? Did their females have orgasms like human women? Would he continue licking her until she expired from unfulfilled arousal? Or would he satisfy her?

Suppose she did something that shocked him or offended him. Something taboo.

“Janis—is something wrong?”

"I don't know what's expected, what's permitted."

He gazed into her eyes. The expression on his face was serious and concerned. "Don't worry. I've learned a great deal about human sexuality. Terilians and humans, we're much alike."

That was reassuring. And so far, everything he'd done had made her shudder with delight.

She wanted more – more licking, more touching. She wanted that lovely sandpaper tongue on her breasts.

He flicked the nape of her neck. She moaned.

"Am I pleasing you?" he asked.

"Yes!" She stared up at him, enjoying the dreamy, lust-filled expression on his face. "What about you?"

"When the plan was first proposed, I never imagined finding a female who smelled and tasted so wonderful. How will I ever bear to leave your bed?"

She didn't want to think about it either. "Let's just enjoy the moment." She touched his cheek, watching his eyes half-close in satisfaction.

She knew what she wanted and she was going to ask for it. He'd implied he wouldn't be offended. *So let's put it to the test.*

"Delos? Did your females have breasts like Earth women?"

"Yes but not so round."

"Did they like to be touched there?"

"With permission. Are you granting that to me?"

"Oh, yes." She arched her back and lifted her tunic.

## Chapter Four

Weeks ago, Delos had brain-linked with the ship's computer and absorbed millions of words uplinked from Earth computers about human anatomy. Intellectually, he knew what would sexually stimulate Janis. But would she really respond to a nonhuman?

He'd realized a year ago that his people wouldn't survive the journey without wives. After he'd made his report, the astrogation team went into overdrive, searching for planets with females who could fulfill the need to mate.

They'd all wanted to survive, to save their lives. They hadn't expected more than that.

They'd never thought to find enticing females who would stir their very souls.

Delos gazed down at the achingly beautiful human, entranced by her soft white globes tipped with dark pink circles. While he'd seen many of the Brides naked, it was one thing to treat them professionally, quite another to lie beside his chosen one in bed.

He'd been longing to touch her breasts, feel their softness, stroke those enticing nipples. But he'd held back, not wanting to startle her.

Now she'd told him she *wanted* his touch. Excitement raced through him.

He took her right breast in his hand, caressing the nipple with his thumb. She murmured deep in her throat and his organ stirred.

He slid down on the bed. Still toying with her right breast, he took her left breast in his mouth, savoring the warm, slightly salty taste of her skin. Flicking the tip of her nipple with his tongue, he growled with satisfaction. She gave out a little cry that excited him beyond bearing. He licked her nipple again while his thumb and forefinger rolled her other nipple between them.

"Yes. That's good," she gasped.

He closed his lips over her left breast and sucked, drawing her nipple into his mouth. It was hotter than the rest of her flesh and as he licked and teased, the tender flesh grew and lengthened. He raised his head, fascinated by the way it had doubled in size in a few moments. Her engorged nipple was as deeply pink as the berries on a *jorem* plant—and tastier.

"Are all human females as responsive as you?" he asked.

She stared back at him for a long moment. Confusion crossed her face. "I've always enjoyed sex...but I've never felt this way before." Her fingers slid into his hair, caressing his scalp. "You're not going to do this with anyone else?"

"Don't worry about that," he said fervently. He had the distinct feeling she'd already spoiled him for any other female. Enticing as some of the other Brides had seemed at first, now he knew he'd found his true mate.

And that would be a problem, if Taddus claimed her. *When* Taddus claimed her.

He didn't want to think about the big primus now. His only aim was to give Janis such pleasure that she'd never forget him.

He licked the soft skin between her breasts. "Don't stop," she gasped. She stroked his neck and shoulder, her fingers trailing desire wherever she touched. He shivered.

*Remember your vow. No one mates until the Spring Running.*

But he couldn't help imagining how it would ease him to plunge his throbbing penis into her slick channel.

*This is for her tonight, not for you.* But he'd never wanted to mate so badly before. Doubt shook him. Could he keep his vow?

He wanted to caress her female pelt until she parted her legs. He'd breathe deeply, inhaling more of her fragrant arousal. Then he'd rub the head of his organ against her labia. Would she moan? Beg him to mate with her? Nothing would feel better than that first hard, hot thrust.



*Stop thinking about mounting her. Concentrate on pleasing her.*

"Do you enjoy it when I suck your nipples?"

"Yes, Delos — more!"

He put his arm around her shoulders and turned her toward him. The bed shifted slightly to brace her in this new position. He closed his lips over her right breast, already swollen from the caress of his fingers and sucked hard. Her breathing changed.

She moved her hips restlessly. "Delos. Touch me."

He looked up from the tender flesh of her nipple long enough to give her a curious look. Wasn't that what he was doing?

She steered his fingers to her female pelt. He was eager to caress that part of her. Terilian females had a small curve of fur surrounding their sex that matched their back pelt. Janis' pelt was unique, a riot of tiny curls that matched the black hair on her head. He ran his fingers slowly through her curls, rewarded by her moan of approval.

She raised her knees and parted her legs. Exactly as he'd imagined. The intoxicating aroma of her arousal thrilled him. He desperately wanted to bury his face in her sex, breathe deeply, lap the sweet cream that was already flowing from her.

*Not too fast, Del. Don't frighten her.*

What beautiful legs she had...rounded knees, plump thighs. He stroked them, seduced by the softness of her skin. She whimpered as his hands moved upward, his fingers teasing the creases between her thighs and vagina.

Much like her nipples, her labia were bright pink and swollen — eager for his touch. Tentatively he brushed his hand lightly against her sex. She moaned, raising her hips wantonly as though begging to be mounted.

He caressed her slowly, his hand moving in a gentle rhythm that soon had her arching toward him with every stroke. Enjoying the hot wetness that drenched his fingers, he raised his hand to his mouth to savor the fascinating taste of her.

The words broke from his throat. "I wish I could mate with you."

Her fingers closed around the head of his erect organ. Growling with startled delight, he moved against her hand, knowing he couldn't achieve release from a caress but unable to stop himself. Her firm touch was both a delight and a torment. If only he could take her now. He'd give her a mounting she'd never forget—plunge his engorged organ into her over and over, a wild, passionate mating. The memory of it would flood her mind whenever she saw him or inhaled his scent.

But he knew what would happen to him if he broke his vow. The thought cooled him long enough to gently remove her hand.

"This is just for you," he said. "Let me give you pleasure."

"But you look like *you're* all ready."

"I've been ready for weeks." Ever since she'd appeared on the transport slab, her mass of black hair stark against her white garment, he'd ached for her. He remembered the way her dark eyelashes lay against her pink skin, her round breasts half-revealed by the low neckline of her garment. In the middle of directing his orderlies, he'd stopped and thought, *Mine*.

Her voice came low. "Are you sure we can't have sex?"

Surprise mingled with triumph. She *wanted* to mate with him.

"Not until the Spring Running." He leaned forward and rubbed his cheek against hers, marking her with his scent. "Beautiful Janis. Let me give you an orgasm."

"Yes. Keep touching me..."

He knew where the female human pleasure center resided—high above the vaginal opening, in the single clitoris. Quite unlike Terilian females, who had two. Conversely, many females didn't like being touched there directly.

He touched her vagina, stroking lightly, fondling the hot, wet opening. Watching her reaction closely, he smiled when she shifted on the bed, parting her legs farther. He continued his caresses, letting the back of his hand brush lightly against her clitoris with every stroke.

Her lovely sex was open and glistening. Inviting his organ inside. If only he were allowed, now would be the time to thrust inside her.

Would it be too much temptation to rub the head of his penis against her?

*Don't do it, Del. You'll never be able to stop.*

Instead he parted her labia, entering her with the tip of his finger.

She thrust her hips, trying to take more of his finger inside. He withdrew.

"Lie still," he ordered. He lowered his head and licked her navel, feeling her tremble. Holding her hips firmly in his hands, he laved his tongue over her stomach. She whimpered with need.

He cupped her mound in his hand, enjoying her heat, which increased even more when he squeezed lightly.

"Delos, stop teasing me." Her voice was edgy, ragged. "Really, I can't take any more!"

She was his now, his female. She lay open to him, awaiting pleasure.

Exquisitely slowly, he entered her with one finger, feeling her wet folds give way before his invasion. Throwing her head back, she let out a cry. He pushed in farther, sighing with satisfaction when her inner muscles clenched around his finger.

Leaning closer, he whispered, "Is that what you want?"

She gasped, "Yes! More!"

He drew his finger in and out, wishing it were his organ that traveled back and forth in her clinging pink channel, stroking and milking him.

"Delos! Please!"

He added another finger and moved his hand faster. Her cries increased, a frantic note in her voice. She stared up at the ceiling, panting, jerking her hips every time his fingers plunged inside. He gazed down at her, fascinated with the enraptured expression on her face.

Her cheeks were flushed, her lips pink and parted. She'd never seemed more beautiful. His eyes went out of focus as he imagined the day of the Spring Running. Her delighted cries at his powerful thrusts...the way she would spur him on, begging to be mounted again and again...

"Oh! So good!"

"Come for me, beautiful one. Take your pleasure." He thrust deep with his fingers. She wriggled hard against his hand while he rubbed his thumb against her swollen clitoris. She screamed and her vagina spasmed. Groaning triumphantly, he felt her strong muscles pulse around his hand over and over.

When the day came and he mounted her at last, she would give him his full release. He was sure of it. And his organ would provide her with the greatest joy she had ever known.

He thrust more slowly now. He still felt her opening and closing around his fingers but less frequently, less strongly. He moved his hand against her wetness and took her breast in his mouth, nibbling her erect nipple. Trembling, shaking, she pulsed around his fingers again.

At last she lay still. She turned her head and looked at him. "Delos. That was wonderful."

"That was just the beginning. At the Spring Running, I'll take you over and over, give you orgasm after orgasm, until you barely remember your own name."

Her eyes widened.

Withdrawing his hand, he gathered her against his chest, his chin resting on the top of her head. She was so soft, so warm. Her hand stole into his and held it. He felt his heart turn over in his chest.

*Mine.*

*Until Taddus claims her.*

*No. Mine.*

She stirred. "Delos? Is something wrong?"

He tightened his hold. "Nothing's wrong. Sleep now."

She yawned. "Will you sleep too?"

Hesitating, he said, "I'll stay if you wish." His wife had been very private, even for a Terilian, never wanting to share the bed after mating. He wasn't used to sleeping beside a female.

"Stay if you *want* to stay," she shot back.

He had no desire to leave her. And he knew as soon as he returned to his own cabin, the council would contact him, demanding a report. Had Janis Stone been receptive? In his opinion, would the human females accept their mates at the Spring Running? Most importantly, would they orgasm strongly enough to draw release from the males?

*Let them wait.* "I'll stay," he whispered, closing his eyes.

Their survival depended on his answers. But at this moment, all he cared about was Janis. And all he could think about was how much he wanted to keep her for his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jan woke with the feeling that hours had passed. Delos was still with her, turned on his side facing her. His eyelids twitched as he dreamed.

How strange that she'd been able to fall into a restful sleep beside this alien male. That she'd let him touch her pussy, fuck her with his skillful fingers. That he'd said, *Come for me* and she had.

He was everything she'd found lacking in Gary. Handsome to look at. Strong and gentle at the same time. With hands and a mouth that felt magical on her skin.

Drawing nearer, she kissed him. He sighed but didn't wake. She kissed him again, darting her tongue between his lips.

He rolled onto his back. His eyes flew open and focused on her. "What did you do to my mouth?" he demanded.

She smiled. "I kissed you. Don't Terilians kiss?"

"No. Mouth to skin is normal. Mouth to mouth seems very strange."

Jan raised her brows. "This shouldn't be a one-way street. Everything can't be the Terilian way."

"But ours is the advanced culture."

"Now you sound like Taddus."

"I apologize," he said instantly.

She propped herself on one elbow, gazing down into his beautiful, pale blue eyes. Breathing deeply, she took in his scent. All she wanted was to feel his sensual hands on her again.

What was wrong with her? She had to stay in control here. She had a duty to the rest of the Brides.

"Listen, Delos. Many times on Earth, two different cultures have come together. Not always successfully. When it works, it's because both cultures are willing to be...flexible. Learn from each other."

"I don't know what the other males will think."

"The Brides will like it."

He reached up, pulling her closer. "All right. Teach me how to kiss."

A tiny flame glowed inside her. He'd listened to her.

"I'll press my lips to yours and you press back. Then we'll open our mouths and let our tongues stroke each other."

The crease in his brow revealed this troubled him. But when she put her mouth over his, caressing his lips lightly, he responded, moving his mouth under hers.

Then she drew her tongue across his and he jerked, startled. She persisted, exploring the sweet cave of his mouth, running her tongue over his teeth. His curved fangs made kissing him a unique experience.

Caressing the side of his face, she slid her tongue in and out of his mouth. She was thrilled when he did the same. Their tongues dodged and encountered, glided and teased.

He flipped them so that she was lying on her back and he was above her. Kneeling between her thighs, he lowered his head and took her mouth, thrusting his tongue almost as though it were his cock.

Jan's breathing quickened. "You learn fast."

"I've absorbed much information about human ways. It only comes to mind when I need it." He kissed her again, thoroughly exploring her mouth, then sucking on her tongue. Jan shifted her hips restlessly.

"That arouses you?" he asked.

She couldn't deny it. Her pussy was wet and throbbing. "Yes. Do you like kissing?"

"It's unusual, but I think I do. Almost as much as I like licking you all over." Slowly he moved down her body, licking and sucking her skin. He spent a long time teasing her nipples, rolling and flicking them with his tongue, then soothing them with gentle sucking. An ache of wanting spread through her pussy. Every time his mouth touched her breasts, she felt flames lick her core.

He moved down, his tongue darting into her navel. Ripples of pleasure spread through her. Her nipples tingled and burned where his rough tongue had touched them. Her hot channel yearned to be filled with his big cock.

"Ready for more pleasure?" he murmured.

"Yes," she groaned in reply. "Please, Delos."

He spread her thighs apart, caressing the soft skin with his hands, then buried his face in her pussy. Suddenly panicked, she asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Lick you until you have an orgasm."

She shivered, excited by his words. But she couldn't help asking, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

He opened her labia with his thumbs. "Oh, I think so." She smiled at the confidence in his voice. He lowered his head again and gave her a long lick all the way up her labia to her clit. She gasped and opened her legs farther as he did the same on the other side.

*Yes, he knows exactly what he's doing.*

Wetness leaked from her hot, swollen channel as his tongue darted and danced over her pussy, teasing the opening, then lingering on her clit just long enough to make her crave more.

As each touch of his tongue thrilled her, she felt herself opening to him, anticipating the next contact. There was nothing else like this. Delos was doing it exactly right, exactly the way she liked and she wanted it to last forever. Every stroke of his tongue was heavenly.

She'd never been so wet in her life, never needed an orgasm so intensely. She raised her hips, trying to get more of his wonderful mouth, his pleasure-giving tongue.

He swirled around her clit and she cried out, arching up. She would have pleaded for more but she'd forgotten how to speak. She wanted to stay like this, hovering on the brink of coming, experiencing shudders of delight every time he licked her.

His mouth fastened over her clit, sucking it gently. At the same moment, he entered her hot, swollen channel with his thumb. The two sensations at once overwhelmed her, pushing her into strong spasms of incredible pleasure. Her hips bucked against his mouth. He growled deep in his throat, then his tongue swirled over her clit again and again as he fucked her with his thumb. Waves of delight rolled through her. She thrashed against him, unable to control herself, unable to stop the high keening issuing from her throat.

She drew deep breaths as her orgasm slowly receded. Finally she lowered her knees, still feeling the pulsing, ebbing waves. He moved to lie at her side, stroking her breasts.



"I've never felt this way before," Delos said. "If I were your husband, I'd do that for you every day. Sometimes I'd give you an orgasm that way and other times I'd make you wait until I mounted you."

*Typical male exaggeration. "I'm sure you wouldn't want to do it every day."*

His brows rose in surprise. "Of course I would. Nothing's more healthy. We have a saying, 'An orgasm a day keeps the doctor away'."

She put her arms around his waist. "But I don't want to keep the doctor away. I want to keep the doctor close." This near to him, she was very aware of his erect cock against her body. "Delos? Let me do something for you now." Tentatively, she stroked his long shaft.

He gazed at her, a crease between his brows. "I can't achieve release like that." He lifted her hand away from him. "Females are lucky—they can seek pleasure so many different ways. But for males, there is one method only. His mate's orgasmic contractions trigger the male's release."

Jan drew in a quick breath, awestruck. No wonder Delos was so skilled in bed.

Among the Terilians, there'd never be a male who'd take his pleasure and then roll over and go to sleep, leaving his wife unsatisfied.

"You can't even masturbate?"

"Females can. Males cannot." His voice was rueful. "Thus our dilemma. Do you see why we need you so badly? Not only for offspring, for companionship, for your lovely softness." Lying against him, she felt him take a deep breath. "Terilians can no more survive without sex than humans can live without food. Without the release of mating, we'll die."

"Don't talk about dying," she whispered.

He stroked her body slowly, not in a sexual way now but lovingly. As though he cared about her. The way she'd come to care for him.

*Damn it, Jan! What a fool you are. Delos says the primus will claim you. Why fall for someone you can't have?*

How could she help it? Delos was so caring, so handsome, so sexually pleasing.

To distract herself, she asked questions about Terilian culture, about the planet they would colonize, about what marriage meant to the males on the ship. He answered in detail and, she thought, frankly and openly.

Finally he asked a question of his own. "Do you think the Brides will resist? Or will they agree to be our wives?"

She sighed. She'd been thinking about this and hadn't yet reached a conclusion. "I don't know."

"What do you feel, in your own heart? Do you want to return to Earth?"

"Forty years later? When most of the people I knew will be gone?" She shook her head. "No, I have no desire to go back. Especially since you and the other doctors changed us. If we went back to Earth, we'd be different from all other women. That was wrong, Delos. You should have asked our permission."

"The council made that decision. And it's to your benefit. I truly think you'll enjoy having claws."

## Chapter Five

Jan pulled out of his arms and sat upright on the bed. "What are you talking about? Taddus never mentioned *claws*."

Delos sat up too. "Humans are weak and defenseless. We thought you'd better have weapons like the rest of us, especially when facing life on the new planet." He raised his eyebrows. "From what I understand, there's a lot of crime on Earth. Pretend I'm a criminal coming at you." He growled and lunged at her.

Instinctively she raised her hands up, going for his eyes. Inch-long claws shot out from underneath her fingernails. Jan gasped.

Delos caught her wrists in his hands. She stared into his eyes and he released her.

She brought her hands up to her face. Her fingers shook as she gazed at these new additions to her body.

"How do I put them away?" Her voice quavered.

"They'll retract once your body understands you don't need them right now."

*Claws*. It seemed so odd to suddenly have claws.

"Did you notice the rough strips of material on the doorway?" he asked. "You can sharpen your claws there. Always keep them sharp. Dull claws are slovenly."

Her claws had a pearly sheen. Perhaps they were rather...attractive.

And she could see how they might be useful. "Show me yours, Delos."

He held up his hands. As fast as ten switchblades, his claws extended—two inches long, shiny and as spotlessly clean and sharp as surgical knives.

Her brows rose. "Wow. And I let you touch me with those hands?"

Noiselessly, his claws retracted. "Janis!" He pulled her into his embrace. "A sane male *can't* hurt a female with his claws. It's one of our strongest taboos. If a male goes feral and hurts a female, all other males hunt him down and kill him."

"That's good to hear—I guess. Does it happen often?"

"No. Much less often than on Earth." He stroked her skin soothingly. "I know how frequently 'domestic violence' is a problem among humans. It's extremely rare among Terilians. Tell the Brides—perhaps it will help reconcile them to their new destinies."

She tilted her head. "Delos, I thought of something else—another way to help everyone adjust. After the Spring Running, when everyone pairs up? Is there some kind of ceremony to mark the occasion?"

"A ceremony?" He didn't seem to know what she meant. "Mated couples return in pairs, bound to each other by scent and cord. Why would a ceremony be necessary?"

She gave him an exasperated look. "What did I say earlier about sharing our cultures? I have a way to make all this more palatable for the Brides."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day, Jan and all the other women were served First Meal in the Great Hall. The Brides were given a ship's schedule, which Jan studied with some surprise. The Terilian days were long—twenty-eight hours of seventy-two minutes each—but they were broken into more meals and sleep-times than human days.

Days were divided into six meals, two nap periods and two work periods. However, Terilians were required to work only four days out of each eight-day week. Jan wondered if this would be the standard operating procedure when they arrived at the new planet, which would presumably require a heavier work schedule.

After they ate delicious yellow berries and drank a spicy hot beverage, Jan rose and spoke to the other women, telling them everything she'd learned from Delos.

“Marriage is a committed pair-bonding until the next Spring Running. If we mate with them, most of us will have babies by the time we land on the new planet. Three or four babies, actually, because Terilian females conceive in multiples and so will we.”

Many of the women in the room looked horrified. Jan continued, “But Terilian young grow up much faster than human children. By the age of six months, they’re talking and dressing themselves. By the age of twelve, they’re teenagers, learning their professions. Secondus Delos is only twenty-eight years old but he’s been a doctor for the last ten years.”

“Don’t they have birth control?” a dark-haired woman demanded.

Jan wrinkled her brow, wishing she’d been able to make a PowerPoint presentation. This was a lot for everyone to take in.

“Husbands and wives can mate whenever they want—just like humans—but wives don’t get pregnant while they have children to tend. When the children reach the age of twelve and leave to learn their professions, another Spring Running is held. At that time, mated couples can stay together—or choose new mates. And the wives will conceive again.”

She went on to tell them about Terilian male anatomy.

The other women were still waiting expectantly. *I have to tell them everything. They must have all the facts.*

She’d been a computer programmer. A solitary one who’d had few boyfriends until Gary. She wasn’t used to speaking of intimate details.

*This is different. You’re their liaison. Tell them what it was like with Delos.*

The Hall was utterly hushed as she spoke about what they’d done together in bed.

Beth, the redheaded woman who had cried at the first meeting, addressed Jan when she finished. “So the doctor is nice. Maybe the rest of them are brutes!”

Jan explained how the males couldn’t achieve orgasm without a female. “I think—I think if we mate with them, we’ll enjoy it.” *The rest of you will, anyway.*

If only she could be Delos' wife. But it seemed that if Taddus wanted her, he had first choice.

It wasn't fair. All her life she'd wanted to be beautiful. In this culture she was but it was working against her.

The women seemed interested.

"I get to come first? Always?"

"They can't jack off?"

"You *sure* they don't have tails?"

Jan answered everything she could. Finally, Beth spoke again. "I don't care! They made me miss my wedding! Now I'll never have one!"

Jan drew a deep breath. "Secondus Delos thinks we can do something about that."

\* \* \* \* \*

"The Brides want *what*?" Primus Taddus demanded.

"They want a ceremony to celebrate the marriages." Raising his brows, Delos added, "And if you ever want to be happily mated, Primus, I think we'd better do what they want."

Primus Asher linked with the handheld computer Delos had given him, then passed it to Primus Goldus. "But Delos! How can we grow flowers in time? And we don't have any horses on shipboard!"

Goldus chimed in worriedly, "There are no children aboard to carry a ring on a pillow. And I don't understand this part about *garters*."

"I downloaded samples from many different human cultures," Delos said quickly. "I don't think the details are important. The Brides expect festivities. Music—and a feast."

"Ridiculous," snorted Primus Bardus. "You want us to put all these resources into a *party*? Look at this estimate for computer time!"

"I want us to put our resources into *making our Brides happy*," Delos retorted. "Let me remind you, if they resist us, we won't have a good Spring Running."

"How can they resist our pheromones?" Asher asked.

"The human females are strong-minded," Delos answered. "If they decide to resist, I can't guarantee a happy outcome, pheromones or not."

"Why should we give these primitives the upper hand?"

"True, their culture is not as advanced as ours. But the human females are little different from Terilian females." Sighing inwardly, Delos wondered why they were refusing to see what he realized so clearly. "You've all been married. I've been married. Did it ever do us any good to oppose something our wives really wanted?"

All fell silent. Asher grimaced down at the handheld computer. Bardus cleared his throat. Goldus rolled his eyes.

Finally, Hirdos said, "Well...perhaps you know best. I vote for the ceremony."

Eventually the vote came down to four to one, with only Taddus voting against the others. Delos could hardly wait to tell Janis that her plan would be followed.

"A moment of your time," Taddus said as the other council members departed. The big primus held up his right hand and extended his claws. "You're going to Janis now, aren't you?"

"I need to tell her about the council's decision."

Taddus took him by the shoulder. Delos stood rooted, trying to ignore the pain as long claws bit into his flesh.

"I can't stop you from mounting her at the Spring Running. But don't forget whose mate she'll be."

Delos stared into Taddus' yellow eyes. "You can claim her. But you'll never have her heart."

"You're naïve, young Secundus. Females love males with power."

"Janis isn't like that!"

"She'll forget all about you once I've taken her a few dozen times." Taddus brought his face closer. "Is she as ripe and juicy as she looks? Have you licked the sweet cream from her sex?"

Sweat trickled down Delos' face from the pain in his shoulder. He trembled with the effort of controlling himself. Losing the battle, he extended his claws.

"Will you raise your claws to me?" Taddus whispered. "You know our law."

Gritting his teeth, Delos forced his claws back inside.

"I didn't *think* you wanted to be gelded by the council." Taddus rubbed his cheek against Delos'. A growl escaped Delos at the insult.

Taddus smirked. "Go to her now, with my scent on you." Laughing, he left the council chamber.

\* \* \* \* \*

Delos found Janis in the Great Hall, sharing Third Meal with the rest of the Brides. He located a free stool and pulled it up beside her.

"Afternoon greetings, Dr. Delos," she said coolly, as if they were mere acquaintances. As though she'd never writhed under his mouth in the throes of an orgasm.

"The same to you, Janis Stone," he answered with formal politeness, longing to do something that would establish her as his own in front of everyone present.

He gave the rest of the Brides a general smile. Many of them had been his patients and would be again, once they conceived. He couldn't help noticing that some gave him covertly interested glances and he wondered what Janis had been saying about him.

Did a male ever know what females discussed when no males were present?

The Brides had been served a great delicacy—*tregarth* shoots—but apparently no one had demonstrated how to eat them. They were chewing on the hard ends of the stalks, which were edible but bitter.

"Is there some trick to eating these?" Jan asked him.



He showed her how to hold the stalk in her left palm, extend the claw on her right forefinger and run the sharp edge along the stalk to release the thick white cream within.

"Scoop it out with your finger."

She gave him a doubtful look but did as he'd instructed, lifting a dollop of cream to her mouth and licking it. Her face changed. "That's delicious!"

The other Brides were eager to experiment. Soon they were opening the stalks, some successfully, some awkwardly. Cutting too deeply brought great gobs of the cream dripping out, provoking little shrieks from Brides with stained tunics.

"Are you hungry?" Jan asked him.

*Only for you.* "I had Second Meal," he said, not really an answer.

Looking into his eyes, she skimmed her finger through the cream, then held it to his lips. "Have some."

His gaze never left hers as he grasped her wrist and sucked her finger slowly into his mouth. The oozing sweetness invaded his senses, along with the wonderful taste of Janis' skin. His tongue laved her long finger, his lips caressing her flesh. He teased the juncture between her second and third fingers with short, quick strokes. She gave him a wide-eyed look and repossessed her finger.

He wanted to talk to her apart from all the other Brides. "Would you like to see more of the ship?"

She agreed to that and they left together. As soon as they reached the corridor, she turned to him. "Did you speak to the council about the marriage ceremony?"

"Yes." He couldn't wait to touch her. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Give me a kiss first, then I'll tell you what they said."

She smiled. "They must have agreed to my plan. You wouldn't tease me if it were bad news." She raised her face and parted her lips.

The sweetness of their kiss almost broke his heart. *Taddus will never kiss her like this.* He recalled how he'd told the council about this fascinating pre-mating technique. Taddus had sneered and declared it perverted.

*The primus will never understand her. He'll mate with her but he won't care about her the way I do.*

His tongue stroked hers as their lips melded together. The kiss turned more sensual, more urgent. Heat built in his loins when he felt her breasts pressing into him.

"Now tell me," she demanded when their lips finally parted.

For a moment he couldn't remember what they'd been talking about. All he wanted was to take her into a cabin—any cabin—and mate with her. Or, since that wasn't possible, pleasure her again with his hands and mouth.

"The marriage ceremony?" she reminded him.

"Oh, yes—the ceremony. The council agreed to it."

"I'm so glad. Thank you!" Putting her hand on his shoulder, she gave him a quick kiss. "Were they hard to persuade?"

He didn't say that her husband-to-be was the only council member who had voted against her plan. Why tell her something that would surely make her unhappy?

"They agreed to please their Brides. I'll show you how to work with the computer to order what you want. I'll have to approve everything."

She made a face. "I hope you're going to be reasonable."

"If not, I'm sure I can be cajoled."

"We're a lot of trouble to you, aren't we? Are you sorry you volunteered to be the Brides' liaison?" she asked.

His lips twitched as he recalled what he'd gone through to secure the appointment—the favors he'd called in, the politicking he'd done. "It's a lot of extra work but I don't mind it," he said, keeping his voice serious.

"Why do you smell so different today?" Janis asked as they continued down the corridor.

"I added an artificial layer, like human males wear. It smells like *zolicia* leaves," Delos said. *At least it covers Taddus' foul odor.*

She wrinkled her nose. "I prefer your natural scent."

"Thank you." No doubt she was unaware of it but she'd just paid him one of the highest compliments a female could give a male. "Your scent pleases me too," he said. "Especially when you're aroused."

A tinge of color suddenly flamed in her pale cheeks. Fascinated, he stopped and lifted her chin, the better to observe the phenomenon. "How did you do that?"

"What?"

"The lovely pink in your cheeks."

She put her palms to her face. "I must have blushed when you made that sexual remark."

He lowered his voice. "So if I said I like the way your nipples swell when I suck them, you might blush again?"

She turned away but not quickly enough. He saw the enchanting pink rise through her face. "Let's keep walking," she said. "I thought you were going to show me the ship."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jan was amazed at the sheer size of *Ecstasy of Generations*. She'd gone on a singles cruise once—and had no luck—but this ship seemed to be much larger than that ocean-traveling Earth vessel.

Delos explained, "We recycle everything we can but some of it's inevitably lost to waste. There are only two stops between Teril and Gazeem, our new planet. So we have to carry or grow all of our food for the seven-year voyage."

"Gazeem?" It was the first time she'd heard the name of the planet they'd be colonizing.

"It's named after Primus Taddus' father. He was one of our greatest explorers."

As they took the shuttle to the shopping level of the ship, Jan asked, "Are your parents still alive?"

"My mother's on Teril." He looked out the window as the corridors flashed by. "My father was on the ship. He was one of those who died."

Jan knew him well enough now to read his expression. He was trying to keep his face blank but she sensed his sorrow. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice soft. "I lost my father a year ago. It's very difficult."

"The illness took my father, my brother, their wives, two of my sisters and my wife." He kept his face turned toward the window. "It's the same for all of us. Most were traveling in family groups. Almost everyone lost a father, a brother. Some of us had our young with us...all succumbed to the illness. And every female died as well."

His hands lay on his knees, the knuckles white. Tentatively she put her hand over his. His fingers gripped hers.

Concerned mainly with the kidnapping of her own kind, she hadn't thought much about the illness that had killed so many Terilians. Now, suddenly, it seemed personal. She tried to imagine going on a cruise with her whole family and losing them all at once. Would she have even wanted to go on living?

His voice was much lower as he added, "It was a hard time to be a doctor. They kept dying. No matter what I did, they died."

"Were you sick too?"

"No one escaped the illness. There were days I couldn't work. Couldn't leave my bed..." He looked down at their entwined hands, his brow creasing.

"On Earth, we have a name for what you're feeling. It's called survivor's guilt," Jan said. "I'm sure you did everything possible."

"Part of me knows that," he said quietly. "Part of me thinks I should have done more."

"I'm glad you lived."

He squeezed her hand. "I am too – now."

The shuttle halted. Delos kept hold of her hand as he led her to the corridor of shops.

Unlike Earth shops, with their brightly lit windows filled with merchandise, these stores consisted of a discreet length of plain gray corridor with small entrances every ten or twenty feet. Jan drew near and read the tiny sign, "Joyous Adornment. Restricted to primuses only."

"I can read this!" she exclaimed.

Delos took on a smug expression. "You don't think I'd have fitted you with an inferior brain chip, do you? You've gained both spoken and written language." He guided her to a tiny viewing window at eye level. "Look here to preview the merchandise."

She peered in at a lovely black tunic. The draped material was caught up on each shoulder by a decorative copper button. As Jan watched, the tunic turned slowly, showing the graceful folds of the front and back. When the rotation completed, the picture changed. Now she viewed herself wearing the garment.

As always, black was slimming. Jan said, "I wouldn't mind having a tunic like that."

Delos took a quick look. "Under our sumptuary laws, only primuses are permitted to wear gray or black." As they went to the next shop, he added, "Of course, you'll be a primus's wife. You'll be able to shop anywhere you want."

She looked up at him, caught by the pain and bitterness in his tone.

"I have to keep reminding myself," he told her, his voice grim. "I don't dare imagine that you could be mine permanently."

“Isn’t there any way that we can be together?”

He looked into her eyes for a long moment. She felt sure he was going to tell her something. Then he said, “The primuses have first choice. In everything.”

Why did she have the feeling he’d almost said something quite different?

## Chapter Six

Delos gave her an appraising look. "You're probably not ready to do the jumps between floors. We'll use the elevator."

He took her to the recreation and exercise floor. Jan imagined the floor would be like a health club on Earth but it seemed that Terilians did not care for mindless, repetitive exercise. Many of their exercise routines engaged the mind as well as the body.

He showed her a large variety of virtual-reality games, usually played wearing full-body suits. Some of them were performed in low-gravity chambers, which looked especially entertaining.

Other games were played in large groups. Delos took her to an observation deck where they watched fifteen primuses, formed into three teams, play something that resembled "capture the flag".

"Do you ever play that?" Jan asked.

"The Medical Corps has four teams. I'm the captain of the doctors' team."

"Because you're the best player?"

"I'm not the best player." He grinned. "But I *am* the best strategist."

"What other games do you like?"

Delos led her to a small room that he said was a ball court. As Jan watched from an upper balcony, Delos stood in the center of the court, unsheathed his claws and said, "Ready!" Small, fluffy balls in various colors began to rain down from the ceiling. Spinning, turning, leaping, Delos caught them with his claws. A scoreboard on the far wall changed rapidly. "If I catch a blue one it counts against me, unless the lights are blinking," he called up to her, not pausing in his quick movements.

The game looked like fun but when he asked if she wanted to try it, Jan declined. She'd never been athletic and didn't want him to see how badly she'd do. Perhaps she would try it on her own, later.

He showed her sparring pits where males wearing gloves tipped with rubber claws fought each other. Jan couldn't figure out the rules as she watched two males in a free-for-all that combined wrestling, clawing and body blows, sometimes standing, sometimes rolling on the ground.

Jan didn't care for either boxing or wrestling on Earth but the sparring held her interest because it was so quick and graceful. The participants were like two dancers who had rehearsed with each other often and could anticipate the next movement.

Delos watched intently. Jan, startled, saw that his claws were extended. Somehow she'd never imagined the doctor as *dangerous* before.

"Good one!" he exclaimed as one male clawed the other's face. "That would've taken an eye in a real fight."

Jan shuddered. "Do you ever do that?"

"Not for real – but I spar with Hannus once a week."

She remembered the orderly who had helped her walk around the hospital room. "Hannus! He's twice your size."

Delos gave her a wicked grin. "Yes but I'm much faster."

As they left the sparring area, Jan saw a glass bulb on a silver stand, filled with tiny, multicolored spheres. Surely the Terilians hadn't developed human-style gumball machines. "What's this?"

"I'll buy a couple," Delos answered, waving his palm in front of the stand. A light came on briefly, then blue and gold spheres dropped from the machine. He handed her the blue one. "They're memory balls. Twist open and sniff."

Watching how the gold sphere separated under his grip, she followed his lead. The pungent odor of Gary's musky aftershave filled the room. The present seemed to fade



away. Gary's beige and leather living room appeared in front of her eyes. Jan heard herself saying, "I'm just startled. We've only been on—what is it, six dates? I had no idea you felt like that about me."

Gary smiled. "I wouldn't waste my time going on all those dates with a woman who didn't interest me. Besides, we've worked together for two years. I know you're punctual, conscientious and an excellent programmer."

She laughed. "Are you looking for a wife—or a business partner?"

"Those traits form a sound basis for a good marriage," Gary answered earnestly. One of his faults, Jan had always thought, was that he lacked a sense of humor. "The other thing is, I don't want children. I figure at your age, you don't either."

She'd been about to protest, to say that she was only thirty-nine, when he took a small blue box out of his pocket. "Janis, will you marry me?"

This was what she'd waited for all her life, ever since she'd been a little girl playing "getting married" with one of her mother's lace curtains for a veil. "Yes," she breathed, leaning forward to see the small diamond. He gave her a quick peck on the mouth as the past faded...

"Did it work?" Delos asked her. His eyes were concerned as he looked into her face.

"Maybe too well."

He took her hand. His warm grip was comforting. "Not all memories are good ones."

Strange, she hadn't realized how very unromantic Gary's proposal had been until she relived it. The thought seemed to leave a bad taste in her mouth. "What memory did you experience?"

"A conversation with my wife." A crease appeared on his brow.

"Do you miss her?" Jan tried but couldn't keep the jealousy out of her voice.

"I did." He sighed. "It's been a long two years. We never dreamed we'd be trapped in this metal shell without our mates." He fell silent as they went down a long corridor.

"Where are we going now?" Jan asked after they'd walked for awhile without speaking.

"I want to show you the maze room," he said.

A hologram outside the door of the maze room showed the day's prize, a gold ankle bracelet. "We'll try this together," Delos said. "I'd like you to wear that." He rubbed his cheek against hers.

"You may as well forget it right now. I'm terrible at games."

"We'll see." The door closed behind them. "Wait for a moment until our eyes adjust."

She almost asked him tartly how they were expected to see in the dark. To her surprise, she began to make out dim shapes in the curtain of black that draped the room.

"The prize is somewhere in the center of the room but we can't go there directly," he explained. "If we choose the wrong path, we'll be dumped out of the maze."

He walked forward, leading her by the hand. Suddenly the ground slid beneath her feet. Jan almost fell but Delos steadied her. "Careful! We'll go slowly."

She breathed a sigh of relief when he put his arm around her waist, guiding her over the shifting ground.

"Stop!" he warned her. She looked down. The ground had ended, leaving them on the edge of a void.

"What now?" she asked.

"We wait."

She heard a soft sound as something approached them. A hovering platform drew near then stopped while it was five feet away.

"Now we're going to jump," he said.

"You're kidding, right?"

"You can do it. You're Terilian now."

She knew she still looked doubtful. He grinned. "I should know—I'm your doctor. I'll count to four and we'll leap."

He counted down and they jumped. To Jan's surprise, her legs were stronger than they'd ever been. The short leap was effortless. She landed on the platform with a foot to spare.

She clutched Delos' waist as the platform rose through the air. It took them to a dark area where they had to proceed single file.

"I'm not sure I like this," she said, stepping back to let him lead the way.

"Really? Terilians often seek out small, confined spaces." He walked forward with confidence. "They make us feel safe."

She followed him, staying close enough to touch him.

They came to a place where three corridors branched off in front of them. He checked out each entrance then said, "This way," heading to the right.

To her relief, the area soon widened and they were able to walk side-by-side again. She felt much more secure with his arm around her.

"Tunnel coming up," he warned.

Hesitantly she entered an even darker area. She raised her hand, feeling the top of the tunnel about a foot above her head.

Delos stopped walking. Had he sensed some new challenge?

Suddenly he gripped her around the waist. Pulling her close, he kissed her hungrily. Heat coiled in her loins. She closed her eyes and kissed him back, caressing his teeth with her tongue, moving her lips under his.

She basked in his warmth, inhaled his attractive cocoa scent but she couldn't see him at all. It was like being embraced by a phantom.

She felt him lift her tunic. Then his hand was on her mound, his fingers tangling in her curls. She let him touch her, enjoying how he stroked and rubbed her until she gasped with desperate arousal.

She heard steps in the distance, steps that drew nearer, then stopped.

"What if someone comes in?" she asked breathlessly.

"He'll envy me. I get to taste your beautiful nipples...like this..." His mouth was on her breast, his teeth nipping her gently through the fabric of her tunic. She threw her head back, panting.

Eyes were watching them from the dark. Lustful eyes. She opened her mouth to ask Delos to stop but all that emerged was a long moan of pleasure.

He murmured into her breasts, telling her how beautiful she was, how much he longed to mount her, how the aroma of her sex excited him. She ached for him to touch her harder, deeper.

Eyes shone out of the dark at the entrance to the tunnel. Yellow eyes. Did she recognize the scent? She couldn't think about it. All she wanted was more pleasure.

He jerked her tunic open at the shoulder. His mouth closed over her right breast. He drew the nipple into his mouth, flicking it again and again with his tongue.

"More, Delos!" She squirmed against his hand.

Delos entered her with one finger. She put her hands on his shoulders, bracing herself and parted her thighs.

"I love touching you. I love feeling your cream on my hand," he whispered.

"Yes! You make me so wet."

He thrust deeper. She gasped and moved against him.

She couldn't believe she was letting him do this to her in public. Anyone might be nearby. But his touch was so stimulating, so pleasurable...

He moved his hand faster. She bucked against him, frantic. What kind of woman had she turned into, to do this here?

A woman desperate for sex. Desperate for his hands, his mouth.

When she came, it was quick and sharp. She wanted so badly to make noise but the thought of that was embarrassing, so she buried her cries in Delos' shoulder. He held her tightly, his cheek against her hair.

"You're mine, Janis," Delos said. "Do you understand? *Mine*."

Was he speaking to her, or to the unseen watcher?

A faint growl emerged from the darkness. Had Delos heard? If so, he ignored it.

Quickly, Jan pulled down her tunic. "Let's go. I wouldn't want anyone else to know what we did in there." It had been too dark for anyone else to really see anything, she told herself.

She thought she heard Delos chuckle as they made their way out of the tunnel and down the next corridor. To her relief, this one was well-lit. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"You're still thinking like a human. We're not in the tunnel any longer but—scents linger." He smiled. "You're blushing again."

She didn't answer, just kept hurrying along the corridor. When it branched four ways, Delos let her choose. Unfortunately, her choice led to an exit door.

"We lost," Delos said, his tone disappointed. "I wanted you to win the prize."

She stopped to kiss him. "I did win a prize—in the tunnel."

\* \* \* \* \*

The day after Delos showed her around the ship, Janis announced to the Brides that there would be a wedding ceremony. The Brides divided into committees. Computer interfaces were set up in the Great Hall and each committee uplinked with the master computer to plan clothing, music, the feast and the vows.

Several days passed while the committees worked. The food committee came up with a menu and then interacted with the computer to find Terilian equivalents. The vows committee squabbled endlessly about the wording. The music committee faced

problems too, as everyone had different ideas as to what was suitable and no one seemed to know all the words to the Chicken Dance.

Arguments about liquor raged until they discovered the Terilians didn't drink. Instead they filled little bags with a fragrant herb and inhaled. Jan requested that *niphela* be brought to the Great Hall. Many women doubted that it would affect them but it turned out they'd become sufficiently Terilian to get a pleasant buzz from the herb. Half a day was wasted in experimenting with the substance.

Everything they requested had to be overseen by Delos but that wasn't a problem. Approvals came through so quickly that Jan suspected he hadn't even listened to them—wherever he was keeping himself. He hadn't been near her in several days. She wondered what he was doing and why he hadn't tried to see her.

One afternoon, Jan was enjoying a hot-chocolate-like beverage and small, meat-filled rolls with the rest of the Brides when a rolling messenger entered the Great Hall. The tiny machine stopped at the doorway. "Janis Stone, you are summoned," it announced.

She followed it out into the corridor, hoping the summons had come from Delos. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"To Primus Taddus' cabin."

## Chapter Seven

Jan's apprehension grew as she paced after the messenger. Delos had said everyone had sworn not to have intercourse until the Spring Running. Did that include the primuses? Or would Taddus try to force himself on her?

*Rape is impossible in our culture.* Delos had said that too. But her growing fear made his earlier statement difficult to believe.

Taddus was standing impatiently in the doorway of his cabin as she approached. He smiled when he saw her. His yellow eyes seemed to search every inch of her body, lingering on her breasts and her pelvis.

"Janis, please come in. I thought we should have a talk before the Spring Running."

She hesitated. "On Earth, women don't enter the homes of men they don't know."

"The messenger shall stay, if you like." He bent and addressed the machine. "Bear witness that I will do nothing to the human woman without her consent."

"Witness function activated." The machine rolled into a corner and extended a blinking glass lens.

Jan entered his cabin. It was three times the size of hers, with heavy, wooden furniture that was permanently affixed to the deck. One entire wall showed changing pictures, like the corridors. Jan assumed they were scenes from Teril.

"Please — be seated," Taddus said, bringing out a stool for her.

Jan sat, arranging her tunic over her knees. She was very conscious of the sheer material she wore.

He stared at her nipples. "Your soft breasts entice me, Janice. Perhaps you'll let me lick and suck them."

She tossed her hair. "I came here to talk. That's all."

He turned and paced toward the bed. "You've been spending much of your time with Secundus Delos."

"Delos and I have become good friends," Jan answered.

"Not surprising. Everyone likes Del. He's considered quite brilliant in his field, you know."

"I didn't know. He doesn't speak of himself much."

"The cream of Teril was chosen for this colonization venture. The best Teril had to offer." Coming closer, he put his hand on her shoulder. She inhaled, trying to decide what she thought of his scent. "So I understand your liking for the young doctor. But primuses have first choice and I have chosen you as my Bride."

Perhaps this was her chance. "You may have chosen me but I haven't chosen you."

He laughed indulgently. "But you will, my dear. When I come for you at the Spring Running, you'll be happy to mate with me. And I will be proud to be married to the most beautiful Earth woman on the ship. Now, let us talk and get to know each other's essences. Once you know me better, I'm sure you will be pleased to be my wife."

She tilted her head, considering his words. "Go ahead. *Talk* all you want." She already knew that nothing could make her choose him rather than Delos.

He smiled, entirely missing her sarcasm. "Not only beautiful but a female of sense." He brought another stool close to hers.

He told her of his family's glorious heritage, the exploits of his explorer father, Gazeem, the beauty and wit of his mother, Alora, the fame and intelligence of his siblings. He spoke at length of his years at school, his training in governance, the prizes he'd won for his carefully reasoned papers. He talked about the wife he'd brought on board with him and how happy she'd been, married to a primus and a council member.

Jan felt like she was on a bad date with a man who wouldn't let her get a word in edgewise.



At last he rose, saying he had something to show her. She took the opportunity to say, "Taddus? Wouldn't you like to hear about my life on Earth?"

Turning back quickly, he said, "Janis, you're Terilian now. I believe the sooner you forget your old, primitive life, the better." He opened a metal chest and lifted out a copper necklace. "I'd like you to wear this. Consider it the first of many gifts you will receive, as the wife of Primus Taddus."

"Perhaps you should wait until we're married." Panic shot through her as he lowered the heavy necklace over her hair.

"No, I wish to see you wearing this lavish gift." Taking her hands, he helped her to her feet. "It enhances your beauty, my dear." Keeping hold of her hand with his left, he stroked her cheek with his right. "As my wife, you'll enjoy the best quarters, the best food. You'll be richly dressed at all times. You'll never have to work."

"I might want to work," Jan suggested.

"But you won't, my dear. Your days will be spent in leisure. All males will envy me—even the other primuses."

His hand moved down her neck, stroking, caressing. She shivered. Like Delos, he was touching her gently, trying to give her pleasure. But she felt no response.

"Let me touch your breast," he murmured.

She hesitated. But after all, why not? If she had to marry him, she might as well see what he was like. "You may touch me," she said.

He rubbed his cheek against hers affectionately. Why did it mean so much more when Delos did it? His fingers went to her breasts, circling the nipples, attempting to stimulate her through the sheer fabric.

Taddus' hands were skillful but he might as well have been a doctor giving her a breast examination. She wasn't interested.

To stop him, she put her hands to his face. He turned his head, licking her palm. If Delos had done the same thing, she would have trembled with delight. When Taddus did it, she wanted to wipe her palm.

"Taddus, I don't want to marry you."

His smile was patronizing. "All females are nervous prior to the Spring Running, Janis. Once we've mated, you'll be content—you'll see."

"There are almost a thousand other Brides on the ship. Choose another. Choose someone who will be proud to be your wife." She took a deep breath. "Let me have the husband I want."

"You only think you want Del. You'll forget all about him after the Spring Running. Glorious beauty like yours must not be wasted on a mere secundus." He patted her cheek. "A year from now, we'll look back on this conversation and laugh."

"You're not listening to me. Do you really want an unwilling wife?"

"But you won't be unwilling, sweet Janis. You'll enjoy our many matings at the Spring Running."

She bit back bitter words. There was simply nothing she could say that he'd hear. "I'm leaving."

He glanced at the silently witnessing machine, then stood back to allow her access to the door. "Of course, my dear." He followed her to the door. His hand was on his groin, rubbing the head of his cock through his tunic. "Leave now if you will. There will be no leaving on the day I take you again and again. I'll make you beg and plead for every thrust of my penis."

Jan's voice went deep and low. She had never spoken with more truthfulness in her life. "Primus, I will *die* before I beg you for anything."

\* \* \* \* \*

Delos was working at the computer console in his quarters when the door announced that Janis Stone wished to enter. Jumping to his feet, he commanded the door to open.

She walked in. He was familiar with her expressions now and knew that she was angry.

Her tunic was pink today, a color that emphasized her pale skin and dark hair. Then he noticed the heavy copper necklace she wore and frowned.

"You've been with Taddus." He smelled the primus's odor on her neck.

She tossed her head and her glorious black hair rippled in waves. "He called me to his cabin. Why shouldn't he? If I'm his destined Bride, I'll soon be spending *all* my days with him."

Rage shot through him at the thought of the primus touching her. He stepped closer to her and reached around her neck. Grasping the clasp of the necklace, he broke it with one sharp tug and threw the necklace to the floor.

She stared at him, eyes wide. In another moment they were in each other's arms.

His mouth took hers savagely. He wanted to devour her lips and tongue. He wanted to lick her everywhere—her neck, her nipples and most of all her aroused sex.

When they finally broke apart, gasping, she gazed up at him fiercely. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "I haven't seen you for days!"

*She missed me. She longed for me.* Her words were so meaningful to him that he had to kiss her again.

"I've been working triple shifts," he said. "Every male on the ship needs extra anti-erection drugs. The presence of so many unmated females is driving us all mad."

She put her hand on his erect penis. "Physician, heal yourself."

He laughed at the apt phrase. "I took drugs two hours ago. They don't help when you're so close." He called the bed out and down to the floor. "Even if we can't mate, let me hold you." He stretched out on the bed, waiting.

She hesitated, then lay beside him. “Really, what’s the use? If we can’t marry, aren’t we just torturing ourselves?”

“Sweet torture,” he groaned, licking the side of her face. Her skin was fresh and soft. He couldn’t think about the future, only the joy of holding her now. “Let’s enjoy each other while we can.”

“It’s foolish.”

“It’s not foolish.” He licked her nipple through the sheer material. “It’s love.”

She gazed at him, a beautiful, soft look coming into her eyes. “Really, Delos? You love me?”

“From the day I first saw you.” He gave her another kiss. Her lips parted and her tongue stroked his. Kissing had felt so strange at first but the more he did it, the more he liked it. What else would she teach him?

“Loving the way I look isn’t loving *me*,” she said, her voice low. “You don’t know very much about me. How can you talk about love?”

“I know plenty about you.”

“You know I’m under forty, childless, fertile and not pair-bonded,” she said, quoting from Taddus’ criteria for the kidnapped females.

He smiled. “And you enjoy sarcasm. I’ll tell you what else I know... You lived in several multi-unit dwellings until three years ago, when you bought your own living quarters. You had two of the Earth animals called ‘cats’ as pets. Last year you took an evening class in something called ‘Ceramics’. You spent more than one percent of your compensation last year on reading material and music.”

She stared at him for a moment, looking puzzled. Then her brow smoothed. “Oh—that’s right, you said your people uploaded data on all the Brides. You must have read my computer records.”

Read them? He’d practically memorized every tiny detail the data yielded. Every aspect of her fascinated him.

He wished he'd known her for years. He could have loved her when they were gawky adolescents together, before she grew into the breathtaking beauty who had attracted Primus Taddus' notice.

"If we were married, I'd have you tell me something different about you every day. We'd record it on the computer so our young could hear about your life."

"So you'd actually want to hear about my 'old, primitive' life on Earth?"

"I want to hear everything. Because I love you."

She snuggled against him, rubbing her face against his neck. "Let me do something to please you. Please let me try," she begged. "Maybe it won't work. But I'd love to give you an orgasm."

He raised his eyebrows, wondering what she was thinking. "Go ahead."

"Lie on your back."

He stretched out.

"Open your legs," she told him. When he did, she knelt between them. As always when he was with her for any length of time, his organ was erect.

Holding his penis by the base, she lowered her head and took it in her mouth. She closed her lips around the head. He raised up on his shoulders, watching as she pumped her hand up and down. Her lips traveled over his shaft, sucking hard.

The sensation was incredible. He knew he wouldn't be able to experience an orgasm this way. But her hand and mouth on his penis, both at the same time, was one of the most pleasurable things he'd ever experienced. He shook and gasped as her hand moved faster and her hot mouth took him deeper.

Her lips, slick and wet, stroked his long shaft. He felt himself growing, swelling even larger. She was doing her best and the pleasure was intense—almost unbearable.

"If only I could mount you now," he gasped. "Janis—stop. I can't take any more."

She raised her head, sorrow in her eyes. "I wish I could give you an orgasm."

He said sadly, "It's not your fault, beautiful one. Terilian males just aren't made that way." As she moved up close to him, he stroked her cheek. "I've never had such pleasure from a female's mouth before."

"I can hardly wait until the Spring Running. I want to have sex with you. I want you to have an orgasm while you're inside me." She kissed him, then murmured against his mouth, "I want to make you happy."

He caressed her nipples through her tunic, rolling them between his fingers until her breathing changed to short gasps. "Then tell me you love me," he demanded.

"I...I don't know what to say." Her eyes avoided his.

"Tell me."

"It's too soon. Don't press me."

He stroked her face again. "Turn on your stomach and raise up on your knees and elbows. I want to give you pleasure."

She sat up, shaking her long hair back, gazing at him doubtfully.

"Trust me."

She did as he asked. Hungrily he stared at her. Inside her tunic, her breasts hung freely. In this position, they looked ripe and luscious, like *polchoi* ready to drop from the tree.

He raised the hem of her tunic, exposing the darkening, swelling lips of her vagina.

His organ quivered. She was in the prime position to be mounted.

Coming up behind her on his knees, he said, "Remember this position. When we meet at the Spring Running, I'll take you this way first." He put his hands on her butt cheeks, rubbing them, squeezing them until she moaned.

Her lovely anus seemed to beg to be touched. He circled it with his thumb, teasing the tender flesh at its perimeter.

"Delos!"

"Don't you like that?"

"I'm not sure. No one's ever touched me there before."

"I'll stop anytime you say."

She was silent, so he continued rubbing his thumb over the puckered hole. Then he slid his fingers up her labia.

"You're wet for me," he said. "You're always soft when I touch you. And so wet."

Her voice shook. "I love it when you touch me."

He fondled her anus again, his thumb pushing against it. She whimpered as half an inch of his thumb penetrated her. "Is that all right?"

"It hurts a little." Her voice was breathy. "But I-I kind of like it anyway."

Keeping his thumb in the tight hole, he softly stroked her labia over and over. When she began moving against his hand, he decided to try a different type of stimulation.

Reluctantly he took his hands off her body to reposition himself, smiling when she gave a soft, "Oh!" of disappointment.

"Hush, you'll like this," he murmured.

He knelt lower, bringing his face to her sex. The scent of her arousal drove him mad. How would he ever wait until the Spring Running?

He lapped at her hot, swollen lips with his tongue, then reached around and brushed her clitoris with his hand. The tiny bud was already hard and swollen. She pushed against him, wordlessly demanding more. He massaged her peak with two fingers, smiling when she jerked her hips and moaned.

Holding her lips apart with his fingers, he plunged his tongue into her tight, hot channel. He thrust again and again, pushing deep inside her. Her body shook and trembled. Lapping her freely flowing juices, he gloried in the knowledge that he could evoke this response from her. Was anything better than giving a dear one pleasure?

She cried out, convulsing against his mouth, rocking her hips hard. Her excited cries filled the room as her orgasm pulsed, an earthquake followed by tremors and aftershocks.

When it was finally over, she turned and stretched out on the bed. He followed her down, satisfied with the joy he'd given her. She nestled against him and stroked his chest.

He was half-dozing, enjoying her stimulating touch, when she whispered, "Delos? I love you."

His arm tightened around her. *She loves me.* Elation brimmed within his chest.

He knew then what he had to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Inevitably, there were setbacks with the wedding plans. The Brides were dismayed to find there were no flowers on the ship, nor was there wax for candles. The clothing committee was bitterly divided over whether white should be worn, some saying that white was for virgins only, others sneering and saying that was an old-fashioned idea.

Most women wanted rings for both Brides and grooms but Jan had learned that only primus males were allowed to wear jewelry.

One woman proposed that the primuses have a separate wedding from the secunduses. "Their whole society is structured like that. Why not?" she asked.

"We should maintain solidarity as human women!" another woman argued. "I say one wedding!"

A vote was taken, with the decision narrowly falling on the side of one wedding.

Jan asked that all the women's belongings be brought to the Great Hall. An hour later, six burly crew members carried in large metal pallets. The computer chose eighteen women at random and they went through the pallets, laughing and chattering as though it were a seventy-five percent off sale at Macy's.



When Jan's wedding dress was held up, everyone in the Great Hall fell silent. Jan gazed at the lovely gown, wondering if Gary regretted her disappearance. Had he found another woman to marry? Perhaps his secretary—that bitch had always been after him.

"You'll have a real wedding gown," Beth said enviously. "The only one." Although the young redhead hadn't cried in days, Jan knew the young woman still mourned the loss of her wedding on Earth. "You're so lucky... I hear you're going to marry Primus Taddus. He's the head honcho, so you'll be like the queen, right?"

"If I marry him," Jan murmured. She walked past the piles of clothing. An amazing array of items had come out of the women's purses—novels, candy bars, makeup, brushes and combs. Someone had brought perfume samples in small tearable packets. Jan took several, tucking them into her shoes.

She was the only woman here who was assured of marrying a primus. As she watched the others laughing and chattering, she thought, *I'm the only one here dreading the ceremony.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Jan dreamed that Delos was with her in bed. His mouth was hot and urgent on her breasts. His cock nudged her entrance as he lay between her legs. Her pussy swelled, begging for his touch. She stroked his beautiful soft hair, so happy he was with her again...

"All Brides report to the fourteenth floor. Follow the blinking corridor lights to the central elevators. All Brides..."

Desolated, Jan tore herself away from the dream. The dulcet voice of the computer continued as she rose and threw a flame-red tunic over her head.

The Brides babbled questions as they met up in the corridors. Many asked Jan if she knew what was happening. She answered that she knew no more than anyone else.

But in her heart, she knew this had to be the Spring Running.

"You wouldn't believe the dream I was having just now," one woman giggled.

"Me too!"

Jan saw Beth nearby, a dreamy expression on her face. The young woman reached up and fondled her own breasts as she hurried to the elevator.

Jan looked away. She would have liked to touch herself too. Her nipples ached and her pussy was drenched with need.

*Stop thinking about sex.*

She had used some of her time with the computer to learn everything she could about the ship. The fourteenth floor was the agricultural level. Here the crops were grown that fed everyone aboard. There was also a parklike area with grasslands and trees.

The women gasped in wonder as they emerged from the central elevators. After the narrow metal corridors of the ship's residential area, the acres of red and green plants were startling. Jan breathed in the intoxicating scents of growing things, tilled soil and rainwater.

The council was present, kneeling on their customary stools. The secondus males were already gathered together, their eyes hungrily devouring the Brides. Jan looked for Delos but couldn't find him in the crowd.

Council member Goldus rose to address them.

"Beautiful Brides, welcome to one of the most important events of the Terilian people. You may have noticed yourself experiencing intense erotic longings recently. You're merely responding to our male pheromones and to your own desires to mate during today's Spring Running.

"When the whistle sounds, run deep into the park and conceal yourselves. At the end of twenty minutes, the secondus-ranked males will search for you. Don't make it too easy for them, Brides! Part of the joy of the Spring Running is the challenge of finding you before mating.

"After another hour, the fifty primus-ranked males will be allowed into the park. Be aware that primuses have first choice among females, so even if you've already mated with a secundus, you may still be fortunate enough to gain a primus husband."

Janis' gaze strayed to Primus Taddus. His eyes were fixed on her.

Behind him she recognized Hannus, the aide who had helped her in the hospital. As they locked glances, he licked his lips.

The secundus males would seek them first. But what if another secundus male reached her before Delos?

Her body was ripe for pleasure. She wanted sex far more than she'd ever wanted food during her long, miserable diet.

But she didn't want just any male. She wanted Delos.

Goldus concluded, "May the Great Fur-Mother bless us all today. Brides, good Running."

The whistle sounded. The Brides, looking hesitantly at each other, moved into the park.

"Run, ladies!" Jan shouted. Somehow she knew what to do almost by instinct. This would be a joyous game, a hide-and-seek spectacular with mating as the glorious prize.

Throwing her head back, she ran. Warm artificial light beat down from the violet-painted ceiling. She moved effortlessly, head high. Surely her legs had never been so strong before. She laughed in sheer delight and heard the same from other women.

They ran tirelessly, spreading out as they moved farther into the park. Jan searched for a place to hide. There were many copses of tall grasses but she wanted to find someplace where she could watch for Delos' arrival.

At last she spotted a tree with a low-hanging branch. Certain she'd be able to reach it, she took a running leap. Breathlessly she caught the trunk with her claws as she steadied herself on the branch.

She'd done it and was now six feet high in the tree.

*You're becoming more Terilian every day.* The thought didn't bother her the way it had at the beginning. She'd grown accustomed to her enhanced sense of smell, her increased strength, even her claws.

And, just like a Terilian female, she was ready to mate. Without conscious thought, she raised her tunic and massaged her mound. Her hand slipped against her slick juices. Had she ever been so wet before? She'd certainly never wanted to come so badly before.

Balanced on the tree branch, she couldn't touch herself the way she needed. Couldn't open her legs far enough.

God, she wanted Delos' cock inside her, moving in and out, fucking her. Deep and hard. So hard...

The scents changed. She peered out eagerly, noting a number of shapes moving through the grasslands.

*The males are entering the park.*

She took a deep scenting of the air, hoping to find Delos. The threads of other scents unraveled in her mind and she identified Hannus.

What would she do if he reached her first?

In the distance she heard a breathless laugh and a deeper groan. Then the high, excited trills of a woman enjoying the hard thrusts of a male's lusty cock.

One of her fellow humans had already found a mate. Jan envied her.

*Where is Delos?*

"Yes! Harder!" A woman's voice came faintly to her ears.

She stroked her nether lips with one finger. She was gushing with arousal, shaking with anticipation. She closed her eyes and pictured Delos' big cock. Would the cylindrical head feel strange inside her pussy? Or would it give her even greater pleasure than a human male's penis?

Her nipples tightened with desire. Heat ignited through her pussy.

The males were close enough to see now. They were naked except for red cords around their loins which kept their erections close to their bodies, supporting their cocks as they ran.

Hannus drew near. "Janis?" he called in his gruff voice. "I scent you. Let me mount your sweet sex."

Her eyes widened as her pussy pulsed. His scent was irresistible. She gazed down at his large erection. How wonderful it would feel as he pumped in and out of her.

"Janis, I want to spread you open and thrust into you over and over. I promise you'll enjoy it."

She knew she would. She wanted to jump down from the tree, throw herself into the soft grass and open her legs wantonly.

She had to mate.

Where was Delos?

## Chapter Eight

*Wait for Delos.* She stayed quiet.

Hannus peered up into the tree. “Janis!” He fumbled with his cord, staring up at her. She looked down into his yellow eyes, a bird caught in a snake’s gaze.

A rustle came from behind her, breaking the spell. Jan’s nostrils were suddenly full of a distinct cocoa scent.

“Find another female.” Delos’ voice was quiet but firm. “Janis is mine.”

Hannus turned but didn’t back away. “Go away, Del. I was here first.”

Delos leaped at him. Faster than Janis’ eyes could follow, Delos raised his arm. A moment later, blood ran from a long scratch on Hannus’ chest.

“First cut,” Delos said. Hannus growled and slunk away.

*Don’t make it too easy for them.* Remembering Goldus’ advice, Janis jumped down from the tree. A bubble of happiness swelled inside her as she ran.

She giggled as she brushed by long leaves of grass. Delos followed swiftly. She glanced back once. The eager look on his beloved face made her heart skip a beat. What would he do when he caught her?

No one had ever wanted her like this before.

Her heart pounded as he grasped her around the waist. She stumbled—or had he tripped her?—and they rolled to the ground.

She wanted him—God, how she wanted him—but a Terilian female always fought. She elbowed him and rolled away, breathless, trying to get to her feet. Swiftly, he caught her from behind. His palms captured her breasts.

His hands were rough, squeezing, groping. Her nipples were instantly erect. She opened her mouth, tempted to shamelessly beg him to fuck her.

She made one last effort, jerking away and trying to flee.

He caught her leg and pulled her down underneath him. Wriggling, she struggled to free herself. He subdued her easily, his arms like steel bands. She ended up face down, panting, while he straddled her butt, pinning her down with strong thighs.

*I'm helpless. He can do whatever he wants to me.* The thought was so stimulating that her pussy throbbed.

Moving her hair, he licked her neck. She moaned, all thought of resistance disappearing.

She was wild with arousal, pulsing with eagerness. She'd die if he didn't put his cock inside her.

She felt him shift as he unwound his cord, freeing his organ. His excited growl rumbled through the air. He raised up, giving her room to move. "Spread your legs."

She hurried to take the mating position, raising her hips, opening her legs. He came up behind her on his knees, hands gripping her hips, pushing the big, cylindrical head of his cock against her pussy lips. She was ready and wet and eager.

"Janis," he groaned and slid his cock inside her with one powerful thrust. Her vagina thrilled at the invasion. She moaned as her slick channel pulsed around his size and heat.

He plunged deep. He was so big, filling her in a way she'd never known. Her pussy gushed with liquid, welcoming him.

He pulled all the way out and that back-stroke was even better than his first hard thrust. Every nerve pleaded for more. He plunged into her again, frantically and she had to cry out. Leaning forward, he bit her shoulder. Pain mingled with pleasure as her pussy contracted.

He thrust fast and hard, pounding her with his thick organ as her juices spurted against him, easing the tight passage.

Pleasure built and built each time he moved. She had one brief thought that others might be nearby. Then she lost all worry about that. Every one of his fierce thrusts demanded that she cry out in response. She gasped and moaned mindlessly, waiting for the orgasm she knew he would give her.

His cock was buried deeply inside her. He reached underneath her and took her nipples with his fingers, rolling and rubbing them.

The extra stimulation was everything she needed. Racking waves of pure delight flooded her pelvis and she clenched against his steel-hard cock over and over. Her orgasm radiated through every inch of her sensitized pussy.

"*Mine!*" he growled, triumph filling his voice. His hips jerked and he shouted aloud. All her senses told her that he'd come.

\* \* \* \* \*

Delos watched Janis slump forward, panting with the force of her orgasm.

He sank into a kneeling position. Never before had sex satisfied him so completely.

He gazed down at his half-erect cock, coated with her juices. Janis had been even more incredible than he'd hoped. Their mating had been soul-satisfying. When he achieved orgasm, he felt as though she'd drained every drop from him.

She was human, he was Terilian. Yet when he'd filled her with his penis, he'd felt that he was part of her. Or as though they were both parts of one being, finally whole.

Her dark hair was disheveled. Her tunic was pushed up past her waist, leaving her lovely naked buttocks exposed to his gaze.

His organ stiffened. Urgency filled him.

"Janis – again." He waited with a touch of apprehension. Had he shocked her?

"Yes!" She rose up and parted her thighs. The scent of her aroused sex made him mindless with lust. His organ was hard and throbbing, more than ready to plunge inside her again. It took every bit of control he had but he delayed, rubbing the head against her labia.



She moaned, trying to thrust her sex against his organ. "Delos! I want you!"

"What do you want?" He teased her, letting his organ slip an inch into her wet channel, then withdrawing. She raised her hips, desperately trying to take his penis inside her.

"Mount me again. Now, Delos! I can't wait!"

He thrust into her, moving with fast, shallow strokes this time. The tight walls of her vagina clung around his organ, caressing and milking him until he thought he couldn't bear the searing pleasure.

She moved with his quick rhythm. "Harder!" she gasped.

Instead he stopped moving, his eyes half-closing, drinking in the sensation of her tight channel clutched around his organ.

"Don't stop!" she pleaded.

"Move for me," he ordered her.

Hesitantly, she rocked back against him, then forward. "That's right, that's good," he gasped, encouraging her. She moved again, harder this time. He held still, letting her plunge against his stiff penis, taking it as hard as she wanted. Taking it deep.

He groaned as she thrust faster and faster, rutting against him wildly, her channel like a hot, wet pleasure device made for his organ alone.

His palms massaged her buttocks, heightening their excitement. She screamed and clamped down around him. White-hot cum shot from the base of his penis and up his shaft like liquid fire. He'd never felt such pure, whole sensation before.

Finally his organ receded. She pulled forward, breathing hard and lay on her side. He stretched out beside her, stroking her flushed cheek, then gave her one of those wet human kisses she liked so much.

*I like them too*, he thought as her tongue glided languidly against his.

He had to take her again. Maybe from the front this time, so he could watch her beautiful breasts quiver as he thrust into her deliciously hot, clinging sex.

He cupped her right breast in his hand, enjoying the softness against his palm.

"I thought of a way to defeat Taddus," she said.

His eyes flew open.

She pulled away from his arms and grabbed one of her shoes, lifting something out of it. "Look!" She held it under his nose. Even though the package was sealed, he smelled the sweet aroma. "If we rub this on our skin, it'll change our scents. Taddus won't be able to find us."

What an incredible female she was. Not only beautiful...not only his perfect mate...but wonderfully clever.

A pity her plan wouldn't work.

"Taddus won't track you by scent, the way I did," he explained. "The primuses follow computer links to their chosen females."

"That seems like cheating."

"It's our way."

Trouble darkened her gaze. "Then there's no escape from him?"

He didn't answer, just pulled her back into his arms and kissed her until they were both gasping with arousal.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," she murmured. "I want you again. *Now.*"

"Then make me hard." He rose to his feet. "Suck me."

Eagerly she knelt in front of him, grasping the base of his organ. Her beautiful rosy lips closed around the head and she stroked him with her tongue.

She gently cupped his testicles, rolling his sac as her mouth caressed him. She sucked him, devouring him as his pleasure built. His organ stiffened. He cried out hoarsely and she made a delighted noise in her throat.

"Lie on your back," he said. She lay in the grass, her thighs parted. The smile she gave him filled his heart with joy. Stroking his hard penis, he gazed down at her.

She'd always been beautiful but now, with her skin flushed with pleasure and her nipples and vagina still swollen from their mating, she was breathtaking. He knelt between her thighs. His inflamed organ demanded that he thrust into her again but he paused to kiss her mouth and her breasts. She whispered his name, stimulating him further.

He raised her legs onto his shoulders and thrust deep. His hard, hot penis slid easily into her wet channel. He rocked back and forth inside her, watching her white breasts quiver as he thrust and withdrew, thrust and withdrew.

"I never knew it could be like this," she whispered.

"I didn't either." His palms traveled up and down her soft thighs. "I want to give you more pleasure, beautiful one."

"I'm so close!" she gasped.

He moved his hand to where they were joined and fondled her swollen clitoris with his thumb. Her eyes flew open. She cried out, her back arching, her hips bucking. He felt her tight spasms clenching against his organ. Pleasure wrenched a shout from his throat as she screamed.

Janis lay half-dozing against Delos' chest, worn out from the three orgasms that had filled her with unbelievable pleasure. Their mating had been so beautiful...but soon it would be over. She'd be another male's wife. Delos would never hold her again, or kiss her, or make love to her.

"He's near," Delos said quietly.

She jumped to her feet, extending her claws.

"Put your claws away," he told her. His eyes were shadowed.

"Are you leaving now?" Desolation flooded her.

He rose easily to his feet and rubbed his face against hers. "Whatever happens, remember I love you."

Suddenly alarmed, she asked, "What are you going to do?"

There was no time to answer as Taddus loped up before them and released his cord. His dark organ was swollen, the head purple with arousal.

In a few minutes, the primus would use that organ on her. She shuddered with dread.

The primus's tongue passed over his lips. He looked at her, slowly stroking the head of his penis. "My wife." Taddus' tone was formal. "Janis Stone, I am here to claim you."

Delos' tone was equally formal as he took one step forward. "Primus Taddus, I refuse to yield her to you."

Jan gasped. So he wasn't going to merely hand her over to the higher-ranked male. He loved her enough to face down the big primus.

A thrill ran through her.

Taddus stared at him. "Are you *challenging* me, Delos? You're insane! Seek another mate!"

"You know our law. It's my right as a secundus to fight for this one."

Taddus lowered his head and growled. Jan's hand flew to her mouth. Slender Delos had to weigh fifty pounds less than Taddus. How could he possibly defeat the primus?

Delos growled back, a terrifying rumble. "State the rules, Primus."

"Claws permitted, no biting, no foreign objects," Taddus said. "We fight until one of us yields."

"Agreed." The two males glared at each other. Delos planted his feet and raised his hands, palm outward. Taddus did the same. They locked fingers and counted together, "Four...three...two...one!"

They unsheathed their claws. Agony washed over both males' faces as their claws dug into each other's hands.

Jan's heart galloped with fright as they tumbled to the ground. Delos, on top, got his right hand free. He swiped at Taddus' face. The primus threw himself clear and rolled, switching their positions.

"No female is worth this!" Taddus hissed. "Yield, Delos!"

Delos clawed Taddus' back. "First cut!"

"Fool!" Rage bellowed from Taddus' throat. "I have twice your strength!" The two males twisted and struggled, their growls growing more fierce. They rolled over and over, kicking and clawing. Jan watched, afraid to make a sound, fearing to distract Delos.

Taddus' back was bleeding. Delos didn't make a sound as Taddus scraped three claws down his chest.

Taddus, on top now, achieved a hold on both of Delos' wrists and forced Delos' hands to the ground.

Jan's heart sank. Taddus sneered, "Yield and I won't hurt you, little secundus."

Delos remained silent. Sweat beaded on his brow and shoulders. Blood dripped slowly from the wounds on his chest.

Taddus brought his face closer and threatened, "I'll notch your ear."

Delos' ears twitched. "Rules!" he gasped. "No biting!"

Taddus laughed. His lips pulled back, revealing his sharp fangs. "Yield!" he commanded.

"Not – to a cheater!" Delos panted.

The big primus lowered his head.

Would Taddus really mutilate Delos? Unbidden, a low growl emerged from Jan's throat. She leaped forward, grabbing Taddus around the neck. Her claws sank into his flesh. Blood welled and he shouted in pain.

For a moment, the two males stared at her with identical, shocked expressions.

Then Taddus' hands shot up as he tried to free himself from her claws. Delos, suddenly loosened from Taddus' grasp, slashed the other male across the face.

"My eye!" Taddus shrieked, his hand covering it.

"Yield!" Delos panted. "Go to Sick Bay—save your eye!" He jumped to his feet, standing over the kneeling primus.

Taddus glared at Jan. "You broke our law! Females don't interfere with challenges!"

"Guess what?" She lowered her face to his. "Human females do."

Their gazes locked. Jan raised her hands again. Her claws were slick with his blood.

"I yield." Taddus' voice was sullen. "Keep your savage female, Delos."

Delos pulled Jan close and possessively rubbed his face against hers. "I intend to."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Brides straggled back to the Great Hall with their new husbands, each couple tied together at the wrist with the red cords, male's right hand to Bride's left. The Brides reluctantly left their mates just long enough to dress in their wedding garb. An anxious Jan talked to many of the women, relieved when it became clear that they were happy with their new husbands.

"I've never had an orgasm with a lover before," one woman confided in her. "Terilian males really know how to please their mates."

"Don't I know it," Jan answered with a smile.

Beth strolled into the Hall by Taddus' side. The big male had bandages on his eye and neck.

"I waited forever. I thought no one would choose me," Beth whispered to Jan. "I was so pleased when Taddus came!" She linked her arm through his. "I know we're going to be happy together." She gazed at Jan, a wistful look lingering in her eyes.

*She loved her bridegroom back on Earth,* Jan thought sadly.

Taddus touched his bandaged neck. "We'll be very happy together, dear." Glaring at Jan, he added, "I like *sweet, gentle* females."

"Are you looking forward to the ceremony?" Jan asked Beth.

Beth's voice was low. "Everyone's worked so hard. I just wish—I wish it could be a *real Earth-type* wedding. I had such a beautiful dress picked out..."

Jan touched Beth's shoulder. "Honey, how would you like to wear my gown?"

\* \* \* \* \*

*To have and to hold...*

*In sickness and in health...*

*From this day forward,*

*Until the next Spring Running...*

Delos' arm was tight around her waist as they waited to say their vows. "And don't think we're going to part at the next Spring Running," he whispered. "I'll *never* let another male mate with you."

Jan smiled, breathing in his intoxicating scent. She knew she'd never want anyone except him.

An hour later, she nestled close to her new husband, sharing delicacies with him as they ate from the same bowls. He couldn't seem to stop touching her. His hands caressed her face, her shoulders, her thighs.

Jan drifted in a pleasant state of arousal. Other Brides were nuzzling their husbands' necks, rubbing cheeks, stroking, touching and being touched.

The music started. Some couples rose to dance. Janis was too comfortable to move. She smiled as she looked across the room. Beth's young face glowed as she danced with Taddus.

Although it was fun to have an actual wedding, Jan realized that none of the details mattered. She didn't care that she wore a plain tunic instead of satin, that there were no

candles or flowers and that the cake tasted like fish. All that mattered was that she had the right bridegroom.

Delos bent to whisper in her ear, "We didn't mate enough today."

Her pussy grew wet as she imagined him thrusting into her. "Three times wasn't enough?"

"Not nearly. I want to mount you again. I want to hear you scream with pleasure."

Her lips went dry as she pictured the scene.

"I'll lick you first, though. I'll enjoy thrusting into you when your sex is slick and wet after an orgasm." He chose a morsel from a bowl and held it to her mouth. She licked the meat. Holding his gaze, she sucked his finger into her mouth, caressing it with her tongue as though it were his cock.

"Your cabin or mine?" Jan asked.

"Whichever's closer."

Raucous music filled the room.

Delos took her hand and they threaded their way through the crowd as a thousand Brides and grooms danced together, flapping their arms in The Chicken Dance.

The earlier part of the day, the Spring Running, had been all Terilian. But this wedding was all human.

Jan hoped the blending of two cultures would continue successfully. In the meantime, she had her wedding night ahead of her.

She could hardly wait.



## About the Author

Solange Ayre, galaxy-hopping investigative journalist, also serves as a policy advisor to the United Conglomeration of Planetary Jurisdictions. She makes her home on Ayriana, her private island-republic in the West Caribbean region of Earth.

After a whirlwind childhood living in the capitals of Europe, Solange married St. Georges Ayre, one of the wealthiest men in the world. The crystal palace he bought her on Ayriana is the primary tourist attraction in the area – at least, for those who can find it. St. George's mysterious assassination is still mourned by his grieving widow.

Directly descended from King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Solange graciously supports the democratic government of France and relinquishes her claim to the throne. Under no circumstances will she answer to the title "Your Highness."

In her spare time, Solange enjoys breeding and showing her prize-winning miniature dragons as well as researching and writing erotic romance.

Solange welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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