



FLIGHT OF THE VALKYRIE

By

Jennifer Colgan

© copyright April 2006, Jennifer Colgan

Cover art by Dan Skinner & Eliza Black, © copyright April 2006

ISBN 1-58608-901-3

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

Pain lanced through Sienna McCade's body, white hot and relentless.

Starting at the base of her spine, it crept upward to the back of her neck, moving like hot lead in her veins. When it reached the base of her skull she clamped her eyes shut and tried not to scream. She'd promised herself when they captured her that she wouldn't show any fear. Had she known then what it would feel like, she would never have made herself that promise.

In her mind, she cursed and fought the dozen hands that held her down while the paralyzing drug worked its way through her nervous system. Had her efforts been any more than an illusion, she might have broken free, but the drug worked too quickly, rendering her inert and silent only seconds after the first injection plunged into her veins. All she could do now was force herself not to panic until the darkness overtook her.

Sienna had never been afraid of anything until she tasted the faint sweetness of the cryogen gases as one shallow breath pulled them to the back of her throat. The flavor of it flooded her senses and made the nightmare all too real. This was actually happening. She was being put into cryogen sleep where she would remain until it was time for her to stand trial for her crimes.

Her heartbeat slowed, beat by beat, and her blood felt like a thick snake, slithering through every dark, arterial passage in her body. It chilled her to near freezing.

I'm dead, she thought. The idea itself didn't frighten her. Her people believed that death was only the beginning of something new and wonderful. They believed the world beyond this life was a comforting place and she believed it, too. She sensed it on a primal level and thus she knew also that this could not be death. This was only a suspension of life, a terrible sleep.

She held her breath and waited for the next exhalation, but it never came. Her lungs filled with thick liquid that hardened like ice, and she cursed her captors with her last coherent thought.

Finally, she descended into blackness.

* * * *

Jordan Dane's eyes traveled the smooth contours of the face visible within the small observation port of the cryogenic stasis tube. The white metal cylinder stood upright against the aft bulkhead of the *Valkyrie's* cargo hold. It generated a slight hum as the technician who had brought it on board completed the last diagnostic tests on its systems.

"I heard this one put up quite a fight," the tech said, double-checking the cargo manifest. Naturally, he found everything in order. As a registered collector for the Galactic Protectorate, Jordan possessed all the proper clearances to carry dangerous human cargo.

“They all do,” Jordan responded with a shrug. *Some more than others.*

After a moment’s scrutiny the technician handed over the thumb pad attached to the manifest. “Sign here.”

Jordan placed his thumbprint on the bottom of the touch-screen and returned it to the tech. After tucking the manifest into his pocket, the man walked around the stasis tube one more time. He eyed the collection of wires that connected the device to the *Valkyrie’s* computer and electrical systems and tightened one of the jack-ins while Jordan looked over his shoulder. The ship had been overhauled only a month ago, so all of the connectors in the cargo hold were brand new and in perfect working order. The tech uttered a grunt of satisfaction and gave the cool surface of the tube a reassuring pat.

“You’re all set here.” He pulled his lanky body upright. “I jacked the tube into your ship’s main power supply. It has a full battery charge, so should anything interrupt power on the ship, the tube can run on its own for three days.”

Jordan nodded while the tech explained the intricate workings of the stasis tube. He’d heard the mandatory safety speech countless times before, and he probably could have recited it just as quickly as the tech. After five years transporting criminals for a living, Jordan had heard the safety procedures a thousand times. He knew everything that could go wrong with a stasis tube and in most cases how to fix it. In all that time, with more than three hundred trips to the outer colonies logged, he had never come up against a problem he couldn’t handle.

While the tech finished his spiel, Jordan surveyed the rest of the hold. The space was small but well-utilized. The stasis tube took up the aft wall across from the hatch that led to the rest of the ship. Four large plastic supply crates that held everything else Jordan needed for this run and several more sat against the port and starboard bulkheads. The heavy crates were magnetized to keep them in place should the artificial gravity fail.

Besides the crates and the stasis tube, the hold was empty and spotlessly clean. No unnecessary items cluttered the space, and that was just the way Jordan liked it. No mess. No extraneous debris to cause problems.

Jordan sensed the end of the safety speech at hand and turned his attention back to the technician.

“If anything should happen, and she *were* to get out of the tube, use this.” The tech handed Jordan a small weapon that didn’t look like though it could do much damage at all. With the practiced ease of a former soldier, Jordan opened the weapon’s chamber and found it loaded with clear casings containing a bright red liquid.

Jordan gave the tech a curious glance. “Nerve toxin?” In all his time as a courier he had never been given a weapon other than the standard issue stunner he wore clipped to his uniform belt.

“It’s a fast acting tranq,” the tech replied with a sidelong glance at the observation port. “Just an added precaution courtesy of the Feds on Carnelia.”

Jordan frowned again. He looked at the face framed in the small window of the tube. Her name was Sienna McCade, and in addition to conspiracy and treason against the High Council of the planet Carnelia, her warrant listed thirty counts of murder—all members of the High Council on Carnelia.

Somehow she had eluded a planet-wide search and ended up here on Trifida

where she'd become Jordan's next assignment. Jordan wondered why someone so dangerous hadn't been executed immediately on Carnelia. A good number of criminals never made it from the colonies to the Galactic Hub for trial. Often during escape attempts, many met with 'accidents' that facilitated their untimely deaths. There had to be a good reason the Carnelian High Council wanted her alive and healthy.

Jordan closed the gun chamber and hooked the small weapon onto his belt. Like most collectors, he wasn't authorized to do unnecessary damage to a criminal, even in the unlikely event one managed to escape from the stasis tube. However, like all his brethren in the service of the Galactic Protectorate, he knew how to defend himself and was adequately armed in case the necessity arose.

Now, with all the paperwork complete and the mandatory safety rules explained, Jordan's stay at Trifida's orbital spaceport was over. He checked the tube's control panel himself, just to make sure all the system lights were functioning. While the tech's attention was elsewhere, he stole another glance at his passenger. Her face, bathed in the tube's green internal light, was expressionless and unblemished in the dreamless sleep of cryogenic suspension.

Of all the criminals he'd transported over the years, Sienna McCade was certainly the most attractive. How could someone so dangerous look so innocent in sleep?

Her dark hair hung in a thick braid that ran down her left shoulder. Dark lashes fringed her closed eyelids, and her lips were slightly parted as though she were perfectly relaxed. Her arrest record hadn't listed a motive for her crimes or much personal information at all except that she resided on the planet Kyrasau and her chronological age was twenty-seven. The docket gave no indication what had driven her to kill thirty people.

"Safe journey," the tech said. He gave Jordan a thumbs-up and exited the cargo hold.

"Thanks," Jordan called as the man hoisted himself up the set of rungs that led to the *Valkyrie's* upper deck. After the tech left, Jordan placed his hand on the side of the stasis tube. The internal mechanisms that continually pumped cryogen gases into the tube's interior chamber caused a faint but steady vibration under his fingers.

He wondered what it was like to sleep for months or years at a time. He'd never been in suspension but he'd heard that going under was often unpleasant. The combination of chemicals used to induce cryo sleep caused strange hallucinations and sometimes feelings of intense panic before the brain shut down. After that, the subject felt nothing, remembered nothing, and was completely unaware of the passage of time. One could remain safely in suspension for a hundred years or more before the body's organ systems finally began to break down. The Protectorate considered this a humane way to transport prisoners, and on some worlds, a way to maintain them as well. Jordan wondered if Sienna McCade would end up back in a stasis tube after her trial and if she would spend a century in dreamless sleep as punishment for her crimes.

With a final glance at the tube, Jordan left the hold. He shut the door and locked it securely from the outside, then berated himself for wasting time contemplating her fate when it was none of his concern. He had work to do and couldn't afford to daydream about his cargo.

The small tranq gun dangled against his hip and he shook his head. If his prisoner somehow managed to escape her confinement, she wouldn't be going anywhere. The manual lock on the cargo hold worked only from the outside. Now with the door secure, even wide awake, Sienna McCade posed no danger to anyone but herself.

A few moments later, Jordan folded his six-foot frame carefully into the *Valkyrie's* pilot seat. He began the ship's launch sequence while he fastened the straps of the flight harness around his upper body. He worked quickly, eager to get out of Trifida's space dock and on his way so he could move around more freely. The narrow pilot's seat wasn't the most comfortable place for him on board. The *Valkyrie* was a fast ship, but small. Since their planet's gravity caused them to be shorter and more compact than average, the shipwrights on Verados, where she'd been built, had designed her with smaller humans in mind. Jordan considered it a fair trade. He could give up a little comfort during launch and docking in exchange for raw power and unparalleled maneuverability. He made up for it by spending most of his time in the passenger cabin where he could stretch out and relax. A courier's life wasn't glamorous, but it had its perks, among them, lots of free time.

The *Valkyrie's* engines came online, and the voice of Trifida's dock manager crackled over the ship's com. "*Valkyrie*, please transmit your launch sequence."

Jordan entered the sequence on the ship's navigation console and hit transmit. "Coming through, now," he responded. The engines powered up and the ship came to life around him. In a moment, the massive clamps that held the ship in the orbital framework of the space dock would disengage, allowing *Valkyrie* to float free in space.

Only a sliver of the planet Trifida was visible below, nothing more than a silver crescent of the northern hemisphere now currently under heavy winter cloud cover. Beyond the glowing arc, the planet's two moons looked like a large double star, glowing with reflected sunlight in the distance. His launch would take him past the moons and three more planets in the Trifida system, then beyond into the huge, empty expanse that separated the outer colonies from the Hub worlds.

He looked forward to the solitude away from the frenzy and chatter of the colonies. Jordan considered himself a loner and the quiet darkness of interplanetary space suited him well. He couldn't wait to return to it.

"Received sequence, *Valkyrie*. You are cleared," the dock manager responded.

"Thank you, Trifida."

"Safe journey, *Valkyrie*."

Jordan waited for the docking clamps to fall away and after a second he felt the subtle change take place. The ship wobbled as it broke free and then small thrusters kicked in and pushed the hull outward away from the clamps. Jordan counted in his mind and watched the framework of the dock recede. When he reached ten, he keyed the final sequence to ignite the *Valkyrie's* main engines. The sudden acceleration pushed him back into the firm cushions of his chair and the safety harness tightened around his chest.

Trifida's north pole slid by under the ship and the moons grew exponentially larger. The white globes drifted apart and the tiny transport ship shot between them like a silver arrow. When the gravitational adjusters came on and his body settled back into

the seat, Jordan sighed. He unbuckled the uncomfortable harness and leaned forward to access the long-range communications terminal.

“Dane, Jordan. *Valkyrie*, registry Calabrel. ID one-two-two-six-nine-seven, requesting rendezvous confirmation,” he said in clipped staccato. A moment later a stream of information crossed the tiny screen on his control console. He read the instructions and made a few course adjustments. With the prisoner’s transfer confirmed, he now received orders to meet with the Protectorate prison ship, the *Guardian*, in orbit above Ontares Prime in four standard days. There, he would relinquish his cargo and receive another assignment. Until then, he had nothing to do but enjoy the ride.

Chapter Two

Two days out from Trifida, the huge purple globe of the planet Galatia dominated the view from the observation port in the *Valkyrie's* passenger cabin. The gas giant was an inspiring sight, with its family of twenty-six moons and system of equatorial rings that stretched for thousands of miles beyond its boiling atmosphere.

Jordan spared only a moment to appreciate the view. More fascinating to him than the brilliant vista revolving by outside the view port, was the tangle of wires and electronic components spread on the worktable before him.

What had once been a body scanner lay in a tumble of mostly unusable pieces. During his last mission the prisoner had smashed the equipment when, after a full security scan had failed to turn up any weapons, Jordan discovered that the man was still armed.

He could get a replacement scanner fairly easily on Ontares Prime, but the challenge of fixing this one kept his mind occupied. He liked fixing things and if possible, making them work better than they had before. Working on small projects kept him sane during the long expanses of time when his only company was a frozen criminal locked in a stasis tube in the *Valkyrie's* hold.

He'd just reconnected the scanner's ailing power supply when a sudden impact caused the cabin lights to blink off momentarily and threw Jordan from his seat. The scanner ricocheted across the deck trailing sparking wires. The nerve-jarring wail of a security alarm replaced the soothing concerto he'd programmed to play over the ship's com system and filled the cabin with deafening noise.

On his feet in an instant, Jordan cursed and ran toward the cockpit. The *Valkyrie's* deck tilted wildly beneath his feet, and he lurched across the cabin and collided with the forward bulkhead. He could think of no reasonable explanation for the disturbance. He knew the route from Trifida to Ontares Prime so well he could fly it blind. There were no hazards along the way. He had just passed through Galatia's outermost ring without incident, and he expected to make no navigational adjustments for at least twelve hours. Even an unmapped debris field would have come up on a proximity scan long before it became a danger. The soldier in him had an explanation. Unlikely as it was, the *Valkyrie* was under attack.

Jordan threw himself into the pilot's seat. He reached for his flight harness out of instinct, but before he managed to strap himself in, a dark shape careened in front of the forward view port.

"What the...." Jordan leaned forward to catch a glimpse of the object that spiraled around in front of the *Valkyrie*. The small, dark-hulled ship was barely visible against the backdrop of space. It flew recklessly fast but there was a purpose to its movements that chilled Jordan's blood.

Space pirates. They plagued the Hub shipping lanes, but this far out a typical

cargo raid would earn a pirate crew nothing--nothing except a dangerous criminal.

Jordan had never been pirated before, and he wasn't about to let it happen now.

The *Valkyrie* bucked again and another alarm sounded. By this time Jordan had fastened the flight harness and was running evasive maneuvers in his head. His years as a pilot for the Planetary Defense Corps on Calabrel had prepared him for anything. His decision to fight or flee depended on the firepower of his enemy. The tiny ship dogging him right now seemed more determined to ram the *Valkyrie* than blow it out of the sky. That was a good thing.

"You want to play?" he asked and switched off auto control with cold determination. Combat had never excited him when it was his job, but now, something in Jordan welcomed the challenge. No one was going to hijack his ship, especially with a killer on board. Losing his cargo, even to an unprovoked pirate attack, would end his career. He wasn't about to let that happen. The pilot of the little black ship was in for the fight of his life.

"How about follow the leader?" he taunted as he rolled the *Valkyrie* away from its attacker and powered off at top speed. Jordan had a plan. It would add few hours to his ETA at Ontares Prime, but since he always factored in at least half a day on all his flight plans, he could absorb the delay. Galatia's icy outer ring wasn't far behind him and in a few minutes his attacker would be dodging frozen boulders twice the size of his little ship if he wanted to keep up the chase.

The pirate ship slowed momentarily when the first dusty chunks of a former moon tumbled into view. The *Valkyrie* avoided them effortlessly, and Jordan urged his ship faster and deeper into the rings where large, rocky balls of ice and rock dwarfed both vehicles. The smaller ship maintained its proximity. It mimicked the *Valkyrie's* movements and avoided the obstacles in its path with ease. The pilot was obviously a pro. *That* was not good.

The two ships wheeled through the debris field and weaved in and out among the flotsam as though they'd rehearsed the route. If Jordan hadn't been so annoyed at having to defend his ship from a pirate, he'd have truly enjoyed the challenge. It had been years since he'd pushed the *Valkyrie* to top speed and practiced evasive maneuvers. It felt good.

He grinned darkly when the aft scanners showed his pursuer taking a clip on the starboard wing. It was barely a shave, but it was enough to send the small ship off course. Jordan seized the opportunity and changed his trajectory while the other ship compensated.

A huge berg loomed in front of him, and he maintained a steady course towards it, aiming dead center until the very last moment. Then, with a silent prayer to the shipwrights of Verados, he skirted the huge rock in a tight orbit and skimmed over its mountainous ridges. Using a crater as a guide, he changed his trajectory once again, and when he pulled out of the loop he found himself behind his attacker. The little ship drifted now, one of its elongated wings damaged. That left it only partially maneuverable. Jordan did a quick scan hoping to come up with some identity markers, but it was a long shot that a pirate would be bold enough to broadcast an ident code. He wasn't surprised to see there were no identifying marks on the hull, either. He wouldn't

have expected to find any, but it was worth a look.

Now, he had a choice. He'd never needed the *Valkyrie's* plasma cannons for anything other than clearing small pieces of space debris from the ship's path. One well-aimed shot would easily destroy the pirate ship's engines.

Jordan considered his options. He didn't kill for sport, and to disable the ship further without destroying it would still mean eventual death for its pilot. Of course, the pirate wouldn't give Jordan even half as much consideration. Nevertheless, as a courier for the Protectorate, an agent of the galactic government, he had to hold himself to a higher standard.

Jordan scanned the ship again and recorded its basic statistics. He could report it to the *Guardian* when he arrived at Ontares and they would send a patrol ship out to investigate. They would probably find it still floundering among the space dust and ice balls.

Satisfied with that game plan, he pulled away, prepared to leave the pirate ship to fend for itself. He'd only lost an hour or so of flight time so he didn't even have to hurry. When he cleared the smaller pieces of debris at the fringes of the rings, he was home free. He reset his course, unstrapped the seat harness, and took a deep breath. The body scanner came to mind, and he hoped all the work he'd done so far to repair it hadn't been in vain. Jordan made it two steps out of the cockpit before the *Valkyrie* lurched violently to port. His right shoulder connected painfully with the bulkhead, and then he found himself floating backward. Whatever had hit the ship this time had knocked out artificial gravity. He used the handholds on the walls to pull himself back to the cockpit in time to see something completely unexpected.

A fleet of the tiny black ships stretched out like dark jewels in front of the *Valkyrie*. Before Jordan could pull himself into the pilot's seat, they fired their weapons in rapid succession. The forward nav-control panel exploded in a cascade of sparks which caused Jordan to let go of his hold on the seat. He flew backward again and hit the bulkhead behind the pilot's seat as the ship bucked around him.

Pain arced through his shoulder, but he ignored it and pushed off the wall with his feet to propel himself toward the seat and the smoking console. Finally he reached the seat and fastened his harness. He estimated there were at least five other ships around him, and he realized he had few choices. Gratefully, the *Valkyrie's* weapons still functioned, so he squeezed off a volley of bright plasma fire and then made an unexpected move. He headed directly for the center ship. The pirates might have expected him to try to escape since it was clear they outgunned him, but they certainly weren't expecting a suicide run.

* * * *

The journey out of cryo sleep took a lot longer than the journey in, but the process was no less unpleasant. Sienna exhaled the breath she'd been holding forever and gasped convulsively on the intake of the next. She smelled and tasted the cryogen gases but the sweet aroma was fading. How long had she slept?

Sienna wasn't sure if what she saw was real. A green haze surrounded her and the world had a glassy, liquid appearance. Wires and panels of telltale lights flickered at the periphery of her vision. She couldn't move her eyes or her head, so her whole world

consisted of what she saw through the small rectangle of glass inches in front of her face. After a moment, the images began to blur and Sienna realized her own breath was fogging the window.

I'm trapped, she thought, and bit back a scream. Her lungs could not have complied anyway. They were still thick with the remnants of the gas. Someone had turned off the cryogen agents, but had not yet opened the stasis tube. It seemed she had been awakened only to slowly suffocate in her metal prison.

Sienna tried to control her breathing as feeling returned to the muscles around her lungs. Each breath she drew was deeper but more labored than the last. She wouldn't last long in the tube, and as far as she knew there was no way to open one from the inside. When she was able to move her arms again, she brought her hands up to the glass and pushed. Her muscles felt like rubber. Even if she *could* open the tube, she didn't have the strength to lift the lid.

"Help me!" she called, but her voice sounded distant even to her own ears. With almost no air to carry it and thick layers of protective glass and metal around her, no one would hear her anyway.

She kicked her legs and heard a dull metallic thud. At least her legs worked now. The tingling in her limbs faded rapidly as the paralysis drained downward. Just as the cold snake had wound its way through her system when the technicians put her under, it slithered away now and left an empty feeling in its wake. A dull ache began at the back of her neck, but she didn't have time to wonder what caused it. Blackness descended for an instant and in that brief moment when the nothingness returned, Sienna panicked.

She kicked as hard as she could and pounded on the glass in front of her to no avail. She hauled shuddering breaths of stale air into her tortured lungs. It was pointless to try to breathe carbon monoxide. She might as well have been breathing in a vacuum. Points of light pinged against her eyelids like fireworks. She realized that if she blacked out now, there would be no one to revive her.

"Please!" she cried with her last full breath. "I'm awake in here..."

An explosion of light and sound accompanied a sudden movement of Sienna's world and the entire stasis tube tilted sideways. She managed to put up her arms to brace herself but had to fight the detached, floating sensation that took over her senses. A second later the tube fell. The gray mesh flooring of a spaceship deck rushed up to meet the glass of the window. Her head hit the foam cushion above the observation port, and Sienna cried out. The tube rolled and crashed into something she couldn't see, then immediately rolled in the other direction. This time the impact was even more violent. The glass in front of Sienna's face cracked and when it did, the front panel of the tube popped open.

Stunned, Sienna lay still for a moment, afraid to believe she was free. With a trembling hand she pushed the lid open and sucked in grateful gulps of air. After a moment she pulled herself to a sitting position and looked around. As her perception cleared, she saw the cargo hold of a ship. Broken connections lay sparking where the stasis tube had been ripped from the jack-ins on the aft bulkhead.

When she was sure her legs were fully functional, she swung one, then the other over the side of the tube and lowered herself to the deck just as it bucked wildly beneath

her. She hit the floor and rolled out of the way of the heavy tube before it barreled across the deck again. This time when it hit the far bulkhead, sparks erupted from a control panel there. The dim lighting flickered again, and she heard the insistent whine of an alarm coming from another part of the ship.

Sienna dragged herself to her feet and lurched unsteadily across the deck toward the hatch. Of course there were no controls next to the door. She was cargo after all, packaged for transport, and not expected to leave the hold under her own power.

Obviously the ship was under attack, and no one knew she had awakened. She heard the impacts on the hull and the blaring alarms. She looked wildly around for a com but found nothing. Why would cargo need to talk to anyone else on the ship? With no way out and no way to communicate, she had no choice but to wait for someone to come check on her.

She looked back at the tube. Shattered glass hung from the window frame and the system lights were dark. With no way to put her back in stasis, she could only imagine what they would do to her when they found her awake.

In desperation she began searching the hold. The four cargo containers that filled the far end of the hold held food and medical supplies but nothing that would serve as a weapon. She would be defenseless when the crew came. There was little chance she could convince them of her innocence. When they found her, they would see only what they had been told to see, a ruthless killer.

To protect herself from the still rolling stasis tube, Sienna secreted herself into a small space behind the cargo containers and waited. She listened to the distant sounds of battle until the artificial gravity failed.

In the semi-darkness now, she floated around the hold and managed to avoid the stasis tube which bumped and bounced around in the tiny space. Fortunately the magnetized containers stayed put, but Sienna found herself having to sail from bulkhead to bulkhead ducking the tumbling cylinder while the ship vibrated around her, obviously changing course again and again. Finally the lights went out again completely, and Sienna could only grip the handles high on the ceiling of the hold and pray the floating tube didn't crash into her in the dark. She stopped fearing what the crew would do if they found her when she realized she would be crushed to death before then anyway. She was contemplating her own death once again when another impact threw her down to the grating on the floor. The stasis tube fell next to her with a crash that rattled the deck plating. Then everything went black.

Chapter Three

Jordan's nightmarish world faded in and out around him. The sound of the *Valkyrie's* engines whining in protest as he pushed the ship to maximum speed merged with that of the alarm claxons and filled the cockpit with deafening noise. The brilliant flashes of energy that buffeted the ship from every direction seared his eyes until all he saw was the single red warning light on the control console before him.

Engine failure.

Sparks erupted around him. The artificial gravity came on without warning and slammed him into his seat. Then it shut off again, just as abruptly. The sudden change flung him toward the forward viewport over the ragged, burning debris of the *Valkyrie's* control console.

The five dark ships surrounded *Valkyrie* and pursued her relentlessly in and out of Galatia's rings. When Jordan finally reached the dark side of the gas giant, the *Valkyrie* was crippled. His only option now was to attempt to land and the choices for that were limited.

Galatia itself was no option. While a number of its moons were habitable, with the nav-com failing and the ship's computer nearly useless, Jordan could only guess at which ones might have breathable atmospheres. He ran through the names he remembered and tried to match the brief descriptions he recalled from flight training with the dark spheres that floated in the empty spaces between Galatia's massive rings.

The nearest moon had promise. Though Jordan couldn't recall the name of the blue-green world, but the swirling white clouds that roamed across its equator and the small polar ice caps gave him hope. He directed the *Valkyrie* toward it and tried to remain on course when the moon disappeared in the shadow of its mother planet.

Something crackled in the control panel before him and more sparks cascaded across the cockpit. Shards of metal flew at him. Jordan reared back, and for a moment he lost consciousness.

When he came to, the pirate ships were gone, but it didn't matter anymore. The *Valkyrie* spiraled in an uncontrolled dive for the watery surface of the nameless moon.

The dark landscape hurtled toward the forward viewport, and Jordan fought to keep on an even trajectory as the *Valkyrie* skimmed what appeared to be a dense jungle. It was then that he noticed the blood that oozed from under his uniform shirt and pooled beneath him in his seat. He didn't remember feeling the metal shard impale him. He reached for it now and pulled it free of his flesh, amazed that the action caused him no pain. Despite his sang froid, the image in the forward viewport began to blur, and a cold weariness washed over him. The last thing Jordan saw before he blacked out again was the green landscape rushing upward as the *Valkyrie* made contact with the surface of Galatia's moon.

* * * *

Sienna descended helplessly through thick green water to the bottom of the ocean. She couldn't move or call for help. Powerless to do anything but watch the layers of water go by and the faint light from above grow dimmer, she panicked and cried out. At that moment, cool air filled her lungs instead of water, and she realized the dream had ended. She swam back to consciousness and became aware of an uncomfortable weight in her limbs that she hadn't felt in a long while.

The last sound Sienna remembered was that of the blaring alarm claxons. She sat up and listened for them but heard nothing other than her own rasping breath. The cargo hold was dark except for a red warning light over the hatch where the heavy retractable door now stood partially open. The stasis tube lay nearby, its white outer casing cracked and the lid partially torn from its hinges. Beneath Sienna, the deck slanted at a slight angle toward the door, but despite the odd cant of the floor, the ship was absolutely still. They had landed. Or crashed.

Somehow Sienna had survived the impact.

Slowly, she rose and took a physical inventory. She found a few bruises she didn't remember and a few that she did. The form-fitting shirt and pants she wore were intact, but her light jacket was torn in a few places. Her eyes stung, probably a side effect of cryo, and her limbs were stiff. For the most part however, everything worked. The effects of the cryogen gases seemed to have worn off completely and although she couldn't forget the frigid emptiness of cryo-sleep, she now seemed reasonably awake and alert.

She climbed carefully over the dented remains of the stasis tube and made her way to the hatch. The door was frozen in place, open just wide enough for her to squeeze her body through without further injury. On the other side, she found herself in a narrow alcove facing a series of handrails that lead upward into darkness. It occurred to Sienna as she contemplated the ladder, that if anyone else had survived the crash they would have come to the hold by now to check on her. She prepared herself for the possibility that she would find only corpses above, and began to climb.

It had been a while since Sienna had been planetside, and she found the planetary gravity made it difficult to pull herself up the ladder rails. Her muscles had atrophied a bit during cyro and were now sore from the battering she'd taken in the hold. Nevertheless it was obvious the ship had ended up on the ground, which gave her some hope for escape.

She recognized the deck above as a passenger cabin, which was currently empty. Sienna rolled into a defensive crouch and got her bearings. The thick glass of the viewport on the starboard side was so badly cracked that she could make out nothing beyond it. The only illumination in the cabin came from warning beacons and hazard lights that glowed near the ceiling. Something hummed and clicked near her feet. She looked down and found a mass of broken circuit boards that resembled a smashed body scanner. The small instrument was the source of the sound. It seemed so badly damaged, she decided it must have been in disrepair before the crash. Sienna hit the barely recognizable off switch and the humming stopped. Then she heard a groan.

Sienna made her way through the passenger cabin toward the forward bulkhead. There, beyond an open hatchway, she found the ship's cockpit. It was a mess.

Beyond the scorched, shattered glass of the forward view port hung wet foliage in countless shades of green. A weak light filtered through the leaves and illuminated a web of torn wires that dangled from the overhead panels. The ship's navigational control console had broken free of its base and lay in pieces on the glass-strewn deck and beneath a large piece of metal debris lay a man dressed in the black and gold uniform of the Galactic Protectorate.

A shiver of recognition coursed through her aching limbs. He was a collector. Was he the one who'd captured her on Trifida? She tried to recall the face of the man who had cornered her in the blind alley, but she remembered only shadows. Maybe she'd recognize him if she got a closer look. She moved around the debris and surveyed his injuries.

His face was badly bruised, and his sandy blond hair was dark with sweat and matted with blood from a wound above his left temple. His uniform shirt was torn and scorched, and through the tatters of the material Sienna saw a deep cut on his left side beneath his ribs. A shard of metal from the ruined control console lay next to him, its tip wet with blood. It appeared as if he'd pulled it from the wound himself, probably believing, in his delirium, that it would relieve the pain, without realizing he'd bleed to death that much sooner.

Sienna swallowed hard at the thought of freeing him from the wreckage. He was the enemy--one of the men she'd fled from on Trifida. If she ran now, no one alive would know where'd she'd gone, but could she live with herself if she left him to die?

Her true nature battled with the fugitive she'd been forced to become and finally won the debate. She wouldn't leave him ... yet.

"So it's just you and me..." Sienna whispered. She braced her sore right shoulder against the control console and heaved it away from him. It was then that she noticed the two small weapons clipped to his uniform belt. The stunner bore a Protectorate insignia but the tranq gun did not. She wondered if it were his personal weapon of choice when dealing with escaped criminals. She removed them both on instinct and set them aside. As she did so, he mumbled something unintelligible but didn't open his eyes.

Sienna regarded his tall, muscular form clinically. Judging by the nature of the injuries she saw, he was in terrible pain and was probably better off unconscious or nearly so. She was no medic, and considering he might have massive internal injuries besides those that were visible, she didn't think there was much she could do for him. It occurred to her, as she knelt beside him to further assess his condition, that she might only prolong his agony if she tried to help him, but her conscience would not allow her to leave him in this condition. Though she'd probably regret the decision later, she had to help him.

With a deep sigh, Sienna checked for any broken bones. Other than possibly the rib right above the wound on his side, he was mostly in one piece. He winced when she applied pressure there but didn't wake. For that, she was grateful.

Her hands shook slightly as she pulled the rest of his uniform shirt away from his abdomen, exposing not only the bloody cut but the bruised area around it. By comparison, the cut on his head didn't look nearly as serious. She knew head wounds normally bled profusely making them seem worse than they were, so for now she decided

to ignore that and concentrate on his side. She lifted his eyelids though, and took note that the pupils, ringed in deep blue, were round and equal in size. She recalled from her basic first aid training, that was a good sign.

“Now what am I going to do with you?” she asked him as she surveyed his position. There was very little room to maneuver in the cockpit, and she doubted she could drag him into the passenger cabin without hurting him. He moaned slightly as if he might be able to hear her. She didn’t want to wake him and have to explain herself. If he were the ship’s only crewmember, he wouldn’t be happy to find a dangerous criminal leaning over him while he bled to death.

“I’ll be back,” she said after a moment. She remembered seeing a box of medical supplies in the hold. Hopefully there would be something in there to help stop the bleeding and maybe ease his pain. Reluctantly, she left her patient and carefully made her way back to the hold.

After the relative brightness of the cockpit, the hold seemed darker than it had been before. Sienna squeezed through the ruined hatch and made her way across the slanted deck to the plastic crates. Two of them were cracked from the impact, though they remained in place thanks to their magnetic panels. Fortunately the crate that contained the medical supplies had broken open, so Sienna was able to lift the lid easily. She rifled through the contents and tossed aside the items she didn’t need, such as vitamin supplements and a topical beard suppressant.

When she finished her task, her inventory consisted of several small bottles of antiseptic, bandages of various sizes and types, sterile cloths, injectable painkillers and topical antibiotics. In all, it was too much to carry in her arms, especially considering she would have to navigate the rung ladder. Sienna stripped off her torn jacket and fashioned it into a sack to hold all the supplies. She slung it over her shoulder for the trip back to the cockpit, hoping the pilot would still be alive when she returned.

As she maneuvered back through the hold, Sienna thought about her treatment plan. She figured she could clean and dress the wound on the pilot’s side first. Antiseptic didn’t pose a problem but the vials of injectable painkiller gave her pause. She would have to guess at a dose and hope her ministrations didn’t kill him. The last thing she needed was another death on her record, even if it was accidental.

Back in the cockpit she found her patient exactly where she’d left him. He was paler than before, his lips colorless. His skin felt slick and cold.

Sienna knew about shock. The body’s response to pain, trauma or blood loss could be devastating if not treated. She would have to work quickly to treat his wounds and then find a way to make him more comfortable and keep him warm.

She spread the supplies out before her and took stock of the situation. Antiseptic should come first, she decided and reached for one of the bottles of clear blue liquid to clean the wound.

“All right,” she told the pilot in a no-nonsense tone. “Get ready, this might hurt. But don’t worry, I’m going to help you.” Sienna didn’t know if he could hear her, but it made her feel better to talk to him. She felt less alone, though no less unsure of what she was doing.

The antiseptic liquid bubbled into thick white foam when it touched the wound,

hopefully killing germs as it did so. The pilot moaned faintly, but he didn't seem to be any worse off. When the foam dissolved, Sienna poured a little more of the antiseptic and then wiped away the excess with a sterile cloth from a metallic package.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" she asked when she examined the wound again. The jagged piece of metal had left a cut about the length of Sienna's thumb. She couldn't be sure if it had hit any vital organs without probing the wound and she was reluctant to cause him any more pain. Unless he died or recovered, she wouldn't be able to determine if the injury was fatal or not.

Next, Sienna sorted through the collection of bandages and selected a derma-gel adhesive, which she carefully removed from its protective sleeve. The cool, slippery bandage looked like a puddle of clear gelatin on her palm. Once placed on the skin, it adhered and began healing surface wounds. It would stop the bleeding and protect the cut from further infection, but would do little to repair any internal damage. That would have to heal on its own.

Sienna placed the derma-gel over the pilot's wound and this time he did react. His eyes opened briefly and though he looked right at her, she was sure he didn't really know she was there.

"Cold," he murmured before his eyes closed again.

"I know its cold. It's helping to ease the swelling," she explained, though she was certain he neither heard her nor would have cared if he did. She examined the wound once more. The dark bruise around the cut spread from the base of his ribcage down to his hipbone. Internal bleeding, she decided. *No way to stop it.* Sienna shivered as she contemplated the pilot's fate. She had probably helped him just enough to keep him alive and in agony for a few days. She didn't have it in her to leave him, so she had essentially sentenced herself to watch him die.

Still shivering, Sienna sat back and contemplated her patient. The injectable painkiller might not be the best idea considering his head wound, but he would rest more comfortably if she gave him a small dose. She measured a few ccs into the applicator at the end of the vial and pressed the device to a spot above his collarbone.

A whispered curse escaped his lips at the mild discomfort.

"This is the least of your worries," she admonished. "There's nothing else I can do for you now. You're on your own, hot-shot."

She watched him intently for signs of trouble, and after a few minutes he seemed to relax. His breathing became deeper and more regular. His face was still pale, but the sheen of sweat had disappeared, and some color had returned to his lips. Satisfied with her work, Sienna gathered the torn metallic packages and set them aside, then placed the unused supplies back in the makeshift sack of her jacket to protect them.

She regarded the pilot skeptically for a moment and wondered what he would do when he discovered a dangerous criminal had attempted to save his life. She supposed, if he lived, she could ask him.

"I'm going to raid the passenger cabin now," she announced as she pulled herself unsteadily to her feet. She decided to look for blankets and maybe some food before she set to work on the pilot's head wound. Since it had stopped bleeding, it was probably better left alone for the time being. The pilot muttered something in response and

groaned a little but then his breathing became rhythmic again. She bent to retrieve the stunner and tranq gun from the deck, then left him, and went to pick through the mess in the passenger cabin to see what useful items she could salvage.

* * * *

There was a voice in Jordan's nightmare. Someone was speaking to him but he could barely hear the words. Fierce pain radiated through his body. He felt hot, then cold and he was so tired he could barely move his aching limbs. An icy hand clamped over his ribs and the pain there flared white-hot before it subsided.

When he was able to think again, a face floated above him. Cool green eyes appraised him and a delicate face framed with dark hair came into focus. It took him a moment to remember where he had seen her before and when he did, his blood froze.

The killer was free.

Chapter Four

Hours later a soft moan from her patient woke Sienna from a troubled sleep. Her back ached from sleeping curled under a thermal blanket on the cold, hard cockpit deck. She would have preferred to rest on one of the cushioned flight couches in the passenger cabin, but she hadn't wanted to leave the pilot alone.

When he stirred, she crawled across the deck and knelt beside him. She felt his forehead with the back of her hand and noted with relief that his skin was cooler now.

With the blood cleaned away, the small cut above his left temple looked a lot better. Sienna decided it would probably heal well without much intervention on her part. A few drops of antiseptic liquid and a small gauze bandage completed her treatment.

"It's all right. Don't try to move," she said. His right hand came up toward his face and Sienna caught his fingers with her own.

"You're safe," she said. His eyes fluttered open and a hint of a smile began to form on his lips. He saw her and his expression froze. His eyes clouded with pain when he tried to sit up. She pushed him gently back to the deck and straightened the blanket she had placed over him.

"Don't move. You've been badly hurt."

"What the hell happened?" The vehemence of his question surprised her. She didn't think he had enough strength to talk, let alone yell.

"Calm down, you'll aggravate your wound."

"You're ... Sienna McCade...", he said.

She responded with a sad smile. "My reputation precedes me. Who are *you*?"

His eyes closed and she thought he'd passed out again, but after a second he seemed to steel himself against the pain.

Before he replied he took a long, calming breath. "I'm Jordan Dane. I'm a collector for the Protectorate. How did you get out?"

A collector. But was he the one? She tried to tell herself it didn't matter. He was only doing his job and it wasn't his place to determine the guilt or innocence of a fugitive.

"How did you get out?" His voice rose and this time, despite her protests, he hauled himself to a sitting position, clenching his jaw against the pain.

Sienna sat back on her heels as he hunched forward. He winced and guarded his abdomen with one arm. Stubborn, she thought with a sigh. "If you start to bleed again, I can't help you."

"How long have I been out?" he asked with a scowl. His eyes scanned the destruction around him, and he shook his head.

"I don't know. A day ... maybe," she replied. Her eyes tracked the movement of his right hand toward his hip. His eyes widened briefly when his search failed to turn up

the weapons he obviously expected to find clipped to his belt.

"How did you get out?" he repeated with a blazing look.

"The stasis tube broke during the crash," she said and broke eye contact.

"Crash?" He looked at the ruined forward port and the scorched debris in the cockpit. "If we'd *crashed*, we'd both be dead. This was an *extreme* landing."

Sienna almost laughed. Absently she reached out to brush a golden strand of hair away from the bandage on his temple. He stiffened and pulled back. His sapphire eyes went cold.

"You're lucky I *did* manage to get out," she told him coolly. "You'd have bled to death, and I would have suffocated in that damned tube. The system malfunctioned and the cryogen gases shut off right before the first impact. What happened anyway? Asteroid field?"

"We were attacked a day and a half out of Trifida by five pirate ships—six if you count the decoy that lured me off course."

"Pirate ships?" Was he delusional? Pirates preyed on the sun yachts and liners that filled the skies of the more populated worlds. What would they want with a courier ship whose only cargo was a murderer?

"I outran them," he said with an appreciative if solemn glance at the wreckage around them.

"I'd say burying your ship in some forsaken jungle and nearly getting yourself killed really showed them who was in charge."

He frowned and a small crease formed between his golden brows. "I got us on the ground without engines."

"That's where most ships without engines end up, isn't it?"

"Look, if you don't like the way things turned out, you can...." He stopped himself and gave her a weary look.

"Leave?" She raised an eyebrow. "I'd love to, but I have no idea where we are."

"One of the moons of Galatia," he said. "Talek, I think."

"You're not sure?"

"No." He shifted his position and reached for the ruins of the nav-con to pull himself up. He kept his left arm curled around his belly as if he were afraid his insides might spill out. Sienna had the same fear. Once again she pushed him back down.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"To check the com. Maybe we can call for help," he responded bluntly with his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Save your strength. I already tried. It's dead. I checked everything. Nothing works."

"I hope you won't be offended if I look for myself," he said, his eyes on the dangling wires around them.

"Of course not," she responded with a shrug. "But I worked hard trying to put you back together, the least you could do is be careful. I'm no medic so I can't guarantee everything is in working order."

The pilot settled back for a moment and examined the dressing on his side. He prodded the now protected area where the metal shard had pierced his skin and drew in a

sharp breath.

“Not a bad job,” he admitted through clenched teeth. “It hurts, but not that badly.”

“By the look on your face I’d say it hurts badly enough. Why don’t you rest and I’ll go find us something to eat?”

“I want to check the com.”

Stubborn, Sienna thought again with another sigh.

“Look, let’s get something straight right now,” she said and leaned close to him, her voice low and determined. “I know you think I’m a cold blooded murderer, and I know there’s no way I can convince you otherwise, but the fact is, if I was guilty of everything you’ve been told about me, you’d be dead already and I’d be long gone. I don’t want to go back into a stasis tube, but I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in this cockpit either, so if the com *were* working, I would tell you.

“If I wanted to shoot you, I’d have your stunner and that tranq gun on me, but I don’t. So you have a choice here. You can trust me and sit back and try to rest while I look for some food and water in this wreck, or you can fight me every step of the way. If that’s the case, I’ll let myself out now and you can fend for yourself.”

Sienna didn’t wait for a reply. She rose and left the cockpit as quickly as possible given the debris between her and the hatchway. Once in the passenger cabin she continued her search through the battered chamber for anything usable, cursing the pilot and his superior attitude all the way.

* * * *

Back in the cockpit Jordan sat staring after his dubious passenger. He wondered what it was about her that put him so off guard. Aside from the fact that she was a criminal, she’d just saved his life.

He looked over the remains of the medical supply packages she’d opened up. His skin smelled of antiseptic and the pain of his wound was bearable. She could have killed him or left him to die, but she hadn’t. He figured she’d done it more for her own survival than his, but right now, neither of them had anyone else to rely on. He thought of her for a moment, and tried to ignore the throbbing pain in his head and the dull ache in his side. For now at least, he had no choice but to trust her. He didn’t want to, but there was something in those luminous green eyes that drew him in. Whether she was guilty or not, he had no doubt that she was trouble.

* * * *

Sienna’s second search of the passenger cabin turned up a small supply of potable water and a bottle of Calabrian Orchid wine. She also found a cache of dehydrated food packs she had missed before. They were edible even if not rehydrated but eating them would be a chore. With a quick glance toward the cockpit, she double-checked the hiding place where she’d secreted the pilot’s weapons. Returning them to him would be a show of good faith, but she didn’t know him well enough yet to trust that he wouldn’t use them. He certainly looked at her as though she were a hardened criminal.

The Protectorate insignia on his uniform told her there was little point in pleading her case to him. His job was to capture fugitives. Their guilt or innocence didn’t concern him. His sole purpose now was to transport her to the people who would decide her fate.

She had little chance of convincing *them* of her innocence either. For now she had to trust him, just long enough to figure out how to escape.

When she returned to the cockpit with her latest salvage, she told him, “Your rehydrator is shot.” He was hunched over a panel on the starboard bulkhead, his brow creased in that trademark frown again. Naturally, he’d gone to check the com the moment she left him unattended. “Let me guess, the com is dead, right?” She accompanied her sarcastic comment with a vapid grin.

“I *had* to check,” he replied. He straightened and lurched stiffly back toward the nest of blankets on the floor.

“There’s not much water,” she said as she arranged the food packs on the deck in front of him. Next she set down the containers of water and the wine. “What would you like to eat?”

He grabbed the nearest pack and tore it open. Sienna smiled when he sniffed experimentally at the contents.

He looked up from the foil packet, one eyebrow raised. “What?”

“It’s completely vacuum sealed,” she said as she chose her own packet. “It won’t ever go bad.”

He looked at her and then at the contents of the metallic pouch. He pulled out a dehydrated strip of whatever it was he had chosen and took a bite before he commented. “You’re one of those, then.”

“One of what?”

“An analyzer. You watch everything people do and comment on it.”

“So?”

“It’s annoying.”

“That’s what I do, Jordan,” she replied through a tight smile. “I annoy people to death.”

The corner of his mouth twitched toward a smile. The moment was fleeting and Sienna was sorry to see the faint hint of amusement leave his face. He had the potential to be rather attractive, when he wasn’t scowling. His sun-streaked hair was short and neatly trimmed. After almost a day, there was no stubble on his chin, which explained the beard suppressant she had found among the medical supplies. His eyes were a deep, clear blue, and his mouth was strong and well shaped. She saw that her scrutiny made him uncomfortable, though, so she turned her attention elsewhere.

“There’s more pain medication,” she said and indicated the bundle of supplies. She opened her own food pack and deliberately took a bite of the contents without any concern for the aroma. He watched her with the same intensity he had shown before, and oddly, his scrutiny made Sienna acutely self-conscious. She became aware of the fact that her sleeveless shirt was smudged and spotted with antiseptic. Her once neat braid was frayed at the edges, and tendrils of hair she had carelessly pushed aside framed her face in kinks that she could see from the corner of her eye.

“I don’t need it,” he replied, his attention on the contents of his food pouch.

His stubbornness amazed her. “You’re in pain.”

“It’s not so bad. Better to conserve the supplies, in case we need them later.”

“Planning on more injuries?”

“We don’t know how long we’re going to be here,” he explained with exaggerated patience. “If we’ve been on the surface for a day, it’ll be two more before we miss our rendezvous with the *Guardian* at Ontares Prime.”

Sienna stared at him. “A prison ship?” she asked before her throat constricted. Of course. It made sense that would be her ultimate destination. She would be incarcerated before she stood trial, interrogated, and then stored in her stasis tube until her day in court.

“That was your destination. They’ll probably conduct a search, but with all the ship’s systems down, including the homing beacon, it could be weeks before they trace my route from Trifida to Talek.”

“Assuming we’re on Talek.”

“It’s a logical assumption. Most of the other moons are too cold and I don’t think any of them have jungles.”

“Are there any cities on Talek?” Sienna asked, uncertain of whether she would prefer the answer to be yes or no.

Jordan shook his head. “Only coastal villages. The colonists are anti-technology, which is bad for us. But at least they’re friendly, last I heard.”

“How far are we from a coast?” she asked casually between two tasteless bites of protein concentrate.

The pilot gave a dry laugh, not a sound of amusement. “We can’t be too far. Talek is mostly coast. Most of the landmasses are nothing more than oversized islands. We’ll have to go outside and look around to get our bearings, but we’re probably no farther than a day’s walk.”

“Tomorrow,” Sienna said.

“Tomorrow? Why wait?”

She pointed to the faint light outside the cockpit viewport. “It’s getting dark. We’re safer in here right now. And you should stay still a while longer. Take some of the pain medication and get some sleep. You’ll be stronger tomorrow.”

“And you’ll be gone when I wake up, right?” He fixed her with that searing gaze again.

Sienna sighed but didn’t respond immediately. She finished her meal and set the empty food packet aside. Then she stretched out her legs in front of her and pulled her own thermal blanket over her.

“I guess you’ll find out in the morning.” She turned on her side, closed her eyes and lay as still as possible, listening to his movements. She felt his gaze on her for a long time while she pretended to sleep. Eventually she drifted off into the disturbing dream in which she sank slowly to the bottom of a cool, green ocean.

Chapter Five

The scorched deck of the *Valkyrie* came into focus beneath Jordan's right hand as he floated back to consciousness. He indulged in a tentative stretch before he remembered his injuries. Though the pain in his side had dulled to a mild ache, his head still throbbed fiercely, and his mouth felt dry as the deserts of Sheyenne where he'd spent his last vacation. He noticed a water canister within reach, and he grabbed it as he rolled to a sitting position.

After a gulp of tepid water, the events of the previous day came back with greater clarity. He immediately thought of Sienna.

Not surprisingly, he was alone in the cockpit. The blanket she had been using was neatly folded and another food packet lay empty beside it. She was wise to have taken his weapons. He would have tranqed her to make sure she stayed put all night.

Could he blame her for wanting to escape? What motivation did she have to stay with him when she could get herself to one of Talek's small colonies and find asylum with the colonists? She didn't seem to have any major injuries, so she'd do well on her own. Perhaps she'd be better off that way. If she stayed with him, he would only turn her over to the Protectorate once they were rescued.

With that thought in mind, he pulled himself to his feet. The movement caused a sudden stab of pain and he held his breath until it subsided. He needed a lot more rest, but he couldn't afford to languish in the wreckage of his ship until he recovered completely. Still guarding his injury, he headed for the passenger cabin. When he reached the hatchway, he found himself face to face with Sienna.

"You're up," she said, and took a quick step back to put distance between them.

He stared at her. "You're still here."

"Surprise." She gave him a quirky grin and the flash of mischief he saw in her eyes for that one instant sent a pleasant but unwelcome surge of warmth through him.

"Here," she said and handed him a plastic packet that contained a spare uniform shirt. "I figured you'd need this."

"Thanks." He took the package from her and noticed she wore another of his shirts over the dark, form fitting pants of her own clothing. The garment hung long on her slender body, but somehow it looked right, with its clean lines and crisp angles. She'd removed the Protectorate insignia from the collar and turned up the sleeves at the cuffs to fit her more comfortably. Her hair now hung free of its tight braid and flowed over her shoulders in damp rivulets. The smudges were gone from her face revealing the perfect porcelain skin he had seen through the observation port of the stasis tube.

"You washed up?"

"There's a pond outside," she replied. "We'll have plenty to drink. The water's clean."

"You went outside alone?" Why did that bother him?

"I came back, didn't I?"

"I just meant...."

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

This time Jordan moved back a step to allow her into the cockpit. "Not bad. You?"

"I'm fine." The look in her eyes told him she was lying.

She leveled a clinical gaze at him and nodded toward the bloody remains of his shirt. "Can I take a look?" she asked.

Jordan saw the concern in her expression. He wondered why she cared about his condition. He nodded, then stood unnaturally still, his eyes focused on the top of her head while she carefully pushed the ruined fabric of his shirt aside.

Jordan tried not to react when she gently probed the skin around his wound. Instead he focused on the scent of her hair. She must have found soap among his supplies, though he didn't remember choosing such a feminine scent the last time he'd purchased toiletries on Calabrel.

"It looks a little better," she said after her brief exam. "I'd say the metal missed any internal organs."

Jordan pulled the torn shirt back in place with a shrug. "I was lucky."

"Very." She didn't meet his gaze. While he watched, she knelt on the deck and began collecting the thermal blankets and water bottles.

"I've already started packing some supplies. We can start walking whenever you're ready." She rose with the blankets and water in her arms.

Jordan leaned against the cracked bulkhead and regarded her with a wry look. "Walking where exactly?"

"I figure, out of the jungle would be a good start. I don't have a problem with a coastal village and friendly natives."

"I don't understand why you're still here." He shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. "You could be on your way already with the food and the water. Chances are I'd never be able to find you, and it would take months for the Protectorate to track you down again."

The look she gave him made him feel ashamed that he'd made such a suggestion. "Are you telling me to go?" There was no sarcasm in her question.

"I can't stop you."

"I wouldn't do that, you know," she responded with a haughty tilt of her chin.

"Do what?"

"Take all the food, even if I were going to leave you. I'm not that kind of person."

Jordan had no response. What kind of person *was* she? There had to be a reason why she'd stayed with him this long when she could have taken off at any time. Maybe she assumed he knew more about the place than she did, and she needed his expertise for now.

"Let me get cleaned up," he said finally. "We'll pack whatever we can carry and get started."

"I'll wait for you in here."

Jordan took it as a peace offering of sorts, a promise to stick around at least for a little while longer. He nodded his approval and left her in the cockpit without a backward glance.

* * * *

By the time the pilot returned from the pond, Sienna had created two fairly sizable packs from canvas storage sacks she had found in the wrecked cabinets that lined the passenger cabin. She gave him a cursory glance when he appeared.

Dampness made his hair a few shades darker and his skin had lost the gray cast it had the day before. He looked much better dressed in the clean uniform shirt she had found for him. The long hem covered the bloodstains that marred the waistband of his flight pants, giving him the illusion of health.

Sienna had hoped to find clothing enough for both of them to change completely, but several of the storage compartments in the cabin, including the ones holding the rest of the pilot's wardrobe, were too badly damaged for her to pry the doors open. At least the new shirt covered the wound on his side. Other than the careful way he moved and the small bandage above his left eyebrow, there were no outward signs of his injuries. The bandage needed to be changed, but she got the impression he wasn't one to tolerate too much fussing, so she didn't offer to take another look at it.

The major wound seemed to be healing. During her brief exam she hadn't detected any signs of infection beneath the derma-gel.

"You didn't tell me the water was so cold," the pilot complained as he surveyed the remaining supplies. He picked up the wine bottle and considered it.

"You have a thing about temperature, don't you? The first word you said to me was *cold*," she told him.

"I'm from Calabrel. We don't like the cold."

She nodded. Hot, dry Calabrel couldn't be more different than Kyrasau with its endless forests and temperate zones. There wasn't a desert anywhere on Sienna's home planet.

"I thought you were just spoiled."

"About certain things, I guess I am," he replied. He studied the wine for another moment before putting it in his pack. "This might come in handy."

"Planning a party?" she asked.

"It's expensive. It was a gift from a friend of mine on Jurasek. We can trade it."

"If the natives like wine."

"I'm sure they will."

For a moment Sienna felt his eyes on her while she rearranged the medical supplies in her pack. Then he crossed the cabin and bent stiffly to retrieve the remnants of the body scanner. His disappointed sigh drew her attention.

"Whatever that is, it's in bad shape."

"It was a body scanner. I was trying to fix it."

"There's a small tool kit over there." She pointed to some debris spilling out of a broken cabinet. "Though I don't see what you'd need it for here."

"It might help to know if someone is carrying weapons." He gave her a pointed glance.

“We should travel light.”

She saw the frown beginning to crease his brow and rolled her eyes.

After some careful rearranging he managed to fit the ruined component into his pack. “I’ll be right back. I need a few things from the cockpit,” he said after a moment’s contemplation.

“We didn’t leave anything useful in there.”

“Yes, we did.” He crossed the cabin and disappeared into the cockpit. When he returned a few minutes later, his pack sprouted a mass of wires.

“You needed those?” She gave him a skeptical look.

“Pieces of the com. I may be able to rig up a portable beacon so the search party will have an easier time finding us.”

“Of course.” Sienna looked away. She didn’t want to consider what would happen when the Protectorate came looking for its missing collector and his prisoner.

With silent determination Sienna finished her own packing and stood up to test the weight of her satchel. The water bottle made the pack heavy but that would get lighter over time. She waited expectantly while the pilot did the same with his overstuffed pack. He winced but managed to hoist his bag onto his right shoulder.

“It might be a good idea to take a weapon,” he suggested pointedly. “I don’t know much about the fauna on Talek but jungles usually have predators.”

“Stunner or tranq?” Sienna kept her response casual.

“Both would be nice.”

She studied him and decided she could use this moment to gain some ground. If she gave him the weapons without comment, she might begin to earn his trust. Then again she might simply give him the opportunity to make her his prisoner again.

She set her pack down and crossed the deck to the small cabinet where she’d placed the weapons. She handed him both guns without comment, and he attached them to his belt, then arranged his uniform shirt to hang loosely over them.

Sienna bent and retrieved her pack. He stood at the hatch, ready to go when she turned around.

“After you,” he said. She bristled at his authoritative tone. On Kyrasau she had been under no one’s command, but in order to maintain his trust she would have to take certain cues from him, within reason.

She ducked past him out of the hatch and lowered herself onto the muddy floor of the jungle. The cloying humidity closed around her immediately like a shroud. The damp tropical heat would make the walk longer and the packs heavier, but they had little choice. Remaining with the wreckage of the ship would afford them no advantage, unless a rescue ship was on its way already, and she could only hope it wasn’t.

Sienna began walking and the pilot fell into step behind her. She kept her eyes focused on the thick foliage ahead and didn’t spare him a backward glance. If she got too far ahead of him, she was certain he would let her know and if she managed to lose him in the jungle, that would be his problem, not hers. She moved steadily past the small pond and in a few moments found herself completely surrounded by enormous plants and trees. Narrow trunks covered in smooth, gray bark stretched forever in the dimness of the jungle and moisture dripped from giant leaves onto their heads. The warm, sticky

droplets clung to them. Sienna sighed and began to wish they had landed somewhere else. No matter how short, this walk would be torture for both of them.

Chapter Six

Jordan had to struggle to keep up with Sienna. She moved like a cat, graceful and sure of her steps even in the damp soil, which was crisscrossed with thick roots and vines from the abundant plant life. He refused to ask her to slow down for his benefit, so he kept up the pace and pushed himself to match her long strides.

Each step sent a stab of pain through the wound in his side and another pulse of discomfort to the cut on his head. At first he was grateful for what seemed like a light rain that drizzled on them, but when he reached up to wipe some errant droplets from his forehead he realized the warm liquid falling on them was not water. The sap leaching from the overhead vines had a faint, citrus smell, which wasn't exactly unpleasant, but the consistency of the fluid was like sticky resin. His fingers stuck together and he found it difficult to pull them apart again. He didn't dare wipe his eyes for fear the lids would become stuck closed. As they walked he noticed the stuff seemed to coat every surface of the plants beneath the tightly woven canopy of foliage overhead. Here and there large insects that had been unfortunate enough to land in puddles of the sap struggled feebly to escape. He hoped he and his prisoner wouldn't eventually suffer the same fate if their skin became too thickly coated with the resin.

An enormous, dark green leaf flapped back in her wake and hit him in the face. "Thanks!" he called sarcastically. He pushed the leaf aside and had to peel it from his fingers before moving on.

"Sorry," she replied without missing a step. "Do you need to rest?"

"Of course not." It seemed like they'd been walking for hours, and since they were unable to see the sky, they had no idea if they were heading in the right direction. Jordan's knowledge of xenogeography was above average, and he remembered there were no landmasses on Talek larger than a few kilometers wide. The odds of them finding a coastal village, or at the very least, a coast, were not that remote. Once they reached the beach, even if they found no inhabitants, their chances of survival would increase.

"I'll catch up to you in a bit," she told him and stopped in her tracks.

He almost fell over her. "You're stopping?"

"I'm exhausted. This heat is killing me." With a weary look upward she began rummaging through her pack and pulled out a bottle of water and a food packet.

Jordan allowed himself a deep breath and crouched beside Sienna. He refused to admit it but he was grateful for the brief rest. While he pulled his own water bottle from his pack, he watched her, noting the delicate movements of her long-fingered hands as she carefully tore open the metallic pouch. She broke off a piece of the dehydrated wafer inside and handed it to him.

"Why don't we share one?" she suggested. "We should conserve our supplies."

Jordan reached for the food but remembered the sticky resin on his hands. He

swiped his fingers on his shirt before he accepted her offering.

"I hope this stuff doesn't harden," he mused between bites of the dry, somewhat flavorless meal bar. He glanced at her again and saw she was examining the ends of her long hair, which glistened with a lacquer-like coating of the sap.

"I might have to cut my hair if that happens." She frowned.

Jordan smiled. He would have been surprised to find such a beautiful woman without a hint of vanity. The thought stopped him, and his smile faded. He had to remind himself to think of her as a dangerous criminal. Annoyed with himself, he turned his attention once again to the jungle.

Judging by the sunlight slanting through the enormous leaves overhead, he surmised they were traveling eastward. He had studied the geography of a lot of worlds in this sector of the Galaxy, and from what he recalled, Talek wasn't known for its jungles. This had to be a relatively small area near the coast of one of the planet's narrow island continents. He tried to remember the last images from before the landing, but his only recollections were a blur of pain and confusion.

With the *Valkyrie's* computer completely destroyed, even if the *Guardian* sent a search party for him immediately when he missed his scheduled rendezvous, it could take weeks for them to locate the wreckage without a working homing beacon. Their only chance might be the components he'd salvaged from the ship's cockpit, but the weight of the circuit boards and wires was already slowing him down. In this relentless heat, he'd be too exhausted to move after another hour of walking.

* * * *

Sienna ate slowly. She wanted to stretch out the rest period, not for herself but for the pilot. Though she'd been determined to ignore him as much as possible during their trek, she'd found herself stealing glances at him every few minutes to make sure he was all right.

His refusal to acknowledge his physical discomfort frustrated her. Obviously he didn't want her to consider him weak. He still thought of her as dangerous, and he wasn't about to let on that the walk was making his condition worse. When she noticed the natural flush from the tropical heat had begun to leave his face and his eyes had taken on a sunken appearance, she decided to feign exhaustion to get him to stop for a rest.

The fact that the dull ache in the back of her neck had grown steadily worse over the course of the morning contributed to her discomfort as well. She thought about the pain medication in her pack but decided that, like the pilot, she didn't want to be incapacitated. She would save it for nightfall when she might need it to help her sleep.

She tried rubbing the back of her neck and found that any pressure she exerted there made the pain a little worse. She'd also encountered a small raised bump under her hair, just above the nape of her neck that was painful to the touch. She figured the sudden impact when the stasis tube disengaged from the jack-ins in the cargo hold might have caused an injury that was swelling now, made worse by the heat and exertion. Some faint, half-remembered image tickled the edges of her consciousness and made her afraid to contemplate what the cause of the pain might actually be if it wasn't a result of the crash.

A cold fear began to grow inside her. Something had happened to her that she

couldn't quite remember, something that was key to her capture by the Carnelian government and her incarceration on false charges of murder and treason. The details were fuzzy, and the more she thought about what had actually happened, the less she seemed to recall.

"Are you all right?" The pilot's voice broke through her muddled thoughts. She hadn't noticed him watching her this time.

"Yes," she answered. "Just tired."

"We should get moving again, so we can cover more ground before nightfall."

"Maybe you should lead this time." She gauged his reaction to her suggestion with a sidelong glance. To her surprise, he conceded. He settled his pack over his right shoulder again, rose, and started off through the dense foliage ahead.

"I didn't mean right this minute," she called as she struggled to her feet. After a moment she caught up to him and fell into step beside him. "Are you trying to lose me?"

"No, I just want to get to a village. I'm not the jungle type. All this...." He paused and gestured to the dark leaves that seemed to stretch down from the trees to engulf them. "It's almost claustrophobic."

"Calabrel is all wide open spaces, isn't it?" she asked.

"You've been there?" He sounded surprised.

"No. I've seen discs of it. What part are you from?"

"Southeast Bajai. I was twenty standard before I ever saw a tree growing outside of a greenhouse."

Sienna detected the homesickness in his voice. She imagined to some, Calabrel might be beautiful. She wondered what the pilot would think of the forests of Kyrasau. Her home world could not have been more different than his.

They walked in silence for a while longer, and Sienna realized if she wanted conversation she would have to continue to ask questions. Jordan seemed reluctant to impart any more information than was necessary. He obviously didn't want to get to know her, and she had to find a way to change that. If she could make him see her as a person, rather than just a criminal, he might be more likely to help her.

"Where was the tree?" she asked finally and heaved a sigh as she adjusted her pack. Her shoulder ached from the weight of it and from the exertion of moving the broken nav-con off of him.

"The tree? Oh, it was on Ontares Prime. That's where I went for training."

"As a courier?"

"No. I was a fighter pilot for the Planetary Defense Corps on Calabrel for seven years. I was assigned to the 21st regiment out of the Battleship *Kantar*."

"You fought in the Decimer Liberation?" Sienna gave him a curious glance. There were so few survivors of the bloody conflict between the Protectorate and the Decimer settlers. The skirmish lasted two years and required more than a dozen planets to send their space fleets into battle.

Jordan nodded solemnly, giving Sienna the impression it was a topic he didn't like to discuss.

"How did you end up a collector?" she asked before she realized that question might also be too personal.

"I got tired of fighting. I opted out of combat when my tour was up and joined the Protectorate."

There was another long silence during which Sienna wondered what to say next. She decided to keep the conversation light. "I'm from Kyrasau."

"I know. I read your transport docket."

"Of course." She nodded. He probably knew everything about her, including the charges against her in vivid fictional detail. "How long have you been a collector?"

"Five years."

"Seven as a soldier, five as a collector." She said. "That would make you..."

"Thirty two standard."

"I'm twenty nine."

"Your docket says twenty-seven." He glanced at her and they both ducked as an unusually large insect fluttered between them.

"That's standard years--three hundred sixty days," she said. The huge insect warranted a backward glance from both of them. "On Kyrasau it's three hundred thirty-five days in a year, so I'm twenty-nine."

He slid his eyes sideways for just a brief second. "Wouldn't you rather be twenty-seven?"

"Why?"

"Vanity. Most of the women I know want to be younger, not older."

"I'm not vain," she countered but thought briefly of the mess her hair had become since her much needed bath that morning.

"You're worried about your hair," he said and she had to laugh at how well he already knew her.

"I like my hair."

Something in his expression told Sienna he liked it, too.

"What part of Kyrasau?" he asked finally and she got the feeling she might have actually broken through his carefully constructed armor.

"Claw River Colony."

"Watch out," he warned, and his right arm shot out like a barrier in front of her. Sienna looked down just in time to avoid stepping in what looked like a round sinkhole. She came up short, stumbling a bit and inadvertently steadied herself by grabbing his arm.

He bent over to examine the perfectly round hole and after a second gently pushed her away from it.

"What is it?" she asked and craned her neck to try to look into the dark hole.

"Not sure, but on Calabrel we've got ground spiders that make holes like that. The smallest ones are about the size of your fist and they're venomous and territorial. I don't know what that is. I don't see anything in it, but it looks suspicious. Keep your eyes on the ground just in case there are more."

Sienna leaned over to get a better look, but Jordan guided her around the hole with a cautious backward glance. There were several more of the strange holes on the jungle floor ahead, which they also carefully avoided.

"Something to keep in mind if we make camp for the night. No wandering

around in the dark.”

“They could be nothing.”

Jordan shrugged. He reached up and broke a half-meter long limb from a low hanging branch and handed it to Sienna.

“Stick this in a hole and see what’s down there.”

She cocked her head as she accepted the stick. “And if something crawls up the stick and bites my arm off?”

“You’ll learn not to be so nosy and leave well enough alone.”

Not to be outdone, she did just as she was told. She walked to the nearest of the perfectly round holes and jammed the stick about halfway up its length. Nothing protested or crawled out of the hole, but when she pulled the stick back up, there was nothing left of the lower half but a smoldering stub.

Jordan grinned at her. “Acid bath. Probably how some nasty jungle creature catches dinner.”

“Well, at least we know nothing is going to crawl out of it,” she tossed back and hurled the stick into the underbrush. “Looks like we both learned something.”

On that note she marched resolutely ahead of him, though she kept her eyes on the ground and continued scanning for more holes. She heard his faint chuckle as he hurried to catch up. Annoyed by his superior attitude, Sienna decided it was time to reconsider her plan to enlist him as an ally.

He was far too self-possessed and frustratingly obtuse to be of any help to her. And now she was stuck with him for the time being. The thought only made her move faster until she was certain he’d stopped laughing. When she turned back to see if he was all right, her heart skipped a beat. The foliage had knitted together into a solid wall behind her and the pilot was nowhere in sight. She’d left him so far behind she couldn’t see or hear him. Cold realization crept over her.

She was alone.

Chapter Seven

Jordan's amusement at his companion's stubbornness faded after she marched off into the dense foliage ahead. It bothered him that he had to keep reminding himself of her history. He couldn't ignore the fact that she was dangerous and unpredictable.

Nevertheless his mind continued to wander to the rich shine of her hair when the occasional arrow of sunlight pierced the canopy overhead. He couldn't forget the deep ocean green of her eyes and the quirky half smile she gave him this morning when he teased her. The jolt of electric current that had raced through him when she had reached for him to stop her fall repeated every time he glanced at her. When her hand had closed over his arm, his heart had given a startled thud at the sensation that traveled through him. The resulting increase in pain from his wound had been enough to warn him off, but he realized that, had he been uninjured, the reaction to her touch would have been entirely pleasant.

He had to stop the small talk and pleasant conversation and concentrate on his mission. He wished there had been more information on the transport docket about the nature of her crimes.

He'd already learned, in the short time he'd known her, how Sienna McCade was most dangerous. Her charm, her kindness and apparent concern for his well-being, had lulled him into trusting her. If he let his guard down too often, he might end up dead.

When she disappeared ahead of him he stopped laughing and berated himself for acting like a fool. He allowed some distance between them so he could look at something else besides her well-formed backside swaying back and forth in her tight flight pants.

What was he doing? How could he lead a killer to one of Talek's simple colonies? Of course, where else could they find passage back to Ontares? If the *Guardian* couldn't track his unexpected course through Galatia's rings and locate the wreckage of the *Valkyrie*, they'd be stuck here. They had no choice but to seek out a settlement and hope the colonists had a way to contact a rescue ship. In the mean time Jordan would have to keep his prisoner in hand, and protect himself and others from her. A woman who was capable of murder was capable of anything, and the last thing Jordan needed was to be responsible for a killer gaining access to more victims.

The sounds of the jungle eventually drowned out her footsteps, and he had a brief respite from the churning of his thoughts.

Time to get tough, he decided. He realized she'd gotten so far ahead of him he could no longer hear her determined footsteps. He jogged a little to catch up, ignoring the pain in his side. Finally, when he was certain he would not be able to catch up, he called for her. A chill washed over him when she didn't answer.

She was gone.

* * * *

Sienna turned in a slow circle to get her bearings. *Damn him. Just like a man to get lost.* She tried not to panic at the thought of being alone in the middle of the jungle. It was ridiculous for her to worry. She possessed all the necessary survival skills to manage quite well on her own in almost any terrain. At fourteen she rafted down the Claw River alone. She sailed over waterfalls ten meters high with only a polyfiber boat to break her fall. At twenty she traded her boat for a *sunsailer* and took to the air. On more than one occasion she had crashed into mountainsides and broken a few bones, but she never regretted it. She never feared anything in those forests and something told her that under normal circumstances she would not have feared the jungles of Talek either. But these were not normal circumstances.

Nevertheless, something unsettling still tickled the back of her consciousness. She had a faint memory of something frightening that eluded her every time she reached for it. Somehow she knew that time was against her, yet she had no idea why. And the pilot, injured and probably exhausted, could have easily fallen into the underbrush where she would never locate him. His death would be on her hands, and it would be real, not a fabrication of her enemies like the others. She had to go back and find him, but fear disoriented her when she realized she had no idea which way to go.

Her calls went unanswered. Had he left her deliberately? Perhaps her ploy to get him to take pity on her had worked too well, and he'd decided to disappear and allow her to think she had escaped him. This way neither would be to blame for the other's actions. If he died, it would be his own fault, and if she escaped he would not be held accountable.

Somehow she could not bring herself to be grateful for his willful abandonment, and she set off in the direction that seemed most likely. Despite her natural instinct to move quietly, she stomped loudly and forced frustrated sighs through her clenched teeth in hopes the commotion would draw his attention, or at least help dissipate her anger at finding herself alone in the jungle.

After several minutes of backtracking, Sienna stopped mid-stride and listened to the jungle. She heard nothing to indicate anyone else might be nearby. The cries of unknown creatures filled the humid air. A faint breeze rustled the huge leaves overhead. What if she had chosen the wrong direction and was in fact moving farther away from him? Surrounded by thick jungle, they might never find each other again.

She called to him once more, but there was no answer. She cursed again and finally let out a scream of frustration, which also elicited no reply. She refused to exhaust herself. Finally she plopped into the soft underbrush and began to rummage through her satchel for a bottle of water and a food packet. A quick inventory told her that she had more of the food with her than the pilot did, and that worried her. If they remained separated he would have less chance of survival. She tore open a foil pouch and ate only half of the contents despite her hunger. She drank a few sips of water and decided it might be prudent to search for another pond to replenish her supply.

After a few deep breaths of the humid air, Sienna closed her eyes briefly and allowed the greenish light of the jungle to seep into her consciousness. The forests of Kyrasau appeared in her mind, and Sienna visualized herself there, alone by choice, enjoying the solitude and beauty of her homeworld. The brief respite rejuvenated her

somewhat and when she stood again she felt better able to tackle the problem at hand.

With no landmarks in the jungle, she had little to gauge direction except a particularly fat tree that looked vaguely familiar. She headed in that direction and had almost reached the oversized bole when something small and fast whizzed through her line of sight. With a loud thunk, a winged projectile embedded itself into the thick bark of the tree in front of her. The capsule, attached to a lethal looking dart, had broken on impact spilling shimmering drops of thick red fluid down the mottled bark of the tree.

Sienna reacted immediately. She threw herself into the underbrush and rolled away from the tree, her mind reeling. The pilot had deliberately allowed her to pull ahead so he could hunt her. That was how he planned to save face, by setting it up to look like she had attempted to escape. She couldn't imagine what he hoped to gain by tranquilizing her now, when he'd be stuck in one place until she regained consciousness. He certainly couldn't be planning to carry her anywhere in his condition.

After crawling a few yards through the brush, she came up against more of the round acid pools and was forced to stand in order to walk around them. She kept her head low and listened. This time she heard the pilot crashing through the forest in pursuit. She ran, aware that his injuries would slow him down.

She thought of the tranq gun. Though Sienna wasn't entirely familiar with the particulars of the liquid in the darts, she imagined it was strong enough that even a limb shot or a scratch might have an effect on her. She wanted so badly to stop, to surrender and beg him to understand that she hadn't run away, but that inexplicable tingling at the back of her neck kept her moving.

Memories of her time on Trifida plagued her. She remembered the hopeless frustration of being unable to convince anyone of her innocence. Driven by a fear she didn't understand, she'd run then too, even though she knew it was the wrong thing to do. There were no other options at the time. She could think of none now, either, so once again, she ran.

The jungle floor canted and Sienna skidded on slippery mud. She found herself on the ground again, rolling uncontrollably, and grateful only that, as a moving target, she would be more difficult to hit with a tranq dart. She heard the pilot yell but couldn't make out the words. Was he ordering her to stop? As if she could. The thick, wet leaves sliced at her skin and she collided with sharp rocks buried in the mud that bruised her already sore muscles. Sienna used the momentum to her advantage. She tucked in her arms to make her body small. Her speed increased down the unexpected slope, and with no way to stop herself she could only hope she wasn't headed for a cluster of the small acid pools.

She needn't have worried about the strange sinkholes, though. The huge pit at the bottom of the slope wasn't filled with acid. Sienna didn't see the hole for the thick barrier of leaves that surrounded it and when she crashed through them and found herself momentarily airborne, she thought for a brief second that she might have found another icy pond. A cold, if unplanned swim would not have bothered her in the least but the jarring impact on the muddy ground some three meters below certainly did.

She hit the floor of the roughly circular pit with a wet thud. Thick mud enveloped her and fortunately, cushioned her fall. She managed a few ragged gasps of the heavy air

before another body sailed over the edge of the pit. The pilot had followed her path almost exactly and without a modicum of grace, landed squarely on top of her, hammering her body deeper into the mud.

* * * *

Under different circumstances Jordan would have enjoyed the feel of sweat-slicked skin beneath him, but having landed unceremoniously on top of Sienna after a wild chase through the jungle, he was now in considerable pain. Angry as a wet cat, she struggled to push his weight off her with little concern for his injuries.

“Get away from me!” She heaved her slippery body up from the floor of the oval shaped pit in which they’d landed. The walls of the hole were smooth and damp, offering no purchase to help them climb free. The thick mud clung to them and covered them in a mossy stench that grew stronger with every movement.

Jordan rolled away from Sienna and clutched his throbbing midsection. He gave her a wide berth and leaned against the wall of the pit gulping humid air. His vision swam, but he watched her with cautious amusement as she scraped the greenish mud from her arms and face and threw globs of it at the ground. Huge drops splattered everywhere.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she demanded when she’d cleared her eyes and nose of the gelatinous goo.

“Oh, I’ll be all right...,” he said with mock cheerfulness though his head throbbed wildly.

“I don’t mean physically, I mean *mentally*! Why were you trying to kill me?” She railed at him as she paced the confines of their dirty prison. “Did you think I was trying to escape?”

“I wasn’t trying to kill you,” he argued through a violent cough. “And actually, yes, I did think you were trying to escape.”

She scraped more mud from her neck and shoulders and threw the handful of it at the ground just inches from his feet. The challenge in her eyes was unmistakable, but Jordan was not a stupid man. He knew he had little chance of winning any battle he fought with Sienna McCade right now.

“Well, I wasn’t trying to get away,” she said. “In fact I was trying to *find* you. I thought something had happened to you.”

He nodded. “I realize that.”

“That’s it? You *realize* it? You realize it. Well, good for you. Ugh!”

Jordan looked up and found her peering inside the front of her oversized shirt. With an expression of pure disgust she reached under the muddy uniform and pulled out the crushed remains of a rather large insect. It’s broken body, a mass of spindly legs and tattered wings, landed next to Jordan. He surveyed the small corpse with distaste.

“You could have broken my neck!”

“I wasn’t *planning* to land on you,” he countered and sank stiffly to the ground. “Gravity sort of took over.”

“You seem to have a problem with gravity, don’t you? I’ve noticed this pattern of you hitting the ground hard ... a lot.”

“Ha ha. Would you mind haranguing me later? Right now, I think we should

concentrate our energy on getting out of this hole. Whoever or whatever dug it, probably is expecting to find something edible at the bottom of it at the end of the day.”

Realization washed over her features and her head snapped up. She searched the rim of the pit more than a meter above them. “Is this another trap?”

“Probably.”

She let out a growl of frustration that echoed through the jungle. “Give me the tranq gun,” she said holding out her hand.

“What?”

“I’m going to shoot myself right now so I won’t be awake when whoever or whatever made this arrives to eat us. I’ve had enough today. I’m done. Give me the tranq.”

“I lost it in the fall.”

Sienna turned away, hands on her hips and began to pace away in frustration. For some reason Jordan actually found her anger endearing. Even covered in sticky green mud, her hair plastered to her head and beside herself with anger, he found her enticing. The damp uniform shirt clung to her curves and there was a tear in the right leg of her pants that exposed a few inches of smooth thigh. Her eyes blazed. Jordan realized if he’d had the energy to stand, he would have gone to her and taken her in his arms to comfort her. Unfortunately, he doubted that in her present state, she’d let him get that close.

“Do you still have the stunner?” she asked finally, her eyes on the jungle floor above them.

Jordan reached under his shirt for the other weapon and his eyes widened when he realized he’d lost that weapon, too. “Uh....”

“What? It’s gone?” She glared at him, hands on hips again, panting in frustration.

“Yep.”

“That’s just great. As if we don’t have enough problems.”

“I’d say we have one more.” Jordan’s eyes tracked from Sienna to a point above her where dark silhouettes had begun appearing one by one at the rim of the pit. She turned slowly when she noticed his attention was focused elsewhere. She backed up toward him as a dozen savage faces appeared above them. The group of hunters brandished long spears with blackened tips. They leered at their captives and whispered among themselves as they crowded closer to the edge of the pit. These men certainly didn’t look like *friendly natives*.

Sienna sank down next to Jordan and whispered in his ear. “I thought you said the natives were friendly.”

He put one arm protectively around her shoulders and tried to seize up their captors without making eye contact. He didn’t want to do anything that might be construed as an act of aggression.

“I guess I was wrong.”

Chapter Eight

Sienna felt Jordan's warm breath next to her ear and the weight of his hand on her shoulder. Involuntarily, she pressed her back against his chest. The twelve native men crowded each other on the far rim of the pit, vying for a better look at the captives.

Nearly naked except for loincloths of brown fabric that hung to their knees, they glared at their captives with unrestrained curiosity. The same greenish mud that filled the bottom of the pit streaked their chests and faces, and each carried a spear of pale wood that ended in a viciously sharp, soot-blackened tip. Beneath the layer of mud, their skin ranged from light tan to dark brown, but they were all dark-haired with almond shaped brown eyes. Uniformly, their lips were pulled back in an expression that resembled a sneer, and as they edged closer to the pit, they all became utterly silent.

Jordan's fingers tightened on Sienna's shoulder. Huddled at the bottom of the pit, they were easy targets for those long spears. There was nowhere to run. Her heart thudded against her ribs as she tried to get a good look at their captors without making eye contact with any of them. Behind Sienna's right shoulder blade, Jordan's heartbeat pulsed like a steady drum. The sensation made her heart beat even faster.

The standoff lasted a full five seconds. Then the native group parted in the middle, and one of the hunters produced a long object that he and one of his companions lowered into the pit. The pole was made of dark wood with alternating protrusions on each side at various intervals. The sharp lower end of the pole sunk a few inches into the soft mud and the top protruded about a foot above the rim of the pit. The man who had lowered it gestured to the protrusions and made a climbing motion with his hands, fist over fist. He looked back to another of his companions then and whispered out of one corner of his mouth.

"Do you think they get it?"

"I don't think they're completely stupid, Raf," the other man answered, then waved to Sienna and Jordan with an amiable grin.

"DO ... YOU ... SPEAK ... STANDARD?" he said, enunciating each word carefully.

"I told you they were friendly," Jordan whispered in relief. He loosened his grip on her shoulder and hauled himself to his feet. He crossed the pit toward the makeshift ladder the hunters had lowered for them.

"Are we *glad* to see you!" he said.

Collectively the hunters grinned and began chattering among themselves. The one called Raf reached down a hand to help Jordan up the ladder.

"You're from the ship that crashed," he said. Jordan heaved himself over the rim of the pit, then reached down to help Sienna climb up after him.

"I'm Jordan Dane and this is ... Sienna McCade. My ship was the *Valkyrie*, out of Calabrel."

“Are there any other survivors?” the hunter asked.

“We were the only ones on board,” Jordan replied. “I guess you saw us come down.”

“Couldn’t miss it. What a fireball. I’m Raf Gadjia, by the way. This is Telk, Bref, Gordi, Bin and Seref.” He pointed in turn to half a dozen members of the hunting party. The other six rattled off their own names too quickly for either Jordan or Sienna to take note. “We’ve been looking for the wreckage. Didn’t expect to find you in our trap.”

“We didn’t expect to end up in it,” Sienna commented as she bent over to brush mud from her knees. The appreciative glances of the hunters caused an unpleasant pang in Jordan’s gut that he couldn’t explain. Of course, if there were few women among the natives, a beautiful castaway might cause a stir.

“What do you normally catch in your pit?” she asked when she’d finished her task.

Raf smiled showing a row of straight, white teeth. “Sloth. Just the small ones, though.”

Jordan eyed the huge pit. “I’d hate to see a big one.”

“Just out of curiosity, are we on Talek?” Sienna asked with an uncertain smile at the one called Gordi. The nearly naked hunter leered at her, and Jordan found himself moving between the two. He wasn’t sure exactly who he was protecting, but something about the other man’s proximity to Sienna made him uneasy.

Raf nodded. “I guess we weren’t your intended destination.”

“Not exactly,” Jordan replied but said no more. Gratefully none of the hunters asked for a more detailed explanation.

“What caused your crash?” another of the men asked.

“You mean our *extreme landing*?” Sienna quipped, eliciting a laugh from the hunting party and a sour look from Jordan.

“Faulty manifold,” Jordan answered before Sienna could say more. She gave him a curious glance, which he ignored. “We clipped an asteroid and threw an engine coupling. The aft manifold sparked and bam--the ground came up and hit us. We’re lucky to be alive.”

“And on our feet,” Sienna took over with a glance at Jordan. Uncertainty shadowed her green eyes. She’d obviously expected him to identify her to the colonists as a dangerous criminal, and she couldn’t figure out why he hadn’t done that. “Do you have a medic in your colony? Jordan’s hurt.”

“I’ll be fine, it’s a small cut,” Jordan protested.

Raf nodded vigorously. “Of course. We have two doctors.”

“We’d be happy to trade for their services.” Sienna’s offer made Jordan think of the wine. Hopefully the natives would accept it as barter.

“No need!” Telk cut in. “Everyone’s welcome in the village. We don’t have any mechanics, but we’ll give you whatever help we can with your ship.”

“The ship can’t be fixed,” Jordan said with a sigh. “We need transport off world. Do you think that can be arranged?”

After a bit of deliberation among the hunters, Raf answered. “A supply ship stops here once a month. You could probably get passage the next time it comes by.”

“When will that be?” Sienna asked.

Raf shrugged, “It was here six days ago.”

“Once a month,” Sienna repeated. She rubbed a muddy hand over her brow, leaving a smudge.

“There’s no way to contact it sooner?” Jordan asked.

“We don’t have a com system. We have everything we need here. We just use the supply ship to get parcel deliveries from our homeworlds,” Telk explained after more deliberation. “Most of us are first generation, so we come from other planets. In a few years we won’t even need the supply ship for that anymore.”

“A month,” Sienna mused. Jordan watched her for a moment trying to decide if she was disappointed or relieved by the news. They would be stuck here for a month, maybe more if the ship didn’t have a set schedule. That would be plenty of time for her to arrange asylum with the natives or run off and lose herself in the jungle. He couldn’t imagine why she seemed upset by the prospect of a month’s freedom, but he didn’t have time to speculate. Raf pulled the ladder pole up from the pit and the hunting party rallied around them.

“It’s about an hour’s walk to the village. Do you think you can make it?” he asked Jordan.

“I’ve made it this far.”

“You can lean on me if you want,” Sienna said. Jordan’s first instinct was to refuse her offer, but he caught Gordi’s dark eyes roaming Sienna’s curves where the muddy uniform shirt clung to her hips. The odd protective feeling surged through him again. He nodded and draped an arm over her shoulders. She slipped hers around his waist, careful not to touch the spot where the derma-gel still protected his wound. With half of the hunters in front of them and half behind, they set off for the village through the gradually thinning jungle, silent and clinging to each other for support.

* * * *

As they walked, the jungle thinned out considerably into a swath of tropical scrubland that sloped down to a wide beach of coarse, white sand.

The Talekian village fit the image Sienna had formed in her mind based on Jordan’s description. Round, thatched huts dotted the area between the edge of the beach and the beginning of the jungle tree line. At one end of the beach a group of women and children played in the crystal blue surf. At the other end, where a tumble of jagged black rocks rose from the water like teeth, another group of people, mostly older women and a few older men, skimmed through tidal pools collecting objects in woven baskets that hung from their hips. In the center of the village a collection of long canoe-like boats stood on end in a circle, leaning against each other. Nets and other implements lay in piles around the boats, and nearby two men sat on small benches weaving thick cord into more nets and tying what looked like dried gourds onto the cords here and there as floats.

Galatia dominated the eastern sky, its rings visible as a brown band slanting to the heavens. Beyond the lavender globe of the gas giant, the sky shaded to cobalt blue. Faint, wispy clouds streaked the horizon just above the sea. Sienna had never seen a more beautiful place, even in her dreams.

By the time the hunting party escorted them to one of the huts, Jordan was

limping pretty badly. With each step he tightened his grip on Sienna's shoulder.

Raf entered the hut first, and after a moment he returned with a middle-aged woman who wore a colorful dress of brilliant blue and green fabric. A universal medical symbol dangled from a metal chain around her neck.

"I'm Tia," she introduced herself and set her clinical gaze on Jordan. He managed a weak smile in return.

"What happened to *you*?"

"We found them in the sloth pit," Telk said. "They survived the crash we saw yesterday."

"He got a metal shard embedded in his side--probably a broken rib," Sienna told the woman as she helped Jordan to sit on a small bench outside the entrance of the hut. "I cleaned the wound as best I could and used some medical supplies from the ship, but I only have basic first aid skills. I hope I didn't do more damage. He's been walking all day--and he also has a head injury."

"He also has a voice," Jordan muttered. "And he's fine. Just a little tired."

"Let's see." Tia lifted Jordan's chin with her fingers and then peeled the bandage off his head. She humped in satisfaction at the partially healed cut and despite Jordan's protest, pulled up his shirt to expose the wound on his side. Sienna and Raf watched anxiously and a few of the hunters milled around while Tia assessed Jordan's wound. The others wandered off, greeted by friends and family members and went to attend other duties in the village.

"You did a nice job," Tia commented after poking at the derma-gel a few times. Jordan scowled at her, then at Sienna.

"He's a bit of a baby," she told the doctor. "He won't take any pain medication, though."

"I have something that will help with the swelling," the medic offered. "I don't see any signs of infection, so there's probably nothing in there that needs to be dug out."

"I'm still here, you know," Jordan said. He couldn't believe the two women were discussing his condition as though he were a child. He certainly felt like one, especially when Tia dropped the hem of his shirt and smoothed the material back in place. She looked at him, her dark brows knit sternly.

"I prescribe a good night's rest and a decent meal. No exertion for a few days and a sincere thank you to your nurse here. She did a good job."

The corner of Sienna's mouth rose very slightly, then turned down again when Tia lifted her chin in the same manner she had Jordan's.

"How about you? You weren't hurt at all in the crash?"

Sienna looked at Jordan. She couldn't explain she'd been in a stasis tube for most of their journey. In truth, she had no idea how she had managed to survive the rough ride locked in the *Valkyrie's* hold without any worse than a stiff neck.

"Jordan is an excellent pilot," she said with a diamond-hard glance at him. "I've got a few bruises but nothing serious."

Tia nodded. "You may not feel it now, but it could hit you in a day or two. Same prescription for you. Food, sleep and no strenuous activity. If anything bothers you, come see me or Daren, my husband."

Sienna nodded. "Thank you."

"You can stay in one of the new huts. We just built a few at the north end of the beach by the waterfall. I'll show you," Raf said.

"Are you sure there's nothing we can do to repay you for your help?" Jordan hauled himself up from the bench. Sienna moved to his side, and his arm curled instinctively around her shoulder.

Raf smiled at them. "Not now. But if you're going to stay a while, we'll find work for you to do. There's always something that needs doing around here."

"That's our way. Everyone helps and everyone benefits," Tia said. "It's a good life." Her pride was evident in the wide smile that spread across her friendly face.

The Talekians were everything Jordan said, and for the first time since her capture by the authorities on Trifida, Sienna began to relax.

She began to think there might be a chance after all to elicit Jordan's trust and his help while they waited for the supply ship. He hadn't told the natives the truth about her so far, and she certainly had no plans to hurt anyone, so there would be no need for him to offer any more information than he already had. If she were lucky, she might be able to convince him to let her go before the supply ship arrived.

Chapter Nine

Raf led Jordan and Sienna to one hut of a group of three that stood at the north end of the beach just within the tree line. Behind the three structures a gurgling waterfall tumbled from a stand of rocks about four meters high. The silvery white water made a soothing sound as it cascaded into a small, dark pool surrounded by mossy black stones and huge flowers in shades of orange and fuchsia. The heady scent of the flowers permeated the warm air and reminded Sienna of ripe fruit. The aroma made her hungry, but she realized she was too tired to care about food at the moment.

The hunter showed them inside the sparsely furnished hut. A narrow cot made of the same brown material as the hunters' loincloths sat on one side of the single room nearest the door. On the far side, under a rectangular window, a pallet-like mattress lay on a flat wooden platform, and from the rafters of the hut hung a number of small nets full of what appeared to be household objects such as wooden plates, bowls and various utensils. A small table and three flat stools sat in the center of the hut.

"You can use this place as long as you like," Raf told them. "You can get water from the pond and later on someone will bring you food. We'll be preparing the evening meal soon, but you don't have to eat with us if you'd rather rest."

"Thank you. You can't imagine how grateful we are that you found us," Sienna told him as she inched toward the cot. She set her pack down on the floor of the hut and turned back to their host. "Are you the leader of the village?" she asked.

Raf grinned widely and his bronzed skin darkened in a faint blush. He pushed dark hair from his eyes and straightened his posture. "I'm the hunt leader. The village is run by a Council. Tia's husband Daren is First Consul, and then there's Malik and Torva. You can meet them all tomorrow if you like. Don't worry, they won't mind you staying until the supply ship comes, or as long as you want to. Like Telk said, everyone is welcome here."

"I would like to talk to them tomorrow." Jordan limped over to the pallet on the floor and gave it a skeptical look. "I have a lot of questions."

Raf nodded amiably and headed for the door of the hut. "Rest well. If you need anything, you can always go to Tia."

"We will, thank you again." Sienna waved as Raf left and then she turned to Jordan with a quizzical look. "Why didn't you tell them?"

Jordan didn't meet her eyes. He stood surveying the pallet, obviously trying to figure out if it was worth the effort to lower his aching body to the floor to lie down.

"Why don't you take the cot?" she asked. "It'll be easier for you to get up."

"Nah, s'allright. I can do this." He sank cautiously to his knees at the edge of the wooden platform and began opening his muddied shirt. Sienna stared at him, willing him to feel the heat of her gaze on his back.

"I didn't tell them, because I just ... didn't think it was the right time," he said

finally, without turning

Sienna sat on the edge of the cot, testing the strength of the springy material and the light wooden frame. She found it surprisingly sturdy and very comfortable. All she wanted to do was sleep, but she couldn't take her eyes off Jordan. She watched the muscles of his back ripple under his skin as he stretched, one hand moving to the dermal gel that still protruded slightly above the flat of his abdomen. A dark bruise ran to the middle of his lower back, and Sienna realized he had probably been much closer to death when she found him in the cockpit than she knew at the time. The fact that he had survived her amateur attempts at first aid and the torturous walk through the jungle was miraculous.

With deliberate care he lowered himself onto the pallet and let out a groan. He closed his eyes and lay there, one knee bent and one hand splayed across his stomach. Sienna watched him for a moment and bit her lower lip. She hadn't had time before now to notice his narrow hips, broad shoulders and strong thighs. She decided that when he wasn't complaining or frowning, he was actually very attractive.

She thought of the cold water tumbling over the rocks outside and shook her head to clear her thoughts. "I suppose tomorrow will be a better time."

He sighed. "I don't know. It might be wise not to say anything for the time being."

Sienna made no reply but stretched her tired legs out in front of her and began unbuttoning her own mud-covered uniform shirt. She looked across the hut at Jordan, but his eyes were closed.

"You mean you might not tell them at all?" she asked as she shrugged out of the stiff material.

"Not unless there's a need," he mumbled through a yawn.

"A need?"

"You're not planning a killing spree, are you?"

Sienna sighed. "If I were, don't you think I'd start with *you*?"

"Hmm, probably."

"Well, then maybe you *should* tell them, for your own protection."

Sienna waited a beat for a reply but when she turned to look in his direction she realized that he'd already fallen asleep.

"I guess you're not that worried, are you?" she asked loudly, but he gave no indication that he heard her.

Sienna rolled her eyes and surveyed the damage to the clinging garment beneath her borrowed uniform shirt. Hopefully the colonists could find her something more suitable to wear. She decided that would be her first order of business in the morning.

She combed her fingers through her hair and found matted, sticky spots where the resin drops had hardened. She amended her growing to-do list to include a bath before anything else and settled herself into the cot. One hand went to the back of her neck where the dull ache that had plagued her all day still resided. The small lump at the base of her neck seemed to have grown. The slight pressure of her fingers on the swollen knot of flesh produced a sharp pain. She winced. Why hadn't she mentioned this to Tia? Surely the village doctor could have offered some assistance. Something kept her silent.

The fear washed over her again. She still sensed a memory that she was not supposed to access. The pain was a reminder and a warning. She rubbed ineffectually at the skin around the small bump and closed her eyes wearily. When the sinking feeling came she didn't fight it, but allowed herself to float downward until she touched the bottom of the cool, green ocean and then drifted away. This time there was no panic, no suffocating sensation. She only felt heavy and so tired. This time the blackness that overtook her was soothing and quiet and complete.

* * * *

A faint gray light bathed the interior of the hut when Jordan awoke. He couldn't tell if it was early evening or early morning, but he was still too tired to care. He rolled over on the surprisingly soft pallet and stretched, mindful of his wound. His side ached a little, but overall he felt better than he had since he had awakened in the *Valkyrie's* cockpit. A pleasant aroma drifted from a large wooden platter on the table in the center of the hut. Someone had brought them food and left without waking them.

He pulled himself to a sitting position and tried to examine his injury in the dim light. The derma-gel had already begun to recede and flatten out against his skin. The jagged edges of the wound were still visible beneath the transparent cushion of gel, but the red line of the cut had already begun to knit back together. He would probably have a scar, but he knew he had Sienna to thank for the fact that his insides were still ... inside.

He rose stiffly to examine the food and found it appetizing. Enough sliced fruits, small loaves of bread and pieces of cooked fish filled the wooden platter to easily feed four people. The generosity of the Talekian colonists amazed him. He had read about their attempt to create a simpler life and not rely on technology. He had never expected to find such a place so appealing.

Sienna made a small sound in her sleep and Jordan turned his attention to the cot. She lay curled in a ball, her chin tucked against her chest and her arms around her knees. Her breathing was shallow and her fists were clenched. She slept like someone who had something to fear. Of course, a fugitive from justice would be afraid to sleep.

He hated the fact that he'd considered telling the colonists the truth about Sienna. From the moment Raf had welcomed them, Jordan had contemplated the problem of what to do with his prisoner. The Talekians seemed so guileless and open. To bring a murderer into their community was inherently wrong, but something prevented Jordan from saying anything. He wondered if the colonists would want to lock Sienna up if they knew the truth about her. Did they even have a jail? Somehow the thought of Sienna caged or incarcerated left him cold. So far she had done nothing suspicious. Even her disappearance in the jungle was accidental. She certainly could have lost herself for good if she'd wanted to, but she had doubled back to look for him.

It troubled him that his first thought was that she had tried to escape. His training as a soldier had taken over and without thinking, he had fired the tranq at her. He was glad now that he hadn't hit her with the dart. Would she ever really forgive him for it?

It still didn't make sense to him that she had chosen to stay with him. At this point she didn't need him any longer, yet she seemed genuinely concerned about him. Why?

When she woke with a startled cry he resisted the urge to comfort her. She sat up,

blinking back the disorientation of sleep.

“What time is it?” she asked, rubbing her arms with trembling fingers.

Jordan took a seat at the table and watched her. “I have no idea.”

“Big help,” she mumbled. “Food?”

“It looks good. Come on, have some.” He patted the stool next to the one he occupied, but she remained on the cot studying the dirt floor between her feet.

“Are you all right?” he asked cautiously. The troubled look in her eyes worried him.

She nodded. “My head hurts. I guess it’s that delayed reaction Tia mentioned.”

“I could go get her for you.”

“No, I’ll just have something to eat and go back to sleep for a while.” Sienna rose and joined Jordan at the table. He handed her a piece of brilliant purple fruit and took a stem full of a globular berries for himself.

He watched her bite into the fruit and smiled faintly when she licked the juice from her lips. Even dirty and pale from sleep she was beautiful. Why couldn’t he get that thought out of his mind?

“Before I talk to the Village Council, I want to know more about you and what you did,” he said finally. He dreaded the answer, but worse than that was the stricken look in her eyes.

“What did the transport docket say, exactly?” she asked. Her gaze was fixed on the table, and she traced a knothole in the wood with one finger while she ate.

“That you murdered thirty people. It also mentioned high treason against the government of Carnelia.”

She nodded.

“You admit it?”

“No,” she said. “I didn’t kill anyone.”

“You were framed?” He smiled again, but there was no humor in it. She glanced at him, then looked away.

“I don’t know exactly what happened. But I have a theory.”

“A *theory*?”

“Someone in the Carnelian Council wanted to hide something. I found out about it and they ... tried to get rid of me.” She shrugged then, her expression one of genuine confusion.

“To have you transported to the Hub for trial, they’d have to have a pretty good case against you,” he commented. “They’d have to know that false charges wouldn’t stand up in Protectorate court.”

“I don’t think I was ever meant to reach Protectorate court.”

Jordan felt a cold shiver at the back of his neck. “The pirates?”

“Maybe.”

“Tell me why I should believe you.” He wanted to. He wished he could.

“There’s no reason for you to believe me.” That wasn’t the answer he wanted to hear. Jordan wanted an excuse, anything he could hold onto to convince himself he wasn’t helping a killer go free.

“But why would pirates attack a courier ship?” she asked.

“Who were the thirty people?”

“Members of the Carnelian Council, I think. I remember an explosion.”

“How did you end up on Trifida?”

“I can’t remember.” She gave him a searching look. “I don’t think I know anyone there....”

“You’re not convincing me.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“How can I convince you of something I’m not sure of myself?” Her voice rose in exasperation. “What can I say? I remember the explosion. I remember knowing something I wasn’t supposed to know, wanting to tell someone about it, but I didn’t know who. I guess I told the wrong person.”

“What did you know? What did you find out about the High Council?”

“I told you, I don’t remember. It’s not there anymore, and the more I think about it, the less I find.”

Jordan studied her for a long moment. The gray light faded around them.

“If you knew something the Council wanted to hide, it would have been easier for them to just kill you. The transport tech who gave me the tranq gun told me in the event you escaped, you were not to be harmed. I’ve been transporting prisoners for a long time, and no one has ever escaped a stasis tube, on *my* ship anyway.”

“But the tube malfunctioned,” Sienna said. “When I woke up I was still inside it, locked in. I would have suffocated if the ship hadn’t been attacked. When the gravity went off and back on, the tube crashed and the observation port broke. If that hadn’t happened I’d be dead.”

“None of this is making any sense,” Jordan sighed and ran his hands over his face to clear away the cloudiness of sleep. “The High Council of Carnelia wanted you out of the picture because you knew something they didn’t want you to know, so they arranged to have you transported to a Protectorate prison ship in a stasis tube, *then* arranged to have my ship attacked to destroy the stasis tube?”

“Or someone sabotaged the tube so it would malfunction and kill me,” she replied.

“Or allow you to escape, which you did.”

“Someone’s plan didn’t work.” Sienna leaned her head back to look at the ceiling of the hut. She winced and her hand went to the back of her neck.

“Why don’t we go back to sleep for now, and discuss this in the morning?” Jordan suggested. “I won’t tell the villagers anything for now. Just don’t run off.”

“Maybe you can help me figure out what happened. I don’t want to spend a hundred years in a stasis tube,” she said and fixed him with a pleading look that tugged at him.

Jordan nodded reluctantly. “If you’re innocent, you won’t have to. The Protectorate will find out the truth.”

“But they’ll put me under while they figure it out. I can’t go through that again. Whatever I found out, it wasn’t worth this. I won’t go in stasis again!” Sienna rose from the stool and paced across the hut. She rubbed her arms vigorously despite the damp heat of the evening. “Please help me, Jordan. I don’t know what else to do.”

A tight coil formed in Jordan’s stomach, and he felt an electric sensation along his

skin as he watched her move. He wanted desperately to help her, to touch her. He wanted to hold her and make promises, but it was absurd to feel so strongly for someone he wasn't even sure he could trust. He remained sitting at the table for a long time, unmoving, battling with himself.

"I'll do what I can," he said finally. "But I work for the Protectorate. I'm bound to follow their rules."

"If the *Guardian* gets here before the supply ship does, you'll turn me in," she said, defeated.

"I have to."

"I understand." The look in her eyes said she didn't. But it would do no good to exhaust themselves with a pointless argument.

"Get some sleep. We'll talk more in the morning."

She nodded and went back to the cot. Jordan sat at the table for a long time watching her as she curled back into a ball and fell asleep.

When he finally fell asleep himself, he dreamed of her. In his dream her face floated above him and she smiled. He reached for her and she disappeared, leaving him with an empty feeling that stayed with him long into the night.

Chapter Ten

Sienna stood over Jordan's sleeping form, battling a tempest of emotions. Sunlight streamed through the small rectangular windows of the hut and illuminated the golden hair on his head and the smattering of curls across his chest. Relaxed in sleep, his features were sensuous. Golden lashes rimmed his eyes, and his lips drew her attention and wouldn't let go. She fought the overwhelming urge to lie down next to him and soak up the warmth of his skin. But the thought of kicking him in the shins appealed to her even more.

His snoring had startled Sienna awake some time before dawn. Jordan's breathing was deep and silent now, but she had been unable to get back to sleep. She had crept from the hut in exasperation and taken a much needed bath in the pond, luxuriating in the cool, fragrant water. Then she had found Tia, who was fortunately an early riser, and procured a comfortable wrap dress for herself in a bright orange color that rivaled the gorgeous blossoms that ringed the pond. Tia also provided her with a clean shirt and a pair of dun colored trousers for Jordan from her husband's wardrobe. Sienna held those garments now, carefully folded in a small bundle and tied with a coarse, woven belt.

Dressed now in the flowing, light material of the wrap dress, her damp hair twisted into a neat braid, Sienna felt almost human again. Too human perhaps, because the very human desire to kiss Jordan was almost overwhelming.

To combat her inexplicable urges, she dropped the parcel squarely on his chest. It gave her a perverse pleasure when his eyes snapped open and he grabbed reflexively for the offending weight.

"Wha! What the...." He sat up with a slight wince, the all too familiar scowl creasing his features.

"You woke me up. Now it's my turn," she told him. "Now I know why you work alone."

He gaped in confusion for a moment then looked down at the clothing in his lap. "This is for me?"

She nodded. "I could get you a loin cloth if you prefer," she said sweetly.

"That's all right, this is fine." He spread out the material and examined the garments.

When his gaze returned to Sienna, she felt an uncomfortable heat rise as he appraised her. The dress Tia had given her was short, the hem falling at about mid-thigh. The thin, soft fabric left little of her figure to the imagination.

She had washed her undergarments and left them to dry on a rock near the pond, so at the moment she wore nothing underneath the dress. That knowledge intensified the tingling in her flesh caused by Jordan's sudden scrutiny. She turned away, giving him a view of her posterior where the bright fabric stretched across her hips. She bent to stow her boots under the cot and slid her feet into a pair of wooden soled sandals that Tia had

also given her.

"The Council is going to meet in about an hour, so if you want to talk to them, you should get ready. Morning meal is being served on the beach. No more room service for us," she explained as she gathered the remnants of their late night snack. "There's also an area for ... personal needs, up the path out back on your right. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." Jordan's eyes followed her around the hut. She pulled down one of the storage nets and found a wooden bowl, which she set on the table.

"I'm going to the tidal pools to help collect mollusks."

"You seem to have settled right in." Jordan stood and prodded the derma-gel experimentally.

"Still hurts?"

"No, actually it feels a lot better today. I guess, like Tia said, I should thank you. You saved my life."

"You can return the favor," she replied curtly.

"Do you want to come with me to see the Council?" he asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"I'm not going to tell them anything about you. I told you that and I meant it. If you want to come along and talk to them, that's fine with me. I'm just going to try to pin down when the supply ship is coming, where it comes *from*, and where it goes *to* after it leaves here. I'm sure they must have a communications terminal somewhere for emergencies. If it's nearby, I may ask if I can use it."

"To contact the *Guardian*?" Sienna's blood went cold.

"No."

"Who then?"

"Maybe the supply ship, to see if it can get here any faster."

Sienna nodded, then grabbed the wooden bowl and left the hut. She strode down the beach, torn between the absolute beauty of the Talekian coastal village and her dark mood. Jordan still hadn't decided what to do about her, despite his reassurances that he would try to help. She knew, to him, that meant following the Protectorate's rules. He wasn't going to let go of his responsibilities that easily and she realized she would have to keep working on him. If the Protectorate found the wreckage of the *Valkyrie*, there was no doubt in her mind that he would turn her over to them, and assume, in his ignorance that the Court of the Galactic Council would give her a fair trial. She might have hoped for that if she possessed complete recall of the events that had led to her capture, but each moment that passed seemed to push everything farther into a dark corner of her mind.

She began to fear that eventually she would lose all of it, and then she might not even remember her own innocence. She wanted to rush back into the hut and beg him to believe her, promise him anything in return for his help, but that cold pain at the back of her neck stopped her. Something about that pain told her not to trust him. She knew she had been betrayed before, and by someone close to her, someone she cared for. If only she could remember who and why but there was only a vague discomfort, and a cloudy spot in her mind, like a veil covering the events. How could she ask Jordan to help her

prove her innocence when she had nothing to offer him in the way of evidence?

When she reached the tidal pools a group of three older women greeted her and showed her where to collect the best mollusks. She fell into the rhythm of the work and listened to the conversation that swirled around her. As she worked, her attention kept returning to the hut by the waterfall. She kept picturing Jordan asleep, his skin glowing in the morning sunlight fueling her growing attraction to him, despite her mistrust.

She decided that was something she would not do. She would not use that attraction or try to capitalize on the fact that he obviously found her attractive as well in order to make him help her. Something told her she couldn't go through that again, though she had no clear recollection of when she'd gone through it before.

* * * *

After a refreshing dip in the pond and a quick breakfast of a crepe-like pastry filled with fruit, Jordan felt almost completely recovered. There was still a slight tenderness in his side, but his head didn't ache anymore and he could walk without pain.

The Village Council met in an oval shaped hut just within the tree line near the center of the beach. Two men and one woman occupied stools behind a curved table at one end of the hut. In the center sat several more stools where members of the community sat waiting for their turn to offer suggestions, air grievances or ask questions of their leaders.

Jordan reached the Council hut just as the Talekians filed in and he found himself standing next to Raf Gadjia in the line of villagers waiting for their turn to speak.

"Feeling better today?" the hunt leader asked with his characteristic grin.

Jordan nodded. "A good night's sleep will do wonders."

A few other villagers came up to Jordan and Raf, eager to meet the new arrival. A woman named Dija introduced herself and Raf explained that the pretty, petite redhead was the colony's teacher.

"What planet are you from?" she asked Jordan.

"I'm from Calabrel, the Bajai sector," he replied.

"I teach the children here, and I'd love to have you tell my class about your home world," Dija said. "Most of them were born here and will never go to another planet, but we still want to give them a sense of the Galaxy. Would you be willing to talk about Calabrel?"

Jordan shrugged, "Sure, not much to tell. It's a desert. I've been to a few more interesting places I'm sure they'd rather hear about."

"We'd love a galactic geography lesson. And what about your ... wife? Is she from Calabrel also?"

Jordan felt that strange electric pulse again when the vision of Sienna in her clingy orange dress came to mind. It had been all he could do not to reach for her when she stood over him that morning, every trace of mud removed from her flawless skin and the curves of her breasts and hips outlined by the thin fabric. His muscles tightened a bit and he supposed Dija must have noticed because her smile dimmed a little.

"She's not my wife, just a traveling companion," he answered. "She's from Kyrasau. I can ask her if she'd like to talk to your students also."

"That would be nice," Dija replied lightly and moved away to take her place in

line. Raf elbowed Jordan in his right side.

“Dija is something, isn’t she?”

“Uh, yes. I suppose,” he replied with a quick glance in the teacher’s direction.

“So you and Sienna aren’t together?”

“No.” Jordan regretted the answer. He wondered why it mattered to Raf. The hunt leader looked to be barely out of adolescence and while he was tall and well muscled, he possessed a certain immaturity about him that Jordan was certain Sienna would not respond to.

“I’ll let Gordi know. He was interested,” Raf commented and Jordan’s fists clenched involuntarily.

“Gordi?”

“He mentioned wanting to make an offer to her.”

“An *offer*?”

“You know, that’s how we do it here. You offer yourself to the woman you want and she says yes, or no. Some couples are married in the old traditions. Tia and Daren are from Parmia, so they’re mated for life. But any tradition is acceptable here as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.”

Jordan nodded. He thought of Gordi, a walking muscle with bronzed skin and liquid dark eyes. His appraisal of Sienna back in the jungle had been offensive. There was no way she would accept an offer of anything from him. At least, that’s what Jordan hoped.

“It’s your turn now.” Raf motioned to an empty stool among those that sat before the Council. Jordan shook off the unpleasant image of Gordi leering at Sienna and moved to take the empty place. The Council members greeted him by name, having obviously been told of his arrival the day before. They introduced themselves in turn and welcomed him to their Village.

“We’ve been told that your ship is not salvageable. That’s regrettable,” said Torva, the female council member. Small and thin with short gray hair and brilliant blue eyes, she looked older than the men by at least two decades. Nevertheless, she glowed with health and her voice was regal and strong.

Jordan nodded. “I’m told I can remain here and wait for your supply ship to return.”

“Of course. Everyone is welcome. Our rules are simple. You and your companion will have to work in the village but you may share in everything we have. You may join the hunters, the fishers or the gatherers or you may provide any other service that will benefit the community.”

“I don’t know much about the ocean,” Jordan said. In fact this was the second time in his life he had even seen one up close. “Other than fishing, I’m willing to do whatever I can, and Sienna is already helping gather food.”

Torva nodded. “I trust your injuries are healing.”

“Yes, very well. Thank you. Do you know exactly when the supply ship will return?”

Torva consulted her male counterparts before she replied. “We estimate twenty days from today. But we cannot account for unforeseen circumstances.”

“Where does the ship hail from?”

It was Daren who answered. The large man had the same black hair as his wife and dark eyes like most of the other colonists. “It comes from Latimer and before that, Suron. From here the pilot chooses his destination. It’s not always the same.”

Jordan nodded. That was the best he could hope for. “You don’t happen to have a communications terminal anywhere, do you?”

“We’re an independent colony. *Completely independent*,” Torva said. “We have no need to contact other planets.”

“Even in an emergency?”

The three Council members shared pointed glances. Their expressions made it clear to Jordan that there was a terminal somewhere, but they were not about to divulge its location to a stranger.

“If there were ever an emergency that warranted it...,” said Malik, the third Consul. He was slim, with nut brown skin and large hands that he splayed on the table before him. “The circumstances would have to be dire and involve danger to all the villages on the planet.”

“I see. Thank you.” Jordan rose from the stool and allowed the next person in line to take a seat. He left the hut and crossed the beach to look for Sienna, but she was no longer among the women working in the tidal pools. He scanned the village for her distinctive orange dress but couldn’t find her. He then berated himself for wondering if she had run off. There was no reason for her to leave now. She was safe for the time being. He decided she had probably gone back to the hut, or maybe she’d gone to see Tia. He forced himself not to worry about her, then told himself it wasn’t worry he was feeling. As long as she wasn’t somewhere with Gordi, he didn’t care what she did.

Annoyed by his conflicting emotions, he stalked off down the beach to where several of the hunters had gathered to sharpen their spears. No doubt they would have something constructive for him to do to get his mind off Sienna for a while.

* * * *

Sienna didn’t see Jordan again until evening meal which, like most meals in the village, was a community affair. The villagers all gathered on the beach just before sunset, each with a specific task to help prepare the feast. Sienna did her part by arranging a number of small stepstools for the children to use to reach the food as it was placed on long tables. She helped serve several portions to the younger members of the community before Jordan appeared at her side.

A strange feeling washed over her when she became aware of his presence next to her. She supposed at first it was relief to see that he was looking well and no longer seemed to be in pain from his injuries. Though she never would have admitted it to him, she harbored a fear that her lack of medical skills might have caused him irreparable harm. As it was, he’d have a terrible scar from his wound, and she couldn’t help but wonder if there was something she could have done to help prevent it.

Fortunately, as Tia had predicted, a good night’s sleep and a nutritious meal seemed to have made a noticeable difference in his health. He no longer guarded his wound with one arm, and she noticed he stood straighter and moved more quickly than he had the day before.

"Where have you been all day?" she asked cautiously as she handed him a plate.

"Talking to the hunters, mostly," he replied evenly. An elder member of the village heaped a large portion of food on his plate. Sienna received her own portion and then followed Jordan to a quiet spot farther down the beach away from the largest concentration of villagers. She sat next to him in the sand and balanced her plate on her knees.

"I found out what makes those acid pools we saw," he informed her between bites of marinated fish and fruit.

"Not sloth, I hope," she said with a grin.

"No, they're actually made by a type of insect. It's probably not something you want to hear about while you're eating."

"You're probably right," she agreed. After that they ate in silence for a while and watched the rising tide reclaim the beach inch by inch.

By the time they finished their meal, Galatia had set. Only a faint crescent of the planet's outermost ring was visible low on the horizon. Higher in the sky, two irregularly shaped asteroids that had been captured by Talek's gravitational field reflected silvery faux moonlight across the breaking waves.

"It's beautiful here," Sienna commented with a sidelong glance at Jordan. "I can understand why the colonists don't want technology. It would ruin the natural beauty of the place."

Jordan hummed in agreement and clasped his arms around his knees. "I guess after a while, a person could get used to this way of life."

"Of course you do. That's how it was on Kyrasau. I spent most of my time in the forest living in a tent so I could study the *gonars*."

"*Gonars*?" Jordan finally returned her glance. It was the first time he had looked at her all evening.

"They're beautiful, amazing animals." Sienna's spirits lifted at the memory. "They stand about two meters high at the shoulder and they're covered in fur that changes color with the seasons. They're white in winter, pale brown in spring, green in the summer and gold in the pre-winter. They have their own language." She sighed. "I was trying to learn it before I left."

"What made you leave?"

"I ... don't remember. I needed something. I had to leave home to get it."

"Considering all that's happened to you," Jordan mused, "you probably should have stayed."

"You're probably right," she agreed. She did wish she had never left home and wondered what would have made her give up what seemed like an idyllic existence and get herself into so much trouble. Thinking about it made her head hurt, and she rubbed absently at the painful bump on the back of her neck. She looked at Jordan and thought of asking him to take a look at the spot for her, but his eyes were focused on the sky and his expression seemed guarded somehow.

"I'm going to go to sleep," he said rising from the soft sand. He took his plate in one hand and reached for Sienna's also. "I'll wash this for you."

"Thank you," she looked up at him, silhouetted against the sky, which had grown

dusty with stars. “Sleep well,” she told him.

He nodded, then hesitated a moment as if deciding whether to make a comment. Whatever thought he had, he chose to leave it unsaid, and turned away. Sienna watched him walk up the beach and disappear along the path leading to the hut.

She remained on the beach for a little while after that and tried to remember her life on Kyrasau. All that came back to her were the beautiful images of sylvan glades and sunlit valleys. She remembered very clearly that she had been happy there, and that only made her more desperate to discover what awful thing would have made her leave such an idyllic life behind.

Chapter Eleven

When Sienna woke the next morning, Jordan was already gone. She lay on the cot for a long while contemplating her surroundings and wondering if she should attempt to leave the village before the supply ship arrived.

In her conversations with the Talekians the day before, she had learned that there were a number of similar villages scattered up and down the coastline. Now that Jordan's injuries seemed to be healing, she could leave him without guilt. She wished she could figure out why she didn't want to go.

She refused to believe it could be the attraction she felt for him. While Sienna could admit to herself she found his muscular arms and piercing blue eyes compelling, she had no time for a romantic dalliance, especially with a man whose duty it was to take her to prison. Under different circumstances maybe...

In an attempt to quell her rebellious thoughts, she hauled herself up and splashed cool water on her face from the wooden bowl on the table.

How foolish she was. There was no point in expending energy thinking about a man who considered her a criminal. His disinterest was obvious in the way he avoided her. After Jordan had returned to the hut last night, he hadn't gone to sleep but instead spent a frustrating hour inspecting the broken body scanner and the damaged components he'd salvaged from the *Valkyrie's* com system. He hadn't spoken to Sienna and barely acknowledged her when she returned from the beach.

Why should Jordan's lack of interaction bother her? She dismissed her concerns and gathered her sandals and the mollusk basket one of the village women had given her the day before. After breakfast she planned to return to the tidal pools to help the gatherers. She found the chore relaxing, and she'd discovered that the conversations of the older women of the village were both entertaining and educational. Sienna looked forward to joining the women for another busy day.

Ready for work, Sienna headed for the door where she nearly collided with Jordan. His borrowed shirt hung from one hand, and he held a spear as tall as himself in the other. Greenish mud streaked the bare skin of his chest and upper arms. He looked at her with mild embarrassment.

"What's this?" she asked, fighting to suppress the laughter that replaced her earlier frustration. Despite the earthy smell of the mud and his wide-eyed stare, he made a virile picture. She would never have imagined him as the fearless warrior type, but he certainly looked the part at the moment.

"I've been invited to join the hunting party," he said, and she detected a faint hint of pride in his voice. She bit her lower lip and gave him a lingering once over.

"Where's your loincloth?" she asked innocently and found it a monumental effort not to grin at him.

"I'm not the loincloth type," he responded with great seriousness as he moved

past her to drop his shirt on the pallet. "They're letting me stick to trousers."

"Ah," Sienna sighed. She turned and followed his movements with her eyes. She let her gaze travel across the burnished skin of his back and down to the purplish bruise that extended around his wound. "Are you sure it's a good idea?" she asked. "Aren't you still in pain?"

He turned back toward her. "Not really."

She placed her hands on her hips and remained firmly planted between Jordan and the door. "That's not a definitive *no*."

"I'm fine," he insisted, then added quietly, "Thanks to you."

Sienna caught his somber glance. Obviously it bothered him that a criminal had saved his life.

"I've been in worse shape than this and flown combat," he said with a shrug. "Besides, we're hunting *sloth*. How difficult could that be?"

"You saw the size of the pit they catch them in," she said. "And that's for the *small* ones, remember? What if you come across a big one?"

"I'll hang back and let the experienced hunters do the heroic stuff."

"Heroic? Shoving spears in an animal that's trapped in a pit is heroic in what way, exactly?"

Jordan groaned. "You're one of *them*, too."

"One of *what*?"

"An animal activist."

"As a matter of fact, I *am*." Sienna thought of the *gonars* and her fight with the government of Kyrasau to protect them from over hunting and blood sports. It troubled her for a moment that she couldn't recall if she had won that battle or not.

"These people live off the land," Jordan said. "They have to hunt to survive."

"I understand that. I just don't think there's anything *heroic* about it. Nor is there anything heroic about exerting yourself before you're fully healed. We don't have enough derma-gel to cover any more major wounds."

"I appreciate your concern, but I heard this all from Tia already," he admitted as he tested the balance of his borrowed spear.

"You did?"

"Yes. She lectured me, so you don't have to."

Sienna regarded him skeptically. "And you're going anyway?"

"Yes."

She rolled her eyes and flung herself out of his path. "Have a good time," she said. "If any of your internal organs should fall out, don't come to me." She resisted the urge to shake her finger at him. "I put you back together once by pure luck, I don't think I can do it again."

"You're overreacting," he called as he stalked past her, spear in hand. "I'll be fine."

"Are you sure they didn't invite you along as bait?" Sienna heard a sarcastic utterance in response but the words were unclear and she let it drop. With Jordan gone for the day, she was left to wonder if he would be all right. She had no right and no reason to care what happened to him, so she pushed the worry out of her mind and

watched him amble down the shady path to the beach. It made no sense for her to feel responsible for him and it made even less sense for her to wish he had chosen to wear the loincloth.

Agh! She shook the image from her mind and went back to the water bowl for another refreshing splash. *Focus, Sienna*, she admonished herself. *You have bigger problems to think about.*

* * * *

A nice long walk in the jungle was exactly what Jordan needed to clear his head. When he had woken that morning, his first instinct was to check on Sienna. He found her curled up tight, her full lips turned down and her brow creased with worry. Whatever dreams plagued her, they hadn't let up yet.

In the dim pre-dawn light, he paced around the hut wondering what to do about her. Nothing constructive came to mind so he left the hut, cleaned up at the pond, and met the hunting party on the beach.

Raf had been all too eager to initiate him into their rituals. Although Jordan sensed a few of the other hunters were not as pleased to have him along, Gordi among them, no one voiced any objections.

He had expected Sienna to still be asleep when he returned to the hut to drop off his shirt. At first he'd been a bit self-conscious, streaked in mud and brandishing a spear. He felt as though he were dressed for a masquerade. He had fully expected her to laugh at him, and the feral appreciation in her eyes took him by surprise. Even more unsettling was his reaction to her unabashed appraisal.

The image of Sienna locked in the stasis tube aboard the *Valkyrie* battled with that of her standing in the hut, hands on her hips, her face flushed with what he could only assume was annoyance, or maybe something more. Today wasn't the day to deal with this inner turmoil. Today, he was a member of the hunting party and that was a serious responsibility among people who worked as hard for their livelihood as the villagers did. He'd worry about how to deal with Sienna later.

He met Raf and the others at the head of the trail that led into the jungle. Besides the young hunt leader, there were ten men including Jordan, making an even dozen. Most of the hunters were older than Raf which led him to believe the position of hunt leader was bestowed based on skill rather than age or experience. When Raf moved off along the trail, utterly silent, and the men followed him without question, it was clear that estimation was correct.

Jordan managed to keep up with the pack despite the occasional twinge in his side. He caught a glance of approval from Raf as they approached the area of the sloth pit. Jordan started scanning the ground for the acid pools he and Sienna had encountered on their journey.

When they reached the pit, the one called Telk pulled Jordan aside and motioned for him to crouch down behind the barrier of leaves that hid the large hole from view.

"Stay here with us," he said. "Raf and the others are going to scare up a sloth and chase it into the pit."

"What do we do?" Jordan asked with a cautious glance into the empty trap.

"When it comes this way, we close ranks behind it and keep it moving. Most of

the time, the fall into the pit will kill it, but if not....” Telk shook his spear for emphasis. “Aim for the eyes.”

Jordan nodded. “Right.” He wondered what had ever possessed him to volunteer for this. He began to worry that it was some misguided desire to test his physical strength against that of Gordi and the other hunters, many of whom had likewise shown a more than passing interest in Sienna. He dismissed the idea that jealousy rather than necessity motivated him to discourage their attention. When the supply ship arrived, he would have to take her back into official custody and he had no intention of arguing that claim with a spear-wielding wall of muscle like Gordi.

Jordan followed Telk’s example and hunkered down in the brush. He kept his eyes on the foliage and listened to the distant cries of jungle animals and the hunters themselves as they attempted to round up their prey.

He waited, enduring the heat and the loamy smell of the mud that masked his scent from their prey. Life in an island paradise definitely had its drawbacks.

A salty bead of sweat trickled to the corner of Jordan’s upper lip just as a commotion broke the stillness of the dark foliage. Shouts and curses filled the sultry air, and Jordan caught Telk’s look of surprise. The other hunter rose partially from his crouch and brought his spear up. Jordan did the same.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered at Telk’s sudden intake of breath.

“Oh no!”

“What?” Jordan squinted into the distance where he saw leaves rustling and heard branches cracking.

“Watch out!” a disembodied voice yelled and an instant later a knot of hunters, led by Raf, came crashing through the trees. They practically sailed through the air, their eyes wide with terror. They screamed, cursed, and uttered unintelligible things in foreign languages.

Jordan turned to Telk with a questioning glance.

“It’s a boar!” Telk announced and his voice actually cracked. “Run! And don’t stop!” Telk rose unsteadily, dropped his spear and took off into the jungle in the direction of the village.

“It got Bref!” someone yelled, and the blood curdling scream of a man in agony split the air.

Just as Jordan rose to follow Telk’s trail, his spear in hand, a dark shape lunged out of the jungle toward him. He saw only sharp teeth and blood-red eyes. At that moment, he didn’t think. He simply reacted and did what anyone would have done. He ran.

Right into the pit.

* * * *

Sienna sat under the sloping trunk of a flowering tree, her feet buried in the warm sand. On her left sat an overflowing basket of round, fist-sized gourds called *matsi*. On her right sat a nearly empty basket of hollowed out *matsi* halves and, in a basket between her knees, lay a jumble of red seeds and pink pulp from inside the pungent fruits.

Three other women sat under the tree with Sienna, all similarly arranged. While Sienna watched and tried to mimic their actions, the other women sliced their gourds one

by one and gutted the halves with scoop-edged knives.

The hulls of the *matsi* were tough and stringy and the slightly acidic pulp stung the small nicks and cuts that already covered Sienna's right hand from her numerous failed attempts at cutting the fruit properly. Despite her troubles, she kept diligently at her task, all the while wishing she'd volunteered for a different work group. She should have stayed with mollusk gathering which, though it made her back and legs ache after a while, required little skill.

The women in the group explained to Sienna that the *matsi* needed to be hollowed out and dried. Then the halves would be glued back together to make floats for the fishing nets. The astringent pulp would be mixed with fish oil, sand and flower petals to make soap. It was exhausting work, but the opportunity to learn more from the conversations of the women about the village and life on Talek, made it worthwhile.

The women in the circle were roughly Sienna's age. Two were mated to hunters and the other was single but interested in finding a mate. Thus far, Sienna had learned the life history of every man in the village while she worked at learning the fine art of properly slicing a *matsi*.

"Your man went with the hunters today, I see," a woman named Bela said. She and her mate, the hunter named Bref, had one child who was currently under Dija's tutelage along with the other children of the village.

"My man?" Sienna questioned with a curious glance.

"Jordan," Bela replied as she expertly sliced a gourd and popped the halves open.

"Oh, he's not really mine," Sienna stammered. The two other women, Jalla, who was mated with a hunter named Foster, and Kalena who was single, gave her curious looks.

Bela laughed. "I wonder who he's trying to impress, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he doesn't seem like the hunter type," Kalena replied. "He seems more brain than brawn."

"His brawn's not so bad," Bela noted with a wink.

"I think he just wanted to be useful." She nicked her thumb again and sucked in a breath.

The women laughed at her remark.

"What?" She glanced at each one in turn. Bela shook her head with a wry smile.

"A wise man wouldn't join a boar hunt unless he wanted to impress his woman."

"A boar hunt? I thought they were hunting sloth." Sienna's confused gaze traveled from face to face.

"The boar hunt is an initiation of sorts," Bela explained. "They'll take him out there, scare the *trelop* out of him, and bring him back needing a little cleaning and patching up. They'll let him tell the story of how he saved one of the others from a boar attack." She dropped her voice to a whisper and added, "They think we don't know it's all a ruse."

"He knew this when he left?" Sienna questioned and the women laughed even harder.

"Of course not!" Kalena cried. "It wouldn't be any fun that way."

Sienna shook her head and the women chuckled and went back to their conversation, which centered on how to find the perfect man for Kalena.

* * * *

Eleven laughing men lined the edge of the pit where Jordan lay, now face up, his spear beneath him in the mud. He raised one arm to wipe the pungent goo from his face and then hauled himself to a sitting position, his eyes on the man who laughed the hardest.

Gordi removed his costume--the hideous skull and skin of what had once been a boar. The preserved hide of the long-dead creature sported red jewels for eyes and carefully reconstructed teeth made of white shells. Draped over Gordi's hulking form, it made for a very convincing beast.

"Are you all right?" Raf called down as he lowered the pole ladder into the pit for Jordan to climb out.

"Oh, sure," he replied with a tight smile and a low groan. "That belly flop face first into the mud was exhilarating."

"Welcome to the pack, brother!" Telk clapped Jordan on the back and shook his hand. The others did the same in turn until only Gordi was left. The big man gave Jordan a wary look.

"No harm?" The hunter held out a meaty hand. His smile was less than sincere.

"No harm," Jordan acknowledged reluctantly. He'd been duped. The only choice he had was to be a good sport about it.

"Looks like you're going to need a new spear." Bref pointed to the broken weapon, which lay half buried in the mud. The spear had snapped in half when Jordan landed on it. Jordan nodded and looked down at his aching left side where he noted the derma-gel on his wound had been partially torn away exposing some raw skin to the humid air. He winced when Bref clapped him on the back.

"Now here's the best part," Bref said as the group closed ranks around him. "When we go back to the village later we all tell everyone *you* single handedly saved *me* from the boar. Your woman will think you're a hero."

"A hero." Jordan laughed without much amusement. "Somehow, I don't think that will work on Sienna."

Chapter Twelve

Sienna returned to the hut at dusk. Her legs ached from walking in the hard-soled sandals all day and the skin of her shoulders was hot and pink from exposure to the Talekian sun. Her only desire was to strip off the borrowed dress and soak in the cool water of the pond, but the muffled sound of cursing coming from inside the hut distracted her from her plans. She rushed inside and found Jordan sitting at the small table holding a fistful of wet cloth to the wound in his side. Blood soaked the cloth and his fingers.

“What happened?” She moved to his side and pulled the wadded material away from the wound despite his protests. A flap of the derma-gel hung from the wound exposing the still healing flesh beneath. The torn skin around the jagged scar oozed bright blood.

“I ... uh ... got hurt saving Bref from a boar attack,” he explained, his voice flat. She dabbed at the blood and he winced.

Sienna let out an exasperated sigh. “Didn’t I tell you that you could get hurt?” She remembered what Bela had told her and couldn’t decide whether to laugh at him or yell at him.

“It’s not that bad, the derma-gel just got pulled away a little, that’s all,” he said as Sienna pulled back the now opaque portion of gel and surveyed the damage.

Sienna rose and tossed the bloody cloth on the table. “I’ll get Tia. Maybe she can sedate you for a week or two until this heals properly.”

“I didn’t plan on pulling the wound open. I thought it was healed. Can’t you do something? I don’t want Tia.”

“Why not? She’s a medic.”

“She doesn’t like me.”

Sienna raised her eyebrows. “What makes you think *I* like you?”

“Just ... can’t you do something? You’ve got more supplies in your pack. I don’t trust, you know, folk medicine.”

Sienna put her hands on her hips and regarded her patient. He managed to look contrite enough to garner a little bit of her sympathy. “Folk medicine?”

“Herbs and things.”

“Where do you think modern medicine comes from?” She turned to search her pack for another derma-gel packet. Fortunately she had brought the entire supply from the *Valkyrie*. She set the packet and a few other items on the table and then rummaged for a small bowl to fill with water from the pond.

“I’d just prefer you do it. I don’t want Tia to lecture me again.”

Sienna rolled her eyes. “You’re saying you’re afraid of her?”

“Of course not, I just--”

“Oh, never mind. Sit still. I’ll be back.” She flung herself out of the hut, bowl in hand and marched to the pond for water.

When she reached the secluded pool, she scooped up the cool water and took a moment to splash some on her face. Her fingers traveled automatically to the back of her neck where the swelling had worsened. Now the sunburn added to her discomfort, and she found that even a slight pressure at the nape of her neck sent a wave of pain down her spine and up into her head.

Tomorrow. I'll talk to Tia about it tomorrow. Tonight she had to tend to Jordan and that thought actually dulled the pain a bit. Her anger over his disregard for his own safety softened a bit at seeing him bleeding and in pain again. He needed her, wanted her to tend to him, and for some reason that knowledge was satisfying as much as it was illogical.

She ignored her growing confusion and took the bowl back to the hut where she found him dabbing at his wound again. She pulled his hand away and sat on the floor beside him with her supplies in front of her. After rinsing the cloth in the clean water she wiped away the last of the blood while Jordan sucked in air through clenched teeth.

"You have two choices," she said after surveying the damage. "I could peel off the rest of the dead gel, which is going to hurt, or I can put a new bandage over top which is going to slow the healing, but it won't hurt as much. Take your pick."

"I thought you didn't know much about medicine." He eyed her, the crease forming once again between his brows.

"I read the instructions."

"I'll take the easy way out, thanks."

"Of course." She rolled her eyes again and he shrugged.

"I promise I'll be more careful," he said.

Her fingers roamed his skin. The bruising was almost gone, and the blood oozed from a tear in the outer layer of skin, not an opening of the deeper cut. She felt his muscles contracting under her hands and suppressed a smile. Her touch was affecting him as much as the feel of his skin under her fingers was affecting her.

She met his gaze. His deep blue eyes had grown even darker and his breathing stilled. Sienna felt a strange magnetic pull. The air between them seemed to crackle but she managed to ignore the feeling welling up inside her.

She tore open the derma-gel packet and let the bandage slide into her hands. Jordan cleared his throat and looked at the rest of the medical supplies she'd set out.

"Damn, that's cold," he whispered as she applied the bandage. "I'm getting tired of having this cold lump on my side."

"Well, you should have been more careful. We only have one of these left so try to endure until this one is completely absorbed," she said with a sigh.

"All right, all right. I don't need the pain medication. It doesn't hurt that bad." He picked up the small vial she had set aside with the bandages.

She took it from his hand. "That's for me."

"What's wrong?" His voice softened and his gaze swept over her, causing a frisson of sensation across her skin.

"I'm sore...." The lie slipped out easily. "All over. And I have a sunburn." She looked away to hide her deception.

Jordan reached up and touched the red skin on her shoulder. The gentle pressure

of his fingers left a white mark on her flesh.

“Ow.”

“Sorry. Why don’t you go to Tia?”

“Folk medicine is okay for me, but not for you?” She raised an eyebrow.

“We don’t have anything in the packs for sunburn.”

“We have pain medication. It’ll do for now.” Sienna picked up the vial and the applicator. Jordan watched, his expression unreadable, as she measured out a small dose.

“Do you want me to do it?”

She handed him the applicator and he reached to push the hair from the back of her neck. She pulled away with a gasp.

“Not there!”

“Why not?”

“It hurts. Do it here.” She pulled the fabric of her dress aside exposing a spot below her collar bone. He pressed the applicator there and with a faint hiss, the analgesic diffused into her bloodstream easing her discomfort almost immediately.

She took the applicator from Jordan and removed the nearly empty vial. “Thank you.”

“Can I get you anything? More water? Something to eat?” Both his tone and his expression were hopeful. Sienna smiled.

“No, I’m fine. I just want to sleep. Good night, Jordan.”

“Good night.”

She left him sitting at the table and went back to the pond to wash up. When she returned he was already asleep, or pretending to be. She curled up on the cot and closed her eyes.

* * * *

Sienna’s scream woke Jordan hours later from a fitful sleep. He leapt to his feet instantly, disoriented but ready to fight. The basic instinct for self-defense was unshakeable, but there was no opponent now, only a dark-haired shape cowering next to the cot. Sienna lay in a ball on the ground, shivering. He saw the tears on her face, like tracks of silver in the faint starlight that streamed in from the narrow windows.

In that instant he forgot everything. He rushed to her and gathered her in his arms, quelling her trembling with the force of his embrace.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. He rocked her as she sobbed. Her body heaved and shuddered in his arms, and he tightened his grip reflexively to calm her. “Sienna, what is it? You’re safe. Don’t be afraid.”

“It was here,” she mumbled through another wracking sob. She clung to him and curled tighter into a ball. She pushed herself against his chest as if she wanted to climb inside him.

“What was here?” he asked gently as he smoothed her hair.

“The *Guardian*. It was here, landing on the beach.”

“It was only a dream.” He rocked her and pressed his lips against her hair. “It’s not here.”

“It was landing on the beach--and you let them take me.”

“It was a dream. Shhhh. It’s not happening. It’s okay.”

“Then the ocean again--” Her body shook.

“What?” Jordan felt her stiffen in his arms.

“When I go to sleep, I remember drowning.”

“You *remember* it?”

“Sinking to the bottom of the sea. I can’t breathe.”

“You’re safe now. It’s okay.” Jordan settled his back against the wall of the hut and pulled Sienna into the space between his legs. He wrapped his arms around her and guided her head to his chest, then rested his chin on the top of her head and held her. He enjoyed the sensation of her body pressed against him and the staccato of her heart thundering against her ribs, but her fear clawed at him. In that moment his detachment crumbled. She’d become more than just his prisoner.

“What happened to you, Sienna? Why can’t you remember?”

She shook her head and one arm snaked around his waist. “I don’t know. It gets fainter and fainter. I can’t reach it anymore.”

“Maybe we need to go back to Trifida. Maybe there was a reason you went there.”

“They’ll put me back in stasis,” she said with a shudder.

“No. I won’t let them.”

“What if the *Guardian* comes?”

“It won’t. They won’t find us. I promise,” Jordan whispered softly as she settled against him. Her breathing slowed and her trembling finally stopped. When she finally fell asleep, he sighed and stroked her hair. What had he done? How could he promise not to turn her over to the Protectorate if they came for her? She was a criminal, wasn’t she?

Could someone have tried to get rid of her? Could she have a secret so devastating that the powerful Carnelian Planetary Council would go to such lengths to hide it? None of it made any sense. Of course, the governments of certain worlds were corrupt. Political secrets were as old as time, and even a galactic government dedicated to peace and freedom for all had enemies.

The Carnelian Council was a powerful body made up of fifty or sixty people. The death of thirty or so would be devastating to the government there. How could Sienna be involved with that? And why didn’t she remember it? He looked down at her and remembered his first impression when he saw her in the stasis tube on board the *Valkyrie*.

Something about her compelled him to care about her plight. It wasn’t just her physical beauty that captured him. In the short time he’d been with her she had saved his life and risked her own to help him. Even tired and uncomfortable she had taken the time to minister to his wound this evening, and all he had given her in return was the fear of capture that haunted her dreams.

Jordan was going to have to make a decision. Should he set aside his oath to the Protectorate, ignore his training, and take it upon himself to help her find the truth? Or should he deny his feelings, ignore the growing conviction that she was somehow a victim of something she was unable to control, and complete his mission?

Since he’d first set foot aboard the Battleship *Kantar* as a young idealist, he had always had faith in the Protectorate. The galactic government was not corrupt, like those

of the individual planets. They would not prosecute someone who was innocent. He knew that. But could he trust them with Sienna's life? Had she been anywhere but in his arms at that moment, the decision to complete his original mission might have been easy. He never would have imagined throwing away his career for a criminal. She was supposed to be nothing more to him than cargo. How had she managed to become everything to him in such a short time? How could he turn her in?

Through the window he saw the dark side of Galatia, which seemed to obliterate half the night sky. The other half was brilliant with stars, any one of which could have been the prison ship in a distant orbit. As sleep overtook him, Jordan realized he had not lied to Sienna when he told her the *Guardian* would not find them. He decided it was true. He would not allow the Protectorate to take her. Somehow he would help her find out the truth. He owed her that much.

* * * *

Sienna awoke nestled in Jordan's arms, warm and safe. The violet light of pre-dawn filled the hut, and the sound of his heart beating beneath her had lulled her into the most peaceful sleep she'd had in a long time.

She looked up at his face and wondered if he had meant all the promises he'd made to her in the middle of the night. It hadn't been her intention to play on his sympathies that way. The dreams came unbidden and with such clarity that she woke shivering from the cold of the water. The same thing had happened during the first night she had spent in the wreckage of the *Valkyrie*, but Jordan had been unconscious then, unaware of her nightmares.

She no longer felt cold. In fact the humidity was rising and the heavy air made it difficult to breath. Though she was reluctant to leave the haven of his embrace, she carefully extricated herself from Jordan's arms. She needed to move, to shake away the lingering uncertainties caused by the dreams.

She left him sleeping and stepped outside the hut into the amethyst light of Talekian dawn. The purple dome of Galatia dominated the eastern sky. Three of the giant's moons stretched in a perfect line from the horizon and a tiny band of neon pink burned just above the water line marking where sunrise would begin.

Although the colonists rose early as a rule, the village lay silent now. No one had begun their chores yet, so the beach was empty. The other huts, strung through the edge of the jungle, were all dark.

In the peaceful silence, the surf whispered to Sienna and drew her to the water's edge. The cold, briny water sent a shiver through her when the first breakers washed over her bare feet. Despite the chill she waded out until the water crested just below her knees, and she dug her feet into the soft, swirling sand, anchoring herself against the onslaught of the next wave.

Unlike the cold green sea in her dreams, nothing about this magnificent ocean frightened her. She wondered where it was that she dreamed about. Could it be Trifida? Or Carnelia? She had no recollection of spending time near a beach on either world, yet she woke with the taste of salt in her mouth and a floating sensation as though she'd been tossed for hours by the waves.

She sighed and leaned back to take in the glorious vista of the morning sky.

“Sienna?”

She gasped and turned to find Jordan standing at the edge of the water.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded. “I just wanted to walk in the water.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“Of this? No, it’s beautiful.” She watched him for a moment. He stood just a hair’s breadth beyond the reach of the waves. She held out her hand to him.

“Come on.”

“It’s too cold.” He backed away a step and she laughed.

“You’re afraid?”

“No, I just ... don’t like the ocean. It’s too....” His voice trailed off and he shrugged.

“Powerful?” she said. Standing at the water’s edge, looking out at the endless waves could be overwhelming.

“I was going to say *cold* again.” He grinned at her, and before he backed away again she splashed towards him and grabbed his wrist.

“Come on, just a few steps.”

He laughed. “No.”

She dragged him toward the water and groaned when the foamy water hit his ankles. “Wouldn’t you rather go for a swim in the pond?” he asked. “At least that water’s warmer.”

“Oh, get over it. You’ll get used to it in a minute. Come on!” She tugged him farther out into the gentle waves.

“Stand right here,” she said and positioned him to face the rising sun. The patch of wild pink spread across the horizon now and mixed with stripes of orange and yellow. Above the fire of sunrise hung thick bands of indigo and gray clouds. “Just let it wash over you for a minute. Feel it.”

“Feel what?” He laughed and jumped from one foot to the other. “Something just crawled across my foot.”

“Feel the ocean. It’s alive!”

Standing next to Jordan with their arms touching, Sienna felt the warmth of his skin contrasting with the cool water swirling around her legs. The tide ebbed, and the water raced past them as the next wave built momentum. She threaded her fingers into Jordan’s and held his hand for a moment.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“For being there, last night.”

“Anyone would have.”

“You didn’t have to.”

His grip on her fingers tightened. The wave broke and crashed towards them.

“The water’s getting deep.”

Sienna laughed. “It’s going to get a whole lot deeper if we stay here,” she replied.

Jordan took a step back and pulled Sienna with him. “Neither of us is ready for deep water, yet,” he said. She followed him up the beach and out of the surf.

“You’re probably right.” Farther up the beach the colonists were beginning to assemble. Preparation for the morning chores and breakfast had begun. “We’d better hurry. I don’t want to cut *matsi* all day again.” Sienna sighed. She eased her grip on his hand, but he didn’t let go right away. She turned to find him looking at her with an odd expression as if he were seeing her for the first time. His dark blue gaze swept over her and heat rose along the column of her throat.

For a moment, she thought he might be planning to kiss her, but the spell broke so quickly she had to wonder if she imagined it all. Jordan let go of her hand and started up the beach.

“I’m starving. Last one to the buffet washes dishes.”

She stared after him for only a moment, then shook away the tingling that had crept up from her center and followed him up the beach.

Chapter Thirteen

Just before sunset Jordan caught sight of Sienna by the tidal pools collecting moonfish with several other women. He figured it was a good time to work on his project.

He situated himself with a clear view out the door of the hut and a little ways down the path leading up from the beach. Then he carefully removed the com components and the body scanner from his satchel and surveyed the damage again. He had taken the small toolkit from the *Valkyrie* but hadn't expected to have much time to work on creating a homing beacon.

After the other night when he'd used the components as an excuse to avoid talking to Sienna, he felt self-conscious about working on it, so he kept an eye out for her return. The promise he'd made to her that the *Guardian* would not find them weighed heavily on his mind. He considered his options. If he could create a working beacon, he could program it with the information that his prisoner had died in the crash and that he would make his way back to the Hub on the next transport ship. That would keep the Protectorate from searching Talek for Sienna.

He listened for her approach while he activated the scanner and made mental notes on which internal parts he could salvage to form a transmitter. With only rudimentary tools, it was going to take some time.

Back on Calabrel, the project would be simple. He could buy the parts he needed at a local shop and have a working, programmable beacon in a few hours. Here, with nothing but his own ingenuity, it would take a bit longer.

He removed a few wires and components and decided he would have to change several connections and clean all the electrodes before he would have any hope of creating a viable signal. Several times he thought of abandoning the project altogether and throwing the components away, but his disappearance would not go unnoticed. He needed to communicate something to the Protectorate, or they would come to Talek to find him and Sienna. Then he'd have no control over what happened to her. He couldn't live with that. He had to keep his promise to her, though parts of his psyche still battled with the decision.

Was it really some primitive desire to prove himself to Sienna? He'd gone hunting to show her he possessed as much strength as Gordi, and he'd come back the worse for his efforts. Now he wanted to prove to her he could be trusted, that he wasn't going to turn her in at the first opportunity. Was he losing his mind? Or his heart?

That thought stopped him cold. His only concern should be to keep an eye on her and prepare her for the eventuality of prison. Deciding her guilt or innocence was not his job. He refused to forget that.

But he also couldn't forget finding her on the beach at dawn, bathed in the ethereal glow of Galatia and its moons. He would never have admitted it, but he had felt

the power she spoke of. He'd felt the ocean breathing and beating around him, and that made him uneasy, but not nearly as much as his reaction to her touch. Something stirred within him when she held his hand and pulled him toward her in the water, something dangerous.

* * * *

Sienna ran into the ebbing surf surrounded by a dozen Talekian children. They clung to her arms and shrieked with delight as the water rushed up to meet them. Dija had dismissed them early from their classes today, and when they asked Sienna to play with them, she couldn't refuse.

The game was simple and pure--chase the waves. When the blue water folded upon itself and rushed back across the shimmering sand, they turned together and ran away laughing and chattering excitedly.

The salty spray in her face invigorated her even though the gentle breeze was laced with the chill of a coming storm. The damp hem of her skirt flapped against her legs, and the back of her neck ached, but the soft, cool sand beneath her feet soothed her sore muscles. She felt wonderfully free.

After waking up in Jordan's arms a few days ago, the terrible images of her nightmare fading rapidly, she and the pilot had fallen into an easy rhythm with each other. Though they had not spoken of it since that morning on the beach, something had changed between them that night. Sienna realized she had begun to trust him.

She thought of him now as she skipped back into the waves. He had joined a work crew that was building an amphitheater just beyond the last row of huts. The colonists needed a larger place to hold festivals and conduct classes for the children. The work was hard, and he had returned at dusk for the evening meal practically exhausted the night before. She hoped he wasn't putting undue strain on his wound, though the new bandage had almost completely absorbed into his skin.

The game ended and the children were called by their parents to attend to their chores. Sienna waved to them and walked up the beach. She collected her sandals and brushed the sand from her legs before she entered the hut. Jordan would be gone for hours and she wanted to wash up and try on a new dress that one of the village women had given to her. The bright blue wrap hung from a hook next to her cot along with a necklace of shells made for her by one of the children. She took the dress, a lump of herbal soap in a small shell dish, and a gourd pot full of salve that Tia had given her to treat sunburn. To Jordan's amusement, when he had finally convinced her to ask for help, the medic had lectured Sienna on the importance of caring for her skin. The balm worked well enough and seemed to protect her skin even though she spent the bulk of each day in the sun.

With her bath items in hand, Sienna headed for the waterfall pond and was glad to see no one else using it at the moment. The communal nature of the village had its advantages, but privacy was not one of them. She hadn't minded sharing her bathing area with a young mother and her twin infants the day before, but when there were two couples lined up to use the luxurious pool, Sienna had decided to put off her bath for another time. The place was empty now and the water was warm from the sun. It was the perfect time for a long soak to ease her tired muscles.

She stripped off the orange dress and spread the material out on a warm rock to use as a towel. Afterward she planned to wash it and hang it from a low-hanging branch near the hut to dry. She set her bathing items on another flat rock and lowered herself into the water, enjoying the feel of the temperature variations. Near her feet the water was pleasantly cool, easing the abrasions from the rough sandals. The upper layers of water were warmer. Slowly she unfastened her braid and spread her hair around her. She combed through the long strands with her fingers, then dipped her head backward and let the ebony mass flow over her shoulders. Finally she sloughed the excess water off with her hands.

She purposely avoided touching the lump at the back of her neck. The pain medication had helped, but Jordan had begun asking a lot of questions, and she worried that he might suspect there was more wrong with her than just sore muscles and sunburn.

She wanted to tell him about it and to ask Tia for help, but the nagging uncertainty made it impossible. A paralyzing fear gripped her whenever she thought of the pain and what might have happened to cause it. She knew her feelings were irrational, but it was impossible to shake them, so she did her best to ignore the pain. Sometimes, for a little while, like now with the cool water flowing over her skin, she was able to put the fear aside.

Sienna floated on her back in the pool and allowed the lazy current created by the waterfall to push her along. Colorful birds danced above her, skipping from branch to branch in the tangle of trees that grew around the pond. Sienna let their songs mesmerize her. She stared at the pure blue patch of sky above her for so long that her eyes lost focus. She sighed deeply and let herself sink beneath the dark water. The silence was restful for a moment, but when memories of her terrifying dream pushed into her conscious mind, she surfaced rapidly, and tried to shake the frightening thoughts away.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a flash of movement at the edge of the pool, and she turned to get a better look at the blurry figure that lounged on the rocks.

Her heart began to thud when she recognized Jordan. He wore nothing but the trousers Sienna had procured from Tia, and he was in the process of removing them.

"Hey!" she called, self-conscious. "I'm in here."

He looked up, then behind him as though he didn't know where her voice was coming from.

"Over here!" she called.

"Oh. I didn't see you." He refastened the rough belt around his waist.

Right, she thought. "Well, I'm here. I'll be done in a minute."

"All right." He settled himself comfortably on the rock next to her clothes. He leaned back on his elbows and contemplated the sky while she treaded water in the center of the pond and wondered what to do. She wanted to pull herself up out of the water and stand before him. The villagers had no qualms about nudity, and on Kyrasau there were no taboos about exposing one's body, though the climate tended to prohibit it. Cool forest glades and chilly mountain air were not conducive to bathing outdoors or wearing little besides a loincloth.

"I wasn't expecting you back so soon," she said as she swam in circles.

"There's a big boulder in the middle of the amphitheater," he said with a casual

shrug. "No one felt much like moving it today, so the work crew decided to take a break and tackle it in the morning. I like the way they think here. Job's too hard, let's all go play on the beach and worry about it tomorrow."

Sienna drew slowly closer to the edge of the pool. He seemed to avoid looking at her.

"Hmm. No one seems to work too hard, but everything manages to get done. They're very dedicated to their community."

"Yep."

"I'm finished. Can you hand me my dress?" she asked, conscious of the nervous trembling in her stomach.

He glanced at the orange fabric, then pointed to it questioningly. Sienna nodded, and he pulled the warm cloth from the rock and balled it up to hand to her.

"Turn around," she said.

"Modest?" He gave her a lopsided grin.

"Maybe."

He did as she asked, and she pulled herself up from the water and wrapped the fabric around her. The cloth soaked up the water on her skin and clung to her body, becoming transparent in places. She lowered herself to the flat surface of the rock next to Jordan and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Thanks."

"Sure." He turned to look at her and once again his eyes darkened as they flicked over the curves of her body revealed by the damp cloth.

"The water's warm," she said quietly.

"Hmm. I see you have the salve from Tia. Need help putting some on?"

She handed him the small *matsi* bowl and shifted to expose her back to him. Her skin had returned to its normal color, but Tia had explained that a liberal application of the balm would prevent future burns, so Sienna made sure to use it every day. This was the first time Jordan had offered to help.

* * * *

It was a long moment while Jordan contemplated the smooth expanse of Sienna's back. Her skin was perfect, with a few freckles just above her shoulder blades. She pulled the heavy rope of her hair to one side and leaned forward, allowing the back of the cloth to drop to give him access to more skin.

Jordan's mouth went dry.

He honestly hadn't expected to find her at the pond. She normally didn't bathe until later in the evening. But when he recognized the sylph-like figure drifting lazily in the water, he had been unable to tear himself away from the fascinating view.

For a brief, reckless moment, he considered joining her in the water, but the nervous lilt of her voice stopped him. It was obvious that she wisely wanted them to maintain some distance, and bathing together would erase certain boundaries they both knew it was important for them to maintain.

He had respectfully looked away when she rose from the water and turned back in time to take note of the transparency of the thin orange dress. Despite his misgivings, the desire to touch her became overwhelming and Tia's medicinal balm afforded a perfect

opportunity.

He dipped his fingers into the smooth white cream in the bowl and spread it on Sienna's shoulders and back. He rubbed the balm in until it disappeared and her skin glistened beneath his tingling fingertips. Once he'd finished with her back and shoulders, he used more of the cream on her upper arms and let his fingers curl to the front of her throat. Her skin was cool from the water, but he felt heat rising as his hands glided across her back.

She moaned softly, and a fire shot through his abdomen. His body responded to the sound on a primal level. The pleasure he caused her with his hands made him ache to do more. She leaned against him then, her back molding to his chest. The warm scent of the flowery balm on her clean skin filled his lungs, making it impossible for him to form a coherent thought. She moved languidly when he gently tilted her head to one side to expose the long line of her neck. Almost blinded by his desire for her, he lowered his lips to her skin, and she shuddered beneath him. The sound she made then caused an urgency in him he could barely control.

He tasted her skin, absorbing beads of moisture with his tongue, and then nipped with his teeth. She gasped when he trailed blazing kisses to the apex of her shoulder, and she melted into his arms.

Sienna's breathing grew shallow, then quickened when Jordan's hands roamed to the column of her throat and slid down into the front of the damp fabric that covered her breasts. He felt her reaction to his touch as he grazed her taut nipples with his fingertips.

Every sound and every movement she made drove his desire higher and hotter. He couldn't imagine why he'd ever tried to keep his distance from her.

She turned her head and captured his lips with her own. Liquid heat surged through him. He held her face in his hands and parted her lips with his tongue, delving into her as her moans of pleasure escalated. She tasted salty and sweet, like a candy he remembered from childhood. The heat of her mouth flooded him, settled in his chest and gripped his heart.

Everything disintegrated around them as Jordan pulled Sienna to him and slowly slid the damp dress from between their bodies. He slanted his mouth over hers and deepened the kiss, which would have lasted forever except for an interruption from the beach.

A deep voice chanted words that sounded like, "Hai! Hai! Everyone get ready!"

Breathless, Sienna pulled back. Her eyes were heavy and her mouth swollen from Jordan's kiss. He focused on her lips, wanting to dive back in and lose himself in her intimate embrace. But then Raf appeared at the edge of the pool. Behind him ambled Telk, who yelled at them again.

"Hai! Hai! Come on! It's here!" the hunter said.

Raf jumped from rock to rock and actually did an embarrassing victory dance. Sienna scrambled to pull her clothing around her. Jordan didn't move at all, but his eyes bored holes in the front of Raf's skull.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded before realization hit him. Could they be talking about the *Guardian*? Or some other Protectorate vessel landing on the beach, as in Sienna's dream? He glanced at her and the panic in her eyes tore at his heart. He

had vowed to protect her, and he would keep that promise no matter what. His hand closed around her arm, and he knew, in that instant, that he was ready to run with her, forever if necessary. He would do anything to protect her.

“It’s a harvest!” Telk responded as he ran away down the path. “A big one!”

“What is he talking about?” Sienna asked shakily. Raf jumped from a mossy rock and landed in the sand with a victory yowl.

“Hai! It’s an algae bloom. The fishers have brought it to shore for harvesting. Come on, everyone has to help. Collecting the pods is a huge job.”

“Pods?” Sienna and Jordan echoed simultaneously.

“Come on, you’ll see! It’s wonderful!”

Jordan drew in a shuddering breath and rubbed Sienna’s arm reassuringly. “I guess we’d better go.”

She nodded with an eye on Raf who still danced around them. “He’s so ... enthusiastic, isn’t he?”

Jordan chuckled. He would have given anything to stay right in that spot with Sienna forever, but now, their kiss broken and the moment over, he clearly saw the folly of allowing his basic urges to take over. She was beautiful and desirable, but he still had no idea exactly who or what she was. He wanted to trust her and to protect her, and in all honesty, to possess her completely. The feel of her bare skin under his palms, the appreciative sounds she made when he touched her, were enough to drive any man mad. But he would not allow his attraction to her to color his decisions. He shook off the last vestiges of the hormonal high and rose, pulling her to her feet behind him.

“I’ll wait for you down the path, so you can get dressed,” he said.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” she responded, and the disappointment in her voice caused mixed emotions in him. She was obviously sorry to see the moment end, too, which caused a surge of satisfaction in him along with regret. He didn’t want to lead her on or make any promises he wasn’t prepared to keep. Correction, he didn’t want to make any *more* promises he wasn’t prepared to keep.

He left her on the rock and stalked down the path after Raf.

“Bad timing, eh?” the hunt leader asked with a laugh.

Jordan gave him a sour look. “Incredibly bad. Or incredibly good. I’m not sure which.”

Chapter Fourteen

The villagers worked continuously for three days to harvest the bulbous, berry-sized pods from the algae bloom. The fishers dragged thousands upon thousands of pods to shore from deeper waters using closely woven nets that captured not only the pods but also the deep blue growth that surrounded them. The sand turned sapphire in places and the tidal pools became vats of indigo.

Everywhere, piles of pods filled bowls, tubs, and nets and the Council had assigned work groups to process the bounty. Some groups shucked the pods to expose the small black seeds within. These were a staple of both an intoxicating wine and several types of medicine that Tia taught the villagers how to make. Other groups collected the pod husks and set them out to dry in the sun. These would be used to make flour meal for the bread the colonists used to supplement their diet of fish and fruit. The last group worked at mashing whole pods into a thick stew that, when heated and cooled, became a waterproof mortar used to coat the thatched roofs of the huts.

The work went on day and night, starting at sunrise and ending well after midnight. Even the smallest children helped by sorting out damaged pods and throwing them back into the sea to be carried away as the waves slowly washed the tidal pools clean. By the fourth day all the algae was gone, and much of the secondary work had begun. Vats of Tia's medicines cooked over low fires, and baskets of fruits sat under the trees waiting to be added to barrels of the seed wine.

Sienna had just finished filling one of the baskets with the sweet purple fruit the natives called *balmalon*. She set the basket in a shady spot and limped up the beach to where Jordan sat, eyes closed, his back pressed against the bole of another tree.

"Hai," she greeted him with a wry grin. He leveled a sour glance at her.

"If I never see another algae pod, it will be too soon," he said as he stretched the kinks from his neck. "Days like this, I think we'd have been better off in the jungle."

"And miss the big party?" Sienna sighed. The work exhausted her, and left her little time to think about her rapidly fading memories. For that, she was grateful. But the harvest had also driven a wedge between them. Since she had kissed him by the pond, Jordan had become distant again, and Sienna couldn't figure out why. Of course they had little time alone together. The enthusiasm of the villagers for their task seemed to transcend all else, and no one complained of the long hours or tedious work. The rewards outweighed the tiresome task, and as Raf and several other villagers had explained, the bloom would supply the village with more than a year's worth of necessary items. They couldn't waste any of it.

"Are we celebrating the end of this torture?" Jordan asked with a yawn.

"I think that's the plan."

"Then I'm in. I'm going to take a nap." He pulled himself to his feet. "Call me when the revelry begins."

Sienna's gaze followed Jordan up the beach. Why was he pulling away from her? She wanted to follow him but sensed her presence would not be welcome. Instead she remained on the beach and dug her toes into the warm sand while she watched the villagers finish their assignments for the day. After a while, Gordi joined her by the tree.

"Where's Jordan?" he asked as he settled into the sand next to her.

"Resting," she replied and closed her eyes against the brilliance of the sun. Gordi moved closer to her until their arms almost touched. The heat from his sun-burnished skin reached her across the scant distance between them. Despite her curiosity at Gordi's growing interest in her, Sienna kept her gaze focused on the late afternoon light. She drank in the soothing warmth, grateful for the respite from her chores.

"Will you be at the festival tonight?" the hunter asked, leaning slightly toward her to increase the contact of their skin. Sienna leaned away.

"Wouldn't miss it."

"Good. I'll look for you."

Gordi didn't wait for Sienna to reply. He rose and brushed sand from his muscular legs, then walked back down the beach. Sienna rolled her eyes. The hunter never missed an opportunity to make it clear he liked to look at her. She had caught him watching her on several occasions, and while his attention didn't bother her necessarily, she found she had absolutely no reciprocal feelings.

His dark gaze caused nowhere near the reaction in her that Jordan's did, and the brief contact between them when Gordi leaned towards her produced no sensation at all, certainly nothing like the electrical pulse that seemed to race through her when Jordan touched her.

The other day by the pond, she thought she would climb out of her skin for wanting him. Every movement he made affected her, and when they'd finally broken apart, the feeling of loss was overwhelming, like a hole had opened up in the center of her chest. She longed to feel the way she had when he had run his hands across her body and cupped her head possessively during their long, satisfying kiss. She couldn't understand what had gone wrong between them. While he'd been polite since then, she could almost see the wall he had constructed between them. She wanted to talk to him about it, but he spent most of his time as far away from her as possible during the harvest, and by the time they both reached the hut late at night, neither had enough energy left for a long, heartfelt discussion.

She thought again of going to him to interrupt his much needed rest and demand to know what he wanted or didn't want from her, but she couldn't. She didn't want to know if he thought the incident between them had been a terrible mistake. She didn't want to know that perhaps he hadn't enjoyed it as much as she had.

* * * *

Jordan kept an eye on the door of the hut while he worked. The broken scanner and his pilfered circuit boards were spread before him on the small table along with the tools from the case he had taken from the *Valkyrie*. Unfortunately there was little in the way of electronic components available that would have made the repairs easy, so he had to improvise by painstakingly reconstructing each circuit, repairing the damaged wires and connections one by one. He had finally gotten to the last connection and was ready

to test his work when he heard footsteps approaching the hut.

He wasn't sure why he still kept his project from Sienna, but he'd only worked on it in stolen moments when he was alone in the hut. A small part of him feared that if she discovered his plan, she would assume he was trying to call the Protectorate to them in order to turn her in. It bothered him that he still hadn't decided exactly what message to program the beacon with, but now, with it so close to functioning, he had to make a decision that would affect them both.

He tucked the pieces of his project back inside his pack and cleared the table of the small debris and wire shavings the work produced. He then headed toward his pallet hoping to feign sleep, but an unfamiliar shadow crossed the threshold of the hut. He looked around to find Dija standing in the doorway.

"Hai!" she said with a wide smile.

He rolled his eyes. "Not you, too."

"It's a customary greeting during harvest time," she explained as she stepped boldly into the hut. She looked around and let her gaze settle for a moment on the pallet and the cot that occupied opposite sides of the small room. "After tomorrow you won't hear it anymore--unless you're still around for the next one."

"No offense, but I'm sort of hoping not to be," he said with a weary grin. "I'm worn out."

Dija nodded and crossed to one of the stools by the table. She sat and stretched her legs out in front of her. "You know, *I'd* be sorry to see you go."

"You have a nice place here, but I've got to get back to my job, get myself another ship."

"What *is* your job exactly? You've never said."

Jordan remained standing near the pallet, his eyes on the door where he expected Sienna to appear any moment.

"I'm a courier. For the Protectorate."

"Really? What kind of courier?"

"Information." He had decided long ago there was no need to give the colonists any more information than that. Eventually he'd get over the guilt he felt at lying to them.

"And Sienna?" Dija's tone was deceptively casual.

"She ... I don't know exactly what she does. She was along for the ride."

"So you're definitely not mated with her?"

"No, definitely not," Jordan said a little too emphatically.

Dija's smile widened. She twirled a strand of her coppery hair between her long, tanned fingers. "Good. I was hoping you wouldn't be bothered by her and Gordi."

Jordan felt the muscles in his jaw tightening. "What about her and Gordi?"

"They were down on the beach together, sitting very close. I figured it didn't matter to you, or Gordi wouldn't be pursuing his interest in her."

"I get the feeling Gordi is interested in anything on two legs," Jordan said under his breath. Dija gave him a vapid look, which assured him she hadn't heard his comment.

"When the supply ship comes, you'll both be leaving then?" the teacher asked.

“Yes, that was the plan.”

“Could the plans change?” She smiled at him, her clear blue eyes sparkling. There was no doubt Dija was attractive, but Jordan would have preferred to see her go off somewhere with Gordi.

“I don’t think so.”

“Too bad. It doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy the time you’re here with us, right?”

“Guess not.” Jordan shrugged and kept his eyes on Dija as she rose and sashayed towards him. She was in his arms before he could protest, her sun-warmed body molding to his. Behind her, Sienna appeared at the door of the hut.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she said loudly, and Dija jumped back in surprise. She whirled and gave Sienna a dark look that would have amused Jordan had it not been quite so predatory.

“Actually, you *were*,” she replied.

“Sorry. I’ll be back later.” Sienna turned around and disappeared without even a glance at Jordan. He wanted to follow her, but Dija blocked his path.

“Take your time,” she called over her shoulder, though Sienna was too far away to hear. She advanced on Jordan again, and reluctantly he put up his hands to ward her off.

“I ... uh ... have to be somewhere,” he stammered and her smile collapsed.

“Really? Where?”

“The amphitheater. I’ve got some *digging* to finish there.”

“Everyone’s stopped working for the day to prepare for the festival. No one will mind if you don’t finish,” she told him sternly.

“I promised.”

“Really?”

“Yep. It’s a Calabrian thing, we’re honor bound to keep our promises.” That was a lie, but it sounded good. “Maybe we could *talk* another time.”

“I’d definitely like that. I’m very skilled at *talking*.” Dija stepped back and gave him an appraising glance from under lowered lashes. She parted her lips and licked them suggestively. Jordan smiled uncomfortably and sidled around her until he had a clear path out the door.

“I’m sure you are, being a teacher and all.”

“Conversation is an art form,” she continued as he moved slowly toward the door. “If you do it right.”

“I bet. Well, that hole won’t dig itself. See you later.” Jordan ducked out of the hut and took a deep, cleansing breath. It had been a long time since a woman like Dija made herself available to him, and he knew it had to be a rare circumstance that would cause him to reject such an offer. It made no sense that the look on Sienna’s face was the cause of his intense discomfort. He shouldn’t care, nor should it bother him if she actually wanted to spend time with Gordi, crass as the hunter was.

The kiss he and Sienna had shared had been unforgettable. The memory of it still burned in his gut, but he couldn’t become involved with her, knowing he might be forced to give her up to the Protectorate. Nevertheless, he found himself looking for her. He searched the beach and the pathways leading from hut to hut, hoping to catch a glimpse

of her. He wanted to explain that he had no interest in Dija, but then the teacher's words came back to him. *They were down on the beach together, sitting very close.* It occurred to him that very possibly Sienna felt the same way that he did and realized it would be unwise to pursue their mutual attraction.

Even if she were innocent, she would have to face the Protectorate courts eventually to prove herself, and it might hurt her credibility to be involved with the courier who had been assigned to transport her to the prison ship. If she were in fact guilty, it would ruin his career. The only other option was for her to spend her life as a fugitive, and in spite of his irrational consideration of the idea, he wasn't ready to spend the rest of his life running from the authorities.

Their only option was to stay away from each other, for now at least. Assuming their paths crossed again one day when everything had been straightened out, then would be the time to explore whatever it was that kept him so on edge when she was near him. The magnetic pull that drew him to her also woke him in the middle of the night with longing to invite her to lie with him. He had to shake those feelings, and now that he knew she had been with Gordi on the beach it would be a little easier. Maybe Dija would be a good diversion after all. Of course she had probably left the hut by now, but Jordan figured he'd have no trouble finding her again if he chose to.

Resolved, he abandoned his search for Sienna and decided on a long walk to clear his head. The amphitheater was far enough away to provide a good workout, and if he still needed physical activity to get his mind off Sienna when he got there, he could always finish digging that hole.

Chapter Fifteen

The music began just after sundown with a rhythmic drumbeat that vibrated the walls of the huts. High, reedy flutes joined in shortly afterward and the singing began as the colonists filed out of their homes and congregated on the beach under the light of Talek's rising moons.

The colonists dressed in their finest clothing, which consisted mostly of bright purples and reds. The hunters wore their loincloths, but instead of streaks of mud, their faces and chests bore intricate designs in red and purple body paint. Necklaces of shells and animal teeth adorned their bodies and their spears. The children wore crowns of feather plumes and pranced among the adults like a flock of brilliant birds, laughing and giggling when their parents chased them playfully along the pathways.

Long tables laden with every Talekian delicacy lined the beach, and everyone brought flat woven mats of all sizes to sit on to enjoy the feast. Huge barrels of seed wine sat at the end of each table, and before the feasting began several of the hunters lit the dark wine with torches which produced huge blue flames. Baskets of fermented fruit slices were then dumped into the tubs to extinguish the flames. When the larger of Talek's misshapen moons touched the horizon, it sent a bolt of silver light coursing across the sea. At that moment, with a triumphant synchronized cheer from the three Village Council members, the party officially began.

"What do you think?" Gordi whispered into Sienna's ear when they met at the water's edge where the children stood throwing small white stones into the water.

"It's beautiful," she said, uneasy at the hunter's proximity. He smelled like musk and soap, and radiated masculine energy. "What are they doing?" she asked pointing to the children who ran back and forth to their parents to retrieve more white pebbles.

"Those are wish stones. The children collect them over the course of the year and save them in a bowl. On feast night, they toss them back into the waves in hopes that the wishes they make on them will come true."

Sienna's throat constricted with emotion. Her eyes filled with tears. What a beautiful tradition, she thought. She had a number of wishes for herself, not the least of which was to have her memory restored. She had discovered earlier in the evening that she no longer had any recollection of how she had gotten out of the stasis tube. She knew she had been in the tube at one time and ended up outside of it, but the details were so hazy. Had Jordan freed her? Or had she managed to escape some other way? If this continued, eventually she would be unable to remember his searing kisses or the warmth of his hands on her body. She feared losing that, but then again, maybe it was for the best. If she couldn't remember the ecstasy of his touch, she wouldn't miss it so much. Perhaps Gordi's interest in her would make a difference then.

"Would you like to eat something?" the hunter asked. She became aware of his large hand caressing the small of her back. Casually, she moved out of his reach as they

walked toward the food stations.

"I could eat." She really wasn't terribly hungry, but the food looked wonderful, and there was so much of it that it was difficult to imagine the villagers eating it all in one night.

"Let me get you some wine." Before Sienna could protest, Gordi pushed a small wooden cup into her hands. The heady, sweet aroma of the dark liquid reminded Sienna of the scent of the meadow flowers of Kyrasau. She found it odd that she could remember that scent, and yet not recall why she had been placed in the stasis tube.

The wine left a tart aftertaste that made her hungry. Now she understood where all the food would go, if the wine enticed people to eat more. She surveyed the food eagerly now and agreed to everything Gordi heaped on her plate.

After he had filled two platters with food and refilled their wine cups, he led Sienna to a mat in a darker area of the beach. They were close enough to the other villagers to hear conversations and feel the vibrations of the drums through the sand, but far enough way to have a measure of privacy. Gordi held Sienna's plate while she arranged herself on the mat, and she did the same for him. He then took a small piece of baked fish and held it to her lips.

"Try this. It's marinated in the wine."

"Oh." She took a bite and chewed experimentally. The wine marinade gave the fish a unique, tangy flavor. Before Sienna realized it, Gordi had fed her half of the portion on her plate. When he held a slice of fruit up for her, she took it from him rather than eating it.

"Thanks, I think I can do this myself now."

"If you prefer." He turned to his own plate and started eating.

"Tell me more about the festival traditions," she said as she placed the fruit on her plate. "Why do the children wear feathers?"

Gordi laughed. "You're very curious this evening."

"There's a lot to be curious about. On Kyrasau we don't have festivals like this. We have small parties, indoors, in the winter when it's snowing outside."

"I've never seen snow."

"On Kyrasau we sometimes get more of it than we know what to do with." Again Sienna wondered why the picture of a forest blanketed in white came so clearly to her mind while the details of the crash on Talek were so fuzzy.

"How do you stay warm during the night when it snows?" Gordi asked with a suggestive smile.

Sienna ignored his pointed look. "Blankets. What about the feathers?"

"There is a jungle creature called a *vetna* that is born with a feathery coating. The feathers fall off when it reaches maturity, and its skin hardens into a tough shell. The children are mimicking that creature. As the night progresses they will shed their feathers and imitate the adults in dancing and singing. Do you see over there?" He pointed to a row of short, blunt sticks that stood upright in the sand. "Those are spears for the children to act out the hunt later. They will pretend to capture one of us, probably Raf."

"I'm sure they'll enjoy that." Sienna smiled at the mental picture.

Gordi laughed again. "No one enjoys it more than Raf. He was one of those children when I came here. Now he leads the hunt."

"I think you have an amazing community here," Sienna admitted with a sigh.

"We do. And it can only be enhanced by the addition of one more." Gordi's gaze was pointed. He brought up one rough hand and brushed at the tendrils of hair that had escaped from her braid. The gesture left Sienna cold. "Why do you have to leave on the supply ship?" he asked.

"I ... don't know. I don't really *have* to leave." She didn't, after all. When the ship came, she could refuse to go with Jordan. The colonists would probably allow her to stay.

"If you do not have to leave, then you should not."

"I ... will think about staying."

"I will do everything I can to convince you." His gaze was deep and liquid, and unfortunately Sienna felt none of that odd magnetic pull that drew her to Jordan. She had no desire to curl up in Gordi's arms and lose herself in his kiss.

That thought caused her to glance up the beach hoping to find Jordan. After she'd left him in the hut with Dija, she had gone for a long walk into the jungle, carried by a rage she didn't fully understand. She thought for a moment that he had followed her, but when she looked for him she hadn't seen him. She realized she probably imagined him coming after her. He was occupied with Dija, and Sienna's interruption of their private moment had meant nothing to him. When she had finally returned to the hut, he was gone again, and she hadn't bothered looking for him. Now she would have given anything to see him somewhere on the beach, even if he was with Dija. At least she would know where he was.

Gordi leaned toward her again, and she smelled the wine on his breath. Sienna felt trapped. She could get up, or take a bite of food, but eventually she knew if she wanted to avoid the hunter's advances, she would have to get away from him entirely. Fortunately, at that moment there was a commotion on the beach. In the center of the tables sat a wooden platform where the Village Council had stood to start the festival. Now they had taken up their places again with Torva in the middle, flanked by Malik and Daren. Torva held two wooden cups that she clapped together in rapid succession. The sharp rappings attracted the attention of everyone on the beach and a respectful silence followed a moment later. Even the children quieted and stared raptly at the leaders.

When Torva spoke, her voice carried amazingly well, but nevertheless Sienna decided to stand up and move a little closer to the platform to hear better. The small gray-haired woman raised her hands to command the attention of her people.

"Welcome to the Hai Festival, everyone!" she said. "We are truly blessed to have had two such harvests this season. I am told that we have enough supplies to last us well into next year, and plenty to trade at the next Gathering. We are indeed *rich*!"

A cheer went up among the villagers and Sienna joined in. Their enthusiasm for life was infectious, and watching the children jumping up and down with joy made her feel wonderful.

"Now! We have a special presentation this evening," Torva continued. "I would like to make way for Raf and Jordan."

Polite applause erupted and the crowd parted to allow Jordan and Raf to step forward. Each man carried a tall drum and a wooden stool, which they set on the wooden platform in front of Torva. They each took a seat, placing the intricately carved drums in front of them.

Silence fell over the crowd again, and in the hush, Raf began a low, rhythmic beat on his drum. When Jordan joined in, the sound became a haunting melody. Jordan's hands moved expertly over the taut skin of the drum, and his face showed the joy he felt in his music. This had to be innate talent, Sienna decided. He could not have learned to play with such skill after only a few days among the colonists.

After a moment, someone else joined in from the crowd and several of the colonists began to sing. Before long the villagers were swaying to the music. The melody, produced only by Raf and Jordan on their drums, made Sienna think first of a storm at sea and then gentle waves on a beach. It amazed her how the music brought images to her mind. She heard wind and rain, laughter and the distant rush of the waterfall. When the song ended, she found herself brushing tears from her cheeks.

Cheering and applause cascaded through the crowd. A knot of excited villagers formed around Jordan and Raf when they finished playing. The hunters gathered first to congratulate the players on their impromptu concert, and when they moved away, Torva Gray stood on the tips of her toes and kissed Jordan's cheek. He smiled at her, and then he turned to search the crowd. His eyes found Sienna's, and their gaze locked for a moment that rocked her. Electric heat coursed through her for the brief moment that he held her eyes. When he turned away, his attention drawn by Telk and Malik, she once again felt bereft and unbearably weak.

"He's very good," Gordi said, his voice dull.

"I had no idea," Sienna whispered.

"Apparently he has many talents," the hunter said wryly.

"Apparently," Sienna agreed. She had been unable to take her eyes off Jordan, even when he turned away from her. She watched the crowd swirl around him. Adults asked questions, and the children inched up hoping for a chance to practice on the large drums.

Sienna noticed Dija slip her arm around Jordan's waist and lean her head on his shoulder. He smiled down at her and a moment later began showing the children how to play a simple beat. Sienna watched him for a long moment, then turned away. Gordi stood before her, his eyes hooded and his suggestive smile unmistakable. She barely glanced at him.

"I'm going to take a walk. I'll see you later," she said.

His smile faded. "I'll go with you," he offered and crossed the mat to meet her.

"No. I'd rather be alone for a while. I'll find you later. I'm sure the party is far from over."

Gordi nodded, but his gaze tracked over her shoulder to Jordan and his posture deflated a bit. Sienna had succeeded in making her point clear. The hunter's expression became unreadable, and he turned away leaving her to walk up the beach alone.

Chapter Sixteen

Moonset left the beach completely dark and marked the end of the festival. The villagers gathered their belongings and their sleeping children and stumbled off to their huts or settled onto blankets on the beach to sleep off the excitement of the party and the effects of the free flowing wine.

As Jordan made his way up the beach, he passed a tangle of bodies on a large woven mat. Among the villagers partaking in the group nap was Dija. Having imbibed about a dozen cups of wine and very little food, she had been among the first to fall asleep, long before the torches had been extinguished and the remnants of the feast cleared away from the tables. Jordan was pleased to see the petite redhead dozing in the painted arms of the hunter called Seref. He smiled wryly as he walked by and silently wished them well. He vowed to find a way to repay the debt to Seref for taking Dija's attention from him some time after the impromptu concert.

Jordan hadn't expected it to go so well. Raf had begun teaching him a simple beat on the drums a few days ago in between work on the amphitheatre and the algae bloom. It had been years since Jordan had indulged his love of music, and he hadn't thought he'd be able to learn to play well enough to join in Raf's serenade. He had enjoyed himself immensely though. He'd forgotten the joy of letting the music move him and transport his thoughts away from the mundane. It was clear that the villagers believed the music spoke to them directly. It pleased Jordan to entertain them, especially the children, who had spent a good portion of the evening trying to mimic the melody he and Raf had created for the festival. They'd kept him busy, but not so busy that he failed to notice when Sienna left the party alone, leaving Gordi staring dejectedly after her.

The adrenaline rush he had felt when he locked eyes with her stayed with him all night, and the wine only intensified the effect. By the time the festival came to an end, Jordan felt as though he were on fire. He considered diving into the surf, but the dark water still made him nervous. Too many unseen things hid beneath the surface of the sea. He decided to settle for a bracing dip in the pond before going to sleep. Something prevented him from passing the hut when he reached it. He should have gone right up the path to the waterfall, but he couldn't. He had to check to see if Sienna was inside. Gordi had remained at the party until very near the end, and then Jordan had lost track of him. He didn't think he would find the burly hunter inside, but he had to know for sure.

He entered the hut and was surprised to find Sienna's cot empty. Had she gone to Gordi's hut? Anger welled in Jordan but was soon replaced by concern when he saw Sienna sitting at the table, her head resting on her folded arms. She stirred slightly at the sound of his footsteps.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, moving quietly across the room. He touched her shoulder gently. Her head came up, and she looked around momentarily disoriented.

"Oh, it's you," she said through a yawn. "I was sitting here, trying to remember,

and I must have fallen asleep.”

“Trying to remember what?”

“How we got here.”

He chuckled and sat beside her. “Seems like we’ve been here forever, doesn’t it?”

“Haven’t we?” she asked, and the look in her eyes made his blood go cold. Did she honestly not remember? “How long has it been?”

“It’s been eleven days,” he said.

“That’s all?” Her beautiful eyes widened with fear.

“Yes.” He reached out to touch her face and brush the errant strands of hair from her cheeks. “Don’t you remember the crash?”

Tears glistened in her eyes. “No. I just remember waking up here. With you.”

Liquid heat coursed through Jordan, and before he could stop himself he pulled Sienna to him. She melted into his arms and took in a shuddering breath.

“It’s all going away so fast. I *know* I should remember, but I don’t. Why not? What’s happening to me?”

“Maybe you got hurt in the crash. Maybe you have a concussion.” His voice went tight with concern. How could this be happening? She looked fine. As far as he knew, Sienna hadn’t been injured in the crash other than a few bruises she had sustained in the cargo hold. “We’ll go see Tia. She can help.”

“Not now. Tomorrow,” she protested. “I don’t want to go anywhere tonight.”

“Okay. Why don’t you lie down? I’ll get you something to drink.”

“No more wine.” She gave him a sad smile. “I’ve had way too much.”

“Me, too. Maybe that’s affecting your memory. I’m sure tomorrow I won’t remember half of what went on tonight,” he said, hoping to reassure her.

Sienna sighed. “I hope I don’t forget your music. It was beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Jordan smiled and rubbed her back gently. “I was thinking of you while I was playing.”

“Were you?” Her smile pierced him to his core, and when a tear escaped the corner of her eye he captured it with his thumb and wiped it away. He took her face in his hands and kissed her lightly, pulling her to him. She responded with a faint sigh, and her breath was warm and sweet. He leaned forward and tasted her again, drinking in the essence of the wine that lingered on her lips. This time when she made that small sound in the back of her throat, it drove him over the edge.

“Come here,” he whispered, and drew her body to his. He pulled her to her feet so he could feel the length of her against him. His hand found the small of her back, and he captured her and molded her hips to his, letting her feel his desire. She responded with a moan that shook him. He kissed her again. Her mouth opened to him, and her hands clasped the back of his neck. She arched against him, and buoyed by the wine, the heat, and the sweet scent of her, Jordan lost all reason. It no longer mattered who or what she was. He had to have her now, before his brain took over and he realized his foolishness. He had to love her before the clarity of daylight broke the spell.

* * * *

Sienna’s knees weakened as Jordan explored her body with his hands. She buried

her face in his neck and took in the warm, masculine scent of him. A delicious shudder coursed through her when he pulled aside the thin cloth of her dress and unwrapped the layers that covered her breasts. When he tossed the fabric aside, she clung to him, afraid that without the support of his arms around her she would collapse. He cupped her bottom with one hand and lifted her against him. His hard length pressing against her thigh sent a ripple of pleasure through her, and she uttered a small cry. Each sound she made seemed to drive him harder until he scooped her up in his arms and set her down on the soft pallet. She shivered in anticipation. He knelt beside her, removed his shirt and pants, and then joined her on the pallet. He stretched out beside her and seared her flesh with kisses on her neck and shoulders. She sighed his name and pressed herself against him with an urgency she had never felt before.

Each of Jordan's movements produced a new sensation in Sienna. His kisses seemed to drug her and blur her perceptions into a sweet haze of desire. His gentle caresses left her tingling and aching for more. When he parted her thighs with one hand and knelt between them she moaned, a low sound that had him ravaging her mouth with his. He let his hands travel from the curve of her hip to her breasts and left a trail of kisses from the cleft of her throat to her navel. Each touch of his lips to her skin sent a cascade of pleasure to her core. She cried out for him and wrapped her arms around his broad back, raking her fingers across the sensitive skin. The movement seemed to send a wave of primal desire through him and in response his kisses became deeper, his touch more demanding.

He settled himself above her and kissed her until she gasped for breath, then, with his eyes locked on hers, he thrust inside her and began a rhythmic movement that sent waves of electric shocks through her. She rose to meet him, arching her back so he could cup his hands under her. The position allowed him greater access, and his thrusts became deeper and lasted longer. Her legs wrapped around his and locked him to her, and she guided his mouth to her throat where he nipped and sucked at the salty taste of her skin. Their synchronized movements continued until both of them were taut, poised on the edge of the precipice.

Then Jordan went still, his eyes dilated to pure black, and his breathing became ragged. All he could think of was Sienna. She was his, writhing under him, her skin hot and slick, her body responsive to every movement he made. All logic left him and the only conscious thought he had was how desperately he wanted her.

When Sienna met his gaze, her eyes unfocused and heavy lidded with intense pleasure, he lowered his lips to hers for one exquisitely gentle kiss before the final thrust that sent them both over the edge.

"Jordan, Jordan!" Sienna whispered as he filled her. The sensations washed over her, and every nerve in her body exploded with pleasure. He kissed her breathless, then held her still, his muscles like steel bands, rigid with the intensity of their lovemaking. Finally the waves of sensation subsided, and she relaxed beneath him, exhausted and sated.

"Oh," she sighed finally as he wrapped his arms around her and settled her head onto his chest.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

"Of course." She sighed again and reached up to touch his face. He kissed her fingers and caught her hand with his. He placed her palm over his heart and held it there above the rhythmic drum beat.

"That's you," he told her as he kissed her forehead. "That's you. I don't know what's wrong with me, why I've been avoiding you. This was all I could think about for the last three days. I needed you so badly."

"*Badly* is the wrong word." She laughed and slid one leg over his. "There was nothing *badly* about this."

"Trust me," he said with a grin. "When I'm not half out of my mind with wanting, I'm even better."

"I don't think I could keep up." She met his gaze and kissed him deeply again. "But I wouldn't mind finding out."

He chuckled. "Maybe after a little bit of sleep."

"Jordan?"

"Yes."

"Don't let me forget this. Remind me of it every day, please."

Jordan's breath caught, and he slid his body from under her and rose up on one elbow to look down at her. He held her hand and placed it over his heart again.

"I'll never let you forget. I promise, Sienna." He lowered himself to her and took her mouth again in a possessive kiss that brought forth another moan of pleasure from her. "I'll always be with you, and I'll never let you forget."

Hours later Sienna lay in Jordan's arms, her body curled around him, her breathing deep and rhythmic. Jordan watched her while she slept and wondered how he had managed to survive thirty-two years without her. Almost since they'd arrived on Talek he had thought of nothing but Sienna. His desire to help her grew each day along with his desire to touch her, kiss her, make love to her. Now that he had done that, now that he possessed her, he knew he would never be able to turn her in. He would spend the rest of his life on Talek if it meant keeping her safe, but even as he'd surrendered himself to the incredible pleasure of her body, a new fear had begun to grow in him. She was losing her memories, and he could think of no logical reason for that. He knew it was not a side effect of stasis. There had to be some other reason that she no longer remembered how they'd gotten to Talek or how long they had been there. He'd promised her that he would not allow her to forget this joining or any of the others he was already planning, but he realized that he might have made her a promise he would not be able to keep.

In the morning he would take her to Tia and demand some answers. Surely the medic would be able to do something. And if she could not, then he would bring Sienna aboard the supply ship and take her somewhere better, where modern medicine was available. There had to be a way to help her, and if it meant they had to run from the Protectorate and lie their way through the galaxy or assume false identities, he would do it. He would do anything for her because she was his world now, his life, his heart. For the first time since he had opened his eyes in the wreckage of the *Valkyrie* and found her staring down at him, he knew with complete certainty that whatever Sienna McCade was, she was not a murderer.

Chapter Seventeen

A shaft of sunlight pierced the darkness of Jordan's dream, and he woke to the sound of jungle birds and waves crashing on the beach. Memories of the night spent with Sienna moving beneath him, loving him, needing him, caused a smile to spread across his features and warmth to flow through his aching muscles. He turned to reach for her and was at first panicked to find the other side of the pallet empty.

He chastised himself for the foolish thought that she might have run off. She knew she was safe with him. He had told her over and over as they made love again and again through the night.

Judging by the angle of the bright light slanting through the narrow window, it was already late morning. He wondered if the colonists had missed them, or if it was understood that the day after festival, no one made it to work detail too early in the morning.

He stretched and clasped his hands behind his head, figuring he would wait for her to return and suggest they spend the day the same way they had spent the night. He didn't think she would protest, though hunger might be a problem. Hopefully she'd gone to procure some breakfast to sustain them for a few more hours. He closed his eyes and listened to the music of the jungle, wondering how he could incorporate the unique sounds of Talek into a new drum composition for the colonists. He began a symphony in his head while he waited, and only after almost an hour had passed, did he begin to worry again.

He rose slowly, cognizant that the seed wine might have a hangover effect. He dressed reluctantly but found that, despite a general and very understandable tiredness, he felt rather well. The derma-gel was almost completely absorbed into his wound, and though the jagged scar remained, it was no longer tender to the touch. He reminded himself to thank Sienna again for saving his life. He imagined a few extremely creative ways to express his gratitude.

He crossed the room and stretched again. He thought of the pond and decided he would probably find her there. Meeting her there seemed like a perfect way to start the day, and he headed for the door. He had just reached the threshold when Daren appeared before him. The Consul's features were set like stone, his mouth a grim line, and Jordan froze under his gaze.

"Daren? Is something wrong?"

"You need to come with me, Jordan," Tia's husband said in a quiet voice that sent a tremor through Jordan.

"What's wrong?" he asked and peered over the large man's shoulder hoping to see Sienna coming up the path.

"It's Sienna."

Jordan's heart lurched and a cold weight settled in his stomach. He stared at

Daren. "What happened?"

"Just come with me. You should have told us sooner."

"Told you *what*?"

Daren turned, and Jordan followed him up the path toward the hut he shared with Tia. Panic rose higher in him with each step. He wanted to grab Daren's shoulder and stop him, force the Consul to tell him what had happened. When they approached the medic's hut, Jordan pushed past Daren and ran inside where he nearly collided with the diminutive doctor. She put her hands up in a calming gesture and pushed him gently back.

"Take it easy. She's resting now."

"Resting? What happened to her? What's going on?" Jordan flung himself through the narrow door that separated the two rooms of the elongated hut. In the back he found Sienna lying on a low cot. She faced away from him, her knees drawn up and her head tucked down. Her hair had been swept away from the back of her neck, and a white cloth lay bunched at the top of her spine, the fabric bright with blood.

"Sienna!" He raced across the room and knelt beside her, then reached a trembling hand to touch her pale skin. "Sienna? What happened?"

She stirred weakly and drew herself up, one hand on the bloody cloth. When she faced him, his heart lurched in his chest. Her features were drawn, and there were deep shadows beneath her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said and slid into his outstretched arms. "I should have told you sooner."

"Told me what?" he asked and turned to Tia as the medic joined them in the back room. "What happened to her?"

"That's what we'd like to know," Tia responded gently. "Dija found Sienna unconscious on the path near the waterfall. She woke up after we brought her here."

Anger colored Jordan's vision and he rose from the cot. For some reason he had an image of Gordi in his mind. If the hunter had injured Sienna out of jealousy he would live to regret it, if he lived at all.

"I want to know what happened! Sienna, who did this?"

"I don't know," she replied with a shuddering breath. "I can't remember."

"Jordan, sit down," Tia said. Jordan obeyed only because Sienna needed him. He joined her on the cot, and she leaned against him. He felt her trembling. Her skin burned against his.

"Here, look at this," Tia commanded. She pulled the blood soaked cloth away from Sienna's neck, revealing an angry wound at her nape. It looked as though the delicate flesh had been torn apart from within. Jordan's breath caught in his throat.

"What did this? It looks like an insect bite."

Tia shook her head. "This isn't an insect bite. And it's not an entry wound. There's something embedded under her skin. Something that's been trying to work its way out for some time. Her body is rejecting some sort of implant that was placed there. I can't say how long ago. Maybe weeks, or months."

Jordan let out the breath he'd been holding and stared at Tia. "What do you mean, an *implant*?"

"There's something there." Tia pointed to the center of the bleeding wound. "I don't know what, and I don't know how large or how deep. I know this, if it's not removed, she will bleed to death."

"Then remove it. Now."

"Jordan, I can try, but as you can see," she said and indicated their rustic surroundings, "I don't have very advanced surgical equipment here. This isn't something I would expect to deal with in the village. I can't guarantee she would survive." The medic's gaze swept to Sienna who closed her eyes tightly against the pain.

Jordan hadn't thought about his minor head wound for more than a week, but now the tender spot at his temple began to throb. He began to feel disconnected. His gaze moved from Tia to Daren. The Consul had taken up a position at the adjoining door, his thick arms crossed over his chest.

Jordan couldn't imagine how this could have happened so quickly. Only a few hours ago Sienna had been vibrant and full of health, and now she seemed to be at the brink of death. It gnawed at him that she had hidden this from him for so long.

"Could this *thing* be the reason she's losing her memories?" he asked.

"It could be a neural block," Tia said with a thoughtful nod, then glanced at Daren. "I've heard of them but never seen one. They're often embedded in the neck or even the jaw, and they release a chemical into the blood that systematically destroys synapses in the memory center of the human brain. Eventually the subject loses all but very short-term memory. Their entire lives can be erased."

"Could that be what's happening?" Jordan asked. He felt Sienna stiffen in his arms.

"I suppose," Tia said with a shrug.

Daren stepped forward and surveyed the wound. "Neural blocks were used decades ago, before cryogenic stasis replaced capital punishment. The idea was that criminals could have their violent tendencies and the events that caused them to become violent erased from their minds, leaving productive members of society. Unfortunately it ended up creating dysfunctional people who couldn't recall anything from day to day. They became invalids."

Jordan shuddered. He would not allow that to happen to Sienna. When he spoke, his voice was ragged, the words torn from him.

"Help her. Please don't let that happen to her," he said.

"You think it *could* be a neural block? Who would do that?" Tia asked. "And why?"

Sienna stilled. Jordan reassured her with a hug. He wouldn't divulge her secrets yet. He closed his eyes. "If you can remove it, maybe we can find out."

Tia placed her hand on Jordan's shoulder, and the pressure of her strong fingers gave him hope. "I'll do my best. Sienna, is that all right with you?"

Sienna nodded slowly.

"You understand even if I remove the implant, I can't guarantee you'll be any better. You may not regain the memories you've already lost."

Sienna closed her eyes. She nodded once, the slightest movement of her head to acknowledge her agreement.

"I don't want to forget anything else," she whispered. "Please do anything you can."

Tia turned to Jordan. "Do you want a minute with her before I get started?"

"Yes." Jordan shifted his position on the cot and looked into Sienna's eyes. Her skin was gray, her lips colorless, and sweat beaded on her forehead. Her pain cut into him, and his blood felt heavy. It throbbed through him in a thick pulse that clogged his lungs. Drawing in breath was a chore, and he would have gladly stopped breathing to save himself the excruciating pain. He could not lose her now.

"Sienna, I'll be here. Tia is going to help you, I promise."

"I know. And ... you'll remind me of everything again, won't you?"

"Of course. Everything," he said and kissed her gently. He smoothed her hair and clasped her trembling hands in his, then turned to Tia and Daren. "What can I do?"

"You should wait outside," Tia replied. "This could take a while."

Reluctantly Jordan rose from the cot and stumbled toward the adjoining door where Tia met him. She put a reassuring hand on his arm and smiled grimly at him. Her expression told him she didn't feel as confident as she wanted him to believe.

"I'll do my best," she said again. He wanted to believe it would be enough, but in this primitive hut, with her herbal medicines, did Sienna really stand a chance? Daren led him to a stool in the outer room and set a cup of water before him.

"I'm going to help Tia. Do you want me to get someone to wait with you? I can have Raf or Dija sit with you."

"No. I'd rather be alone right now." Jordan closed his eyes and rested his head on his arms in the position he had found Sienna in the night before. The darkness closed in around him.

Though the people of Calabrel had no major deity, and Jordan had never felt the need before to beg for divine intervention in his affairs, he did so now. He didn't know who to call to or if any higher power might be listening, but he asked anyway that he be granted a favor now. He asked that the woman he needed so desperately, the woman he had vowed to protect no matter what, survived long enough for him to tell her again how grateful he was to have found her.

She had saved his life, and he had to find a way to repay that. If praying was all he could do, he would do it. He only hoped he was going about it the right way. Behind him Daren stood for a moment, silently contemplating him before joining Tia in the other room.

Jordan was relieved when Daren left and glad also that there was no one else with him, no one who could see his grief and the guilt he felt over having once believed that Sienna might be evil in some way, that she might manipulate or betray him. He hated himself for not trusting her, but more so, he hated whoever had done this to her. He vowed to set things right. With or without her, he would find whoever was responsible and make them regret hurting her, just as he regretted doubting her.

Time stood still while he waited, and at some point he fell asleep. He dreamed of a cool, green ocean pulling him down into silent darkness.

Chapter Eighteen

Jordan lowered himself to the warm sand beneath a sloping tree trunk and closed his eyes. He couldn't remember when he'd slept last, but his weariness came not from lack of sleep, but the worry that gnawed at him. Sienna lay in the hut on her cot, pale from loss of blood, her skin dry and hot from the fever that raged in her. Jordan held the cause of her illness in his hands. He opened his eyes and turned the small object over and over, examining it as closely as the waning light of evening would allow.

Three days had passed since Tia had removed the small metal cylinder from Sienna's neck, and still she had not opened her eyes. Daren and Dija hovered nearby most of the time, offering to stay with her while Jordan went for a walk, or took a nap, but he refused all their help. Finally, today, he'd come outside to catch the cool breeze stirred by a coming storm and let the quiet of the evening wash over him.

For what seemed like the hundredth time, Jordan squinted at the tiny symbols etched in the metal and wondered what they meant. Daren had confirmed that the object was a neural block, of the type that had been outlawed on most civilized worlds decades ago. The fact that someone had used the device on Sienna in addition to putting her in a stasis tube seemed utterly incongruous. If she knew a secret so powerful, why had her enemies simply not killed her? Why would they go to the trouble of destroying her memories and then arranging for her to be brought before a Protectorate court to defend herself against crimes she would not even remember committing?

The thought of the suffering the tiny object had caused her made Jordan angry and filled him with disgust. Whoever had done this to her would be very surprised to find out that she might be able to recall everything they had tried to erase from her mind. The knowledge that someone had gone to such lengths reinforced Jordan's belief that Sienna had committed no crime. She was no murderer, but a pawn in some foolish political game. Unfortunately Tia and Daren had the same suspicions as Jordan, and now he found himself confronted with endless questions from the village doctor and the Council members. He had finally confessed to them that Sienna was a prisoner and under his jurisdiction as a courier when the *Valkyrie* crashed. He neglected to mention the pirate ships, but he did make it clear to the colonists that Sienna posed no threat to them. Jordan had promised that the two of them would leave the village if they felt their presence would cause any danger to the people around them.

Torva had been the first to reassure him that he and Sienna were welcome in the village for as long as they wanted to stay. This knowledge lifted some of the burden of guilt from Jordan, though he apologized for keeping the details from them. Now, with the villagers sympathetic to his desire to help Sienna clear her name, he could relax and concentrate on helping her get well before the supply ship arrived.

When he saw Raf approaching from the north end of the beach, he placed the neural block back in the pocket of his pants. The hunt leader had visited him each day to

bring food and ask after Sienna. It pained Jordan to have to keep telling him there was no change in her condition. He had begun to fear she might never recover, and that thought filled him with dread. How could he lose her now?

"The amphitheater is shaping up nicely," Raf said as he lowered himself to a spot opposite to Jordan. "If you'd like to take a walk over, I'll stay by the hut."

"Thank you," Jordan replied. He absently turned the small metal spike over in his pocket. "Maybe tomorrow."

"You should get some rest," Raf said. "You're no help to her if you're exhausted."

She could have left me to die in the wreckage, but she stayed with me. I'm going to do the same for her, Jordan thought, but to Raf he only nodded. "Maybe tomorrow."

Raf regarded him sadly. It was obvious the younger man had no understanding of the emotions that were roiling within Jordan. How could he long for something he'd known for such a short time?

"When Sienna's better, we'll give a concert in the amphitheater," he said.

Raf brightened a bit. "Of course. I'm sure she'd like that. As soon as she's well."

* * * *

Sienna woke in the purple light of early evening disoriented but strangely calm. A seashell bowl full of white pebbles came into focus on the small stool which sat beside the cot, and the sweet smell of flowers wafted from a basket of blooms on the table in the center of the hut.

She was alone. The realization frightened her at first. Where had Jordan gone? Would he come back? She thought of their last hours together and was grateful that she hadn't lost the precious memories. She sat up slowly and found her head felt heavy. The terrible pain was gone, but her muscles were so weak, as if her body had forgotten how to hold itself up. Now that her head was full of the past again, keeping it upright was a daunting task. She leaned forward and put her face in her hands, rubbing away the disorientation of sleep. She shivered when the thermal blanket fell away from her arms. Though her skin was hot and dry, for the first time since her arrival on Talek, she felt cold.

It was then that the memories came back in a tumultuous rush, like seawater through the narrow channels between the dark rocks on the north end of the beach. Images flashed in her mind, and she doubled over with fear and disgust.

The detention center on Trifida came first. A dark holding cell had been her world for seven days before the medics dragged her off and put her in stasis. It stank of decay and the filth of prisoners who came before her.

Then Sienna recalled the alleyways of Crystal City, Trifida's capital, where she had hidden for weeks while the local police searched for her. They were cold and dank and rife with the lowest element of Trifidan society. She had been welcomed by those who thought she might have something to offer them, but chased away when they found she was as destitute as they were.

She remembered the explosion at the Council Hall on Carnelia. The resulting chaos had tied up the city streets for more than a day. Thirty people died, their families

devastated. Someone had chastised Sienna for feeling sympathy. A familiar voice played in her mind. *They deserved it. They were spreading evil into our society.*

Sienna clutched at her stomach when she remembered who had uttered those awful words.

Davin. His name came to her like a flash of lightning across a black sky. *Davin Sheridan.* He was a member of the Carnelian Planetary Council. He was incredibly wealthy, incredibly intelligent, and absolutely evil.

Sienna searched the memories that flooded back like waves over the sand, soaking into her conscious mind and making dark, wet stains there. Sienna knew the truth now. The anger that welled up in her had less to do with Davin's betrayal than it did with her own shame at having trusted him in the first place.

She had foolishly allowed Davin to become her world, her mentor, and worst of all, her lover. He had repaid her devotion with cruelty, and her trust in him with a betrayal that almost cost her life. She understood now why the medics on Trifida had placed a neural block in her neck. She knew why they had put her in stasis, and why the pirate ships had attacked the *Valkyrie*. She also knew what had to be done to finish the job Davin had begun and put an end to the suffering he had caused for so many people.

She rose unsteadily from the cot, testing her legs gingerly on the hard packed floor of the hut. She still felt heavy, as though she'd been floating for days and had finally come back to earth. Her movements were slow but purposeful. She reached the door of the hut in three shaky steps and leaned on the rough doorframe for support while the pounding in her head subsided. She touched the back of her neck and found the soft, cool bulge of a derma-gel bandage there, already partially absorbed into her skin. There was no tenderness, only a stiffness in the muscles. Tia had done a good job. With the odds of survival stacked against her, it was a miracle Sienna was walking, or breathing for that matter.

Sienna squinted into the orange light of the setting sun and recognized two shapes in the lingering shade beneath a tall tree down the beach. Raf and Jordan.

Jordan. Sienna tried to recall the feel of his hands on her, his urgent kiss and the deep magnetic longing that drew her too him, but the anger that welled in her from the earlier memories drowned it out. She was too hurt, too angry to enjoy what Jordan had stirred in her, and that only intensified her disgust. Davin still managed to hurt her, even though he must think she was long dead. He would pay for the pain he had caused her and the devastation he had wrought on the lives of so many others. In that moment, as she vowed to set things right with Davin, Raf caught her eye.

A moment later Jordan turned, and for a split second, Sienna's heart lightened. His relief at seeing her was palpable. She wanted to run to him and beg him to hold her and make the awful memories of Davin's betrayal go away, but her legs were so weak and her head was so heavy, it was all she could do to remain standing.

She held herself up for a moment longer as Jordan started up the beach toward her. She wanted to call out his name, but she found she could barely move. Defeated by her weakness, she lurched back to the cot and collapsed on the springy material. She pulled the thermal blanket up around her and shivered with exhaustion. The simple act of walking a few steps had drained her so badly she was afraid she might not be able to

remain awake. She forced her eyes open, and when Jordan appeared in the doorway a moment later, his expression one of pure dread, she tried to smile to reassure him.

“Sienna!” He rushed to her side and cradled her in a desperate hug. “I was afraid you’d never wake up.”

She clutched him to her for a moment. When he pulled back to look at her, the tears threatened to blind her.

“I remember now,” she said. “I know everything.”

Jordan searched her eyes and he lowered his head to kiss her gently. Behind him Raf, Tia and Daren crowded into the hut. “Don’t worry. None of it matters to me. As long as you’re all right, nothing else matters anymore.”

“It matters to me. The neural block wasn’t to make me forget something I had already done. It was to make me forget something I was *going* to do.”

Chapter Nineteen

Tia pushed past Daren and Raf and then gently urged Jordan aside so she could examine Sienna. Jordan stood back and watched expectantly until the medic finished her work. After a moment, the older woman sat back on her heels with a satisfied grunt.

"The fever has broken," she said, "but you're dehydrated. I'm going to get some medicine for you. Raf, can you bring something for her to eat? Not too much though, we need to start slow."

Raf left the hut, and Daren crossed the room to sit on one of the stools. Jordan lowered himself to sit next to Sienna and put his arm around her. She leaned on him and nestled her head into the crook of his neck. The sensation buoyed his spirits. He tightened his arm around her, and together they met the curious stares of the medic and the village consul.

"I'm glad to see you're recovering," Daren leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees. "We don't want to pressure you, but we're all very interested to know if you can remember anything prior to being put in the stasis tube."

Sienna's head came up, and her hot glance tracked to Jordan. Her accusatory stare made him feel terrible.

"I had to tell them," he said. "It's all right. You're safe."

Sienna sighed and leaned back against Jordan's chest. He felt the thready beat of her heart against his ribs, and the faintness of it worried him.

"I do remember," she said slowly, studying her hands. "I don't expect anyone to believe me, but I know I'm not guilty of the murders. I know who *is* responsible, and I plan to go to the authorities--as soon as I can stand up." She smiled at Jordan and he stroked her hair. "I need to return to Trifida to clear my name."

Daren nodded solemnly and glanced at his wife. "As we told Jordan, you're welcome here as long as you like. Our only concern is that your presence here might bring trouble for the colony. If we are in danger, we need to know about it."

"I'm fairly sure anyone interested in me thinks I'm dead. The plan was to destroy my memory so that I couldn't reveal the information I found out while on Carnelia."

"What did you find out? What happened exactly?" Jordan asked. With each moment his concern for Sienna's safety grew. If she knew some terrible secret, she might never be safe.

She sighed, and Tia reached for her wrist to check her pulse. "You're too weak for this right now. I want you to rest for a few days before you try taxing your memory."

Sienna shook her head at Tia's suggestion. "I want to tell you what I can. I'm afraid I'll lose it again."

"With the neural block removed, your memories should be safe," Daren told her. "Whatever you remember now, you won't forget again."

"The reason this happened to me was because I was the only one who knew. If

I'm the only source of the information, I'm still in danger. The more people I tell, the safer I'll be."

"Go ahead," Jordan prompted, "Tell us everything."

* * * *

Sienna glanced at him again, and snuggled closer. She wrapped her arm around his waist and leaned into his warmth. His strength seemed to transfer to her and with each word she felt stronger and more confident. With a shuddering breath, she began her story.

"I'm a biologist at the Claw River Colony on Kyrasau. My project was to study the *gonar* population there and make recommendations to the planetary government to designate large areas of reserve for the animals despite the growing human population in the Claw River Basin. I contacted several members of the Carnelian High Council to get information on their wildlife policies. They have an excellent natural resources program." Sienna waved away the details with a trembling hand. "Anyway, one of the Consuls that I contacted actually came to Kyrasau to discuss my work in person. Davin Sheridan." She paused on the name, amazed by the foul taste it left in her mouth. She must have shivered involuntarily because Jordan held her tighter.

"Sheridan was very enthusiastic about my work, very supportive. He offered to intervene with the Council on Kyrasau on my behalf. I was grateful for his attention--and his friendship. He even invited me to Carnelia to see some of the preservation projects there and suggested I might do some work for the Carnelian Science Ministry." Sienna paused for a breath. The rest would be difficult to tell.

"I stayed on Carnelia for six months, and during that time Sheridan asked me to become involved with his political agenda. He told me there was a dangerous faction among the Council members. Of the fifty-seven members, he told me more than half were involved in a subversive plan that would destroy Carnelian society. If they succeeded in taking control, the whole planet would become a political prison. Innocent people would die. He was very charismatic. I believed him and I agreed to help him get information about the council members about whom he had suspicions. I spied for him."

Sienna hung her head. She'd been so gullible. The memory of it burned. She was a fool for Davin all because she thought she loved him.

"You believed you were doing the right thing," Jordan said gently.

Sienna nodded before continuing. "I came across some information that implicated Davin. In fact it turned his whole story around. He orchestrated the coup. The Consuls he told me were enemies of the Carnelian people were the ones that opposed him. I found out he had been supplying money to an offworld organization--the Red Sun Reformation."

"I've heard of them," Daren said. "Years ago they led a revolution on Vega. Killed thousands before they were stopped. I had thought they were disbanded by now."

"The movement has apparently been growing since then, with new leaders and a new agenda. Davin Sheridan is a member. He was selling Carnelian political secrets to the Red Sun, but he was also lying to them. He was playing both sides of the field. I made the mistake of confronting him about it." Sienna stiffened at the memory of Davin's betrayal. "When he found out I knew his true plans, he tried to justify his

position to me, and he promised me the information I had uncovered was false. The next day during a session, the Council Hall exploded. Before nightfall I'd been thrown to the wolves as the scapegoat.

"I escaped from Sheridan's estate right after the attack on the Council. I was trying to get back to Kyrasau when I discovered the local authorities were searching for me. He had concocted some elaborate story that I had planned the attack."

"How did you end up on Trifida?" Jordan asked.

"I was already on a transport off world when I discovered the authorities were looking for me. At the Carnelian Space Station I changed my destination from Kyrasau to Trifida because Sheridan has an estate there also. He had told me in the beginning that, should the coup take place, he would go there and bring some trusted members of the Council with him. I wanted to be at his estate when he arrived."

Sienna laughed derisively, her voice hoarse. "I was so naïve. I thought I could take him on. I planned to alert the authorities on Trifida, but when I arrived, they were already looking for me. I hid for a while and then I was captured. I couldn't run any more."

"So Sheridan arranged to have your memory erased?" Tia asked. Sympathy softened her dark eyes. "Why not just kill you?"

"Because the Carnelian people wanted someone to blame. Alive, I could face punishment for my crimes, and Sheridan would look like the hero he wanted to be. If I were dead, the Carnelians wouldn't have their pound of flesh. I realize now Sheridan wanted me alive to face the charges so he could keep up his charade, but he had to make sure I couldn't confess what I knew about him. He arranged for the medics on Trifida to administer the neural block." Sienna glanced at Jordan and saw the pain in his eyes. "By the time I was taken out of stasis on the prison ship, my memory would have been completely destroyed. Cryogen gases don't affect the progress of the neural block. By the time they revived me for my trial, I might not have even known my own name."

Jordan's muscles stiffened beneath her, and Sienna realized he was angry for her.

"Of course the Protectorate would have thought you were lying. They would have given you the maximum sentence, and Sheridan's secret would have never come out," Tia finished. "It was extremely fortuitous that Jordan's ship threw a manifold and you ended up here."

Jordan and Sienna shared a glance, and she could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't want her to discuss the real reason for the crash. Right now she wanted nothing more than to curl up in his arms and draw from his strength to replenish herself.

Raf appeared at the door then with a small platter of food, which he set on the table. Daren and Tia took his arrival as a cue to leave.

"I'll be back with some medicine," Tia said as she rose from the floor. "Then we'll leave you alone to get some rest."

Daren followed his wife to the door. "The storm is going to be a bad one. Be sure to shutter your window tonight or the wind could damage the hut."

Jordan nodded. He left Sienna on the cot and moved to obey Daren's instructions. After the villagers filed out, Jordan lit a small shell lamp and the cozy glow filled the room. Within minutes the rain began to batter the thatched roof and the wind howled

outside.

Sienna leaned back against the wall of the hut and regarded Jordan. His eyes were dark in the lamplight and his skin was golden. If she'd had the energy she would have begged him to make love to her. She needed his strength and the feel of his hands on her to reassure her that everything that had happened to her since she'd woken from stasis was real.

As she watched, he crossed the room and sat on the stool that Daren had vacated. His expression was neutral, but she saw the hurt in his eyes.

"Why didn't you wake me the other morning?" he asked. "You might have died if *Dija* hadn't found you."

"*Dija* found me?" Sienna smiled at the irony. "I'm sorry. I was afraid. I woke up in pain, and when I realized I was bleeding, I panicked. I didn't know what was wrong. I couldn't remember what had happened to me." She paused and searched his face. "I ran to Tia's hut but she wasn't there. I came back to get you, but the pain was unbearable and I couldn't walk anymore. I sat down on a rock, and that's the last thing I remember."

"The pirates," he said softly, and his eyes flicked to the door where Tia was expected to return any moment. "They were members of the Red Sun Reformation."

"Probably. I think Sheridan promised me to them."

Anger flared in Jordan's eyes. "What do you mean?"

"The secrets I found out were worth a lot to him. I think he agreed to turn me over to them, but when he found out I knew he was cheating *them* as well, he couldn't afford to keep up his end of the bargain. It made more sense to turn me over to the Protectorate."

"Sienna," Jordan said, leaning forward to brush the sweat-dampened curls from her cheeks. "Why don't you just forget about Sheridan? You would be a lot safer if you just disappeared. He probably thinks you're dead. The Red Sun didn't bother to pursue us, they probably think that, too. The authorities on Trifida and Carnelia are through with you. You could find a quiet place to live ... *we* could--and we'd never have to worry about them again. You'd be safe."

Sienna smiled. She had thought she loved Davin, but nothing she had felt for him compared to what Jordan stirred in her. She would have given everything to run away with him and hide, maybe even stay here on Talek among the villagers who had been so kind to them, but she knew she would never be able to live with her secrets.

"If Davin succeeds in his plan to take over the Carnelian government, he'll become the most powerful planetary leader in the galaxy. He'll eventually be eligible for a seat on the Galactic High Council. The damage he could do from that position would be unimaginable. I can't allow that, Jordan."

Part of Sienna also wanted the satisfaction of seeing his expression when he discovered his plan to silence her had failed. It would be dangerous. He was not a man to play games with. She would need a fool-proof plan to get herself safely to his estate, and it frightened her to think that Jordan would put himself in danger to help her.

"I have to put a stop to his plans," she said, forcing her words through parched lips. "I can't ask you to--"

“You don’t have to ask,” Jordan said. “I’ll be with you all the way. I’ll help you do whatever you need to.” The conviction in his words gave her strength. She smiled at him wearily and held out her hand. He took it and placed her fingers over his heart again. “Anything you need to do, I’m with you.”

Chapter Twenty

The cool surf washed over Sienna's bare feet and briny foam crested at her ankles. She took a few more steps in the soft sand and tossed a small, white pebble into the oncoming waves. The children who were gathered around her cheered and clapped.

In the three days since she had woken after Tia's surgery, Sienna had grown stronger each day, thanks in part to Jordan's constant attention and the medic's amazingly potent homemade remedies.

After days of rain, Sienna was as eager to play in the sun as the children. They'd happily accompanied her to the beach to help her cast the wishes they had collected for her into the sea. After she released the last of the twenty-three tiny stones, Sienna turned and ran back up the beach to where Jordan sat on a woven mat. A new drum rested between his knees, and though he'd brought some tools for tightening the skin and carving the sides of the drum and planned to work while Sienna walked the shore, thus far he'd accomplished little. Each time she glanced back at him, she found him staring at her and smiling, his long fingers idle on the taut skin of the instrument.

She stood before him, digging her toes into the sand. "You're not getting a lot of work done." His gaze traveled slowly up her legs to the hem of the short skirt she wore, and the look in his eyes caused a surge of desire in her. For the past three nights she had slept in his arms, and there had been no nightmares. The peaceful rest had all but cured her weariness, and the nameless fear that had plagued her was gone. The derma-gel bandage at the nape of her neck was almost completely absorbed, and according to Jordan, the scar left by Tia's invasive surgery was minuscule. It was nothing compared to the one on his side, though his wound was now completely healed.

"There are too many distractions on the beach," Jordan said with a scowl, though a smile played at the corner of his lips.

"I can tell the children to go home," Sienna said with a pout and turned to give him a view of one curvy hip and a length of thigh.

"Children?" He made a show of scanning the beach and raised his eyebrows in mock amazement. "What children?"

"Maybe you should go back to the hut to work, since you can't seem to concentrate out here," she suggested.

"Only if my muse will accompany me."

"Accompany you? I can't play a drum," she told him with questioning grin.

"Who said anything about playing *music*?" He set the instrument carefully aside and lunged for her. She reeled back with a screech and ran for the waves, enticing him to chase her.

The children caught on to the game immediately and fell upon Jordan as a group, tackling him into the breakers. When he surfaced, sputtering, Sienna stood over him laughing.

"My army is small, but they're unbeatable," she said and danced backward before he regained his feet. He had to peel a number of small hands from his arms and legs before he could chase her again. Just before he reached the dry sand, Dija's class whistle sounded and the children gave a collective moan of disappointment.

"I guess I beat them!" Jordan laughed but feigned disappointment for the sake of the small faces that turned to him. The children filed between him and Sienna and headed up the beach where their teacher waited expectantly.

"Only by default. It's a *hollow* victory," Sienna responded with a stern look, her chin high. Jordan lowered his head and charged at her, sending her scrambling up the beach. She allowed him to catch her just few steps away from the door of their hut. She pounded his back ineffectually with her fists when he slung her bodily over his shoulder and carried her inside.

The exertion of the short run up the beach left Sienna breathless, but she didn't care. She had wanted Jordan every night since her awakening but had found she barely had the strength to stay awake longer than a few minutes after lying down. Knowing he held her while she slept had been enough then, but now she wanted more. The memories of their one night together replayed in her head, finally crowding out the unpleasant images of Davin with his dark hair and eyes the color of the strange, green ocean of her nightmares. It shamed her to think she had loved him, and she wanted to wash away the sting of his betrayal by renewing herself with Jordan.

She sighed as he lowered her to the pallet with a playful wink.

"Now that you're up and around, our long, restful afternoons are over." He settled his palm on her stomach in the area of bare skin between the top of her skirt and the hem of the short top she had fashioned from the torn remnants of her sleeveless shirt. Her breath quickened at his touch. "We're going to have to spend our days working again."

"I know." She cocked one knee allowing her skirt to ride up and expose the full, flawless length of her leg. Jordan stretched his body out next to hers and slid one muscular thigh between her legs. She gasped, her eyes wide.

"Your drum—you left it on the beach."

He shrugged, and his fingers inched upward under her shirt, causing her to moan softly. "It'll be there when I get back."

"I hope it's above the high tide line." She turned her attention to the shuttered window above them. "Maybe I should go get it for you."

His fingers raked down her flesh and caught the knot that held her skirt in place. In a swift movement he yanked the flimsy garment open. "You're not going anywhere," he told her, his voice husky with desire. "I don't care if it washes out to sea."

"That's not true. After Raf helped you make it--"

"Sienna," he said as he rose above her. She parted her thighs to allow him to settle his body between them. "Hush now." He quieted her protests with a deep kiss that took her breath away. She'd longed for this. The memory of their intimacy had sustained her during her recovery, but now, the anticipation of welcoming him inside her had her heart racing. Eagerly she curled her legs around his waist and moved to accommodate the hard length of him against her. He rose again and stripped before

lowering his head to her abdomen. He set her skin on fire with a line of kisses from one hipbone to the other and smiled darkly as her muscles bunched beneath his feathery touches.

One by one, he unfastened the clasps of her shirt. He took a moment to explore the flesh beneath the thin fabric. His fingers teased her sensitive flesh, igniting her desire with a sinfully sensual caress. Finally, when she lay panting, he pushed the material back off of her shoulders, exposing her body completely to him. The weight of his eyes on her was more sensuous than any touch, and she arched under him, desperate for more.

"Are you sure you're strong enough?" he asked, his smile fading. "It may be too soon for this."

She smirked and raised herself on one elbow to meet his lips with hers. She nipped playfully at his lower lip and allowed her free hand to speak for her. She caressed him, drawing his body toward her. Her ministrations produced a low moan from him, and she pulled him down on top of her in an easy motion.

"We'll take it slow," she murmured into his ear, and the whisper of her breath made him shiver. The reaction of his body to her suggestion was exquisite, and Sienna reveled in her power. She began to move under him, urging him to take her, drawing him to her with the movement of her hips. "Real slow," she whispered again and laughed when Jordan ignored her command.

"Maybe next time," he rasped in her ear, and sent an electric frisson down her body as he nuzzled her neck. He ran one hand from her shoulder to the curve of her waist and then clasped her hip to steady her beneath him. He entered quickly, drawing a small surprised gasp from her. Despite her original desire to savor every sensation, she found herself desperate for release. She matched his rhythmic movements, rising to meet each deep thrust. She used her ragged cries to urge him faster and faster until once again they crested together. He kissed her deeply as they rode the wave of sensation, taking her mouth and her body simultaneously. She moaned his name, riding the wave with a rocking motion of her hips that slowed gradually until they both lay spent.

Jordan rested his head on Sienna's abdomen just below her breasts and she stroked his hair gently with her fingertips.

"You don't listen, do you?" she admonished when her pulse and breathing finally returned to normal. She forced herself not to giggle when his fingers found a sensitive spot below her navel. His touch there caused another wave to ripple through her sensitive flesh.

"I didn't actually hear you complaining," he replied and drew himself up so that his face was even with hers. His expression sobered and her smile faded slightly when she met his gaze.

"The supply ship should be coming soon," he said. "But we don't have to leave here."

"I do," she replied, almost choking on the emotions. "My only chance to set things right is to get back to Trifida before the Protectorate finds me."

"They won't find you. They won't look for us."

The intensity of his conviction worried her. She sat up. "How do you know?"

He sighed and rolled from the pallet. She watched while he opened his pack full

of com circuits and took out the remnants of what had once been the body scanner. A small red diode blinked in a steady rhythm. "I built a beacon using the parts I salvaged from the ship. It's sending out a signal on a Protectorate frequency."

"Oh." Sienna's blood cooled. "So they know we're here."

"They know I'm here and that I'm alive. But you're not. I coded the signal so they would know your stasis tube malfunctioned and you died in the crash."

"Oh." Her heart raced. He'd lied for her, thrown away his career to save her, and she loved him for it. "Thank you."

"So stay here with me. When the supply ship comes, I'll send word that I won't be coming back."

"Won't they question you? Won't they care that you gave up your job?"

"In a month or so, I'll go back and formally resign. I'll tell them I fell in love with a native girl, and I'll be living on Talek now." He replaced the makeshift beacon in his pack. "You'll be safe here."

Sienna shook her head as Jordan came back and joined her on the pallet. "I can't let it go that easily. I have to deal with Davin. It's not just me he hurt."

He nodded and placed a tender kiss on her lips. "You're amazing," he told her. "Someone else would be more than happy to hide forever."

"I hate to leave here, but I would never be at peace with myself if I didn't try to fix my mistakes. I helped him. Before I knew what he was really planning, I *helped* him. I hate myself for that."

Jordan's brows knit together and he took her chin in his hand. "You have no reason to hate yourself. Hate Sheridan for lying to you, for using you and throwing you away." His voice grew harsh. "Better yet, let *me* hate him for you."

"I don't want you to get hurt. You've lost enough because of me." Sienna let her fingers trail to the scar beneath his ribs. "You could stay here and wait for me. I'll come back when I've done what I need to do." The thought of Jordan confronting Davin for her filled her with dread. Davin had supporters throughout the governments of Carnelia, Trifida, and a dozen other worlds. By defying him, they would both be risking everything.

"You're not going anywhere without me," he insisted. "Maybe we ended up together by accident, but we're stuck with each other now. I'll see this through with you. No matter what."

Sienna knew at that moment that she loved Jordan, but she couldn't say the words. She was afraid, not that he would betray that love the way Davin had, but that she might lose him too soon. The danger they faced was enormous. Perhaps he was right to want to walk away and live a quiet life somewhere where no one would ever find them. Maybe that would still be possible, after she had set things right with Davin.

She wrapped herself around him and kissed him until she became aware of his rising desire again. This time she rose above him and straddled his hips.

"This time, slow," she whispered as she began to move, lowering herself onto him inch by inch, delighting in the pleasure she caused him. "Think you can handle that?"

"I'll do my best," he promised with a slight gasp. He reached for her and pulled her down to lie across his chest, then wrapped his arms around her and held her still for a

moment. The depth of his need shone in his eyes. “Sienna,” he sighed. “Whatever happens, I’ll always be with you.”

She kissed him again, and this time he obeyed her commands. The rest of the afternoon melted away beneath them, and by sunset they slept, wrapped in each other, dreamless and content.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dija placed a necklace of shells around Jordan's neck and hugged him. He smiled self-consciously, and his gaze slid to Sienna who stood next to him, ready to accept another necklace from the teacher. He tightened his grip where his fingers entwined with hers, and she smiled back at him as she accepted the colonists' parting gifts.

Dija gave Sienna a hug also, then stepped back into the line of villagers that had assembled on the beach. Everyone in the village had gathered at daybreak to escort their guests to the salt flats a kilometer away where the supply ship was scheduled to land. The gray silhouette of the bulky ship, a Conqueror Class cargo runner called the *Horizon*, blotted out the fiery orange rays of the rising sun as it descended.

The children heralded its arrival with clapping, singing, and shrieks of delight. The supply ship meant presents from distant relatives, candy from other worlds, and a day off from their classes. But their revelry was subdued today since it also meant Sienna and Jordan would be leaving the village.

After Dija presented the necklaces, Tia and Daren stepped forward and bowed, as was the custom when saying farewell on their homeworld.

"Take care of each other," Tia said with a smile.

"We will," Jordan replied. "We've gotten pretty good at it."

"The next Hai festival will be in about seven months," Daren told them. "I hope we can expect a visit from you." The Consul winked.

"We'll be back in eight months," Jordan responded without missing a beat. "But save us some wine."

The couple stepped back, and now Torva and Malik took their place. The tiny Consul barely reached Jordan's chin, and she had to crane her neck to look him in the eye. "You both know that you are always welcome here," she said. "Even if you can't hunt."

Jordan managed to look contrite, but Torva was smiling. She patted his cheek and Sienna's and then pulled two small cards out of her pocket and handed them to Jordan.

"These are Identity Cards for you. We considered that under the circumstances you may not be able to travel under your own names."

Jordan looked at the cards and showed them to Sienna. They shared a glance. Dija and Raf had given up their identities for Sienna and Jordan.

"We will return these to you as soon as we can. Thank you," Sienna said softly, her voice whispery with emotion. Leaving was hard on both of them, but they had agreed it was necessary. Though Jordan hated to put her through the torment of confronting Davin Sheridan and her enemies on Carnelia and Trifida, he understood her need to set the record straight and put an end to whatever injustice Sheridan had caused.

He put his arm around her shoulders as Torva and Malik backed away, and together they hugged Raf. The hunt leader's dark eyes were moist, though he valiantly

tried to hide it.

“Normally, a departing warrior is given a spear,” he said solemnly, hiding his mirth. “But in your case I didn’t think that was a good idea.”

Jordan’s face colored a bit at the laughter that surged through the crowd. Sienna nudged him with her elbow. He lowered his head and regarded Raf from under his brows. “I’ll never live that down, will I?”

“No. Sorry.” Raf shook his head. He then produced a small object from behind his back and presented it to Jordan. The bone knife was intricately carved, more a work of art than a functional weapon.

“We figured this might be more appropriate,” he said.

Jordan accepted the gift and squinted at the delicate lines carved in the handle, which formed it into the shape of a multilegged sea creature. He hoped it was a beast from folklore and not reality. The knife’s tempered blade glinted in shades of blue and green in the early dawn light.

“You made this?” he asked in awe.

Raf nodded. “It’s not my favorite,” he said with a grin.

Jordan laughed. “Thanks.” He turned to Sienna. “We’d better get moving.”

With a rallying call from Torva, the villagers fell into line to begin the procession to the salt flats where the *Horizon*’s crew eagerly awaited their customers. Jordan and Sienna joined the group, their nearly empty packs slung over their shoulders. They had left most of their supplies as gifts to the villagers--the wine for Raf, the rest of the *Valkyrie*’s first aid supplies for Tia. Jordan had given his new carved drum to Diya so the children could practice with it. Once they had completed their mission, there would be plenty of opportunity to make another one, so Jordan didn’t feel that he would miss the instrument at all.

“We *will* come back here one day,” he whispered when Sienna leaned close to him. “I promise.”

She smiled a little sadly at him, but there was mischief in her eyes. “Right after the next Hai festival,” she replied.

He laughed and slid his arm around her waist, reassuring her with his touch. He only hoped he could keep his promise. He had no idea what awaited them on Trifida or how difficult it would be for them to get back there. They had a dangerous journey ahead of them, but one thing was certain. He loved Sienna. He trusted her and would do anything for her. He only hoped she would let him.

* * * *

Passage on the *Horizon* from Talek to the port station orbiting Canobia came with a price. As in the village, Jordan and Sienna were given jobs aboard the supply ship that kept them busy for most of the five days of their journey. At the end of their work shifts, which entailed sorting through packages and parcels to be dropped off at the station and packing huge crates of supplies for transport to other colonies, they usually had just enough energy to collapse into the narrow bunks assigned to them. There was no privacy on the cargo ship, so the two wisely maintained their distance from each other, in spite of the overwhelming desire to be together. Fourteen other crew members shared a communal sleeping room and mess hall, and though everyone was friendly and

congenial, the togetherness of the crew was inescapable.

"Once we get to the Port Station, it'll be better," Jordan assured Sienna on the fifth day. They sat in the mess hall sharing a plate of protein biscuits and waiting for station fall.

"Do you mean the food or the accommodations?" Sienna muttered as she chewed the tasteless fare. She hadn't realized how boring standard space rations were until she'd spent twenty days eating fresh fish and naturally grown fruit at every meal.

The lack of sunlight had already begun to dull her skin from the honey bronze she had acquired on the beach. That, coupled with the gray flight suit she had procured from the ship's stores, made her look and feel like a shadow. Though there had been no mirrors on Talek, she had been well aware that during their time there she had glowed with health, despite her few days of illness. She had seen it in the way Jordan looked at her. Now that he was separated from her for most of the day, the primal glint in his eyes had begun to fade. It worried her to think that perhaps his interest in her was waning also since she still felt an irresistible magnetic pull when he touched her. She felt it even now, as he rubbed his thumb along the side of her wrist while they ate.

"I was hoping both," he answered after a moment's contemplation. He had taken a third biscuit but thought better of it and put it back on the plate. "It shouldn't be hard to get passage to Trifida on a regular transport, but I don't know what it will cost. We'll have a lot to pay back to Dija and Raf when we're done."

"We owe them all so much. I hope we're able to make it up to them."

"Don't worry." Jordan lowered his voice and glanced around the nearly empty mess. "Right now we have to concentrate on what we're going to do on Trifida. Do you know the layout of Sheridan's estate?"

"Not very well. I've seen pictures but I've never been there. We'll have to bluff our way in."

Jordan fingered the collar of her drab flight suit. The shapeless gray outfit was practically universal for service workers. "Let's hang on to these. I have an idea that might get us through the gates. What about his personal staff? Do you think any of them might be willing to help you?"

"It depends on who he brought with him from Carnelia. He has at least a dozen servants. Most of them are fiercely loyal. They certainly didn't help me when he was holding me prisoner on Carnelia. I wouldn't trust any of them."

Jordan nodded. He had expected as much. Rich, powerful men usually kept their underlings very happy to avoid the inevitable security breach that might come from a disgruntled employee. Once they reached Trifida, they would be on their own entirely.

Sienna studied her hands pensively while Jordan considered their options. He remembered a good deal of his training as a soldier, and storming a well-guarded compound would take a lot of skill, a little bit of luck, and preferably an army on their side. He had a lot of preparations to make, but none of them could be done from the crowded corridors and cargo holds of the *Horizon*. They would have to secure First Class accommodations for the next leg of their journey, so he would be free to use a communications terminal. With the plans he had in mind, he figured the small savings he'd garnered over his years as a courier would be wiped out to pay Raf and Dija back.

It didn't matter. Once this was over, he would be starting anew anyway, and if he had to start with nothing, so be it. At least he would have Sienna, and she mattered more to him than anything else.

He studied her face as she traced idle patterns on the tabletop with her fingernail. With her hair pulled back and carefully combed into a neat braid again and her downcast eyes rimmed with those thick, dark lashes, she looked almost as she had when he had first seen her. He had thought her beautiful then, without even knowing her. Now, after having seen her with her hair loose and flowing, wet and silky against her skin, wearing nothing but a smile for him, he realized he hadn't come close to knowing her in that first moment. Again he thought of the amorphous beliefs of some cultures in a higher power, and he decided that if one existed, he owed it a debt of gratitude for bringing Sienna into his life.

Their forced separation on the *Horizon* was driving him slowly mad, and he couldn't wait to settle into a passenger cabin on a transport to Trifida where they would finally have some privacy. But other thoughts crowded his mind, and though his desire for her grew each day, he had to put it aside and concentrate on the task at hand.

This was like going to war. Though he didn't fully understand what was happening in the Carnelian Council, he understood the stakes. The coup of a planetary government would have grave consequences for more than one world. He found that he was becoming as dedicated to the cause as Sienna, but perhaps for different reasons. Certainly he wanted to avenge the damage done to her by Davin Sheridan, but he also wanted to uphold his pledge to the Protectorate in some final way. When this was over, there would be no place for him in the Courier Corp. There would be no place for him anywhere except by Sienna's side, wherever that took him. Though he had purposely disregarded his last orders to help Sienna, he still felt an obligation to uphold his duty. Since bringing Sienna to the Protectorate prison ship was out of the question, he would fulfill his obligations another way. He would find a way to stop the corruption on Carnelia.

"Where are you?" Sienna asked. Her voice brought him back from his daydream. "Have you gone back to Talek without me?"

"No. I'm just trying to work out a plan. We'd better collect our gear. The ship will be docking soon, and I don't want to waste any time."

"No argument from me," she replied, rising with the plate of unappetizing biscuits. She dumped the food in the recycler and followed him out of the mess.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sienna woke from a fitful sleep, momentarily disoriented. She shivered under her light blanket and reached for Jordan, but the other side of the bed they shared aboard the transport ship was empty. The soft mattress was cold. He hadn't come to bed.

She sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, and looked around the small cabin they had rented for the trip to Trifida. At least the sparse accommodations were private. The prospect of sharing a bed with Jordan had buoyed her spirits until she discovered he planned to spend so little time there.

For three nights, she had gone to sleep alone while he read downloaded files from the transport's news archives. This was also the third time she had woken alone in the middle of the night. Irritation replaced her initial concern. It was nearly morning and today they would disembark at Trifida. They would have little time alone after that, and she had hoped they might take advantage of the privacy that had eluded them on the *Horizon*.

She rose and stretched the kinks from her muscles. The artificial gravity felt good at first after all the physical exertion on Talek, but the lack of exercise was having an effect on her. When they made planetfall, she and Jordan would feel uncomfortably heavy for hours, maybe even days, which would slow them down.

She pulled a thin robe over her shirt and undergarments and rubbed her arms to ward off the chill of the reconstituted air. She scanned the room and realized that, once again, Jordan hadn't left her a note. Her options were to go looking for him or wait for his return and she was tired of waiting. After a few frustrated turns around the small room, she tore off the robe and replaced it with a new shirt and pants. She slid her feet into her boots and hit the door controls with a vengeance. She had to find him and discover what it was that had captured his attention during these last three days while she slept alone, wanting him and wondering why he hadn't come to her.

The corridor outside the cabin was dim with artificial night. The diurnal cycles on the transport ship *Demeter* were short, based on those of Tiannis, its home world. Sienna felt like time was accelerated on the ship, almost as if she were rushing forward, out of control. She found herself more than once wishing they had stayed on Talek where time seemed to stand still. She had begun to fear that maybe she had made a mistake in leaving their safe haven.

Frustrated, she leaned against the cold metal bulkhead and wrapped her arms around herself. She still felt the chill, not from the recycled air around her, but from the memories she wanted desperately to suppress.

The image in her mind of Davin's ice-cold eyes froze her blood. A man like that would not succumb easily to a trap. She realized now that the dream she had when she was going in to cryogen sleep, the slithering sensation of a snake crawling on her skin and through her body, wasn't just a drug-induced hallucination. It was Davin she

remembered. His touch, the caress that she had once found so pleasing, had in reality been cold and dry. He had wormed his way into her consciousness and coiled around her soul like a serpent, and in the dark, when she was alone, she realized he was still there. It wasn't over. She had to find a way to purge him from her thoughts. She couldn't ever do that while living an idyllic dream on Talek, but she wished there were another way besides confronting him again and reliving his betrayal.

After a moment, Sienna pulled her thoughts together and headed off down the corridor. The *Demeter* was a small ship, but its fourteen passenger decks were catacombed with chambers for sleeping, eating, entertainment, and storage. She and Jordan had been told upon boarding that the manifest was full, which meant more than three hundred passengers and fifty crew members filled those deck, and Jordan could be anywhere among them.

She considered having him paged, but she wanted to keep the use of their false names to a minimum. In public they referred to each other as Dija and Raf, but they kept to themselves as much as possible, minimizing their contact with the other passengers in case someone on board questioned their identities.

One deck above their cabin there was a small communal room where the passengers gathered to talk and use the communications terminals. She knew Jordan had spent some time there downloading information on Trifida and trying to discover whatever he could about Davin Sheridan and the rest of the Carnelian Council. He had asked Sienna to remain in their cabin as much as possible, since her face would be more recognizable than his. She obeyed because it was a logical request. She still recalled her horror at seeing her picture broadcast by the media on Trifida when the local police force instituted a citywide search for her. She had felt utterly naked.

Her lustrous dark hair and deep green eyes, which had always brought her compliments, had become badges of dishonor that made her easily recognizable in a crowd. She had taken to wearing a hood and hiding in shadowed alleyways then. Now, as they drew closer to Trifida, she again felt the need to keep herself hidden. According to Jordan, her incarceration had occurred months ago, but there might still be locals who would remember her face and the scandal associated with her.

When Sienna arrived in the lounge area, it became apparent immediately that Jordan was not there. Only a few people were awake at this hour, and those appeared to be stupefied from too many hours in the ship's bar. She ignored the interested stare of a man who still nursed a glass of wine, and ducked away, unsure of how to proceed.

She was loath to try the bar, and she couldn't imagine Jordan being there. Despite his enjoyment of the seed wine during the Hai festival, she knew he was not one to imbibe to excess. Reluctantly she peered into the dark, smoky chamber where a weary looking bartender served spirits at all hours. Thankfully, Jordan was not there either.

With a sigh she turned away and took an adjoining corridor that would lead her back to the lift. By now, he had probably gone back to their cabin. She wondered if he would feel her absence as keenly as she felt his.

The dark corridor ahead branched off into several small alcoves where passengers could sit to have private meals or conversation. The first few were empty, but as Sienna advanced, she heard voices coming from up ahead. She stopped, confused by what

sounded like Jordan's voice.

"Are you sure it will work?" the familiar voice asked.

"I guarantee it. It's old but well maintained. Just show this card at the shop at the address printed there, and they will release it to you," a raspy voice responded. Sienna slowed her progress and held her breath, straining to hear the whispered conversation.

"All right. I'll take your word for it."

"Do you have the payment?"

"Right here."

"Very good. It's all here."

"Were you expecting me to cheat you?" The voice was definitely Jordan's.

Sienna began to tremble. She leaned against the bulkhead for support, unsure whether to be angry or frightened by what she heard. Why was Jordan purchasing something from another passenger? What could it be?

"Of course I was. No one has an honest use for a neural injector. I can only assume you're some type of criminal."

"I may be, but I'm an *honest* criminal."

Sienna's throat closed. A neural injector had only one purpose--to administer neural blocks. What would Jordan need with one of them? Her hand went involuntarily to the back of her neck, and though her wound had healed, she remembered the awful pain that plagued her while the tiny foreign object was embedded in her neck. A violent shiver passed through her, and she had to fight the urge to turn and run. She had to hear the rest of the conversation.

"Did you get the information I asked for also?" Jordan asked.

"Of course. The code worked just as you said it would."

"Well?"

"I'll need the rest of the payment." There was a throaty chuckle followed by a shuffling sound. "Excellent. This is all here as well."

"I'm waiting for my answer." Impatience clouded Jordan's voice.

"Yes. There *is* still an open warrant on Sienna McCade in the Protectorate registry. It lists her as missing, but not yet presumed dead."

Sienna covered her mouth with one hand to keep from screaming. Not again. She could not stand another betrayal. Jordan told her he'd reported her death to the Protectorate. Could it be they hadn't updated their records yet? Or had he lied to her?

Why would he be checking on her warrant and purchasing an illegal neural injector? The reason seemed very clear. Despite his feelings for her and the promises he'd made, he was still obligated to turn her over to the authorities.

A familiar pain shot through her like a blade had lodged behind her breastbone. The cool air grew thick in her lungs and her vision clouded. She had to reach out to the wall to steady herself. It had been the same when she realized Davin was behind the murders of the council members.

"Anything else?" Jordan prompted. Sienna forced herself to remain a moment longer and listen even though the words caused a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"I transmitted the message you asked."

"Let me see the receipt."

"It's right here, satisfied? It was transmitted at the beginning of last cycle."

"All right. Then our business is concluded. Thank you for your services."

"Any time. It's been a pleasure, Raf."

"I wish I could say the same."

Sienna flung herself backward when she realized the conversation was over and the participants would be leaving the alcove. She sprinted for the next small room and threw herself into the deeply cushioned seat, knowing that if Jordan came this way down the corridor he would see her. She sank into the shadows and closed her eyes. Anger washed over her, replacing the pain. What could she do? Go back to the cabin and confront Jordan? Could she pretend she hadn't heard the whispered conversation and wait for him to make his move? She couldn't decide. There was too much at stake.

When no one passed her alcove after a few moments, she realized that Jordan and his informant must have gone the other way. She relaxed slightly but remained there for a long moment, doubled over, hugging her herself and fighting off the rising nausea. Unanswered questions bombarded her thoughts. Why had Jordan promised to protect her? Why had he entreated her to stay on Talek, if he had planned all along to fulfill his mission and turn her over to the Protectorate? Did he think she would now be able to defend herself and therefore manage to be acquitted of the charges against her?

Perhaps he had never believed her and wanted to use a neural block to erase the memories of their time on Talek so that he would not be implicated in any wrongdoing. Why had she trusted him? Was it because there had been no one else to trust, or was it because from the moment she had found him lying bleeding under the damaged nav-con, he stirred something within her, something that had been terribly abused and misused by Davin Sheridan?

It didn't matter now, she decided. Either way she could not allow herself to be captured. To be placed in stasis again would destroy her, and as angry as she was at Jordan now, she would die before giving up the memories of their beautiful days on Talek. Even if it ultimately meant nothing to him, she would carry it for the rest of her life. Painful or not, she refused to forget.

Sienna took a deep breath and fought to clear her lungs of the constricting weight that had settled there. Unsteadily, she rose from the cushioned seat and emerged into the corridor where the faint golden running lights had come on, heralding the beginning of *Demeter's* short day cycle.

Though she spent so long without them, all of Sienna's memories were clear and accessible to her now, and she knew that she had never been one to shirk a responsibility. She had a duty to herself and to the thirty people who died on Carnelia to finish what she had come to Trifida to do.

With her head high, she walked back to the lift and returned to the cabin to Jordan. She would say nothing of what she heard, and bide her time until she could do what was necessary. When everything was over with Davin, if the Protectorate came for her, she would accept whatever punishment they might have for her, but she would do so with her memories intact.

* * * *

When Jordan returned to the cabin, he found Sienna asleep, curled in a ball in the

center of the bed. He moved quietly to repack the contents of his pack and secrete the small card he'd been given into a side compartment.

Excluding Sienna from the illegal transaction made him feel terribly guilty, but he didn't want to involve her in anything else that could be used against her by the Protectorate. There would be time later to explain his secret dealings. For now, the less she knew about his own plans for Davin Sheridan, the better off she would be.

He paused in the doorway and watched her for a moment, concerned by the tension evident in her position. She hadn't slept like that -- with her arms around her knees and her eyes tightly closed -- in days. He thought the nightmares were gone, but now it looked as if they had returned.

Perhaps he'd spent too much time away from her. He berated himself for that, but he felt like he had little choice. He had studied the options available to them, and he'd decided the wisest course of action would be to confront Sheridan in private at his estate on Trifida and force a confession from him.

Sienna had suggested they make a public statement to the authorities on Carnelia, but with her arrest warrant still in effect, she would be captured the moment she showed her face anywhere near the remnants of the High Council.

The news reports he'd read about the attack on the Council were brutal. A society in mourning for dozens of beloved public servants would not be satisfied with anything less than the maximum punishment for those responsible. The current reports listed Sienna McCade as the mastermind behind the terrorist attack, and vicious editorials by the victims' family members called for vengeance.

Jordan had decided, based on his investigation, that without solid evidence of Davin Sheridan's involvement in the crime, Sienna would stand no chance of clearing her name. Getting the exiled consul to confess wouldn't be easy, but Jordan was banking on a well-known characteristic of wealthy, powerful men. Most of them had multiple secrets, and it was never too difficult to catch a politician in a lie.

He only wished he could pull off the plan without involving Sienna. She looked so vulnerable now, so pale and small. He hated the thought of exposing her to more danger.

She stirred fitfully, and Jordan crossed the room to stand next to the bed. He longed to climb in beside her and ease her into his arms. He wanted to brush the troubled furrows from her brow and reassure her that she would never suffer the terror of cryo sleep again. But somehow, the farther they got from Talek, the more he doubted they would ever be able to return to their idyllic island paradise.

They were only two people, and the government of Carnelia was a lumbering political machine obviously under the influence of men like Sheridan. It would be nearly impossible to complete the plan by themselves, but if anyone in authority found Sienna before Sheridan confessed, Jordan would not be able to protect her. The only way he could make it all work was to forget, for the time being, that he loved her. He had to become a soldier again and focus on the task at hand.

Later, when it was over and she was safe, then he could think about Talek and the sultry nights they'd spent in each other's arms. If he allowed himself to become distracted, the only thing he would be able to offer her would be another endless sleep.

With that sobering thought in mind, he left her sleeping and went into the adjoining bathroom to shower and dress in preparation for planetfall.

* * * *

When the bathroom door closed, Sienna sat up slowly, careful not to make even the slightest noise. Jordan had stood over her for a long time, and she had begun to wonder what he might be thinking as he watched her sleep. She had never found it so difficult to keep her eyes closed and her breathing steady.

She listed for a moment and was relieved to hear the sound of running water. She slid out of the bed and paced the room, her thoughts in a tumult. Part of her wanted to leave, but she had nowhere to go until the *Demeter* landed on Trifida.

Another part of her merely wanted to curl up into a ball and cry. Without Jordan to rely on, she had no one, and she had never felt so alone in her life.

Now, with her memories intact, she recalled her friends and coworkers on Kyrasau and how they had entreated her not to leave. They had rightly feared she would never come back, though they believed it would be because she would find life more interesting on an advanced world like Carnelia. She couldn't return home with the shame of her failure hanging over her. As unpleasant as they were, her choices were clear.

She looked around the cabin at the meager belongings she and Jordan had accumulated during their travels. They had exchanged their satchels for proper travel bags when they'd boarded the *Demeter*, and most of their clothes and personal items were neatly packed in anticipation of their arrival on Trifida.

With a careful glance toward the bathroom door, she reached for Jordan's bag and searched the contents. She moved aside the clothing he had purchased and found what she was looking for. The small, carved knife Raf had given him lay in a hidden inside pocket.

Though it made her feel like a criminal, she took the gift the hunt leader had given him and carefully placed it in her own bag. She hoped she wouldn't need it to defend herself, but the fear that she could be captured again had taken hold of her and now forced her to think like a fugitive again.

Perhaps someday she would be able to find a way to return the knife to Jordan, when she was truly free, but for now she planned to be long gone before he discovered it was missing.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A cold drop of sweat trickled down the back of Jordan's neck. He resisted the urge to wipe it away. The customs agent in front of him peered intently at the computer screen before her. She squinted her gray eyes and twisted her lips in consternation while Jordan forced himself to breathe. *We're fine*, he told himself as he fought to maintain his composure. *We're fine*.

Sienna stood off to the side of the customs line, having already passed the agent's scrutiny with her borrowed ident card. She blended well into the crowd of tired passengers debarking from the *Demeter* at Trifida's Crystal City Space Port. With her dark hair covered by the hood of her flight jacket and her eyes shielded with a pair of glasses from the amenities shop on board ship, no one looked twice at her.

He was amazed at how cleverly she managed to blend in. Her height and regal, self-assured bearing would have drawn attention anywhere she went, but she had learned, since leaving Talek, to slouch a bit and shuffle, taking on the weary gait of those around her. He admired her ability to disguise herself with body movements, but he longed to be able to strip her disguises away and allow her to walk proudly at his side. That could only happen if her name was properly cleared from the Protectorate database and he would have to call in every favor owed to him to do that.

The agent made a clucking sound with her tongue and finally handed Raf's ident card back to Jordan.

"I'm sorry for the delay," she said. "My screen is malfunctioning. Maintenance was supposed to be here eons ago to fix it."

"That's okay," Jordan took the card with moist fingers and jammed the plastic rectangle in his pocket along with the small paper card he had already stored there. He turned away from the customs desk with a faint smile of relief. Another moment longer and he might have succumbed to panic. The heat of the port terminal and the blazing lights above only added to his nervous discomfort.

They were home free now. Having passed customs, they could move about Crystal City at their leisure. With the plan he'd devised to get them into Davin Sheridan's estate on the outskirts of the city, he decided they actually stood a chance of completing their mission.

Each moment that passed made it more difficult to concentrate on anything but returning to Talek. He could almost taste the salt air and feel the intoxicating sensation of Sienna's silky hair running through his fingers.

He shook off the distracting thoughts and scanned the crowd for Sienna. A wave of panic began to rise from the pit of Jordan's stomach when he realized Sienna was not among the small knot of gray-clad passengers waiting next to the customs terminal. He craned his head over the crowd and searched the oncoming faces for her familiar shape but she didn't appear. He thought of calling for her, but dismissed the idea. They had

agreed they would do nothing to draw unwanted attention to themselves. He would not break that promise.

He took a calming breath and waited a moment for the group of passengers and crew to clear the terminal. When the crowd dissipated there was no one left that fit Sienna's description anywhere in the brightly lit debarkation center. The cold lump that had formed in Jordan's stomach rose to his chest. Had she deliberately disappeared or had someone recognized her? Perhaps a loyal servant of Sheridan's had been waiting to take her back to his lair? That made no sense. There was no way Sheridan's people could have discovered Sienna was still alive and en route to Trifida. What could have happened to her?

Jordan was on the verge of full-blown panic when a man caught his attention and nodded to him. Jordan watched skeptically as the squat, powerful looking man, obviously a native of Verados, approached him with purposeful strides.

"Raf Gadjja?" he asked and Jordan nodded, torn between relief and utter confusion. Only Sienna could have sent the man. Perhaps she had decided to hide, in fear that the delay with the customs agent meant trouble.

"This is for you," the man said as he pushed a tightly folded paper into Jordan's palm. "Dija says goodbye."

Jordan froze. His fingers closed around the sharp corners of the paper and squeezed the note even smaller. The man ambled away without another word and left Jordan standing in the thoroughfare, the river of passengers surging around him. He stared at the note for a long time before he could bring himself to open it, and he cursed under his breath when he read the words she had written.

He heard her voice in his head as he read the note.

I won't go under again. You won't find me until I've done what I came here to do, and then I'll turn myself in. Go to the Protectorate and tell them I escaped. Forget the neural injector. You won't need it.

Jordan swallowed hard and his jaw clenched painfully. How had she discovered his clandestine meeting? He had waited patiently each night for her to fall asleep. He'd forced himself to keep his hands off her, knowing that if he made love to her, he would lose himself in her and be unable to concentrate on the task at hand. While she slept, he learned all he could about Davin Sheridan and the Carnelian Council, and he had managed to find an informant to help him with his plan.

It seemed that in the intervening months since Sienna's capture, Sheridan had become a hero to the Carnelian people. He resided now on Trifida in exile, awaiting a time when he would return to Carnelia with a few surviving members of the original Council and wrest control of the government from the subversives who had taken over after the explosion. Sheridan was calling for military intervention, but not from the Protectorate. He wanted a new order, and he openly announced his alliance with the Red Sun Reformation claiming only *they* were strong enough and cunning enough to purge Carnelia of the corruption that threatened to destroy its government.

Jordan had left all the files for Sienna to read, and he knew she had, but he hadn't discussed the implications of his findings with her. His mind had been too involved with the preparations he needed to make to ensure Sheridan's capture. He hadn't wanted

Sienna to try to talk him out of the dangerous plan, and he hadn't wanted to change his mind. He knew a few hours in her arms would make it impossible for him to think of anything but running away with her and he didn't want her to be a fugitive for the rest of her life.

When he discovered that the warrant for her arrest had not yet been discharged, he knew he had to be careful how he proceeded. If they were careless in their dealings with any official on Trifida, she might be taken into custody before Jordan had proof of Sheridan's guilt in the attack on the Council.

There would be no recourse then but to allow her trial to continue. Though she might be cleared of any involvement with the attack, she would spend time in a stasis tube while awaiting the court's decision. Jordan could not allow that to happen, and he had tried to take steps to ensure it would not. Now with Sienna running from him, probably believing he had betrayed her just as Sheridan had, there was no guarantee she would not get herself into worse trouble.

He jammed the paper into his pocket and flung himself through the crowd almost blinded by rage. Why hadn't he told her everything? In wanting to spare her, he had caused her to distrust him. He reminded himself he was no longer a soldier and this wasn't his war. It was foolish to assume that he could control every variable, especially Sienna. He should have understood her fragile emotions. She had trusted Sheridan, and he had ripped that trust to shreds. It was only natural she would be keenly sensitive to any further betrayal, real or imagined. Jordan should have been more careful.

Now he had only one option. He had to carry out the plan, knowing that Sienna would end up embroiled in the middle. The stakes were higher now. Separated from her, he couldn't protect her. He would need more than a neural injector to deal with Sheridan, and wondered if Raf would be offended if his identity were used to purchase a more dangerous weapon. It didn't matter. There was no choice.

* * * *

Sienna emerged from the transport terminal still huddled in her flight jacket. The inhabitants of Crystal City swarmed around her. To them she was nothing more than another object to be avoided in their journey from one point to another. She melded into the crowd that moved through the wide avenue and used Dija's ident card to board a jitney that would take her to the outer territories of the city where the wealthy lived in a more pastoral setting. She climbed into a hard-backed seat and folded her arms across her chest. Turning her face toward the window of the vehicle, she watched the crowd go by and wished she were anywhere else in the universe.

When the vehicle turned a corner, she thought she saw Jordan running along the street, his features pale and drawn. She turned her head away and swiped angrily at the tears that threatened to spill from under her dark glasses.

She wondered if she could manage to elude him for as long as it would take to reach Davin. She hadn't considered what she would do if Jordan found her first. She couldn't bring herself to hurt him. Despite his actions on the *Demeter*, she still loved him. That would never go away. With no memory of who or what she was, she had given herself to him freely because she loved him deeply and completely. It didn't matter if he didn't return her feelings, or if he still thought of her as a criminal.

Despite her anger, she hoped he wouldn't suffer for her mistakes. As a courier, he might receive the blame for her escape. Though the logical part of her brain told her she shouldn't care what happened to him now, she couldn't help but wish he would go to the authorities and save himself the shame of having to admit he had helped her escape. She would gladly take the blame for that, since she knew she was guilty. She could have remained aloof from him and demanded he return her to the Protectorate immediately to face her punishment.

With the knowledge she had regained from the removal of the neural block, she would now be able to defend herself in the Galactic courts. She might have saved herself more time in a stasis tube with a full confession of her involvement with Davin, but instead she had drawn Jordan in, hoping to convince him to help her. She had foolishly allowed her attraction to him to blossom into something that put both their lives in danger. Her own selfishness stung her more than Jordan's actions did. She knew in her heart that if he only asked her, she would forgive him. Not so of Davin. She would never forgive his betrayal, and she was certain he would never ask her to.

The jitney ride took far longer than Sienna expected, but when it reached its final destination, she was no closer to a plan than she had been in the terminal. She debarked and looked around the small commerce street where the jitney had dropped her off. After a moment of near panic, she decided to avail herself of the shops she found there. It was time to lose her disguise.

Davin would no doubt be happy to see her. Having her back in his power would be exactly what he wanted. She didn't expect to have any trouble gaining access to his estate. What she did there would be another story. Once inside she was certain of two things. One, she would not leave without forcing Davin to confess everything to her, and two, she would not hesitate to defend herself.

As she entered one of the small shops, she removed her glasses and shoved them into the deep pocket of her jacket. Her hand bumped the small bone-handled knife that she had taken from Jordan's bag while he dressed that morning. She hoped it would serve her well, and she also hoped she would not be forced to use it. She didn't want Davin to turn her into the murderer he had created, but she knew, if he touched her, she could easily summon the rage to kill him. If it came to that, she'd turn herself in and accept her punishment.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Davin Sheridan's estate sprawled over ten square kilometers of rolling hills covered with towering trees. The buildings were set low to the ground and were protected by numerous force fields that pulsed with rainbow colored light even in the brilliant sunlight of Trifida's second summer. According to Jordan's research, most of the actual living quarters in the displaced Consul's home were underground, along with the servants' quarters and service entrances.

The latter came and went in startling quantity. For that, Jordan was grateful. He had found a spot on the narrow service road that lead to Sheridan's estate and waited there overnight, his mind reeling with thoughts of Sienna. He hoped she had changed her mind about going to the estate alone. He only wished she trusted him enough to let him handle Sheridan for her.

Now, near midday, Jordan was ready to begin his plan. He would have given anything to have Sienna by his side, but he had decided that no matter what, he would confront Sheridan. He had committed to doing what was necessary, and with or without her he would see it through. Then he would dedicate every moment thereafter to finding her, and beg her to forgive the mistakes that had cost him her trust.

A small motorcar rumbled down the smooth pavement toward him and he shifted into position. His pack lay next to him on the ground. He scooped it up and slung it over his shoulder as he pulled a small object from his pocket. The stunner he had procured in Crystal City, along with a few other necessary objects, looked real, but it was actually a costume prop. A real one, while it was within his means, required a deep background check and a two-day waiting period. Jordan didn't have that kind of time. Though, as a Protectorate Courier he was within his rights to be armed at all times, he could not use his own identity yet. He had no jurisdiction to pursue a criminal, even one that had escaped from his custody, on the world on which that criminal had originally been incarcerated. Had he used his own name, he would have been required to turn over all the information he had on Sienna and wait while the local authorities reinstituted their search for her.

The stunner was a fake, but the neural injector in his breast pocket was very real. It was heavy and cold and already loaded with the small, sharp cylinder Tia had removed from Sienna's neck. In addition to these items, Jordan's pack held a small recording device and a global positioning beacon. When the time was right, the authorities would know exactly where to find Jordan, Sienna and Davin Sheridan.

As the small car approached, Jordan ambled out into the middle of the road and waved his arms. His smile must have appeared perfectly genuine, since the man driving the car pulled to a stop immediately and motioned Jordan over to the side of the vehicle.

"Are you lost?" the man asked with a distinctive Trifidan accent. Jordan nodded, disconcerted by the pang of regret he felt at what he was about to do. His smile froze as he produced the stunner and held it level with the man's chest.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I need you to get out of the car," he said in a deceptively calm voice.

Shock blanched the man's doughy features, and his hands trembled as he held them up in a gesture of surrender.

The man nervously unfastened the latch of the door and stumbled onto the pavement. "I ... this is absurd! How can you expect to get away with this?"

"Believe me, sir, I don't enjoy this at all. I need you to take off your shoes, please, and leave them in the car," Jordan said. He waved the gun in what he hoped was an erratic and dangerous manner.

"My shoes? Why?" The man's entire body shook as he maneuvered carefully around the barrel of the stunner. Jordan shoved the weapon at him and adopted a wild-eyed stare.

"Just do it! Please!" he insisted, adding a slight apoplectic shoulder twitch for effect. The man jumped, but he obeyed. He kicked his footwear off and tossed the shoes into the car.

"Thank you," Jordan said. He waved the stunner frantically, gesturing at the hot pavement. "Now start walking back to the commerce sector. Don't turn around until you've gone at least a kilometer."

With no shoes, the walk would be slow and painful unless the man veered off into the brush at the roadside. By the time he reached the commerce sector and reported the crime, Jordan would be inside the estate.

"But I'm supposed to be at work," the man whined, and Jordan rolled his eyes.

"I just gave you the day off. What kind of work do you do, anyway?"

"I'm a messenger. I'm deliver--"

"That's good. That's enough. You can go now. *Hurry*. It wouldn't hurt if you forgot what I look like, too."

"Sure, sure." The man stumbled off, practically dancing to keep his tender feet off the blistering pavement. It wouldn't be long before he sat down to rest, to concoct an exaggerated story about the band of muscular thugs that attacked him. Jordan watched him go, vowing to make it up to the poor man somehow. When the small figure disappeared in the distance, Jordan got into the car and searched the contents. Next to the driver's seat lay a sealed plastine envelope with a label addressed to Davin Sheridan. Perfect. It was exactly the cover Jordan had planned for. The wealthy and powerful got deliveries all the time. Now, just as he hoped, he would have a way into the estate.

* * * *

The security guard that met Sienna at the front gates of Davin's estate dismissed her out of hand.

"You'd best be on your way," the burly man told her with a bored expression.

"Consul Sheridan doesn't see anyone without an appointment."

"He'll see me. Just tell him that Sienna McCade is here. I can almost guarantee you he will have me escorted inside immediately," she said cheerfully, adopting a lilting Trifidan accent.

The guard rolled his eyes. "Don't make me come out there and remove you from the street." She saw the sweat pouring down his dark skin from under the black cap he

wore. The guard station must have been unbearably hot in the second summer sun. Trifida was normally a temperate planet but every seven years the dwarf star orbiting its sun reached the perihelion of an elliptical orbit that brought it close enough to the planet to create an exceptionally hot season called *second summer*. Davin had told her about it and explained that the inhabitants suffered through it unhappily, since there was nothing they could do to change it. It was probably fortunate that she arrived now, because the guard's discomfort might eventually work in her favor.

The guard was obviously uncomfortable. Sienna smiled at him again, and in response he rolled his neck, causing the joints to crack loudly.

"Did you hear me?" he asked with an irritated sigh.

"Yes, I just ... well, it's just so *hot* out here. And the sun is very bad for my skin." She moved a few steps closer to the guard station and peeled back the neckline of her new dress, a clingy turquoise shift that accentuated her curves to full advantage. It had never been her style to flaunt herself. She had never needed to, but this situation called for drastic measures.

Naturally, the guard leaned a bit closer for a better look at the freckles on her shoulders.

"See what I mean? Aren't they awful, these terrible sun spots? I could come inside for a short while and maybe wait while someone told Consul Sheridan I was here. I promise you, I really *promise* you,"--Sienna paused and actually batted her eyelashes at him--"he *will* want to see me."

"Right."

"Really!" she insisted. "And if he doesn't, I'll make it up to you somehow." She was really reaching now.

The guard didn't seem to mind the sloppy seduction. He finally smiled and cocked an eyebrow at her. "You'll make it up to me? How?"

She gave him her best blank look, the one she'd used while teasing Jordan on the beach. Her heart lurched at the thought of him, but she kept her expression neutral and open.

"I'm sure you can think of something I could do for you, couldn't you?"

"You have no *idea*," he said with a familiar leer that reminded her of Gordi.

She smiled even wider to hide her revulsion. "Just call inside."

While she waited for the guard to make the call, she fanned herself with her hand and scanned the high gates and the sculptured lawn beyond. The layout mirrored Davin's estate on Carnelia.

The look on the guard's face when he completed his call was a mixture of astonishment and disappointment.

"You're in," he said gruffly. She rewarded him with an intentionally high-pitched squeal of delight.

"I told you! I'm old friends with the Consul. He'll be so happy you let me in, he'll probably make it worth your while too, I promise!" She kissed her fingers to him and waved sweetly as she sauntered past the guard post and through the huge white gates as they opened to admit her. Once inside, another guard met her almost immediately. This one was female, and although Sienna did not recognize the compact, muscular

brunette, she could tell by the cool assessment the woman gave her that she had been dispatched with a clear description of Sienna in her mind.

She muttered something unintelligible into a communications bud on her right sleeve and appraised Sienna with a razor-sharp look.

"I'm Lerena Canton, Davin's chief of security here on Trifida. He has asked me to escort you to his office."

"I imagined he would," Sienna replied in a silky tone that matched that of the security chief. Though her insides trembled, Sienna surprised herself by maintaining a perfectly calm demeanor. She couldn't let Davin's security chief see how nervous she was. "Would that be some time today?" she asked when the woman's hesitation stretched to a full minute.

The look Sienna received could have melted granite, and she began to wonder just how much Lerena Canton knew about her. The expression on her face was more of jealousy than suspicion. Undoubtedly, the woman realized she was a wanted criminal. But did she know just how close Sienna and Davin had once been? Was she Davin's new lover? The thought buoyed Sienna's spirits. If her presence here caused ripples of discontent among his staff, that could mean she might find an ally somewhere, though she knew better than to look to the security chief for overtures of friendship.

"Follow me," Lerena commanded. She pushed past Sienna, her dark silhouette stretching, cat-like with each long stride. Sienna followed her effortlessly, gliding across the cobbled walkway that led to the massive front door of the estate.

Yet another uniformed guard met them inside. He spoke quietly to Lerena, then stepped aside to allow the security chief to escorted Sienna down a flight of polished stairs to the lower levels of the residence.

Sienna took in the scenery as she went and marveled at the opulence around her. She had lived most of her life in tents and small cabins at the edge of the forest and she had learned to enjoy the freedom of living sparsely. She had never understood the draw of being surrounded by countless priceless objects that existed only to be admired.

Davin had found her simple tastes charming, or so he said. He had lured her into respecting him by telling her he hoped one day to retire from public life and live as she had, with few possessions, her only responsibilities those that caused her intense joy. Fool, she admonished herself. With each click of Lerena's sharp heels on the stairs, Sienna felt herself descending deeper into Davin's lair. He would expect to be able to confuse and charm her again.

Unbidden, her mind traveled back to Talek, and she conjured the image of Jordan as he guided her cautiously away from the small acid pools. She remembered his description of the ground spiders of Calabrel. He'd used the words *venomous* and *territorial*. Those words described Davin perfectly. Sienna was walking right into the spider's lair and expecting him to behave like something other than a spider. She was out of her mind to think this plan would work. And out of her element.

"Wait in here. The Consul will join you shortly," Lerena announced when they reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped before a wide door inlaid with gold filigree. She twisted the crystal handle to allow Sienna entrance to Davin's inner sanctum.

Sienna crossed the threshold with confidence, giving the security chief a superior

grin. The effort wasn't wasted. Lerena's pale skin colored. She was definitely involved with Davin in some deeper way than merely as an employee. Before turning around, Sienna ran her hands down the slim lines of her dress and through the cascading waves of ebony hair that flowed over her shoulders.

"Thank you, Chief. I appreciate all your help and I'm sure Davin will, too."

Lerena made no comment as she shut the door. Sienna's breath caught, and she nearly stumbled. She had expected to see a desk and perhaps some of the thousands of books that Davin collected. She was shocked to discover it was not an office that Lerena had led her to but an underground solarium. The room was huge and dominated by a rectangular pool of blue-green water that actually changed colors while Sienna watched. The green shade deepened until the water was almost black and then lightened again all the way through the cool end of the spectrum to a pale, crystal blue. Sienna shivered and a terrible memory surfaced. Her nightmare came alive before her.

The pool was identical to the one at Davin's estate on Carnelia. When he had shown her how the water changed color, she had been delighted. She had spent many afternoons swimming in the pool while Davin attended meetings. In fact, the day she confronted him, she had found him just getting out of the water. He had pulled a robe around his naked body and greeted her with a feathery kiss.

He had noticed the stoniness of her skin immediately and pulled back with an expression of curiosity.

"Sienna? Are you cross that I've been swimming without you?" That day, his smile had been unctuous, and it had been the first time Sienna realized she had never seen sincere emotion on his face.

She remembered launching into the tirade she had been rehearsing for hours. He had chuckled at her unbridled wrath. The argument had raged, with him feigning confusion first, then innocence, and finally, tossing aside all artifice, he had warned her that she had made a grave mistake. She had turned to walk away from him, intending to leave Carnelia forever, but a violent force drew her back. His long fingers tangled in her hair and yanked her off her feet. She had hit the water, which was thick and briny from the chemicals that caused the color changes. Her surprised gasp drew the liquid into her lungs, and before she could do anything, she sank to the bottom of the pool while Davin stood above her, laughing.

Sienna shook herself out of the nightmare memories, but panic clutched at her. Without thought for her plan, Sienna threw open the door of the solarium and ran.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The uniformed guard escorted him to the service entrance of the estate and said, "Wait here."

Jordan held the document envelope in his hands along with a small ident pad like the one used by the transport tech that had delivered Sienna's stasis tube to the *Valkyrie*. He shifted from one foot to the other while he waited for the guard to return to the small room in a sublevel of the estate building. In an underground parking structure, the stolen motorcar sat idling among others that belonged to various service people. Jordan watched the door behind him, hoping no one else would come in while he was waiting. His plan required a few moments alone with the guard.

When the man returned, Jordan produced the fake stunner from his pocket and jammed it against the guard's temple.

"I'm going to need your uniform," he said through clenched teeth. To his credit, the guard didn't panic. He stiffened slightly and gave Jordan a look of disgust.

"You won't get away with this."

"You don't even know what I'm trying to get away *with*," Jordan said. "Your uniform." He reached down to the guard's belt and unfastened the real stunner that hung there. He tossed the prop aside and brandished the actual weapon. "That's better. *Now*."

The guard complied slowly, obviously hoping he could stall until someone else arrived at the service door. He peeled off the black coverall he wore and tossed it to the far side of the room with a contemptuous glance. Jordan shrugged and shot him.

The man collapsed. Jordan caught him and lowered him to the floor to avoid injury. A stun blast would keep him unconscious for several hours, and he would no doubt wake with a headache and very little recollection of what had happened to him.

Jordan locked the service entrance and exchanged his gray flight suit for the guard's black security uniform. He carefully transferred all the items from his pockets and his pack into the new outfit, and using the guard's ident card, let himself into the corridor beyond the service foyer.

He found a household computer terminal and discovered the ident card allowed him access to a basic map of the estate and a schedule of shifts for the dozen security guards. He also found he could access the Consul's agenda for the day. Armed with the information he needed, Jordan started off toward his destination.

* * * *

Sienna ran blindly up the polished steps and found herself alone in the huge entry hall of the estate. Her breathing slowed momentarily as she flattened herself against the wall and berated herself for panicking. Of course Davin would try to capture her the way he had the first time. It had worked perfectly then. She had never expected him to throw her to the bottom of the pool.

She would never know if he had originally planned to kill her that day, or if his

attempt to drown her was merely an effective way to silence her until he could formulate a better plan. She remembered waking in her room, cold and sick, her clothes soaked in the chemical-enhanced water, and her lungs aching. Now she knew why the terrible dream had recurred so often. She remembered drowning because she *had*. Davin had managed to revive her, or had one of his staff members do it, and then left her to contemplate her mistakes, shivering and alone for more than a day.

She owed him for that.

Calmer now, but no less angry, she realized she had to stay, but not in the solarium where it would be too easy for Davin to try to kill her again. Grateful that no one had seen her leave the room, she turned and crept back down the stairs. She smoothed her hair and waited by the door. If Davin wanted her, he would find her there in the corridor where he could not use her fear to his advantage.

* * * *

Davin Sheridan fastened the high collar of his shirt with exaggerated care and smoothed the crisp lines of the cerulean fabric across his lean chest. He then turned his attention to each sleeve, fitting a jeweled clasp into the holes in each cuff. He turned to study the overall effect in the mirror of his private room, and a faint, satisfied smile crossed his thin lips. One strand of black hair clung defiantly to his left brow and he considered using a grooming scissors to cut it off but thought better of it. Sienna had always teased him about the one errant lock and had so often told him she found it alluring.

He turned away from the mirror and took a deep breath, then straightened his back and flexed his shoulders to relieve some of the lingering tension coiled there. The burden of his office had weighed heavily on him in the last few months. With so many people demanding his time and attention and expecting him to act the role of the concerned and dedicated public servant, he found little time for exercise to reduce stress. When Lerena told him that a woman calling herself Sienna McCade had arrived at the front gate, the burden had lifted almost miraculously. His spirits buoyed, and his muscles had begun to relax.

His Sienna was alive. His beautiful forest creature had returned to him, and now he could put to rest the only fears that plagued him. The only variable that threatened the security of his position would soon be taken care of, and he would have the satisfaction of seeing to it himself.

A knock at the door interrupted his reverie, and he signaled his visitor to enter. Lerena appeared, her sharp features creased with disapproval.

"She's in the solarium, as you instructed," the security chief announced. Her words were clipped and her jaw tight, evidence of her displeasure at this turn of events.

"Thank you," he said as he crossed the room. He drew himself up to her, close enough to feel her breath on his face, and looked her in the eye. "You're dismissed."

Lerena turned away viciously, her head snapping around. Davin suppressed a smile of delight. Her jealousy was delicious. The security chief had been a pleasant diversion from the moment he had hired her. He had stolen her from Trifida's planetary police force with promises of great wealth and privilege and an invitation to his bed. She had accepted with such eagerness that he had almost rescinded the offer. After all, there

was no challenge in a woman who was too willing.

He didn't regret keeping her for these months in exile, though. She was athletic, and possessed several insatiable appetites that he admired. Up until now, however, he had believed that she was using him as much as he was using her. To discover she had feelings that could be stirred by the presence of one of his former lovers made her all the more interesting.

"Lerena," he called before she could reach the door of the antechamber. She stopped but didn't turn. "See that the household staff prepares my bedroom. I'd like candles, chilled wine, and privacy."

He could see the tremor in her slim back as she reached for the door handle. "Certainly, Consul." She spat the words. When she left the room, slamming the door behind her, he threw back his head and laughed.

* * * *

Lerena stood seething outside the door of Davin's inner chamber. She heard the consul's laughter through the heavy door, and it ignited her rage all over again. After the security guard at the front gate had announced the arrival of Sienna McCade, Davin had begun to glow with enthusiasm. When he and Lerena had received the call, they had been in the middle of some intimate negotiations in his bedroom, and he had all but thrown her off the bed. At first he had told her to send someone else to fetch his lost lover, but after a moment's consideration, while Lerena hastily pulled her uniform back on, he had changed his mind and told her to personally escort Sienna McCade to the solarium.

Lerena hadn't said a word at the time. Of course, she also hadn't expected Sienna McCade to be so different from herself. Lerena was short, compact, and muscular, almost boyish in her physique but with the strength of men twice her size. In contrast, there was nothing masculine about Sienna. Where Lerena was sinewy muscles and sharp angles, Sienna was all curves. Even her hair tumbled in feminine waves down her back. She looked so soft, so delicate and pliable, it was no wonder Davin had been able to take advantage of her. She made Lerena sick.

Lerena couldn't stand to think of Davin and this woman together. Lerena had ignored him all those times he'd wistfully mentioned his Sienna. Up until today, they both thought his former lover was dead. Now she was back, and she was a threat to more than just Davin Sheridan's career.

Lerena stalked out of the outer dressing room and into the corridor beyond. She hesitated only a moment and thought about when Davin had told her how he hadn't planned on hurting Sienna that day at his estate on Carnelia. He had been naturally furious to discover that she had learned the incriminating truth about his political agenda, but he believed he could lie his way out of it. In a fit of uncontrolled rage he had thrown her into the pool, with the intent to scare her and let her know that he had the power to hurt her if he wanted to. The act apparently surprised her more than he expected and before he could react, her lungs were full of water. Fortunately his personal physician had been on hand to revive her, because by then he had decided that she would make the perfect scapegoat for his impending coup.

Lerena traversed the corridor and let herself into the servants' staircase and down

to the sublevel of the estate. She knew the grounds and hidden corridors even better than Davin, and while he was making his way to the solarium through a back entrance to surprise his honored guest, Lerena made her way to the control room beneath the pool.

The little room was dank and chilly, crisscrossed with pipes that fed clean water and chemicals into the pool. A small computer attached to the pump system allowed the pool to be drained, filled, cleaned, and the chemicals adjusted to create other special effects besides the cycling colors that Davin favored. Lerena sat down at the terminal and entered the security code that belonged to the pool maintenance specialist. A complex recipe of chemicals appeared on the screen.

Lerena knew what she needed to do, not because she was an expert on pool maintenance, but because the compounds contained in the various pipes, if misused, could be deadly. Several of them were favored by assassins because they could kill without leaving much trace of themselves behind in the body.

Lerena scanned the list until she found what she was looking for. One of the common chemicals in the mix was often added to the water in minute amounts to kill certain types of bacteria. A drop or two per gallon of water would be harmless to humans, but a little more than that--or a lot more--would be deadly to anyone who ingested the water by accident.

Lerena made the necessary adjustment and logged out of the system. She listened to the pumps overhead begin their work. She wasn't concerned that it would be unlikely for Sienna McCade would allow Davin to try to drown her a second time. If he failed to take care of his ex-lover, Lerena would do it for him, and it would still look like an accident. And if Davin decided to take a swim himself later today, before Lerena could come back and readjust the chemicals..... Well, then that would look like an accident, too.

* * * *

Davin reached the solarium via a back entrance and emerged between the branches of two potted trees. He scanned the room, his features cast in verdi-gris tones reflected from the green water of the pool. He realized in disappointment that Sienna was not there.

Had Lerena misinformed him or had his naïve biologist run away again? He doubted that. If she had come this far, obviously escaped from Protectorate custody or better, perhaps from the agents of the Red Sun Reformation who planned to *liberate* her from the courier ship, she would certainly not turn away now. She wanted her revenge, no doubt and Davin relished the idea of allowing her to think she might get it.

Momentarily frustrated, he turned to the household terminal on the wall and tapped in Lerena's call number. Before he could finish the four-digit code however, he felt a presence behind him. A cold, metallic object pressed painfully into the skin of his neck.

"Consul Sheridan, I presume." The voice was low and deadly. Davin stiffened, his finger poised above the last key that would summon his security chief. One convulsive movement would alert Lerena to his predicament.

Unfortunately his attacker realized that. A strong arm snaked around his neck and dragged him away from the terminal.

"There are security cameras in every room of the estate," Davin whispered as he pedaled backward to keep up with his assailant. In a moment he stood at the edge of the pool facing the now pale blue water. The arm around his neck drew closer, forcing him to tilt his head upward and directing his view to the black glass bubble in the corner of the vaulted ceiling that housed the security camera.

"Isn't that convenient?" the intruder asked. The cold metal dug deeper into Davin's skin. "Do you know what this is?"

"I can only assume it's a deadly weapon of some sort," Davin replied coolly. "I imagine you're going to tell me what I have to do to avoid being murdered today."

"No, that's not what I'm going to do. This isn't a gun. It's a neural injector. I know you're familiar with how it works."

Davin sighed and closed his eyes. He nodded. "Not death, then. You're threatening me with the destruction of my mind."

"Oh, it's no threat, Consul. It's a promise. I understand there's quite a lot of valuable information in your brain. I bet you'd hate to lose it, piece-by-piece, day-by-day, have it fade away until you can't even remember what you ate at your last meal. For some, that would be worse than death. I imagine you're one of those people."

"What do you want?"

"The truth. That's all. All those memories, all that information. Just tell it to me, and you get to keep it. You get to walk out of this room with your mind intact."

"I don't understand what you want. What information are you looking for?" Davin struggled feebly against his attacker, but the pressure of the neural injector at the top of his spine grew more intense.

"I want to know who was behind the attack on the Carnelian Council. Thirty people died for your political agenda, and you made an innocent woman the scapegoat. I want to know why, how, and who *really* did it."

Davin almost laughed. He had expected something like this. The family and friends of the dead consuls numbered in the thousands. The remaining members of Carnelia's ruling body had declared a national day of mourning, and on that day more than one grief-stricken relative had made public their intent to get to the bottom of the issue. At the time, Davin had dismissed the ramblings as those of devastated loved ones, but in the back of his mind he had always wondered if there might be one person who had the guts and the brains to follow through on the threats made that day.

"Who did you lose that day?" he asked, forcing unfelt sympathy into his deep voice. "Someone close, no doubt. One of the victims was your father? Or perhaps your mother?" Eleven of the thirty who had died were women, all with families.

There was a metallic click behind Davin's right ear, and he knew it would take only a faint pressure to release the pointed end of the neural block canister into his skin. He had touched a nerve.

"It's not who I lost. It's who I *found*," his assailant said cryptically. "And I won't lose her again."

"Sienna." The name escaped Davin's lips in a startled whisper, and he felt the reaction in the body of his attacker. The man froze.

"You're smarter than I would have given you credit for," he said finally, but

Davin was no longer paying attention. His eyes were focused on the far side of the pool where Sienna now stood, her arms at her sides and the barrel of Lerena's blaster pointed at her temple.

"I found *this* wondering around," the security chief announced contemptuously. Her words sounded hollow in the damp air of the room. "I figured something might have gone wrong with your little tryst."

"Lerena, my dear. I've never been happier to see you," Davin said with a chuckle. "Now we can come up with a way to resolve this little situation. I trust you can remove this person from my back without injuring me in the process?"

"I'd rather shoot *her* first, if I may," Lerena said. Sienna's eyes were trained on the man behind Davin, and he realized now that they were working together. He should have expected she wouldn't be so foolish as to return to his lair alone.

Davin considered Lerena's offer carefully, even as his eyes traveled up and down the luscious curves of the woman he had once thought to make his wife. Compared to Sienna, Lerena was boyish and far too angular. The look in his eyes must have conveyed his disappointment because Lerena's face tightened. She pushed her prisoner to her knees at the edge of the pool and leveled the blaster at the back of Sienna's neck.

"If you do it," Davin's captor warned, "I'll inject the neural block. He'll lose his mind."

"He's already lost his mind," Lerena countered without missing a beat. "He thought he could use me and throw me away like he did with her. He was wrong."

Davin stiffened and took in a slow breath. *Damn*. He had expected a little more loyalty from Lerena. Jealousy was entertaining, but when it went too far, it became deadly.

"Kill her," he said quietly. "But aim for the water. I don't want bloodstains on those tiles."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The water below Sienna changed from blue to aqua to dark green as Lerena Canton and Davin Sheridan discussed her fate. The strong, clean smell of the pool chemicals had begun to make her lightheaded, and the prospect of being dumped back into the water choked her.

She kept her head down, afraid to glance at Jordan. She should have known he would come to Davin's estate looking for her. The fact that he had found the Consul first and held him at bay with a neural injector surprised her. She wanted to rush into his arms, but indulging her feelings like that now would get them both killed, or worse, tortured in front of each other.

She heard the faint whine of Lerena's blaster as it powered up. When it reached its peak, one shot would scatter her upper body all over the room. It wouldn't matter where Lerena aimed. There would be bloodstains everywhere.

"He betrayed you, too," she whispered when the barrel leveled against the back of her skull. Engaging the security chief in conversation was a gamble that could get her killed all that much sooner, but she had to try.

"It's what he does, isn't it?" Lerena replied. Her small hand closed over Sienna's shoulder in a vise-like grip and pushed her torso forward until she leaned over the water which had cycled back to blue. "Always playing one side against the other. The moment he heard your name, it was clear that I was nothing to him but a toy."

"I was nothing to him either," Sienna said, amazed that she was able to draw Lerena in with her words. "He gave me up to save himself. He'll do the same to you."

"I know what he did to you. I know he had you take the blame for the explosion on Cernelia. He's talked about how proud it made him to find out you had disappeared from Protectorate custody. I guess he expected less from you."

"I'm sure he did."

"Ladies, can we get on with this?" Davin said from across the pool. "I've been a bastard to both of you. So what? Lerena, kill her. That's an order."

Sienna leaned forward a little more, and her hand snaked under her right calf. Slowly she drew an object out of a small holster there.

"I think you have a choice, Lerena," Jordan said, and Sienna's heart began to thud at the sound of his voice. She missed him so much. She wanted desperately to look at him but she couldn't afford to distract anyone but Lerena right now. "You can obey him or you can walk away. He's not leaving here a free man today. Don't think we're alone in this."

At that, a faint beeping began from somewhere across the pool. "Make the choice now, Lerena. You don't have a lot of time," Jordan warned.

"You're going to blow us up?" The security chief's voice held a hint of amusement. "There's nothing more pathetic than a suicide terrorist."

Jordan laughed. "That's not a bomb. It's a global positioning beacon. A *Protectorate* beacon. I would have thought you could recognize the sound. I wonder who will get here first, the Protectorate or the Trifida Planetary Police? Maybe some of your old squadron will be here, *Commander* Canton, or should I say *former* Commander?"

Sienna felt the barrel of the blaster pull away from her head just slightly, and Lerena shifted her weight from one slim leg to the other.

"You did your homework," Lerena said. "So you know I gave up a lot to come here and work for Davin. I expected a lot in return."

"And you'll get it!" Davin interjected. "Anything you want, Lerena. You know that. I have no use for this woman anymore. I was planning to kill her, not sleep with her. You must understand that, Lerena. She's nothing to me."

Sienna almost smiled.

"Granted, she was worth all the effort I put into it. Taking her from a canvas tent in the middle of nowhere on Kyrasau and grooming her to be the wife of a Consul was no small task, but I think I did a good job," Davin said. True to form, he couldn't resist pushing his luck.

Sienna's head came up finally. "Wife? You thought you would marry me?"

"It was my plan," Davin answered. Behind him Jordan's eyes were downcast and his expression was stony. He never flinched though, and his grip on his captive was strong. "You would have been perfect."

"Instead I was the perfect dupe. My finding out the truth about you cancelled our engagement pretty quickly, didn't it?" Sienna laughed, but her throat was dry.

"You were convenient. And you foolishly discovered too much about me. A truly wise woman would have kept all that knowledge a secret and used it on me years from now when she had something monumental to gain from it. You could have ended up a Consul yourself one day, but you were too naïve, too rooted in the pursuit of justice to see the value of the information you had."

"You're right," Sienna agreed. "I see my mistake now. Rather than tell you I found out you had hired the Red Sun Reformation to attack the Council, I should have used the knowledge to blackmail you anonymously for years. I could have been rich and powerful." She shook her head in mock shame.

"That's exactly what you should have done," Davin said. "Having that knowledge go public would have destroyed me."

"It still can," Lerena added. "Or it can be kept secret depending on what goes on in this room today."

"You still have time to make a choice, Lerena," Davin urged. "I'll offer you anything."

"Actually," Sienna cut in as her hand came up. "Your time is up, and you chose wrong."

She jammed the blue green blade of Raf's knife into Lerena's thigh with one hand, and knocked the blaster out of the security chief's hand with the other.

Lerena screamed, the sound more one of indignation than of pain. She reached for the blaster as it tumbled toward the water, but Sienna rose and pushed the smaller

woman into the pool. As thick, blue-green liquid splashed over her, Sienna pivoted and raced across the tiled floor toward Jordan and Davin.

"Don't do it, Jordan," she pleaded. "He needs his memories intact for when they interrogate him."

"There's a stunner in my pocket. Get it," Jordan ordered as Davin struggled. His voice was harsh but the look in his eyes told Sienna all she needed to know.

She reached into his pocket and found the stunner. Before Jordan could react, she grabbed the front of Davin's impeccably pressed shirt and pulled him forward. Jordan let go but kept the neural injector at the ready.

Sienna fired the stunner point blank at Davin. His eyes went wide and his body sagged to the wet floor.

"You could have been so much more," he whispered before he collapsed.

A hundred different replies came to Sienna's mind, but she said nothing. It was already too late. Davin was unconscious, his expensive clothing soaking up the water that ran across the tiled floor.

"I'm sorry you thought I betrayed you," Jordan said as he stepped over Davin's body. Sienna reached for him, desperate to feel his arms around her, but a cold hand gripped her leg. In the next instant Lerena pulled Sienna into the pool.

Lerena dragged her victim under the water, her strong fingers snaking into Sienna's thick hair and tangling there. She held Sienna's head down with one hand while the other closed around her throat.

The memories came back in a frightening rush. The cold water closed around Sienna and darkened in color as she sank to the bottom. It was like night falling. The pale blue turned deeper and deeper, finally cycling to the deadly green of Sienna's nightmares.

She fought the urge to scream. She kicked instead, clawing for the surface that she knew to be only a meter above her head. Lerena's nails ripped at her skin, drawing blood. The wounds stung from the chemicals in the water, but the pain only served to remind Sienna that she was not dead yet.

She kicked and clawed and managed to find Lerena's face in the dimness. Sienna grasped a handful of the security chief's short hair and pulled violently. At the same time she brought her knee up into the other woman's solar plexus.

She heard the air escape from Lerena's lungs and the scream of rage that followed. Another kick connected with some part of the chief's body, though Sienna wasn't sure whether it was an arm or a leg. Sienna angled herself toward the surface and kicked viciously until her fingers broke the surface. One more lunge and she would be above the water.

Strong arms closed around her waist, and before she could push her face above the now pale blue surface of the water, Lerena pulled her down again. The agile security chief literally climbed Sienna's body, clawing her way by tearing at the thin material of Sienna's dress. After a moment she hovered above Sienna in the water, and her feet found Sienna's shoulders. Lerena stood on her victim's shoulders and pushed Sienna all the way to the bottom of the pool.

Sienna heard the splash as her opponent broke the surface above and envied her

the breath she would get to take. She reached up and clamped her own nails into the flesh of Lerena's legs, digging into the hard muscles through the thick cloth of her uniform pants. She twisted her body and bent her knees, and Lerena fell off her shoulders and crashed back into the water. Sienna didn't waste time. She pushed off the floor of the pool and sailed for the surface, but the water was so heavy, and her lungs were taxed to the point of collapse.

Jordan, she thought. *I can't leave him now!* She reached through the water, kicking her legs spasmodically, but it seemed as if the liquid around her was solidifying. It became too great an effort to move.

As the water darkened around her once again, Sienna closed her eyes.

* * * *

When Lerena broke the surface of the now dark blue water, Jordan reached for her but her appearance was too brief. She fell below a moment later, dislodged by Sienna's movements. Jordan saw her dark silhouette at the bottom of the pool, and his heart rose when he realized she was free and kicking toward the surface. The stunner had gone with Sienna into the water and now lay at the bottom of the pool with Lerena's blaster and Raf's knife. The neural injector had no range, so unless he managed to pull the security chief out of the pool, it would do him no good. He ran from one side of the pool to the other as Sienna sliced toward the surface and knelt down to pull her up. Cold fear gripped him when he realized she had stopped moving beneath the thick water. She had been submerged too long.

Before Jordan could dive into the water, an explosion ripped the door of the solarium from its hinges. A complement of Protectorate soldiers burst through the smoky wreckage. Within seconds they had swarmed around Jordan and pulled him to his feet.

"She's drowning!" he yelled as he struggled against their armored grip. "Save her, she's going to drown!"

"She's already dead," Lerena announced. The security chief slithered out of the water and lay on the wet tiles, panting from her exertions. The Protectorate squadron gathered around her in a circle, and one of them yanked her to her feet. She hung limply from his arms, a cruel smile on her colorless lips.

"Someone get her out of there!" Jordan insisted and Lerena laughed. The throaty sound ended in a spasmodic cough.

"It's too late. The water is poisoned."

Jordan lunged at her but the guards surrounding him held him back. One of them barked a series of orders into his communicator and motioned for several of his men to collect Davin's limp form.

"What do you mean?" asked one of the men that held Lerena.

"When Davin said he wanted to meet her in the solarium, I knew what he was planning. He was going to push her in. He drowned her once, back on Carnelia." Lerena paused to cough dark water from her lungs. "He knew she would be panicked by the water. I changed the chemicals in the water, just to be certain he couldn't change his mind and have her revived again."

"No!" Jordan sank to the floor.

"Get someone suited up and get the body out of there," one of the guards ordered.

“Hurry up.”

“You don’t need a suit,” Lerena announced with a smile. “You have to swallow it. Your men will be safe as long as they don’t get any in their mouths.”

“Danners! Go!” the commander shouted. The man designated to retrieve Sienna stripped off his heavy uniform coat and boots and dove into the pool. A moment later he rose to the surface with her limp body in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bright sparks of color exploded against Sienna's eyelids and the water grew thick around her tired limbs. Her lungs burned, but she refused to breathe even when her weary brain told her there was air around her rather than water.

As the neurons in her brain fired randomly, familiar images came back to her. She heard the medical technicians talking above her as they settled her body into the tight inner casing of the stasis tube. She heard the metallic click of the heavy lid closing over her and the icy hiss of the cryogen gases filling the narrow cylinder. Still, she held her breath. She would rather suffocate than go through this again. When the Protectorate opened the tube, they would find her dead of asphyxiation.

An annoying thought tickled her mind. *You can't hold your breath until you die.*

She remembered with startling clarity from her basic medical class that the autonomic nervous system eventually takes over. But at least, Sienna realized, she would be unconscious when the cryogen gases took effect.

Well, if she couldn't hold her breath forever, she would do so for as long as she could. She would hold on to every memory she had for as long as possible, and her last thoughts would be of Jordan.

His face loomed above her. Behind him she saw the brilliant sky of Talek. She felt warm sand under her and the weight of his body above.

"I love you," he told her. She smiled and reached up to clasp her trembling arms around his neck. He pulled her into his embrace and cradled her against him, smoothing her damp hair away from her face.

"Don't let me go," she said. "I only have a little time left...."

"What?"

She squinted at him in confusion as his features blurred.

"She's trying to talk," an unfamiliar voice said. "Give her some room, people, stand back!"

An explosive cough wracked through her and she sat up and doubled over in one swift, painful movement. Strong arms caught her and held her while she wretched and sucked in damp air that tasted of pool chemicals.

"What happened? What ... happened?" She struggled against the arms that held her. Her stomach hurt and her head throbbed. She turned and stretched her body out on the cold floor, unable to hold herself up. She shivered violently.

"Sienna!" Jordan was at her side, scooping her up in his arms. He nearly crushed her with his embrace, and for a moment she was disappointed that her previous vision of him had been a dream.

"Jordan! Are you all right?" she gasped and reached up to touch his face. He kissed her fingers and held her hand to his chest as he drew her closer with his other arm.

"Me? I'm fine. I thought...." His voice broke. "I thought you were dead."

Lerena poisoned the water in the pool. You should be dead.”

A quartet of unfamiliar faces loomed above them. Sienna recognized their uniforms as Protectorate. One of the men dripped green water in a widening puddle at his feet.

“Glad you’re all right,” he said with a shy smile.

“Danners pulled you out of the water,” another man explained. He was obviously their leader. “It’s a miracle you survived.”

“I held my breath,” she replied with a cough.

“What about Lerena?” Jordan asked. Another group of officers crowded around the security chief on the far side of the pool. She lay on the wet tiles, her breathing shallow.

“Looks like she got a mouthful. But she’ll probably live,” someone said.

Sienna shifted in Jordan’s arms and curled into a ball when she realized the remnants of her torn dress barely hid her body. No one, other than Jordan, seemed to notice, however. He smiled down at her but his features clouded. They were surrounded by Protectorate soldiers, and she was still a wanted criminal.

“Jordan, what’s going to happen to me?”

“I suspect we’ll have to dry you off, get you something to wear and find a place where you can rest. Then I plan to have my way with you.”

She coughed again. “What? Don’t I have to go with them?” she asked, indicating the men milling around. The solarium was full of soldiers in their black and gold uniforms and Crystal City Police dressed in blue. None of them, other than the three that stood over her now, seemed the least bit interested in Sienna.

“You’ll have to make a statement,” Jordan said. “And testify against Sheridan when he comes up for trial. But otherwise you’re free.”

“How? Will Lerena talk?”

“She doesn’t need to,” Jordan said with a wry grin and pointed to the ceiling. “The surveillance cameras captured enough of Sheridan’s confession to keep his counselors jumping through hoops. He’ll be in stasis for a decade at least before all the evidence is ready for his trial.”

Sienna shivered. A decade in stasis was a terrible punishment in itself. Jordan held her tighter and then rose with her in his arms.

“Captain, can I take my woman home now?” he asked.

“Home?” Sienna echoed. Home for her was Kyrasau. She had no idea what Jordan meant.

“Well, technically we should go to the medical center first and make sure you’re all right,” he said. “Then, I was thinking a nice stateroom here in Crystal City for a few days before we drop by Talek on our way to wherever you’d like to go with me.” Jordan’s eyes were liquid heat. Sienna smiled, grateful to be back in his arms. Her knees would never have held her up.

“I love you,” she told him. “I’ll go anywhere with you.”

“I love you, too. I wasn’t sure you heard me say it before.”

“I thought I dreamed it,” she whispered.

“It wasn’t a dream.”

Jordan swung her around and the soldiers parted so he could pass.

"There's a portable hospital arriving on the grounds," the Captain said. "You can see a medic out there."

"Thank you," Sienna called as she settled against Jordan's chest. She didn't spare Davin Sheridan a glance when the man she loved carried her past his body. A group of soldiers hoisted the Consul's limp, dripping form from the floor.

"I hope you don't still think I ever had plans to turn you in," Jordan said as they left the solarium. He eyed the staircase skeptically and Sienna laughed.

"Why don't I walk to the front door?" she offered.

"No, that's all right," he said as he began climbing. "At least there's a medic nearby." He groaned a little and smirked at her. She responded with a playful punch to his shoulder.

"You didn't answer my question," he said.

"No. I don't think you were going to turn me in, and I'm sorry I thought, even for a moment, that you might. I was so scared."

"I know. I'm sorry. I should have told you what I was doing on the *Demeter*, but I figured you would try and talk me out of getting involved."

"I would have. And if I had succeeded, I'd probably still be at the bottom of Davin's pool right now. Thank you," she said and rested her head against his neck. He turned and met her lips with his own, pausing on the stairs to kiss her breathless. The sensation warmed her to the core, chasing away the deep chill that had penetrated her bones. For a moment, she was back on Talek, cradled in his arms in the warm sand, luxuriating in his masculine scent.

"I still don't think I've properly thanked you for saving my life on Talek," he said when he broke the kiss. "I'm not sure where to begin."

"You could start by buying me a new dress." She indicated the tattered remains of the turquoise fabric that hugged her thighs but barely covered her breasts. Jordan smiled evilly.

"No way. I like this look on you. Think of something else."

"Come with me to Kyrasau and let me show you my world," she suggested with a smile. In response, he kissed her again, softer this time, with a hint of promise that stirred her deeply.

"That's a request I can honor."

At the top of the stairs a group of medics met Jordan and Sienna and guided them to the portable hospital, a medical shuttle that had landed in the courtyard of Davin's estate.

After a brief exam, the medics pronounced Sienna healthy but in need of rest. They gave her a pair of pants and a shirt to wear, which, though they didn't meet with Jordan's approval, were comfortable and dry. As they left the shuttle, they passed two stretchers carrying Lerena and Davin. Both were unconscious, which disappointed Sienna. She would have liked to see Davin's expression as his carefully constructed façade of respectability disintegrated around him.

"I'm sorry I ever thought I loved him," she said, leaning on Jordan as they descended from the shuttle. He twined his fingers into hers and squeezed.

“Forget it. Forget all about him.”

She laughed and squeezed his hand in return. “No, I don’t want to forget. All my memories, good or bad, are mine, and I don’t want to lose any of them.”

Jordan nodded and slipped his arm around her waist. “Why don’t we go make some more?”

He kissed her once again and it was unforgettable.

Epilogue

Torchlight reflected warmly in Torva's bright blue eyes. She smiled and placed a small white pebble into Jordan's right palm. She did the same for Sienna and then closed their fingers tightly around the stones. She then placed her left hand on the silver cord that bound their left wrists together.

"By the white light of moons and the golden light of the sun," she intoned glancing up at the couple who stared deeply into each other's eyes. "By the stars over our heads and the grains of sand under our feet, do you, Jordan Dane, pledge yourself to this woman forever and promise to care for her as though she were a part of yourself?"

"I do," Jordan said softly. Torva nodded, and he threw the pebble into the sea foam that swirled around their ankles.

Torva turned to Sienna. "By the white light of moons and the golden light of the sun, by the stars over our heads and the grains of sand under our feet, do you, Sienna McCade, pledge yourself to this man forever and promise to care for him as though he were a part of yourself?"

"I do," Sienna responded without hesitation and cast her stone into the water. Torva removed her hand from their wrists and gently untied the cord that bound them. As the silver string fell away, Torva glanced at them in turn.

"Then you no longer need this string to bind you. You are one and the ties that hold you together are eternal. By the power vested in me by the New Republic of Talek, I have the honor of pronouncing you life mates. You may kiss..."

A cheer went up among the assembled villagers. The members of the hunt drew themselves in a long line, raising their spears to form an archway that led from the stone altar set at the edge of the waves up the beach to where the wedding feast had been set.

Wrapped in each other's arms, Jordan and Sienna barely noticed. Torva finally had to prod them into the processional.

"No one can *eat* until you two fill your plates, you know," she said with a grin.

"Sorry," Jordan replied, though his eyes never left Sienna. She laughed and clasped his arms so they could walk under the tented spears and begin the festivities. A drumbeat began in the background and a gang of children, decorated in white feathers, danced around the couple as they emerged from the spears. Dija and Raf met them at the head of the first of the food-laden tables. Each of them held a burning torch.

Jordan and Sienna stood before Raf and Dija and bowed. The teacher and the hunt leader joined the flames of their torches together and lit a barrel of seed wine. The blue flame rose high and cast a silvery flicker over their features.

"As the flames are one, you are one," Dija said with a smile. Raf extinguished their torches and handed them to Seref, who waited nearby. He then looped his arm around Dija's waist and pulled her to him. "Pretty soon, we will be, too."

"Congratulations!" Jordan and Sienna responded in unison. They laughed

together and followed the other couple to the head of the line to begin the wedding feast.

Hours later Jordan and Sienna sat together on a woven mat watching the moons of Talek sink below the waves. Jordan trailed his fingers along the intricate braids in Sienna's hair and finally brought his mouth down on her bare shoulder to taste the salty sweetness of her skin.

"You'd better stop right there," she warned. "We can't leave the beach until moonset or it's considered bad luck, you know." She laughed as his fingers slid along her skin to the neckline of her dress.

"How long until moonset?"

"Long enough."

"I guess I'll have to have some more wine," he said and took a sip from his cup. He leaned back on one elbow to look at his wife with the backdrop of a million stars behind her. "If it wasn't for all the quirky customs, this place wouldn't be so bad..." he told her.

She regarded him with a raised eyebrow. "So bad? I thought you loved it here."

"I do. If it wasn't for the algae blooms and this silly rule that says I can't make love to my wife until the moons set."

"That's only for tonight, it's a wedding thing," she explained.

"Still..."

"Stop complaining. We could have gotten married on Trifida. All it takes there is to sign a public announcement form and pay an administrative fee. Here we get a feast, dancing, and flaming wine. The least we could do is wait until the party is over to leave."

"I suppose," he rubbed one finger up and down her arm, enjoying her reaction to his touch. She shivered for him, and he knew all she had to do was make that little sound he loved so much, and the party would have to go on without them. "I guess it's not so bad. In general it's a nice place, don't you think?"

"Of course. You know I love it here." Sienna regarded him with a curious glance.

"Good. I was thinking maybe, after we visit Calabrel and Kyrasau, we could come back here again, well after the next Hai festival of course, and permanently take up residence in the hut by the waterfall."

"Hmmm." Sienna looked around, scanning the beach where the villagers were engaged in dancing, eating and a number of nuptial games that pitted males against females. The children cheered and raced up and down by the water line, and she could see Raf and Diya walking slowly up the beach, their arms wrapped around each other. She smiled.

"You want to live on the beach for the rest of your life?" she asked her husband.

"I want to live with you," he replied. "The beach makes a nice background."

"I think you'll have to convince me," she said in a serious tone and Jordan sat up to look her in the eye.

"What can I do to convince you?"

"Ask me after moonset," Sienna sighed as she melted into Jordan's arms and together they settled back in the sand to watch Galatia rise over the sea.