

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

# Athina

COURTNEY  
BEE



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Athima

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# ***ATHIMA***

**Courtney Bee**

## Chapter One

*Arcadia, a futuristic planet much like Earth*

He had never liked seivls. Well, not the seivls themselves but rather the idea of them. The summer before his voice had deepened from a high chirp to a smooth, level sound of maturity, he had visited his uncle's sprawling estate near the city of Orion. Orion had always reminded him of the Emerald City from one of his favorite books from the ancient world. Whenever he skimmed *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, he wondered what life had been like before space travel, before the discovery of other planets and civilizations. Tom Sawyer's eyes probably would have popped out of his head if he'd known that centuries after he was painting fences settlers from Earth would be claiming entire galaxies, discovering new planets and creatures and settling in the farthest corners of the universe. On Arcadia, the settlers had forged a new culture, a combination of Earth's traditions and new values based on their planet's resources. Arcadia's lakes brimmed with a unique algae used for baking and combining the algae with wheat and sweet dragon's milk produced a delicacy known as *Tacelet* pastries, which Alex thought superior to the imported cookies in their silver wrappers. Many of the new cities evolved into a mixture of technology and Earth nostalgia, some cities, like Orion, began to resemble the mythical tapestries of the Renaissance. Alex liked to think of Orion as the last place in the universe that wasn't choked by technology, a harmonious blend of old-fashioned romanticism and new innovations. The people who had settled in Orion valued nature above all else and because of this it remained a unique gem in a galaxy of planets smothered in technology.

Now as his uncle's coach drove through Orion's sparkling streets, among the first on the planet to be paved in shining lapis, Alex couldn't help admire the passersby. Everyone they passed seemed determined to make sure that the universe knew their financial status after a mere glance. Diamonds dangled boldly from earlobes, glittering in the afternoon sun. Men wore suits coated in a fine metallic sheen, their leather shoes raw from meticulous polishing. When darkness washed over the valley, they retreated to their monstrous houses scattered throughout the nearby hills, peering down at the city with a sense of superiority.

But his uncle's magnificent abode certainly must have impressed even the most ornate of the bunch. The towering structure was perched on a plane at the edge of the city, illuminated so dazzlingly by sunlight that photographers often traveled to Orion for the sole purpose of capturing its ethereal beauty from the golden fields below. The entire exterior of the manor was constructed of an imported glass so thin Alex was afraid to go near it at first, terrified that one firm push would send him falling to his death.

At sunset his uncle led him quietly to the south corridor, where he pointed to the dusk licking at the horizon. "See that, kid? This is the only place within a hundred miles where a person can see all three suns setting at once." From the hills to the left, a golden orb was sinking behind the distant mountains. To the center a rose-colored ball made one last colorful gasp before being enveloped by the nearby hills. And straining his neck, Alex was able to see the last sun, a pulsing orange sphere still roaring with light. The suns reminded him of three bright drops of paint hurled against a mute canvas, their rays bleeding across the sky in a swirl of fusing colors.

He could see the edge of the stable tucked to the side of the manor, could hear the dragons bellowing below as servants hauled large slabs of meat into their pens.

When his uncle was sure that his young guest was sufficiently awed by the beauty of Orion, he turned to the child with a hospitable smile.

"Well, my boy," he said, "your parents have entrusted you to my care for an entire week. I can only imagine your mother's dismay. She knows I can't keep a plant alive for more than a few days."

He chuckled then added, "So what will it be, Alex? You want to take the dragons out for a little sunset ride before supper?"

The boy tilted his head, taking in the vastness of the place.

"There's a large garden. Your mother told me you love animals. Well, just around this time of day the *chemens* scamper all over the grounds like they own the place. Have you ever seen a *chemen*?"

Alex shook his head.

"Pesky creatures with their flower nibbling but they're cute little buggers and your aunt would have my head on a platter if I ever tried to get rid of them. They look a bit like rabbits but with great, flapping elephant ears and legs so little they can't be seen unless you catch one and turn it upside down. Would you like to see if we can spot one?"

Alex cleared his throat then burst out, "I heard you have a sevil."

The smile faded from his uncle's face.

"I—well, I heard my dad talking once," Alex said. "Is it true? Do you own one?"

His uncle nodded slowly. After a long moment of contemplation, he turned away and muttered, "Children shouldn't know of such things."

"But you do have one?"

"Yes."

Alex opened his mouth to speak but his uncle's voice drowned out his own. "You needn't ask it. I'll show you the sevil if you wish. You're how old now? Eleven? Twelve? Well, your mind may well be contemplating such topics already. Come on, kid, but don't tell your mother."

He motioned for the boy to follow and they made their way to the north corridor. Though, given the time it took, journey might have been a more appropriate word.

They passed a library with books towering so high they seemed to strive for heaven. Alex felt his breath catch in his throat when he noticed several glass cases containing books from the ancient world. When his eyes caught a scuffed but remarkably preserved copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* he fought the urge to rush to the case and beg his uncle to let him sift through the smooth pages. They probably even had that warm, slightly sour smell that always filled Alex with a euphoric rush. But he quickly shook his head, snapping himself out of his daze. The sevil! Even Mark Twain paled in comparison to the rarity of a sevil.

Down a long hallway illuminated by blue sconces was a large alabaster door, where they stood for a long time. Finally his uncle removed a key from his pocket and guided it into the lock.

"She's shy," he said softly, letting his hand linger on the doorknob. "Sevils are friendly but I'm the only human Cossani's known for almost all her life. I want you to stay on the far end of the room, by the door, in case she gets nervous. Understand?"

"Yes."

Gently his uncle nudged open the door. They stepped inside. The first thing Alex noticed was the panoramic window that overlooked the west valley, with miles of tree-flecked hills. Then his eyes darted to the walls, where crimson velvet covered every inch from floor to ceiling. His ears pricked at the sound of trickling water and his eyes widened when he glanced upon the crystalline waterfall towering in the corner of the room, descending into a shallow lagoon. A crystal chandelier shimmered from the ceiling above an oversized bed smothered with enormous velvet pillows and satin sheets. Around the room there were other splendors—several ruby-encrusted balls, a large golden dish overflowing with exotic fruit and breezy tapestries draped across the bed. To Alex, it seemed as if he were standing in the harem from *Arabian Nights*.

Then he heard her—a soft, crystal purr that made his ears tingle. From behind the massive bed she came, taking delicate steps on dainty paws. A sevil.

Alex remembered what his uncle had told him and stepped backward until his back was pressing against the far wall. The sevil didn't notice him as she pranced forward.

Her body was remarkably human in its silhouette. Cossani's limbs were long and graceful and her sleek shoulders sloped into an elegant back that curved down to her ample hips, where a lush tail was brushing back and forth, caressing her ass. Her small hands had a strong resemblance to a human's, save for the sharp claws, now invisible under the tips of her fingers, and her feet mirrored those of a human female. Her body may have been strikingly similar to a woman's but her limbs possessed a unique flexibility, allowing her to walk on all fours with the fluidity of a tiger. It was breathtaking to watch a creature with arms and legs slinking across the floor, her head high and regal. Alex had heard that a sevil's fur was so short and fine that it felt like human skin glazed with silk. Cossani's coat was a glossy white with a slight silver sheen that caught the light with every flex of her muscles. Crowning her head was a long mane of raven hair that fell like a curtain past her shoulder blades. Her large green eyes fixated immediately on his uncle as she trotted toward him making gleeful,

feathery sounds. Then she spotted Alex and in a flash she had sprinted to the opposite wall, where she stared at him without blinking.

"It's all right, Cossani," his uncle called. "He's a friend. Now, now, don't be nervous. Come here! Come on, that's a good girl! Yes, right over here."

She crept across the room and sat next to him, eyeing Alex with a mixture of curiosity and fear. He watched as his uncle reached out a tender palm, stroking her, soothing her as if she were a newborn child. The gruffness of his features seemed to dissolve as he ran his hand through the creature's hair. Their eyes met and it suddenly struck Alex that he had never seen two beings gaze upon each other with such affection.

"There's my good girl. Such a beauty. Such a good girl."

Cossani's pupils dilated at the sound of his voice, she let her head lean against his thigh.

"You can come over," he told Alex. "I think she'll be fine. She just needed a bit of reassurance."

Alex walked very slowly as if Cossani were a deer that might startle and disappear in a flash. But she had mellowed, her eyes soft, and soon he was standing next to his uncle and looking down at her with wonder.

"So what do you think, kid?"

"She-she's so pretty."

Cossani's velvet tongue licked her master's hand.

His uncle nodded. "Sevils are the most beautiful creatures on earth. They're nothing short of a real-life angel. Creatures so intelligent and anatomically like us that they boggle the mind."

"She looks pretty human," said Alex. "Can she walk on two feet?"

"Not as far as I know. Technically, sevils have the ability to walk upright—the anatomy would allow it. But I've never seen her do it. Unless... Have you been holding out on me, Cossani? Do you do pirouettes around the room when I'm not here?"

He patted the sevil's head. She sat upright, again surprising Alex with her humanlike movements.

"Can I pat her?"

His uncle nodded. "I think she'll be all right with that."

Alex reached out a hand and it hovered over her back for a long moment as if she were too precious to touch. When his fingers made contact with her silken body he felt little prickles of pleasure course through his flesh. His heart skipped a beat when she made that lovely purring sound, like rain falling on water.

"She looks so much like a human, yet she moves on all fours like a cat," said Alex. "So is she human or beast?"

"Neither," came the reply. "She has the mind and demeanor of a woman, as all sevils do but the most remarkable attribute lies here. Cossani, back."

The sevil obeyed and dropped to the floor, rolling onto her back, her legs parting of their own accord. His uncle brushed aside her lush tail to reveal her pink sex, which, to Alex's fascination, was glistening with abundant moisture. He felt himself draw near as he watched his uncle run a single finger across the pulsating flesh. Cossani arched her back and moaned with pleasure, her eyes fluttering sweetly. But when his uncle removed his hand, just as quickly she growled gloomily and Alex swore her little feline face was contorting into a pout.

"A sevil's only purpose is for man's pleasure," his uncle said solemnly. "The few that can afford them gain a devoted servant in all ways. It used to be that wealthy bachelors purchased them if no marriage prospects loomed so they could enjoy a sevil's pleasures at whim. But some married men like myself keep one to experience the bond that only a creature of this caliber can fulfill."

"You-you lie with her?" Alex gasped. "And Aunt Arianna doesn't mind?"

"She understands that the bond between Cossani and me is of no threat to her." His uncle smiled. "She's actually rather fond of the little thing though she keeps her distance."

Alex shook his head. "But you keep her captive."

His uncle scoffed. "Captive? Hardly. Cared for, more like. She enjoys a lavish existence in a harem fit for a queen. And she lives to please me. Never have I visited her and not seen her grow wet between the legs."

Alex felt his cheeks flush.

His uncle seemed amused by the boy's sudden embarrassment. "What is it? If you'd heard of sevil's before, surely you were aware of their purpose."

"I'd heard stories..."

Alex didn't know why but he felt a strange pang in the pit of his stomach as he watched Cossani rub her body against his uncle's legs. She looked happy enough, she seemed to blossom with each caress her master administered.

"If you do well in the world of commerce," his uncle smiled, "one day you can aspire to own one."

Cossani arched her back, giving Alex a glimpse of her rounded breasts, her nipples pebbled. Her master gently took one between his fingers and squeezed rhythmically, causing her to release a little tremor of a purr, her claws gripping the carpet.

Alex felt a stirring within his body that made him shift uncomfortably.

"Alex, what's wrong? You all right?"

He stared at Cossani's flushed nipple, the thighs that squeezed rhythmically as his uncle's fingers grazed her breasts. And it was in this manner that Alex experienced his first erection.

\* \* \* \* \*



As the coach soared over the long stretch of cobblestone, Alex suddenly wasn't sure if he could go through with it. They stopped in front of the long building, which appeared equal parts barn and cathedral. The dragons pawed at the ground, snorting their discontent at having to stand still. The coachman yanked on the reins and they quieted, grumbling softly to themselves. An older man appeared from the windowless building, a smile plastered across his face as he slipped into his coach. He gave no hint of what he had seen or done – he simply wore an expression of content.

A younger man in a loose velvet tunic appeared at the entrance, waving a warm farewell to the older gentleman. When his eyes fell upon Alex, his smile broadened and he made his way toward the coach.

"Morning!" he called. "Mr. Raylen, I presume?"

Alex nodded and forced a smile. He hopped from the coach and shook the man's hand.

"Right on time," the man chirped. "I'm Hayden. Hayden Maverick. We spoke on the teleportation module."

Alex nodded.

The man was a unique mixture of aristocrat and old-world cowboy, his words articulate and warm but thick with southern twang. He had a bushy mustache that twitched upward when he spoke and the pointed tufts of hair gave a quiet vigor to every word that fell from his lips.

"Well, let's get right to it," Hayden said. "This way, Mr. Raylen."

Alex followed him numbly to the barn. When they reached the heavy doors he felt the sickness gnawing at his belly, felt the uncertainty swelling in his chest.

Hayden seemed to sense his reluctance. "Is this your first purchase?"

"Yes."

He put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "Some clients experience a bit of an ethics crisis with their first one. It's a new realm and initial guilt isn't uncommon. But once they realize the sheer joy and devotion these creatures bring to a fella's life they quickly understand that this is an entirely justifiable enterprise. Mr. Raylen, if you are one of the exceptionally lucky individuals that can afford such a luxury, I suggest you enjoy your status in this world and step inside."

"Y-yes."

The brass-laden doors were pushed aside and it took Alex a moment to adjust to the soft pink lighting.

"Mr. Raylen, welcome to the stable."

They stood at the end of a long aisle with massive stalls extending as far as the eye could see. It was as if they had stepped into a king's personal stable, with bejeweled stalls that reminded customers that they were not just purchasing some scruffy-haired equine but one of the finest creatures on Arcadia.

One of the stall doors slid open and a young man with a sweaty brow emerged, fumbling to fasten his belt.

"How was she?" Hayden grinned.

The man nodded in approval. "Like a dream—my stars, like an absolute dream. I've had all kinds of women, mind you, but this was extraordinary."

He was panting with exertion, his cheeks crimson.

"So you'll take her then?"

"You bet your ass I will! Reserve the silver filly for me until Tuesday, will you? I'll pick her up in the morning."

Hayden clasped his hands in approval. "Excellent. She's a little shy, that one, but warms up rather nicely, don't you think?"

The man seemed to be searching for words to describe what he had just experienced. "Incredible..."

As he brushed past them he gave a little wink to Alex.

"Ready to work yourself into a similar daze?" said Hayden.

"I don't understand." Alex frowned. "Did that man just—did he—"

"All clients, for a moderate fee, may try out any of our seivils before purchase. I assume you will want to do the same?"

"I-I didn't know that was a possibility."

Hayden laughed. "Think, man! Would you buy a three-million-*drano* home without going inside?" He grinned then added, "So to speak."

"I suppose not."

"Of course you wouldn't! Now, Mr. Raylen, walk with me and I'll give you a bit of general information as we peruse your options."

They made their way slowly past the stalls, a bright-eyed sevil in each one, rushing to press her face against the bars whenever they approached. Alex's uneasiness began to melt as he glanced at the angelic faces, the powder-pink noses, the tails that swished eagerly as they drew near. He thought of the delight that had flooded Cossani's eyes every time his uncle entered her chamber and suddenly Alex was reminded of why he was here.

"There are several types of seivils," Hayden began. "Most are gray or black but some are spotted and in more rare instances, white."

A petite gray sevil sleeping in her stall tilted her head to make low clucking noises as they passed. Her stomach was contracting in little heaves, she looked weary.

"That little beauty," Hayden said, "is now off the market."

In the adjoining stall a sevil with midnight fur rubbed her cheek against the bars, giving a blissful sigh when Alex went to scratch her head. He remembered the little shivers he had felt when he had patted Cossani those many years ago and now those same tingles returned, eliciting a smile from his lips.

"That one's very sweet, very sweet." Hayden nodded. "Very even-tempered. Where was I? Ah—price. Many people wonder why sevilis are so expensive and this is due to several factors. First only half of all female sevilis are able to reproduce. And are you ready for this—most females don't *want* to reproduce with a male sevil! They actually prefer humans! But I've come up with a way to solve the breeding problem. I let the females lap from a saucer of wine until they can barely walk straight then let my studs have at them."

"How kind of you."

"Ah ha! A personality emerges," Hayden crowed. "Progress. Now the second reason sevilis are so expensive is that they're considered an endangered species. Because of this, less than one percent of the population owns one. Most people have never even seen one. For all they know, sevilis are a myth!"

"I've always wanted one," Alex said. "Ever since I saw my uncle's. Instead of fantasizing about girls, I was imagining what I'd name her, how I'd spoil her... I-I guess that seems a little silly."

"I don't blame you, kid. Women will mean as much to you as amebas after you've been with one of these. Once you go cat, you never go back!"

A gleaming silver sevil pranced about her cage, begging fervently for their attention.

"This one's a nice mare. Boundless energy, this one."

Alex nodded.

"It's almost like shopping for a soul mate, isn't it?" Hayden mused.

The next sevil was already rubbing her sex against the bars, glancing coyly at them from over her shoulder.

"That's Winnie," Hayden said. "They don't get any more enthusiastic than this little lady!"

By the time they reached the end of the building they had seen nearly twenty sevilis. Alex was about to narrow down his prospects when a piercing roar shook the barn, rattling the walls and causing the other sevilis to wince. Alex couldn't place it, the noise sounded as if it were coming from outside.

"Bloody hell," Hayden groaned. "She's at it again."

"What is it?"

"The white witch."

"The white what?"

Hayden shook his head. "Never mind. Come on, let's get you better acquainted with—"

"Is that a sevil making those noises?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Hayden sighed. "We keep her in a separate building away from the barn so she won't scare the customers. I tell you, in my ten years of breeding

seivils I've never been bitten, scratched—I've never met a sevil that didn't immediately bend over at the sight of a man. But this one lets out noises that could blow a man's flesh right off his bones. She hisses, she screams, she tries to rip my hand off whenever I slip a platter of food into her cage."

The other seivils were making nervous chattering noises as the bellows continued.

"Show me," Alex said.

"You don't want to see her. She's the devil with fur."

"Show me."

Hayden shrugged and motioned for him to follow him outside. About fifteen yards away, a small, singular barn was vibrating as screeches thundered against its walls.

When they stepped inside the barn they stood staring at a single stall. When they approached the cage there was a flash of white then seconds later her face was against the bars, a murderous glare in her eyes. Alex felt dizzy as he took in the sight of her. Her coat was a shade of white with such a fine sheen that in the light it took on an ethereal golden glow. Her eyes were just as piercing as her voice, silver and dangerous, like clouds on the verge of a storm. She curled her lips and, without blinking, let out a snarl that caused Alex to falter backward. The sevil had a mane the color of butter and now she whipped it 'round her head magnificently in a display of fury. She began to pace back and forth, her eyes burning into him until he found himself spellbound by her ferocity.

As if making a conscious effort to snap herself out of this moment of tranquility, she released a guttural growl but this time Alex didn't flinch. Her pointed ears were pinned back, pulling her features taut. He stared at her with equal intensity and suddenly it was she who wavered, sitting on her haunches, her gaze locked on his. She seemed perturbed by his sudden fearlessness. She quickly went back to roaring and pacing.

"If she wasn't the most beautiful mare you'd ever laid your eyes on, I would have gotten rid of her years ago," Hayden said. "But the little hellion is beyond gorgeous, isn't she? And you know what? I knew keeping her was a good call. Some foreigner from across the east galaxy saw a picture of her and fell in love. I told him she's wild, completely unmanageable. And you know what he said? The guy said that's exactly what he's looking for. The bastard wants to play rough with her! I was so ecstatic I told him I'd throw in some whips and feet clamps for free."

She bowed her head slightly and through a veil of wispy eyelashes she gave a sad, mournful look as if she understood her fate and Alex felt as if her eyes were burning straight into his soul.

Once, when he was sixteen, he was walking in a busy street and as he made his way through the bustling crowds he saw a girl sitting on a wooden bench. With jet-black hair and flashing green eyes, she had the look of a panther and people seemed uneasy as they passed her. They didn't know what to make of her dangerous beauty, frowning when they glimpsed the girl's intense features. But Alex found himself staring at her for such a long time that she eventually turned her head and met his gaze. She glared at

him and taken aback, he scowled back at her. For a moment she seemed surprised. Then her head tilted back and she laughed, her voice like bells. When their eyes met again she was smiling and her face bore an expression of such softness it left him breathless. Alex had never really demonstrated a keen interest in the opposite sex but at that moment he wanted that girl badly. He wanted the ferocity just as much as he wanted her cherubic smile. But then someone bumped into him, distracting him, and when he went to turn his attention back to the girl she had vanished, leaving his soul aching.

Now this sevil sat before him, fire flashing in her eyes, a snarl on her lips, but there was the faintest hint of yearning on her face as her eyes combed his features. She seemed to be contemplating the russet hair that brushed across the dark eyes, the strong jaw softened by his smile.

"Don't let those doe eyes fool you," Hayden snorted. "She'll slit your throat if you let her. Come on, let's go look at the sevilts that don't aspire to homicide."

Alex felt a hand on his back, a hand guiding him away from her.

"Wait," he blurted out, digging his heels into the ground. "I-I want to try her."

Hayden's eyes bulged in their sockets. "What? You a masochist or something? Hell, no! She'd rip you apart. Besides this little bitch is already betrothed. Come on, I'll let you try out Winnie—"

"No—her," Alex said. "I'll pay triple the 'test drive' fee if you let me try her."

Hayden scratched his head and started to object but it was clear that Alex's generous offer was having an impact. Finally Hayden shrugged his shoulders and muttered, "I'll go get Deron to help me wrangle her. This is gonna require a lot of manpower. You're nuts, boy. Wait here."

He left them alone. Alex moved toward the cage until he could feel her breath brushing across his skin. She tilted her head, giving him a quizzical look.

"Are you really the white witch?" he said.

Though she had calmed slightly, her body still twitched nervously at his presence.

"I think it's because they keep you cooped up in this shack." He frowned. "All alone with no one to keep you company. My uncle once told me that sevilts live for attention—you don't even get a kind name."

He pressed his face close to hers. She didn't try to claw him, didn't run. The silver beauty of her eyes was even more electrifying up close. Alex saw a fiery soul behind those eyes and at this moment she almost appeared to be contemplating something.

But when the barn door lurched open, she quickly bolted to the corner of the cage, hissing and bristling as Hayden and a burly-looking man fumbled to unlock the door. Alex noticed the thick ropes and chains draped across the newcomer's shoulders and immediately grew alarmed.

"What's all this?" he blurted out.

Hayden, who was adjusting a leather halter, seemed annoyed by the question. "Well, do you want to mount her or not?"

"Yes," said Alex. "But I don't want her bound and gagged like a prisoner."

The other man chuckled. "You got a death wish, son?"

Hayden put a hand on his comrade's shoulder. "Know what? This could be rather interesting. Mr. Raylen, if you understand that I am in no way responsible for any injuries you may incur then you're welcome to step in that cage without our assistance."

The other man struggled to contain his laughter.

Alex rose, ignoring their smirks. Head held high, he entered the cage. To his surprise she took soft, delicate steps toward him and pressed her face forward. Alex felt his spirits leap. He carefully, slowly, lovingly reached out a hand to caress her face. Her little pink nose tilted upward and she parted her lips slightly. Alex held his breath as he realized she was about to lick his hand.

Or so he thought. When she lunged at him with a flash of teeth and raised claws, he barely managed to scramble from the cage with his life. Hayden and the other wrangler immediately burst into peals of laughter, holding their stomachs to steady themselves as Alex slammed the door shut.

"Hey, I think she likes you!" Hayden roared. "She waited a full five seconds before trying to tear your balls off!"

Panting and nearly collapsing on the floor, Alex turned his head to glance back at her. The sevil had darted to the corner of the cage, where her face was now frozen in a permanent hiss.

"It's all right, kid." Hayden grinned. "We have a little thing called foresight and now we're gonna do it our way."

Alex watched as the two men stormed through the cage and began to taunt and provoke her where she huddled, working her into a fury.

"Come on, precious! Is that all you got?"

She let out a scream of rage as Hayden's hand shot out, his fingers curling around the scruff of her neck. She tried to swipe at him with her paw but the other man managed to clamp his hand around her tail, dragging her backward so quickly that her head slammed against the ground. Her cries cut to Alex's core like a knife and he rushed into the stall.

"Not so rough!" he yelled.

Hayden ignored him, grunting, and as the other man forced her to the ground he managed to slip the halter around her head. In an instant they had fastened two ropes to each side of the halter. They moved quickly to opposite sides of the pen and went to work securing each rope to a steel bar. From both sides of her face, a rope was yanking her upright, wrenching her to the middle of the cage and rendering her immobile. She was bound, on all fours, her ass high in the air. Her two captors stepped back to admire their handiwork, giving each other a high-five.

"All yours," Hayden called as he exited the stall. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

The other man gave him a wink and added, "Do the little bitch real hard for me, will ya?"

They left him alone with the writhing creature and as Alex watched her struggle against her bonds he thought that perhaps he shouldn't do it. Why had he asked it in the first place? He wasn't sure he knew. Despite her violent demeanor, Alex could see something buried deep within her, an epic loneliness that compelled him to get closer.

He looked at her with gentle eyes as he unfastened his belt, letting the pants slide to the ground with a soft thud. He took a step forward, pausing when she snarled at his approach.

"I'm sorry, beauty," he whispered. "But our foreplay will be minimal as I don't wish to find out what would happen if I put my cock in your mouth."

She pawed the ground frantically as he slipped behind her.

"I think this is your first time," he said suddenly. "Is it, beauty?"

She tried to thrash her head, straining the ropes to fatigue. He placed a hand on her back, running it lightly toward her rear. She inhaled sharply.

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I only want to make you feel good."

Her muscles tensed as he let his hand roam her satin body, gliding it over the arch of her back up to her shoulders then lightly across the curve of her ass.

"Good girl," he murmured. "Has anyone ever told you you're a good girl? Has anyone ever spoken sweetly to you?"

He knew the answer to that question, his jaw clenched remembering the manner in which she'd been tethered.

He took a soft step forward until he was standing before her, taking in the wild beauty of her face. Her breath caught in her throat when his fingers traced the contours of her cheek, smoothing the fine mist of fur with his palm. When she met his gaze, the silver eyes were pools of confusion.

He was already hard. Her body was contorted in such a way that every graceful curve was prominently exposed. For a brief moment he was overcome with a primal lust, tempted to drive himself inside her, filling her again and again until she cried out in pleasure. But his senses returned and he continued his tender stroking.

Crouching behind her, Alex let his hand dip past her collarbone until it brushed softly against her breast. Her body went rigid as he teased her nipple with his fingertip but he felt a surge of triumph when it tightened into a hard pink bud. Encouraged by this small sign of progress, he felt his blood pulsing hotly in his veins. Oh, she was still squirming and straining against the harness but her flesh had become so warm and inviting that he couldn't force himself to stop now.

Alex continued to fondle her breast. With his other hand he began stroking her flaxen hair, whispering a torrent of praise in her ear. "That's right, just relax. Doesn't that feel good?"

She was whimpering almost inaudibly, seemingly confused by his touch and by the way her body was responding. He paused. Feelings of confliction swirled in his head but when she struggled to push her ass against him he felt his guilt melt away.

*I'll only enter her, he promised himself, if she's wet...*

With bated breath he parted her tail from between her legs, pinning it gently against her thigh. He closed his eyes and slid his finger across her velvet sex. She was like warm silk beneath his touch. It was a kind of softness he had never felt before and he almost went dizzy at the joy of it. When he removed his finger and brought it breathlessly to his face, his eyes went wide – the tip of his finger was glistening with her honeyed wetness.

Without a moment's hesitation he spread her legs. Alex felt her tail brush against his cock and he shivered. In a panic, she first tried to buck but her wetness drew him inside her before she could squirm away. She let out a gasp like music to his ears. Alex moaned as he became engulfed in her heat, smothered in her wetness. He pushed himself deeper, straining to go slow, go gentle, even though he wanted nothing more than to plunge inside her and thrust until she collapsed in a puddle of sighs at his feet.

But he restrained himself, massaging her from the inside with the same mildness he had used to caress her cheek. As he began his languid thrusting, a slew of murmurs poured from her lips. With a mixture of curiosity and defeat she shifted her weight to her upper body, steadying herself for his thrusts.

Alex urged his cock deeper until every inch was surrounded by her slickness. He let it rest there, pulsating inside her until she released a tortured growl that spurred him to begin thrusting again. He could feel her gripping him from the inside, tightening around his cock until he had no choice but to come. He let out an explosive groan when he felt her first spasm. She moaned in orgasm as he twitched and spurted, soaking her insides with the heat of his cum.

He lingered there for a long time, wanting to savor the feeling, dreading the moment when he would slide out and leave her warmth. When Alex finally pulled away from her and moved to stand before her, she was staring at him with a look of wonderment. Her body fell forward in a little heap, motionless except for the rapid heaves of her chest. He scratched her head, smiling at her mystified expression.

Alex let his finger trail across her lips and in a voice rich with pride, said, "You're mine now, beauty, in every sense of the word. I'm going to take you away from this wretched barn and spoil you rotten. All I ask is that you let me taste you every evening. I'll be your slave as much as you'll be mine. I'll give you anything you want and your happiness will never be denied. Jeez, that sounds so cheesy, doesn't it?"

She bit his finger, piercing the flesh with her pointed teeth. Alex quickly withdrew his hand and glared at the droplet of blood tumbling down his skin.

"Of course we'll have to put you on a firm training schedule..."

He was fastening his belt just as the door swung open. Hayden swaggered in, his crony giggling behind him.



"Did you manage to wipe the sneer off her face?"

"I did," Alex said, running an affectionate hand across the sevil's back. "And I intend to do so again...indefinitely."

Hayden's mustache twitched. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Alex, "that she's coming home with me — *today*."

Hayden shook his head. "I told you, remember? The white witch is already sold."

"Tell the purchaser she died," Alex ordered. "Tell him whatever you like but make no mistake that this sevil now belongs to me."

"But —"

"I'll double whatever offer he made."

Swayed once again by the almighty *drano*, Hayden shrugged and said, "If you're willing to pay for hell then she's all yours, son."

Alex flashed a look of disdain at the man before returning his gaze to the bright-eyed creature at his feet. As slivers of sunlight filtered through the splintered walls, the light shimmered across her body, making her look like an angel in a baroque painting. The wildness hadn't dissipated—she looked like she could still leap into a mode of attack if given the chance—but she now held an undeniably coquettish charm.

In her eyes, he saw the little raven-haired girl on the bench who just needed someone to take her challenge, to scowl back until she had no choice but to laugh. The sevil's face had softened when he had touched her, whispered to her, mounted her. In her eyes there was possibility and he found himself convinced that he could coax out the tender part of her buried beneath the snarls, the part of every being that craved affection.

"I'll get you a leash and collar for the ride home," said Hayden. "You'll need to be generous with the discipline if you want to make a lady out of her."

"On that point we're in agreement."

"And I'll need to talk to you," said Hayden, "about her basic care."

"Well, I don't have a dank shack to keep her confined to but I think I'll manage."

Hayden rolled his eyes. "This won't take long, Mr. Raylen. Follow me, please."

Alex knelt slightly so that he could look into her eyes again before he left the barn. He didn't know what he wanted to say so he simply patted her head. He wanted her to know that it was all right now, that she would be taken care of and that he would never mistreat her. And for a brief moment her expression mirrored his, her eyes serene as if she understood his intentions.

"Er, Mr. Raylen?"

Alex felt his cheeks flush. The two men were watching him, their eyes mocking. He quickly rose and followed Hayden from the barn, the sunlight shocking his eyes. Across the courtyard was a modest building with a small fountain babbling near the entrance. They slipped inside.

Hayden motioned for him to have a seat in the small office and as Alex settled himself into a leather chair, his eyes scanned the picture-covered walls. There were certificates authorizing the stable as a licensed breeding facility but more impressive were the photographs of clientele posing with their sevil. He recognized a member of the eighth senate, smiling as he nuzzled an almond-eyed sevil with smoke-colored fur. Hayden followed his gaze and grinned.

"Talk about falling in love," he smirked. "Notice you haven't seen that gentleman about much these days? Ever since *that* purchase the guy barely ever leaves the house."

"Mm." Alex nodded, understanding the temptation.

Hayden fumbled through a stack of papers on the mahogany desk, making low clucks with his tongue until he found what he was looking for.

"Sale agreement," he said, handing some papers to Alex. "All our sevil come with a bill of perfect health but, under our terms and conditions, if she becomes ill or dies within thirty days, you'll receive a full refund."

Alex bristled at the morbidity of the statement.

"I'll be giving you the booklet on all of the sevil's basic care needs," Hayden went on. "Though I doubt you'll have to reference it often. Sevil are almost identical to humans in their basic needs. Feed her imported shellfish, feed her *chemens*—don't matter. She can take it. But I recommend feeding her for optimum health. Most sevil love fruit. Your little lady happens to love apricots in particular. Think lots of fruits, vegetables, fish. Keep sweets and junk to a minimum. Case in point, I had a guy that found out his new sevil loved *Tacelet* pastries. Well, he spoiled her with the damn things and before long her voluptuous figure became downright portly."

Alex smiled.

"There's only one other thing you need to know regarding sevil," Hayden said, leaning forward. "And it's astronomically important."

He ferreted through a drawer in his desk, scuttling around until he pulled out a large jar of what appeared to be pills. He tossed them to Alex, who promptly raised an eyebrow as he examined the bottle.

"What's this?"

"Sevil," said Hayden, "aren't just rare because of breeding issues."

His face became very serious and his mustache drooped with the weight of what he was about to reveal. "Mr. Raylen," he said, "these creatures have the same general makeup as human beings with one exception—they lack the ability to process trace elements of the current environmental toxins in the planet's oxygen."

Alex paused. "I don't understand."

"The only reason sevil aren't extinct is because new developments in science allow them to survive outside their natural setting. Their immune systems, while perfectly healthy on their planet of origin, are not designed to process the complex

environmental allergens and toxins on this planet, as well as most other industrial planets.”

“Wait, I thought their planet of origin was condemned nearly a century ago.”

“Ah, you’ve done your research, Mr. Raylen.” Hayden nodded. “Yes, we managed to muck up Abilonia pretty quickly. Luckily a small colony of these little beauties was exported before the gas cloud hit. Wiped out everything except the roaches, or so I heard. Luckily for me, they managed to keep the species going, otherwise I’d be working at my brother’s coach parts dealership in Philona.”

Alex smiled. “So, the pills...”

“A daily supplement,” Hayden said, his tone serious again. “Absolutely vital. It strengthens their immune system to the level of a healthy human being.”

“And let me guess.” Alex smirked. “It just so happens that I’ll be buying these handy pills from you on a monthly basis?”

“Listen to me, Mr. Raylen, this is very serious. Without this daily supplement, she’ll wither slowly, painfully. Do you understand? Her immune system will lose its strength without these pills.”

“I didn’t know it was that serious.”

“Very much so,” said Hayden. “If you stop giving a sevil this supplement, in exactly one week she will become infected, weak, diseased. She will die, Mr. Raylen. And if that happens, the government will prosecute you for neglect—if she perishes, manslaughter.”

“I-I think I remember reading somewhere that sevil have delicate immune systems.”

“Delicate?” Hayden snorted. “There’s an understatement! Right now they only exist because we allow them to, because we make ‘em swallow a pill every morning. Forgetting to give her the pill once or twice in a row won’t do much damage but more than two weeks and you’ll be looking at a creature on the brink of death. So stock up on her supplements and call me if you ever run out and I’ll rush a bottle over. You hear me? There’s no excuse for her to be sick—ever.”

Alex’s expression was solemn. “I would never do anything to jeopardize her health.”

“See that you don’t. That little hellion may be wild as whiskey but she’s by far the prettiest sevil I’ve ever acquired. Don’t let that beauty go to waste. Make her something great, boy.”

Hayden’s eyes were warm as he spoke and Alex started to think the man actually had a fondness for the sevil he called the white witch.

“I will,” he said. “She’ll be no less than a princess in my eyes.”

Hayden nodded. “Except most princesses don’t claw their subjects. Sign here, Mr. Raylen, to confirm the purchase.”

Alex looked over the contract, found the guarantee clause and initialed. He traded the piece of paper for a thick book, five bottles of green pills and some pamphlets.

"This is the most comprehensive manual on sevil care in existence," Hayden assured him. "Though you're welcome to call me anytime, this baby will be able to answer almost any question you could think of. This little starter set is complimentary, mind you, but additional supplements will cost you two hundred *dranos* per bottle. Oh, and I threw in a sturdy leash and collar, which our friend Deron should be helping her into at the moment. There's a button on the end of the leash that administers a mild electric shock in case she gets a little too rambunctious but you seem to have found your own methods of subduing her. Ah yes, and of course there is still the matter of payment..."

Alex fished through his pocket and pulled out the small electronic payment device that would transfer payment to Hayden's accounts.

"The doubled price would be two million, correct?"

Hayden nodded as Alex leisurely authorized the payment and handed the device to Hayden for verification.

"Well, that was gloriously simple. Come, Mr. Raylen. Your princess awaits."

He ushered Alex from the room and they returned to the small barn, where they found the alarmingly placid-looking sevil, head drooping, sitting at Deron's feet. He clutched the ruby-flecked leash, staring down at her without a hint of wariness.

Alex tilted her head and studied her faraway eyes. She didn't look at him but rather through him as if she wasn't sure what she was supposed to be staring at.

"Why is she suddenly so docile?" Alex asked.

The sevil's shoulders slumped forward and it looked like she was fighting gravity with all her might, struggling to keep her head upright.

Alex felt Hayden's hand patting his shoulder. "You'll thank us later, boy," he said. "Deron gave her a little sedative."

His comrade grinned. "Gave her three."

"Jeez, man." Hayden shook his head. "Three? She's gonna be trippin' dragon balls for days!"

Alex watched her sway slightly as if she were being manipulated by some invisible gust of wind. He reached out, touching her nose tentatively with his finger and she giggled as if this was the funniest thing she had ever seen.

"What the hell did you give her?" Alex scowled.

"Oh, she'll be fine in about six hours, which is plenty of time for you to go home and get her settled. Then she'll go back to sinking her teeth into your testicles, good as new."

"Yeah," Deron added, "she'll be fine. Hey, man, don't look at me like that. I wasn't about to let her out of that harness unless she was dazed out of her mind. You're lucky I

only gave her three caplets. I'm of the opinion that this one should have nothing short of dragon tranquilizers."

Alex sighed, resting a hand on the sevil's head. "I suppose it'll be all right just this once."

Deron handed him the leash. Alex pulled it gently and she teetered forward, a giddy grin plastered on her face. It took them a while to reach the coach—she got distracted by an oddly shaped leaf and refused to budge until she had examined it thoroughly—but Alex was relieved when he opened the door and she willingly climbed inside.

"Don't forget to read the manual!" Hayden said as the coach lurched forward. "And call me anytime if you have a question!"

As the two men faded into the distance Alex felt a surge of excitement coursing through his body. She was his. He smiled as she sprawled across him in a childlike stupor, making soft chuckling noises to herself.

"I get it now," he said. "I understand what the big deal is."

She cocked her head and a wisp of hair fell across her eyes.

"People would probably just think I'm crazy for saying this but I feel a strange connection with you, little hellcat. I feel like...you need me."

She ignored him and swatted at some invisible enemy with her hand.

"I've never been that great with girls," he admitted. "I mean, I've dated but nothing really clicked with any of them, you know?"

He gazed out the window at the dimming horizon.

"When I inherited the estate suddenly the women were all over me, batting their eyes, flashing these fake, disgusting smiles and tossing their hair like bimbos. None of them had anything to offer beyond a forced giggle. I quickly realized that what I wanted didn't exist—not in a human." He paused, his eyes combing the wide expanse of hills. "I wanted something pure and genuine and marriage wasn't going to deliver that. Then I remembered my uncle's sevil and suddenly it made sense. Here was a relationship built on pleasure—pure and simple. Wealth, attractiveness and status had nothing to do with their arrangement. In that creature's eyes there was genuine affection and devotion. He loved her and she loved him. Simple."

She rolled onto her back and stared at him.

"Today in the barn," he said softly, "I saw a beautiful creature that craved a man's touch and when I touched her she opened up for me—she bloomed like a flower." He paused and a smile spread across his face. "Hey, how about that? You know what the ancient Gretonian word for flower is?"

She made a little gurgling noise as if genuinely trying to answer his question.

"It's Athima," he said. "And you know what? I think we just named you."

## Chapter Two

Rhysen Manor had been built to resemble a castle of old. Upon entering the threshold, sweeping pillars of smooth marble towered on each side of the entryway, looking as if they had been plucked straight from ancient Earth. The glossy floors poured in all directions, ushering guests toward the kitchen or ballroom, depending on which way one was looking. On the right, Ellora was bustling across the kitchen, muttering gritty curses beneath her breath, provoked by an appliance that happened to be malfunctioning that day. On the left, two impressive doors of burnished gold commanded attention, hinting at the gaiety that could be had in the large ballroom.

Fifty feet beyond the entryway, garnet stairs curled like a young girl's tendril toward the heart of Rhysen. Just beyond the corner, a sprawling library had been converted into an office, a study, a place of meditation. The velvet amethyst chair near the window had an indentation hinting at the owner's favoritism while the small table brushing the furniture often harbored small beads of moisture from a glass that had just been whisked back to the kitchen. Bookshelves towering nearly twenty feet enveloped the large room but the owner had made them redundant. Leather-bound books from the ancient times were strewn throughout the room, their spines arched to exhaustion. They were piled in chaotic stacks on the tables and the floor. A cluster of newly acquired titles in modern silver binding swarmed the velvet chair in an unruly circle.

A similar understated elegance could be found in the neighboring bedroom. The lush room could have been taken from a cover of *Modern Interplanetary Living Magazine*. A vault forged of titanium gleamed in the corner, containing heirloom jewelry and large sums of currency. Shortly before his death Alex's uncle had ordered the vault's installation, though no one had been able to comprehend its necessity.

Farther down were the servants' quarters and beyond these rooms the hallway narrowed into a long path, leading, after many steps, to a single room whose purpose was known only to those who resided at Rhysen. Alex had spent the last two months furnishing the room with luxuries to delight the senses, scraping the back of his mind in an effort to recall what the room had looked like when it had been inhabited by his uncle's sevil.

All rooms contained windows that delighted the eye with the rolling countryside. A large terrace near the back of the house dissolved into a garden bursting with color, flecked with willow and *cresnia* trees that offered their blossoms to the sunlight. Flourishing rosebushes had been elegantly clustered throughout the landscape, their scent coating the warm breeze. There were statues that looked of ancient Earth origin, save for their flawless texture. Several topiaries shaped like whimsical creatures enchanted the eye. Norlan had imported a variety of flora and fauna from all over the

galaxy, creating a small sanctuary where Earth butterflies fluttered among Arcadian *cresnia* trees. Once visitors took in all the beauty the garden had to offer, their attention would be drawn to the high, thick hedges that surrounded the sliver of paradise like a green wall, then their eyes would wander to the distant hills. Beyond these mounds was a large city bursting with energy while manifold countryside estates dotted the landscape.

When the coach arrived at Rhysen, Athima was sleeping heavily, snoring like an eighty-year-old man, a little string of drool dangling from her lips. Alex scooped the sevil into his arms and carried her through the front door. The jostling elicited a grumble from her throat. She lifted her cheek from his chest, eyes rolling 'round her head in a drug-induced daze, puzzled by the vastness of the marble floors, the massive staircase bathed in crimson.

Alex smiled. "I know, I always thought it was a bit much myself but inheritors can't be choosers."

Ellora, face pinched with excitement, came bustling from the kitchen, her eyes lighting up when she glimpsed the creature in his arms. Though she was old enough to be his mother, her face would take on a childlike jubilation whenever something pleased her. It was her lighthearted personality – her cleaning and cooking skills were adequate at best – that had won Alex over the day Rhysen had become his new home. The other staff members had been dismissed – he'd found them gratuitous – but Alex had fond memories of Ellora sneaking him *Tacelet* pastries and helping him catch butterflies during the summer visits of his boyhood. He wanted her warmth to stay with Rhysen. She and her husband Mick maintained the manor though Mick did it a little less cheerily.

"Master Alex!" she exclaimed, a hand flying to her cheek. "She's beautiful."

Athima made a disoriented squeak, her head slumping against Alex's chest. Ellora reached out a tentative hand, stroking the soft fur near her shoulder.

"Oh, she's lovely!"

From behind Alex, Mick's voice rose in a cranky hiss. "Your parents would turn in their graves."

Alex tilted his head to see the old man's eyes narrowed on the sevil. He examined her skeptically, frowning as he scratched his beard.

"Aw, hush up," Ellora frowned. "We've been over this, Mick. It's perfectly natural."

The old man stared at Athima, shaking his head. She had started humming something softly to herself, merry as could be.

"Bestiality is what it is."

"Mick!" Ellora snapped.

"Come on, old man," Alex said. "You know they have the same intellect as humans. Don't you remember when Uncle Norlan had Cossani? This is the same thing. Athima's got spirit, Mick. You'll love her. She's a spunky one."

"So is she your pet or your mistress?"

"You be quiet, old goat!" Ellora said. "Mick's just jealous, Master Alex. He's afraid you're going to spend all your time with her, just like Master Norlan. He's worried about losing his chess buddy."

Mick fidgeted uncomfortably, his hips making a soft creak as he swayed back and forth. "Well," he grumbled, "you remember what happened with Master Norlan..."

A knowing silence hung like a dark cloud over the group.

"But this is different," Alex said finally. "He was married. I don't blame Aunt Arianna for getting annoyed. Toward the end he was spending most of his days locked in that room with the sevil. But he was mentally unbalanced and Cossani wasn't to blame. Anyway, this is different."

"Yeah? And what if you wind up meeting a nice girl and decide to settle down? How long before she gives you an ultimatum and you have to send this one away just like Cossani?"

Alex remembered visiting his uncle a week after it happened. All the relatives had agreed that the sevil was only feeding his erratic behavior, encouraging his withdrawal from society. One day he went for a ride on his dragon through the countryside and when he came back Cossani was gone. From that day onward his uncle had roamed the house like a ghost, forever clutching the little jeweled collar limply in his hand. He never recovered. When Aunt Arianna passed away nine months later his weak soul convinced his body that he no longer had purpose. His heart gave out within weeks.

"I told you," Alex said firmly. "There will be no girlfriend, no wife. And no one will ever be able to take her away."

He turned quickly on his heels and ascended the long staircase, clutching Athima tightly to his chest.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "You're safe, angel. You never have to worry about that."

Athima seemed thoroughly bedazzled as they moved through the long hallway lined with paintings. The curtains that lined the upstairs windows, made of a high-tech fabric that was so sheer it was almost unnoticeable at first, caught Athima's eye and she studied their subtle sheen with curiosity.

When they reached the room at the end of the corridor, Alex felt a little burst of nostalgia washing over him. He remembered the way his uncle's face used to light up whenever he opened the door and Cossani came bounding toward him. As Alex turned the knob he kept his eyes on Athima's face, watching her take in her new surroundings.

He had kept all the comforts his uncle had given Cossani, the large velvet bed and oversized pillows, the glimmering chandelier, the waterfall that bubbled with warm, iridescent water. But he had added his own little flourishes. He had commissioned a special blanket, made from the softest silk fibers in the west galaxy. He imagined her lithe body wrapped in the sumptuous fabric, the silk brushing gently against her legs, her hips, her nipples.



As he laid her across the bed, she nuzzled the silk blanket with her nose, smiling at its sleekness. She rolled around the bed, obviously delighted at the way the material caressed her body. Alex saw her nipples harden as her chest made contact with the soft silk and his breath caught in his throat. He instantly felt the urge to cover her with kisses until she made little sighs of pleasure, parting her legs and allowing him to enter her again. Of course he shouldn't, he reminded himself. She was tired, drugged and he knew she could use the solitude after her long ordeal. But as Athima continued rubbing her body against the mattress in a content stupor, he felt himself weaken. The silk blanket brushed against her legs, her back, the swell of her breasts. Her body curved toward him, exposing every inch of flesh. Without thinking Alex's hand shot from his side and he stroked the curve of her waist, causing a little shiver where his fingers met her flesh. Her eyes fluttered slightly but she didn't squirm away.

Overwhelmed by a primal, greedy desire, Alex could feel hot blood rushing through his veins. His hand stroked down past her stomach, her hips and hovered over her sex. He remembered how wet she'd been when he'd entered her, clenching down on his cock until he'd spilled his desire in a dizzy rush. That painful burning germinated within him now and before he could talk himself out of it his hand boldly claimed the soft triangle between her thighs, his fingers dipping low until they felt the warmth of the slick folds nestled inside the soft fur. Athima let out a moan that forced Alex to fight the impulse to rip off his clothes and take her right there. He wanted his face pressed close to hers. He wanted to take in the heat of her eyes as he entered her, watch her cheeks flush as he slid deep inside. The tips of his fingers grazed the tiny curve of her clit. Her body tensed, then slackened suddenly, as if she were melting into the mattress. Alex's willpower had abandoned him, he swirled his finger teasingly in little circles, watching her teeth part, her mouth form a small "o".

Athima tilted her head toward Alex and she stared at him with a mixture of surprise and delight. Alex knelt slowly in front of the mattress, rubbing until her little pink folds glistened with moisture. The piercing, musky scent of her rose in sharp waves, invading Alex's nostrils until he was intoxicated. He pressed his finger harder against her clit, demanding her body to twitch, to shiver, to yield to him. He glanced up to see her bite her bottom lip, her body on the verge of an explosion. Alex pressed his entire palm between her legs and her thighs clamped around it desperately. Her hips rocked haphazardly until she was grinding against him with a determination that made him smile. She squeezed hard and suddenly she was coming. He felt her orgasm flutter out from between her legs and pulse against his hand.

"That's it," he whispered, watching her face relax as she accepted the bliss that poured from her body. "Oh Athima..."

Breathing heavily, she allowed her body to go slack against the mattress and Alex lightly withdrew his hand. Little dots of her juice still clung to his flesh. He watched her smile and roll over. She snuggled her cheek against the pillow and drifted into a content sleep. Alex took a deep breath and waited for the blood to return to his brain.

He wanted to pull her to him, to kiss her awake and drive himself into the sweet little nook that still glistened with arousal. *Not yet*, he told himself. *Patience, Alex. Get a hold of your senses.* With spectacular willpower, he left her sprawled across the bed.

Alex locked the door. As he strolled down the hallway, he felt as if he were walking on air just knowing Athima was here within these walls. He felt a childlike giddiness, excitement coursing through his veins at the prospect of pressing his bare flesh against hers. The next time it would be different—he would explore every silken inch of her. He belonged inside her and her body was made for pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex was reading his uncle's old copy of *Interplanetary Natural History* and though the volume was a bit outdated, he had found a surprising wealth of information on sevils. Everything Hayden had told him was thoroughly documented in the chapter profiling Abilonia's flora and fauna. Abilonia had once been home to a moderate number of creatures, including sevils, but once the iron mines were established, chemical gases began to seep across the land. But fifteen years ago the pollution had become so hazardous that the Arcadian government had declared it unfit for humans, closing the mines and ordering everyone to evacuate. But a scientist named Michas Demprey had become enamored with the small population of sevils and managed to smuggle fifteen of the creatures on one of the returning ships. Shortly after, a cloud of toxic buildup exploded across the land, killing all life forms except the roaches and bacteria. Demprey took his sevil colony and began to breed them on a small farm, obtaining a special permit from the government after giving one as a present to the Commissioner of Galactic Agriculture.

Alex smiled. He had no doubt that once the commissioner was introduced to the creature's voracious libido he was quite content to allow sevils to continue their existence. Now their rarity and sexual devotion made them highly coveted by those with the means to afford them.

He remembered something his uncle had told him one day when he asked if people approved of Cossani. "Alex, most people have heard of sevils by now though few will ever see one in their lifetime. About half of the men who own them have wives. Initially most women roll their eyes and look at sevils as a boyish phase—an outlet for their hormones. But some, like your Aunt Arianna, realize that it's more than that. It's a special bond that no one but a sevil's owner will ever understand. My male friends, as you might have guessed, look at the situation with a mixture of awe and jealousy. Society deems them as a bit of an unspoken vice—like gambling and prostitutes. But no one will ever be able to convince me that Cossani is a plague on society. Without her, I'm afraid I'd be a rather bitter man."

Shortly after his uncle had become reclusive, locking himself in Cossani's chamber for days, declining all visitors and ignoring Aunt Arianna's pleas to come out of the room. When she finally managed to convince her husband to leave the house, she had a

group of friends wrangle Cossani into a coach, where she was shipped to a breeding facility in the north galaxy. Alex heard that the moment his uncle returned to find Cossani gone, he collapsed on the floor and released a howl so piteous that Aunt Arianna said it was the sound of an old man's heart breaking.

Alex felt a twinge of sympathy. He would never make that sound, there was no one to take Athima away from him. She would be his – and his only – forever.

Ellora's voice echoed down the corridor as she trotted toward the library. "Master Alex! Master Jess is here to see you!"

Alex grinned. He knew exactly how the conversation with his best friend would begin. He looked up to see Jess flashing him a juvenile grin.

"Whatcha doing?" he said. "Reading up on how to please your new love slave?"

He gave Alex a playful punch to the shoulder.

"So you really did it!" said Jess. "Well, let me see her! Is she hot? Does she just gyrate all day long until you plow her?"

"Eloquent as always." Alex rolled his eyes. "Yes, she's gorgeous, Jess. But she's not just some machine. She's got a beautiful personality." He paused. "Or at least she will...once she's declawed."

"Oh, a little spitfire!" Jess crowed. "Even better. *Meow!*"

Jess had been Alex's closest friend ever since growing up together, when their scrawny bodies and secondhand clothes had united them in their awkwardness. But they couldn't be more different when it came to personality. Jess was shorter, with roguish blue eyes and a smile that constantly insinuated trouble. He was brash with his words, letting the world know when he was horny. He was the kind of guy that bent down to tell a tantrum-throwing toddler to knock off the drama. Although his bluntness often drove Alex to the brink of madness, they remained closer than ever. Several years ago when his parents had died in an accident, Alex had felt such anguish that for a brief period he had entertained the idea of joining them. But then Uncle Norlan had taken him in, bathing him in luxury and treating him like a son. Jess had visited every day, telling him obscene jokes and making up wild stories to distract him from the pain. When his aunt and uncle died within weeks of each other, Jess slipped back into comfort mode. Both of them couldn't believe it when Alex discovered that Uncle Norlan had willed his entire fortune—including Rhysen—to him. Jess, naturally, made himself quite at home, dropping in and raiding the food supply on a daily basis. Alex could see the crumbs from one of Ellora's *Tacelet* pastries lingering on Jess' lips as he grinned at his friend.

"So?"

"So what?"

"Are you gonna show her to me or what?" Jess groaned.

Alex frowned. "She's sleeping right now, Jess. She's had a long day."

"Oh, she has, has she? And what exactly would leave the dear creature in such a state of exhaustion?"

"Well..."

"Oh my stars!" he blurted out. "You took the coach for a test drive, didn't you?"

Alex felt his cheeks flushing.

"Right on!" he cried. "Was she a virgin? Was she?"

"Grow up, Jess."

"She was!" he cried. "Oh, this is incredible. Now tell me all the details—did she make that face cats make when you put them in water?" He pinched his lips together and his eyes bulged in their sockets.

Alex laughed and shook his head. "No, you lunatic. It was actually very..."

Jess leaned forward with eager eyes.

"We bonded," Alex said. "I can't really describe it but it was, well...incredible. I just knew immediately that she belonged here."

Jess was jumping up and down like a child. "Show me! You have to show me!" He tugged at his shirt until Alex let out a sigh of defeat.

"Fine," he said. "But we're not going to wake her up. Just a quick look, all right?"

Jess nodded, skipping alongside him as they left the library and walked toward the room at the end of the long hallway. Alex slipped the key from his pocket and gently opened the door. Athima was curled in the middle of the bed, her expression conveying pleasant dreams. Her eyes fluttered lightly when they closed the door but she remained asleep.

Jess put a hand to his mouth as they crept to the bed, looming over her in silence. Her butter-colored hair was splayed about the bed like a fan. Though her arms cradled her torso, holding her body in a comforting embrace, the gentle curve of her breast was visible from where they stood.

"Oh wow, I want one," Jess said, eyes scanning the length of her body. His face bore the same expression of awe Alex had displayed earlier that day when he had first glimpsed Athima.

"She's pretty special." Alex smiled.

"How much do these things cost, again?"

"Two million *dranos*."

"Son of a —"

"Ssh, you'll wake her up," Alex whispered. "Come on."

Jess glanced over his shoulder one last time as they left her chambers and pursed his lips together in a soft whistle of approval. As the door closed, he said, "You know, Al, I used to hate you because all the girls always giggled about how cute you were. Then for a while I hated you because this place just fell into your lap. And now..." He gave Alex a playful smile. "I absolutely detest you."

Alex patted his friend on the shoulder as they made their way down the staircase.

"That's why I'm not going to give you graphic descriptions of our encounters," Alex said. "Because then you'd *really* hate me."

They headed downstairs toward the kitchen.

"You know what the key ingredient to a great friendship is, Al?"

"Mm?"

"Sharing." Jess winked.

Alex gave him a shove that wasn't quite as playful.

## Chapter Three

That night Alex felt like a kid on the night before his birthday, his mind racing at the thought of touching Athima. He had summoned every last drop of willpower that day, fighting the urge to rouse her from her slumber and pour kisses onto her lips. He had faltered for a brief moment, tiptoeing down the hallway toward Athima's chamber, thinking he'd just pet her a little, stroke her hair for just a few minutes. But Ellora spotted him as she carried a pile of laundry and like a bull she drove him downstairs in an angry huff. "Let the poor thing rest!" she ordered. "For galaxy's sake, Master Alex, the little creature's drugged and in a strange new place. Leave her be and save your hormones for tomorrow." He sulked off and did as he was told.

That night Alex stroked himself in a tortured fever, thinking of the sevil who slept soundly in the other room. He imagined Athima's pink tongue as it grazed his cock, her eyes playful as she knelt before him and administered soft licks. He came in a rush of exhaustion, her silver eyes searing into him from the depths of his mind.

When dawn came streaming through his window Alex's eyes flashed open. He nearly tripped over his own feet as he leapt from the bed.

"Master Alex!" Ellora called from downstairs. "Breakfast!"

He growled in frustration and yelled back, "Not today! I'll be busy this morning!"

There was a brief pause before Ellora's voice thundered through the manor. "I won't hear of you skipping meals! Kitchen – now!"

Alex sighed. Had his mother really died or had she been reincarnated in the form of a screeching old woman? He shuffled downstairs to the kitchen and planted himself in front of the bowl of warm *eldergrass* porridge sprinkled with *sychekyte*, one of his favorite flavorings imported from the north galaxy. It tasted a bit like dark sugar but had a deep, lingering aftertaste. Ellora nodded approvingly as he shoved a spoonful between his lips.

In the corner of the room a telecast projected a newsflash into the air, the headline blazing before them.

"Volume on!" Alex called from across the kitchen and the level voice of a newscaster filled the room.

Alex raised an eyebrow as the newscaster began to talk about plummeting stocks. An image of a rocket soared through the air.

"They're raising the prices of rocket fuel again," Ellora said as she scrubbed a pot. "You know it's a shame the government enforced that silly natural transportation clause. I miss riding the sky train."

Alex nodded. Several years ago it was mandated that all residents of the west galaxy must abandon any form of atmosphere-destroying transportation, thanks to an impending smog problem, and now intergalactic airplanes and ships were the only fuel-consuming machines permitted. Alex had always loved traveling by coach, listening to the beating of dragon wings as they soared across the sky but some days he yearned for the old hover cars.

Another stock flashed across.

Ellora pointed at the report. "Plutonium's gone down a bit."

Plutonium was the bread and butter of his uncle's once-vast empire. He had owned nearly all the major factories and distribution centers in the west galaxy. After a year of struggling to oversee the many complicated facets of running the company, Alex had sold most of the major plants for a total of seventy million *dranos*. He retained ownership of the original plant, a small operation on a planet about three hundred light-years away. Alex had quickly decided that he didn't want to spend the rest of his life yelling into teleportation modules and attending lengthy meetings. He had trudged through his childhood in near poverty, working hard and helping his family scrape by and now that he had been stricken with incredible wealth he simply wanted to shelter himself from the cruelty of the outside world. He took pleasure in making donations to poorly funded charities, watching the suns set from his favorite nearby hill overlooking the valley, spending hours with a book on his lap. And why shouldn't he? Alex could spend his days however he pleased now...with Athima.

"Uh-oh," Ellora smiled. "Somebody's got that dreamy look on his face again."

"She is beautiful, isn't she?"

Ellora nodded. "Cossani was a beauty in her own right but the eyes on your girl are positively striking. And a fine coat too—so short it almost feels like skin—like liquid silk."

"Why, Ellora, I do believe you've transitioned from disapproval to acceptance."

"Well...you have to understand, Master Alex, that seeing your uncle's heart break up close and personal was an ordeal. But he was a bit unstable toward the end, even before they took Cossani away. He was rambling about conspiracy theories, really dark stuff. Cossani wasn't the true problem and I personally thought they shouldn't have taken her away. But you're an emotionally grounded young man so I think you'll be all right. Who knows? It may do your spirit a bit of good having her here."

Alex smiled.

"Old Mick still isn't so keen on her," she added. "But we'll bring him around."

A flash of fur darted across the trellis near the window.

"*Chemen!*" Ellora exclaimed. "Big one too! Oh, he'd better not get near my rosebushes or I'll crush his head beneath my—"

"Isn't it a little early for violence?"

"Darn critters tear all my good perennials to shreds."

Alex watched as the *chemen*, whiskers twitching, scuttled across the lawn.

"I think they're cute."

"You would—your uncle brainwashed you. Now the most expensive landscaping in Orion has become a *chemen* wildlife preserve."

"You know," Alex said, fighting a grin, "I was thinking, there hasn't been much rainfall lately and the little critters are probably parched. Why don't you set out some saucers of nectar for them?"

He managed to dodge the spoon as it made a beeline for his head.

"The heck I will!" Ellora roared.

His laughter brought out a furious blush in her cheeks.

"Go on," she growled. "Go to your sleeping beauty. But you be gentle with her, you hear?"

Alex shoved his bowl toward the sink and bolted from his chair, leaving Ellora to her mumbling. When he found himself standing before the door he sucked in a deep breath and fished the key from his pocket.

She was still sleeping, her chin tilted toward the ceiling, hair spilling around her shoulders like a river. The satin blanket was scrunched around her feet, exposing her bodily attributes and making her look like a divine offering. Alex reminded himself that his goal was gentleness and patience but the sight of her legs parted just enough to slip his hand between them weakened his willpower. For one fleeting, guilty moment he smiled at the thought of her eyes fluttering open to his probing. Perhaps he would receive an expression of shock followed by an accepting moan as he slipped inside her—the thought made him lightheaded. He felt a shocking urge to haul her by the waist, smash her body against his and lower her sharply onto his cock. He suddenly wanted to know what she looked like when her hair was pulled, when her hips shook from the force of his thrusts. Would she beg, uttering a breathy stream of whines, if he brought her little body to the brink of exhaustion? But Alex wanted her trust, so he let his palm stroke her cheek until her eyes twitched open. Eyes cloudy with sleep, she stared at him with a look of confusion.

"Good morning, beautiful Athima." He smiled. "I trust you slept well."

Of course she had slept well—the drugs she had been given probably had knocked her into a coma. Alex was relieved to see that her eyes lacked the haziness of the previous day. She slowly turned her head, taking in her surroundings, eyes wide with amazement.

"It's all for you," Alex said. "No more dark barn. This is your home."

She gazed at him and almost appeared to be contemplating something but the knock at the door startled her and she leapt from the bed. Athima stared warily at the source of the noise.

"Master Alex!" Ellora cried. "Open up! I've brought your mistress breakfast!"



Of course, how stupid of him. He hadn't stopped to think that his sevil was probably famished. He opened the door and Ellora walked straight over to where Athima crouched, an oversized tray of food in hand.

"Aw, precious, don't be frightened," she cooed. "I'm the bearer of gifts."

Athima studied the tray's contents as Ellora nudged it toward her. The *cresnia* fruit, plums and apricots, *Tacelet* pastries and poached dragon eggs seemed to overwhelm her for a moment. But hunger won out and she shyly lowered her face to the tray and began to nibble at the fruit.

"Good girl!" Ellora beamed to Alex. "I put one of those pills in the plum, just like you asked. Make sure she eats it."

Yes, *the pill*. Alex nodded firmly, remembering its vital purpose.

Ellora's petticoat bustled as she left the room. Alex sat at the edge of the bed and watched as Athima took delicate bites of an apricot. She ate tentatively at first but as the new, sweet tastes flooded her mouth she began to take greedy, vigorous bites. As he watched her lick at the fruit's flesh with abandon Alex felt a pang in his groin. She closed her eyes, savoring the juice as it began to coat her lips, dripping down her chin in little trickles.

As Athima's mouth smothered the fruit, the eggs, the powdered pastries, he felt himself twitching uncomfortably at the image. He was glad when she finally nudged the tray away from her with her nose. She had consumed every morsel—except the plum. With a sigh Alex moved toward her, scooping up the fruit in his hand. He held it in front of her face.

Athima glared and took a step backward.

"Mmm, delicious plum," Alex said in his most tantalizing voice. "The juiciest of all the fruits."

Athima's head scrunched back against her shoulders. She flashed him a look that said the plum was nonnegotiable.

"Fine," said Alex. "We'll just take your little pill out of the plum—there we go—and have you swallow this."

He held the pill close to her face. As her eyes dropped to the small green object, a dark emotion coursed through her face. With a snarl she ran past him, nearly knocking him over.

"Hey!"

She was huddled in the corner, eyes warning him to stay away. He stepped forward.

"It's okay," he said. "Just a tiny pill. One swallow and you're done."

He towered over her, pill in hand.

"It's for your health, angel. It's good for you."

Athima's eyes darted to Alex then the pill. She let out a low hiss.

"You aren't going to eat this, are you?"

Athima stared at him defiantly.

Alex groaned. He didn't want to force her but she was giving him no choice. Before she could bolt across the room, his hand caught her waist. Athima squirmed and growled as he pried open her lips. He was trying to be gentle but she was thrashing so violently that he was forced to shove the pill between her lips and clamp her mouth shut. She kicked at him with her legs but Alex held her firmly, tilting her chin backward so that she was forced to swallow as the pill hit the back of her throat. When he finally released her she fled to the satin mattress, curling her tail around her body with a huff.

"Don't be sore." He frowned. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you upset."

Athima's eyes were glossy and for a moment she looked as if she might cry.

"Jeez," said Alex. "You're looking at me like I just killed your mother. Please don't be mad."

She didn't move when he sat beside her but she quickly averted her gaze. Alex began to run his hand gently over the curve of her back.

"This pill ordeal may be a detriment to our relationship," he said. "Next time we'll stick it in an apricot. You sure gobbled those up fast."

She let her head sink against the mattress. As he stroked the length of her body her eyes slipped shut, letting the lightness of his touch flood her senses. Alex had pored over all the literature on sevilis, their care, their origins, their temperaments. But he had found nothing on how to train a sevil that wasn't quite the "eager pleasure cat" all the books described. There was no mention of how to win the trust and adoration of the apprehensive creature that lay before him. He channeled his affection into his touch, hoping that she would understand that he only wished to make her happy.

When she had become sedate beneath his strokes Alex let his fingers trail to the curve of her breast. She stiffened but didn't move. He held his breath as his fingertips grazed the soft nipple, tracing slow circles, until it hardened against his flesh. Her eyes were closed but Alex could tell that she was contemplating the feeling of him, her lips pursed in confusion as he began to squeeze gently. His hand dipped low to tease the soft flesh between her legs and her eyes flickered with alertness. He let his fingertips tickle her, eliciting a soft shiver that coursed through her body until her lips trembled slightly. She tilted her head back as his strokes became more demanding.

"I wonder," he whispered, "if you will let me do what I crave most..."

Alex lowered his head until the pillowy contours of her lips were inches from his. He had wanted to kiss her ever since he first laid eyes on her and now she was melting beneath him, ready to be tasted. He pressed his lips to hers, moaning at the warmth of her mouth. As the tip of his tongue slid between her lips Athima's eyes flashed open, glittering rage. She drove her pointed teeth into his lip so quickly he didn't have time to scream. Athima fled from the bed like a bolt of lightning, leaving him to gulp down the droplets of blood that spouted from his lips.

Head throbbing, he rose dizzily, turning to find her snarling in the corner. Her eyes were narrow slits and her expression was filled with such hatred Alex felt a jolt of rage course through his veins at the sight of it.

"I thought—I thought we were beyond that," he cried. "How dare you act that way after everything I've—"

Her glare didn't dissolve under the weight of his voice. Instead she let out a shriek that made his bones quiver. Alex clenched his hand, his fingernails digging into the flesh of his palm.

"Don't ever look at me like that!" he roared. "Like an enemy! I saved your life! I..."

With a livid cry he fled the room, her hiss echoing in his ears as he stormed down the corridor.

## Chapter Four

"You know you can make her, right? I mean, she is your property. Don't be so soft. Most females, no matter what species, respect a guy that shows a little dominance."

Alex shrugged and tilted the carafe, letting the violet liquid fill his glass. Jess' brow was furrowed in contemplation, chin resting against his hand.

"They're supposed to have the dispositions of angels," Alex said.

"Horny angels." Jess grinned.

One of the suns was dropping below the hills, illuminating the library with one last gasp of orange light. Alex sank gloomily into the shadow of his chair, taking slow sips from his glass while Jess struggled to brighten his mood.

"She's a cat-thing, right?" he said. "Well, my grandma once had a cat, little devil of a creature. Attacked anything that moved. So one day it's hissing and clawing like it usually does but suddenly my grandpa bends down and grabs the cat by the scruff of the neck. At first the thing starts swiping at him and screeching something fierce but my grandpa continues to hold it like that until finally the cat gets it, you know? My grandpa looked it in the eye until that animal understood exactly who was the master."

Alex shrugged and stared at the bottom of his glass.

"So go on, go break her in," Jess encouraged. "Hold her down and give it to her good until she knows what's what. I'll come and supervise to make sure that—"

"I'm not going to do that," Alex glared. "I'm trying to build her trust, not blow it to pieces."

"But—"

"No!"

"All right," Jess grumbled. "Sheesh."

Jess kicked lazily at a book on the ground.

Alex's eyes became clear as he allowed himself to contemplate his friend's theory. "There may be something to what you said, Jess. The first time I took her she was forced into a submissive position and afterward I swear she actually respected me. She stopped her hissy fit and the way she looked at me—it was like we had an understanding. But then today..."

"So let's go get some ropes and hoist kitty-cat's ass in the air," said Jess. "Come on, I think I have some handcuffs in the trunk of my coach."

"I appreciate your enthusiasm to help but anything I do to Athima will always be a one-man job."

Jess rose reluctantly, shaking his head at Alex.

"Spoilsport."

\* \* \* \* \*

He found her underneath the bed, her head poking out from beneath the satin trimming. But Athima's hard expression told him that she wasn't hiding—she was stalking. She watched him with wary eyes as he set his tools on the ground, harness, tethers, leash.

"I'm a little drunk," he announced. "And still a bit angry."

Her eyes narrowed as if challenging him to take a step forward.

"I wish you could understand," he said bitterly. "I saved you from a lifetime of *real* pain. You may hate me right now but I promise it won't be that way for long. Once you realize that I only want to make you feel good..."

He scooped up the leather harness, checking that the leash was secure. Tossing the tethers over his shoulder, Alex moved toward her, his face stern purposeful. Athima quickly sprinted forward, rushing past him in a flurry of snarls. With one quick movement his hand clasped her tail, yanking her backward until she tumbled against his lap as he dropped to the ground. They wrestled fiercely for a moment, Athima's small body squirming under the weight of his. She flung her claws in all directions and made little huffs of confusion while Alex struggled to pin her arms behind her. Grappling for the harness, he slipped it quickly over the contours of her face, tightening it into a stiff muzzle. Her cries became agitated muffles, as her mouth was forced shut. She may have fought with the rage of a warrior but her delicate body was no match for Alex's strength. He worked swiftly as she continued to kick and lunge forward. Once he had bound her ankles with one of the tethers he worked to secure her wrists. He guided his knee into the curve of her back, making her arch forward while he tied Athima's hands behind her. When he had finished the last knot, Alex paused to take in the sight of her, writhing and straining against her bonds.

He pressed his lips close to her ear. "Looks like all that ferocity's about to go to waste."

Alex pulled her shoulders until her body fell back against his, the curve of her ass brushing against his lap. With a smile he tilted her chin back so that he could look upon her face. She stared at him with wide eyes that were half fury, half fear. He hadn't expected to be so aroused by the sight of her stormy eyes, her trembling body quavering as she absorbed her fate. And, remembering her earlier tantrum, he was tempted to bend her over his knee and spank her until tears rolled down her cheeks. She deserved it—his lip was still throbbing from the viciousness of her bite.

Instead he scooped her up in his arms and carried her slowly to the bed. His gentle intentions waned a bit and when he reached the mattress he tossed Athima on the bed without gentleness. She immediately tried to kick at him with her bound legs. Alex watched in amusement as her feet rose and fell in awkward jolts, making her look a bit like a drunk mermaid. He chuckled softly while she glared venom.

"Getting tired?" he said, noting that her thrashing was becoming less vigorous.

Alex seated himself beside her, eyes looking over her naked flesh. Her mane was crushed in a golden tangle beneath her neck, leaving her breasts free for him to savor. He lowered his gaze to her twitching thighs and the pink folds they sheltered. There was the faintest hint of a triangle framing her sex but so light that it provided no modesty.

When Alex lifted his eyes to meet hers he found them brimming with contempt. The little twinge of anger returned and without thinking he seized her by the shoulders and drew her toward him. She squealed in protest as her face was brought close to his. He was smiling now but there was no warmth in the action. It was a smile of victory, of power. She seemed to sense the rawness of his intentions because she began to twist her torso frantically, turning her head quickly away. Alex released a grunt and clasped her cheek with his palm, turning her face so that she had no choice but to look into his steady eyes.

"I'll have that kiss now."

Her eyelashes fluttered rapidly as he drove his lips to hers, crushing them until she bucked and bleated like an animal caught in a trap. He held her steady. Athima's lips formed an impenetrable, tight line at first but, as his kiss seared her lips apart, they softened, shaking slightly as his tongue pried them open. The muzzle allowed her mouth to open just enough so that his tongue could glide toward the wetness inside. She tasted like the fruit she loved, sweet, juicy, delicate. For a moment she bristled silently, apparently unsure of how to respond. When Alex released a groan, pouring it into her lips, she panicked and he felt her teeth struggling to pierce his flesh.

"No," he commanded in a voice so hard she immediately froze. Alex quickly tightened the muzzle and her jaw snapped shut. Athima closed her eyes as he traced the outline of her lips with his tongue, giving her one last whisper of a kiss before he pulled away. She let out a surprised yelp when he pushed her back against the mattress.

"Bound and muzzled," he said. "And even now you still try to bite me."

She shot him a look of detest.

"How did the males on your planet approach you when they were feeling lusty?" said Alex. "I'm guessing they were far rougher than I'm going to be with you." He paused. "Maybe."

He leaned over her and let his body glide on top of hers. With gleaming eyes he pulled the tunic over his head and tossed it aside.

"I wonder if I could get your nipples hard using only my skin..."

He let his chest brush across the tips of her breasts. She made a low, barely audible whine as he rubbed her nipples with his flesh, rubbing back and forth until he could feel them hardening beneath him.

"I hope it aches," he whispered. "I want you to remember what it feels like to be tormented, to remember that I am your master. Do you understand? I'm capable of bringing you pleasure...or pain. You'd do best to try harder at inspiring pleasure."

He plucked at a hard nipple with his fingers, pleased by her wince.

"If you have to fear me before you respect me so be it."

Athima strained wildly against the mattress as his mouth dropped to her breast, teeth scraping at her nipple. She tried to raise her shoulders, to lift herself from the bed but he raised his arm and pushed her back against the mattress. He bit harder until tears sprang from the corners of her eyes.

Alex squeezed her breasts beneath his hands, twisting them, tugging them, licking their tips until they flushed pink while a steady stream of whimpers tumbled from her lips. He ignored them, letting his tongue glide toward her navel, stopping to administer slow, languid licks to her inner thighs. When she tried to bump him away with her hips he nipped at her flesh until she quieted.

The scent of her arousal flooded his nostrils. Alex rested his cheek against her thigh, his breath catching in his throat as he took in the glistening wetness mere inches from his lips. It was clear to him that Athima was damp with an arousal she didn't yet understand, a strange sensation that frightened her, causing her body to react against her will.

Without waiting for her heartbeat to slow he lapped hungrily at the source of her torment. His tongue glided over the delicate contours of her pussy, nudging her thighs wider so that they strained against the tethers. He probed deeper, bathing himself in Athima's sweetness until his tongue was flicking in and out of her. He plunged inside her insatiably and let his finger drift across her clit, making slow, teasing circles.

Athima's voice was a high rasp, a muzzled plea kept feeble by the harness that clamped her mouth shut. When he began to rub her harder, mercilessly, she summoned all of her strength and brought her knees sharply to his cheek, sending him reeling. Jaw throbbing, Alex lifted his head to find her cowering against the mattress as if immediately regretting the action.

"I was going to finish you off gently," he said through gritted teeth. "But you've just destroyed any chance of that. You want to be a bad girl? Then you'll find out exactly what happens to bad girls who don't respect their masters."

Alex hauled her across his lap, her hair spilling forward over her shoulders as she released a dizzy cry. He pressed the palm of his hand hard against the small of her back, forcing her ass high into the air. He raised his hand. She was still attempting to kick though her efforts were so feeble he couldn't suppress a smile. Alex's hand whistled through the air, smacking her ass with a force that caused her body to stiffen and then go slack against him.

"Do you still want to bite? Still want to kick me? Or are you going to be a good girl?"

He spanked her again, bringing his palm down hard where her flesh was already reddening from the last blow. Her growl melted into a moan as her flesh throbbed beneath his hand. He could feel her pussy twitching against his crotch, digging into him

with each strike. Alex felt her wetness soaking through his pants, the heat of her juices making his cock throb.

She was thrashing her head, her curls batting at his chest but he didn't stop until both cheeks were crimson. When her body had gone limp, legs dangling dejectedly behind her, he hauled her up by her hair and bent her over the bed. He pulled his pants from his body, running his hand over his cock, soothing the ache Athima had created. She was unable to see him, her forehead pressed wearily against the satin sheets.

Alex grabbed her hips and hauled her backward until her ass curved high over the edge of the bed. He halted but then Athima gently pushed back at him, inviting him. He drove himself between her warm thighs and entered her. Athima's head bolted up from the bed as he plunged inside, shocking her body into alertness. She tried to wiggle backward again, pushing her ass into his lap. Alex smiled. He wanted her screaming, raw, exhausted. He smacked her ass again, softer this time. Her obstinate cries had melted into submissive moans. Alex's hands snared her waist, pulling her even closer until he was going so fast that the slap of their bodies drowned out her moans.

Seemingly overwhelmed by her body's primal desire, she had no choice but to take in the hot feel of him, to accept her body's natural reaction.

Alex saw her muscles relax slightly and whispered, "I'm your master, Thima. I only want to make you feel good...that's it...good girl..."

He slowed his pace, caressing her gently with his thrusts. When he heard the little purrs that rumbled from her throat, his hand gently stroked the curve of her ass, encouraging her to accept the pleasure that captured her body. He went so slowly that it pained him, letting Athima enjoy the smooth sensation of his cock gliding in and out of her. She came so suddenly it took them both by surprise.

She was flinching from the inside, tightening around him, until she finally sucked the orgasm from his body. Athima's body went rigid when his warm explosion shot through her. Alex clenched his teeth, leaning against her back for support, barely able to hold himself up as he finally met release. Athima's head fell forward and drooped against the bed. A low wail escaped her lips, a noise of sweet release. Her hair clung to her neck in a sweaty mess. The fine mist of fur coating her body was lacquered with sweat, her chest heaving in little gasps of exhaustion.

Lightheaded and groaning, Alex fumbled with her bonds, releasing the ankles that had turned white from straining against the leather. He guided Athima gently onto her back. Her eyes were half-closed, the pink lips drawing quick, rapid breaths. With a sudden tenderness he brushed away a wet strand of hair sticking to her forehead.

Alex sat beside her on the mattress and paused to stroke her hair. He loosened the harness and the muzzle slid silently from her face. As he untied her wrists he expected her to lunge at his throat, to scream and hiss her hatred as she tried to tear him to pieces. Instead Athima curled against him and let her head fall against his chest. It was in this way that they spent the next three hours.



## Chapter Five

"It was incredible, Ellora," Alex blurted out. "I used a firm hand with her and she finally yielded. It was amazing! Afterward she draped herself over my lap and just let me pet her—actually pet her—for hours. It's crazy but I think Jess was right—females respect dominance!"

The old woman raised an eyebrow as she ran a grimy pot under the faucet.

"If Mick told me to just bend over and take it, he'd have a flaming red handprint on his face," she puffed.

"Ellora!" Alex grinned. "I don't think I've ever heard you speak so lewdly."

She examined the oatmeal bubbling on the stove, deemed it edible and poured it into a porcelain bowl.

"What, you think only the young and virile enjoy sex?"

She shoved the meal before him.

"Of course not," Alex smiled. "I'm picturing you as the kind of gal who likes to be on top."

"Master Alex!"

"What?" he said innocently. "I thought we were having a bonding moment."

"You'll be having a bonding moment with my rolling pin if you don't hush up and eat your breakfast."

He shoved a wad of oatmeal into his mouth.

"Oh," she said, turning around to stare at him with concern, "Master Alex, I made your girl breakfast and put the pill in an apricot like you asked but, well..."

She gestured to the silver tray near the sink. It had been picked clean save for one ripe, untouched apricot.

"Again?" he frowned.

He hated the thought of shoving the pill down her throat again.

"Very well," Alex sighed. He rose from the table and grabbed the fruit.

"She seemed rather exhausted today," Ellora mused.

"She's well-cared-for," Alex called back as he trotted toward the staircase. "In *every* respect!"

Athima was lounging near the waterfall when he pushed open the door. She actually looked pleased to see him—until she saw the apricot. She made a low, distressed growl, inching backward as he moved forward.

"Please," he said gently. "I don't want to go through this every morning."

He saw her turn to bolt but managed to leap forward, grabbing her by the waist.

"No you don't," he grunted, letting the pill tumble from the fruit into his palm. "Come on, be a good girl."

She reared against him, knocking him backward and for a brief, horrible moment he felt his foot teeter on the edge of the pond. She craned her neck and they stared at each other with dread as he felt himself fall backward. They hit the water with a pounding splash.

While Athima yelped with outrage Alex seized the opportunity and popped the pill into her open mouth. She swallowed it, paused then yelped louder when she realized what he had done. Their bodies dripping wet, she happily let him lift her out of the water. When he set her near the water's edge she curled her lips at the indignity of it, shivering as beads of water ran down her body.

Though the pond was only two feet deep, Alex had managed to submerge every inch of his body. He followed Athima's lead and shook his head, little droplets flying chaotically through the air.

"Sorry." He shrugged when Athima narrowed her eyes at him. "But it was partly your fault."

He started to wring out his shirt then noticed the apricot on the ground. He picked it up, figuring that she deserved the treat after her impromptu bath. She was licking her fur, guiding the frazzled hairs back into place with light, feathery strokes. Alex suddenly had a better idea. He unbuttoned his pants.

Squeezing the fruit until it dripped juice, he let the orange droplets coat his cock. When Athima looked up, her eyes fastened on the flesh that glistened. Alex held his breath as she took a tentative step forward. He watched the pink tongue dart from between her lips until it brushed across his flesh, lapping steadily, smacking her lips at the taste of the apricot's nectar. He became hard quickly.

When Athima had licked him clean of juice she paused to examine his hardness. She tilted her head, shooting him a questioning look. With a smile he nudged closer and ran the tip of his cock along the outline of her mouth, waiting for her reaction. Surprise flooded his brain when she parted her lips and took him fully into her mouth, running her velvet tongue down the length of his shaft. He swallowed a moan when her lips pursed tightly and he heard the soft sound of sucking as she bobbed her head back and forth.

He groped dizzily at her hair, stroking it, patting her head, murmuring a flood of praise he was scarcely conscious of. He felt her lips slide from his cock and looked down to see her rolling onto her back, smiling as she parted her legs.

"Oh, you want a little reciprocity, do you?" he said, kneeling beside her.

She gave him a look that mimicked begging. Alex brushed a warm hand across her inner thigh. He stared at her exposed sex, it flushed a deep pink, crying out for touch. A deep sigh of relief shook Athima's body as Alex brushed his lips across the moist flesh, his heated breath a welcome blanket. He began to lick slowly, languidly, urging her to

open for him, to blossom until the piercing scent of her arousal drugged his senses. Low, whining noises poured from her throat and Alex recognized the sound of a creature pleading for gratification. He crawled forward and slid his body gently over hers, his cock brushing the ache between her legs. She welcomed him, wrapping her arms around his torso, staring at him with eager eyes. Her eyes—for as long as he lived, Alex would never forget the delight that radiated from her silver eyes at that moment.

He let the tip of his cock tickle her, teasing her aching flesh until she began to growl with torment. He laughed as Athima attempted to maneuver him inside her, sliding her hips down until he was compelled to thrust. The sound she made was that of a child finally given the candy she'd pleaded for, a sound of satisfaction. She smiled at Alex as he began to gently rock his pelvis, massaging her in a steady rhythm. Athima's smile didn't fade, it grew wider until it infected Alex and soon he was grinning like a teenager as their bodies moved in harmony.

The tips of her hands twitched against the flesh of his back and he recognized the expectant look in her eyes. He moved faster, urging her body to claim the satisfaction within her grasp. Her body stiffened then went soft beneath him and he felt the spasms rock her hips. He let her little flutters guide his thrusts, whipping his cock into a frenzy until he was coming, panting, melting into her. He let his head fall against her sweat-kissed breast, letting the waves of release wash over him. Weak and content, they lay together in silence, waiting for their flesh to cool. When Alex lifted his head to plant a soft kiss on Athima's cheek, she smiled and tilted her head, gazing up at him with adoration.

"We'll call this," he said, his breath ragged, "Mondays."

\* \* \* \* \*

"No freaking way!" Jess cried. "You dropped your pants and she just went right to it? Unbelievable!"

They had just returned from the stables after taking two of Alex's dragons for a brief flight over the neighboring countryside. They sat at the kitchen table nibbling at the warm *Tacelet* pastries Ellora had just plucked from the oven. Jess dunked a pastry into his beer and tossed it in his mouth. He turned to see Ellora give him a blatant look of disgust.

"What?" He glared. "You should never drink on an empty stomach. Get off my back, woman!"

"If I were that close to you I do believe I'd be vomiting." Ellora smiled. "I'll leave you two to your crude stories."

As she left the room, Jess called, "Don't worry, baby, I'll be thinking of you the whole time!" He turned to Alex. "She's a keeper."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Sometimes," he said, "I can't believe we grew up together."

"Aw, we're still close as cousins. Except now you're richer than a god and I'm barely able to afford a can of bug-spray to kill the roaches in my apartment. Ain't life funny?"

"Jess, if you're ever having problems I told you to just tell me and I'll—"

Jess raised his hand. "No, no, I'm not just going to have Mr. Moneybags wave his magic wand whenever things get rough. No charity, thank you. I'll be fine."

Alex sighed at his stubbornness. "All right but the offer always stands."

Jess took a long gulp of beer then said, "So, back to sexy cat-girl. When do I get to have a go?"

"Jess—"

"All right, all right. Greedy bastard."

Alex set down his drink. "Guess who teleported me a message today."

Jess shrugged his shoulders.

"Manny Brenton."

Chunks of pastry spewed from Jess' lips. "*Manny?* Holy crap! I haven't seen that smug jerk since pre-university."

"It was weird," said Alex. "He sent a message to say he saw me on the telecast. They were doing some news segment on entrepreneurs and they were talking about Rhysen. Then they mentioned my newest purchase—"

"Athima?"

Alex nodded.

"Damn, those tabloids don't miss a beat."

"Tell me about it," Alex groaned. "Every time I leave the house, it's front-page news for this dinky little town. So Manny saw the story on me and he teleported a message a couple hours ago. He's been living over in the east sector in a huge place by the ocean. Anyway, apparently Manny has a sevil too—and get this—he wants to arrange a play-date."

Jess raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, he basically invited himself over so that his sevil, Fifi," they exchanged snickers, "can come play with Athima."

Jess was shaking his head. "Play-dates? Now it's getting weird. Do all sevil owners go on annual retreats too? Yoga with sevil or something of that nature?"

"I couldn't say no," Alex said. "We did go to pre-university together. Do you remember him, Jess? He always addressed anyone he talked to as 'old chap'. Drove me crazy!"

"Yeah," Jess blurted out, "and he was the one picking on you every day until you inherited all that money from your uncle. Then he cozied up to you real quick."

Alex sighed.

Jess was curling his lips as if he had swallowed something awful. "But he still tore *me* to pieces every day. After he was done telling you what well-to-do activity was going on at his place that weekend, he'd turn to me and say, 'Hm, Jess, when was the last time you bathed?' Arrogant jerk."

"Oh shit, you're right," Alex groaned. "He *was* a jerk – and I just invited him over to Rhysen this afternoon!"

Jess patted his shoulder. "Well, I'm off to pay my slumlord. Enjoy your enchanted afternoon of aristocratic conversation and feline debauchery!"

He chuckled to himself as he left.

Alex shoved the last cookie into his mouth as he contemplated the predicament. He couldn't cancel – Manny's coach must be halfway to Rhysen by now. Damn. He'd have to bite the bullet and tolerate his old classmate's presence for a couple hours. Hopefully Athima and Fifi would become fast friends – or at least tolerate each other.

When he went upstairs to check on Athima he found Ellora gliding a brush through her hair, fussing over the sevil like a mother grooming her daughter for her first date. Though Athima didn't seem to relish the attention, when she saw Alex she flashed him a look that said, "Ah, well, what are ya gonna do?"

Ellora didn't look up. "Since company's coming, I thought I'd give her a proper grooming. I don't know what in the world you did with her this morning but her hair's a wet, tangled mess."

"Maybe giving you an extra key to Athima's chamber wasn't in her happiest interest," Alex said.

"Bah! She loves it!"

Athima didn't look too enamored as the brush batted at her mane.

"Somebody's got to attend to the girl's needs – her *other* needs anyway."

Alex rolled his eyes.

"I do say," Ellora continued, "she's become much more sociable, hasn't she?"

Alex felt himself blush. "Much more."

"She didn't run, didn't hiss when I entered. Do you think she'd come to you if you called?"

"I don't know." He paused. "Let's find out. Here, Thima. Come here, Athima."

To his surprise the sevil trotted to his side. Alex watched as she opened her mouth and pressed her face toward his crotch.

"What's she doing?" Ellora frowned.

"Er, nothing," Alex said quickly, scooping her into his arms and carrying her back to Ellora. "I think she just wanted a...treat."

Ellora shrugged and went back to brushing the sevil's hair.

"So this Manny Brenton fellow," she said, "he an old school chum?"

"Well, sort of. More of an acquaintance. We weren't close friends. We actually – what the heck are you doing?"

Ellora's hand clutched a pink satin ribbon.

"If you put a bow on her head I'll have you mucking out the dragon stalls for a month."

The old woman rolled her eyes and tucked the offending item back into her pocket.

"I'll go put tea on," Ellora said with a sniff of indignity and she sulked off, shutting the door softly behind her.

Athima stared at him blankly.

"I just saved you from being one step above a poodle," he told her.

Her lips curled into a slight smile as she sauntered toward him, her tail flickering back and forth. Alex nearly choked on his tongue when she rolled onto her back and slowly, gingerly, parted her legs, revealing the soft pink flush of her sex.

"If you're flirting with me," he said, "then you are very, *very* forward."

Alex knelt down beside her, running his hand down the length of her waist. Athima's lips opened slightly and a soft purr spilled from her lips as he let his fingers trace slow circles along her inner thighs. He teased his way toward her pussy, watching her back arch in anticipation every time he came near its warm folds. But just as her breath caught in her throat and her eyes closed dreamily, he let his fingers drift back down to her thighs, leaving her whining. Alex felt himself grow hard as he watched her whimper and twitch beneath his touch. It was the image he'd been dreaming of ever since he'd laid eyes upon her. His hand glided smoothly up her leg and finally caressed the part of her that was throbbing with frustration. She gave a low, full-body murmur as he began to probe the flesh that was wet with yearning. As he gently parted her legs wider, his hand dipped lower, ready to feel her heat from the inside.

Alex let out a cry of shock as Athima lunged toward him, batting at his belt with her hands.

"Easy, easy!" he said. "I'm taking the pants off – see? Hold on..."

The moment Alex pulled his pants down toward his ankles she leapt onto him, gripping his shoulder blades with her hands and driving her hips against his cock.

"Whoa – hold on – I'm losing my balance! Thima!"

He tumbled backward and she seized the opportunity to straddle him and lower herself sharply onto his cock. He gasped as he was plunged inside her throbbing walls, suddenly engulfed by her heat.

"Thima..."

Words deserted him as she began to bob up and down, steadying her hands against his chest for support. A mixture of shock and bliss churned through him as he watched Athima grind her body roughly, intent on satisfaction. She came quickly, her tail twitching as she paused to savor the spasms that jolted her hips. She smiled at Alex then started rocking – hard – until he had no choice but to come. When every drop had

been spilled and he felt the blood return to his head, Athima climbed off and flashed him an impish smile. She licked her hands and gently smoothed her hair.

"I think I've just been used," he said, but in a tone that conveyed such a practice was perfectly acceptable.

Suddenly Athima's ears flicked back and forth at a distant sound. Alex heard the soft hum of the doorbell downstairs, faint at first, coursing through the manor with increasing urgency until it was blasting their ears.

"Great," growled Alex, "looks like it's time for you to meet your first yuppie."

She rolled onto her feet and stared at him quizzically.

"Come on, Thima," he groaned. "Time to meet our special friends."

He had decided to serve tea on the veranda overlooking the sprawling gardens, where the surrounding hedges that formed an encompassing wall would serve as a makeshift playpen for the sevil. They could roam freely about the garden, splashing in the ponds, running through flowerbeds, enjoying the sunshine. It had been several days and although Athima's enormous window overlooked the lush countryside, he knew it wasn't the same as lying beneath the caress of sunlight.

But Athima hesitated when Alex motioned for her to follow him out the door.

"It's okay," he said. "Nothing bad is going to happen outside this room—with the exception of Manny's gag-inducing stories."

Athima took a hesitant step forward then tentatively walked beside him as they left her chamber. She took in Rhysen's beauty with fresh, curious eyes as they moved quietly down the corridor. When they passed the library she paused, sticking her head through the doorway and staring intently at something.

"Come on, Thima," he urged. "Our guests are waiting."

She ignored him, bolting into the room with sudden determination.

"Hey!"

He followed her into the library, watching in confusion as she ran toward a book lying on the coffee table. As Alex moved closer he laughed and picked up the book, suddenly understanding. On the front cover a picture of a smiling sevil loomed beneath the title *Sevils—An Owner's Manual*.

"You saw the picture of the sevil." He smiled. "You're pretty smart, you know that?"

With a frown she hopped forward and nudged at the book with her nose, making gruff little chirps.

"I know, I see her too," he said, placing the book back onto the table. "It's a great book. I'm halfway through it."

Athima made a low whine.

"Master Alex!" Ellora's voice crackled through the house. "Master Brenton has arrived!"

Alex clasped Athima's collar and guided her back into the hallway. She gloomily followed him down the long staircase. Alex found Manny standing next to Ellora near the entryway, a congenial smile on his lips. His dark hair was combed neatly in a dramatic side part and styled stiffly against his scalp and with his dark metallic suit he looked like someone off the cover of *Intergalactic Entrepreneur Magazine*. By his side was a creature whose appearance almost made Alex erupt in laughter. Fifi, as she was aptly named, was a petite sevil whose fluffy silver curls nearly swallowed her body. She had at least seven puffy bows scattered throughout her hair and an enormous pastel confection of ribbon and pearls attached to the end of her tail. Her claws had been painted a shimmering pink that matched her jeweled collar perfectly. She stared at Athima inquisitively with her almond-colored eyes.

"Well, well." Manny grinned, grasping Alex in a firm hug. "It's been awhile, hasn't it?"

Alex forced a polite smile. "Pre-university."

Manny nodded, his eyes dropping to Athima, who crouched shyly at Alex's feet. His eyes brightened as he studied her striking features, skimming her body with an impressed gaze.

"You've done very well for yourself!" he declared. "Who'd have thought that old secondhand-sweater Alex Raylen would inherit all this—and a sevil that takes my breath away to boot!"

Alex nodded at Ellora and she disappeared into the kitchen to tend to the tea. As Manny tilted Athima's chin back to examine her flickering eyes she took a quick step backward, looking up at Alex with an uneasy expression.

"Shy, huh?" Manny chuckled. "Have a look at my girl, old chap! Amazing, isn't she? Cost me a pretty penny too. You know that she has the largest tits of any sevil I've ever come across?"

Alex tried not to stare at the bulbous breasts framed by Fifi's poofy curls.

"So it was love at first sight then," said Alex.

"My wife spoils her like some trust fund brat," Manny smirked. "Has the servants give her daily massages, buys her pricey toys, does her hair every morning. Lisa's bisexual, you see, so we share Fifi."

"I..."

"All my friends are insanely envious as you can imagine," he went on. "I mean, it isn't every man that gets a beautiful sevil, a beautiful wife and often enjoys both at once. And little Fifi simply adores Lisa."

Alex chuckled. "You better watch out, you never know, she might start preferring your wife if you're not careful."

Manny laughed at the ridiculousness of such a notion then paused abruptly. "You know she does always come to Lisa first whenever we enter her room..."



"Er, why don't we enjoy the sunshine out in the garden?" Alex suggested. "Ellora's fixing tea and the sevil's can get better acquainted."

"Of course, old chap. Lead the way. Come on, Fiffums."

The sevil's followed quietly as they strolled to the opposite end of the manor. Manny quickly proceeded to list a steady stream of accomplishments as they stepped onto the veranda.

"And we're opening up a new branch that's going to manufacture high-end coaches in the near future. Not that the iron plants aren't doing swimmingly but I just thought I'd expand my —"

"Go on, Thima," Alex whispered, gesturing to the massive courtyard. "Go play with Fifi."

Athima looked at Alex then the other sevil. Fifi was staring off into space, chewing placidly on her own lip. Alex could practically read her mind. *Are you kidding me? What the hell am I supposed to do with that thing?*

Alex and Manny seated themselves at the long marble table as the sevil's wandered unenthusiastically onto the grass. Ellora appeared carrying a tray of *Tacelet* pastries. Before she disappeared back into the house she turned to gawk at Fifi, one of her massive bows had become caught on a rosebush and she was tugging her head backward with perturbed huffs.

"So, old chap," Manny said, bringing the teacup to his lips, "stocks are down in the rocket fuel business, I see."

Alex nodded. He glanced at Athima, who had quickly deserted the other sevil and wandered slowly about the garden. With a grunt, Fifi wrenched her tangled hair from the rosebush's thorns. She quickly trotted to where Athima stood surveying the thick hedges that surrounded the property. Athima turned to stare at her fellow sevil, looking a little disappointed that Fifi had managed to free herself.

"Well," Manny went on, "you certainly don't have to worry about stocks now, do you? Did I hear right—you sold most of your mines?"

"Mm, I kept a small handful but I'm not interested in maintaining the hectic schedule of a company overlord."

"I know what you mean. And I'm sure you wanted a bit more free time for your new acquisition, ay?"

They turned to look at Athima. She was pacing the garden with a determined look, pausing to shoot Fifi an annoyed glare as the other sevil continued to shadow her.

"I've always wanted one." Alex smiled. "My uncle had a sevil and I vowed that if I was ever wealthy enough to afford one, I'd buy the most beautiful sevil I could find."

"And I think you've fulfilled that goal, old chap. That creature is built for lust."

Athima stared at him from across the garden, her eyes warm. Ever since the night he'd overtaken her and forced her to succumb to his touch her eyes had softened. It was as if she understood now—he only wished for her to experience pleasure, to feel the

thrill of giving it. She was still discovering her body's response to a warm hand brushing across her breast, a kiss that took her by surprise. But her curiosity urged her forward and now she eagerly accepted his touch and even offered her body like wine for his consumption. He smiled recalling the way she had lunged at him earlier, practically forcing him to satisfy her.

"The truth is," Manny mused, "they're more low maintenance than any woman I've ever come across. And you'll never get the headache excuse. Actually I think Fifi would plow her way through a headache and go all night were one to occur!"

Athima had seated herself beneath the shade of a *cresnia* tree, among the purple blossoms that had fallen. Fifi pranced around her, making merry little circles. When Athima grew weary of her skittish companion her hand shot from her side and Alex could barely contain his laughter as he watched her club Fifi over the head, knocking her to the ground with a look of quiet satisfaction. The other sevil rose dizzily to her feet then proceeded to walk sideways for a few seconds before toppling to the ground again. When Athima caught Alex staring her mouth formed a little "o" and she quickly looked at the ground.

Alex returned his attention to Manny, whose eyes were fixated on the sloping hills. He was droning on about property values or rocket fuel stocks or something like that—Alex didn't really care. He nodded and smiled whenever his guest paused to take a breath, occasionally throwing in a "very interesting" or "is that so?" but his thoughts were narrowed on Athima.

When Manny began listing his many newly acquired assets—solid gold coach, a silk mattress with hydrasphere technology imported from the north sector—Alex let his eyes wander to Athima again. To his surprise she was staring intently at him, a hint of a smile on her lips. She tossed her hair over one shoulder so that he could see the full outline of her body as she began to stretch. Her smile widened.

"And it was nearly impossible to find, old chap, but I have my sources. I always say that if something can be found it can be bought. But finding it was no happy ordeal..."

Athima's eyes burned with mischief when she took in Alex's entranced expression. Closing her eyes slightly she tilted her head back and pressed her chest forward, the silky hair that again spilled down her shoulders parting like a glistening curtain to reveal her breasts. She let the image seep into his brain for several seconds before she opened her eyes to catch his look of yearning.

"And let me tell you, the folks in the north sector have atrocious accents that makes doing business with them a wretched task."

Athima's face sparkled with the knowledge of her sexual power. She seemed thoroughly delighted by Alex's frustration, it quickly spurred her further. With impish glee she trotted over to the small *cresnia* tree. She glanced coyly over her shoulder at him, sat in front of the tree, then propped her arms against the smooth trunk, sliding her hips forward. Alex nearly choked on his tongue when her legs parted brazenly and wrapped around the tree. Athima tilted her head to stare at him, unblinking, as she

rocked her hips back and forth, driving her pussy slowly against the firmness of the trunk. The tips of her breasts dragged against the hard surface, becoming visibly taut as she began to press harder. Her tail swished in excitement, revealing a flash of pink whenever it stirred. Alex felt his throat tightening. She had to stop – she *needed* to stop or he'd go insane!

"Don't you agree, Alex?"

He turned to find Manny staring at him with a look of expectation.

"Oh, of course."

"I knew you'd think so," Manny said contentedly. "Everyone else believes all the interplanetary races should receive the same rights but I'll always maintain that certain races are simply not equal."

"I, uh..."

"So," Manny said brightly, taking a long sip from his cup. "How is – Athima, was it? – working out for you?"

Alex glanced nervously at Athima, who now sat quietly next to Fifi on the grass, flashing him a look of innocence.

"Well," said Alex, relieved to be free of the taunting imagery. "We started out a little rocky but she was a special situation. She'd never had close human interaction before –"

"Ah, how exquisite! What fun it must have been to tame the feral spirit and subdue the untamed body. When I purchased Fifi she was gentle as a lamb and positively insatiable."

"Athima..." He smiled. "Athima's blooming rather nicely."

He turned his gaze to the sevil. Fifi was bobbing her head left and right as if keeping the beat to some silent tune in her head. Athima's gaze was focused on the towering walls of hedges.

"May I ask you a question as a novice sevil owner?" Alex inquired.

"Of course, old chap."

"Does Fifi ever make a fuss when you give her the green pill?"

Manny thought for a moment. "Ah, the vitamin! You have been making sure she takes it?"

"Yes but –"

"Good," he said solemnly. "It's my understanding that sevil have weak immune systems and would become horribly ill without it. Modern science, eh?"

"No, I understand all that," said Alex. "But Athima avoids it like the plague. I even tried slipping it into her food but nothing works. Each day I have to force it down her throat."

"Mm, Fifi's never had a problem with it. Of course," he grinned, "Fifi will put anything into her mouth without question."

A crescent bird whizzed across the sky, the blue tips of its wings shimmering in the sunlight.

"So no tips on finicky pilltakers?" Alex frowned.

Manny shrugged. "I suppose physically driving it down her throat may be a necessary evil for you."

"I was afraid of that."

Manny eagerly jumped to the subject of a telecast story that had recently documented his status as one of the top-ten wealthiest Orion residents. Alex zoned in and out of the conversation, impatient for his guest to leave so that he could be alone with Athima. When the sunlight began to fade and Manny had exhausted all topics relating to his wealth or social status they rose from the table, shaking hands politely.

"Great to see you again, old chap," said Manny. "Fifi, come!"

Fifi quickly jumped to her feet and began rubbing her hand between her legs.

"No, no, darling – not that kind of come! Come *here*!"

The sevil grumbled and trotted to her master. Athima followed, sitting patiently beside Alex as they said their goodbyes. Minutes later Alex was closing the front door behind them, breathing a sigh of relief. Athima stared at him expectantly.

"Whew," he said, "Manny Brenton is a walking bank account. We'll keep them on our list of acquaintances but I don't think you and Fifi will be having any slumber parties anytime soon."

Athima's look told him that she couldn't agree more.

"And now..."

He knelt in front of her, the image of her legs wrapping around a tree trunk haunting his mind.

"I think it's time we relieve you of that itch you've been dying to scratch."

His tongue slipped between her lips so swiftly that a startled cry escaped her throat. When his mouth fused with hers she melted against him, moaning as he grasped her hips and pulled her onto his lap.

"Are you already wet for me?" he whispered, parting her legs and letting his fingers glide between her thighs. He felt the warm juices coat his fingers and stifled a groan. She made him hard so quickly that he felt a twinge of pain.

Her tongue was brushing across his lips in eager little flicks when he scooped her up, carrying her in a rush toward the stairs. Alex gripped her tighter as they approached her room. By the time he laid her across the mattress her body was writhing in frantic waves against his body, desperate for more contact.

"Hold on, angel – easy," he laughed. She was grinding against his torso with a fervor that made it difficult to undo his belt. When he finally ripped the pants from his body she was already raising her hips to meet his cock.

"Oh Athima..."

She slid her pussy up the length of his hardness, leaving a wet trail until she reached the tip. He put a swift end to her teasing by thrusting sharply between her legs, driving himself into the deepest recesses of her warmth. Athima's legs wrapped around his torso, pleading for him to thrust. When he caught the urgency in her eyes Alex quickly obliged.

She didn't flinch, didn't wince as he plunged deep inside, withdrawing sharply only to enter her again with increasing force. She gripped his shoulders, her nipples grazing his chest as moans spilled from her lips.

He watched her bite her lip, wincing at the weight of the impending orgasm. When she came he could feel her clenching from the inside in shocked, feathery spasms. He loved the way her body's response to pleasure always seemed to take her by surprise. The quick contractions came in a burst, gripping his cock in frantic little beats until they slowed into a weak pulse. Athima's head fell back against the mattress with a dizzy thud. But it would be some time before Alex would allow her to recuperate. His cock throbbed in anguish, driven to madness by the flutter of her orgasm. If he didn't come, a scream would claw its way from his throat and sear the paint off the walls. Alex continued to thrust, holding her hips firmly until the tremors shook him, planting his hand on the mattress to keep himself from collapsing onto the bed.

Seconds later he was smothering Athima's face with kisses, whispering a torrent of praise in her ear, wrapping his arms around her in a sweat-soaked hug.

When he pulled his head back to examine Athima's face she looked up at him with bliss-coated eyes. They lay there for a long time, the rhythm of their breathing slowing into a steady lull. When he felt her leg winding around his back he looked down at her with surprise.

"Again?" he rasped.

But it wasn't his choice. She was already parting her thighs, beckoning him back inside.

## Chapter Six

Athima's newfound lust had filled Alex with a joy he couldn't describe. Each morning he fed her, bathed her and concocted new ways to keep her happy. Soon her room was brimming with flowers, silks—anything to complement her beauty. Every time he opened the door to her chamber Athima would raise her head eagerly then rush to greet him in a flurry of licks. He found that if he entered her room naked the flurry of licks was even more spectacular.

"You're going to turn her into a spoiled brat," Ellora cautioned one day when she caught Alex rushing toward Athima's chamber, his latest gift in hand.

"What was I thinking?" Alex grinned. "I forgot that all females absolutely detest things like flowers, jewels, exotic candies..."

Ellora rolled her eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "I saw you sneaking an extra apricot into her room the other afternoon. You're quite guilty yourself."

Ellora waved her hand at him but there were plenty of occasions where he had spied her slipping an extra treat to Athima or brushing the sevil's hair. He knew she wouldn't admit it but the old woman was just as fond of Athima as he was.

"Smart ass," she muttered. "You be careful, Master Alex, you're spending so much time with your kitty that you're starting to neglect your human acquaintances."

Alex frowned at her words. Ellora was right—it had been at least a week since he'd seen Jess. He'd only left Rhysen once in the past month—to buy Athima a new velvet bed.

"You, my saucy lady, are correct," he declared. "I'm going to teleport Jess right this instant. And I'll even throw a party to reestablish myself with the upper crust. How's that for sociability?"

Ellora nodded in approval.

Alex was true to his word and fired up the teleportation module in the library. The image of Jess' face appeared before him, his eyes narrowing on Alex.

"Oh well, if it isn't the literal cat lover," Jess grumbled. "So nice of you to pull your dick out of Miss Kitty and call."

"I'm sorry," said Alex. "I meant to—I just got a little sidetracked."

Jess snorted.

"Let me make it up to you. Come over tonight and I'll have Ellora boil up two giant red-beaked crabs. They'll be dripping with sauce—a physician's nightmare—just the way you like them."

Jess, an easily swayed individual by nature, quickly dropped the scowl. "Done. And fly some of those *milbury* truffles in from the south galaxy, will you? Oh, and what was that drink you served at your last party – you know, the red algae extract with the crushed rose petals?"

"Speaking of parties," Alex said brightly. "Don't make plans this Saturday. I'm going to throw a big get-together – with the exception of Manny Brenton."

Jess' face lit up. "Aha! So you've finally climbed aboard the Manny-Brenton-is-an-asshole bandwagon!"

"Oh, I haven't just climbed aboard – I'm driving."

"Yee haw!"

"So I'll see you tonight?"

"Sure you will." Jess grinned. "Think you can go a whole evening without ramming your pleasure pet?"

"You've gone nearly a year without carnal relations so I suppose anything's possible."

"Ooh, you're cold. I'll see ya tonight, Al."

"Later."

Alex promptly began making the arrangements for the weekend's party. He teleported invitations to his mass of social connections – charity organizers, business associates, some old schoolmates he saw on occasion. *There*, he thought, *I'm still a socially healthy individual*. And with that he bolted from the library and toward Athima's bedroom.

But Ellora's voice caused him to halt once again.

"Master Alex!" she cried. "Master Loveland called and wanted to ask if you had those records from last year's environmental fundraising event."

Alex frowned. "Are you kidding? All that stuff was probably shoved up into the attic somewhere by now." He grinned. "Well, looks like *your* afternoon is all planned out. Ah well, today might be a fine day for reorganizing the attic!"

Ellora grumbled something to herself as she turned and scuffled down the hallway. Alex opened the door to Athima's chamber to find her sprawled across the mattress, her legs parted invitingly. She had heard his voice in the hallway and now she displayed her body like a feast for his eyes. Alex muttered a quick thank you to fate before leaping onto the bed.

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Because Athima had proven herself well-behaved when in the presence of others, Alex often let her accompany him on his day-to-day tasks about the manor. One afternoon he decided to let Athima ride with him into town, much to old Mick's disapproval. But she fared remarkably well, watching the passing countryside with

great interest, curling up against him for the duration of the journey. She did however detest the large dragons that pulled the coach, bristling every time they snorted or bellowed, shooting them vicious glares when Alex helped her out of the coach. "So I take it you don't want to ride one?" He grinned.

That night Athima lay quietly at Alex's feet in the dining room, staring up at Jess as Ellora placed two hulking plates of red-beaked crab before them. She reappeared with a smaller plate for Athima, giving her a warm wink before leaving the room. Athima stared at the strange, steaming creature before her. The dark blue crustacean, aptly named, had a small red beak below its eyes. She waited several moments before licking it tentatively, perhaps to make sure the intimidating creature was really dead.

"So," Jess said snarkily, "it looks like the obedience problem's been solved."

"Thanks in part to your advice."

Jess seemed taken aback. "Whoa, that actually worked? Unbelievable! That's it—next date I have I'm just going to bend her over the table at the restaurant and start plowing her. If she's into it she gets a marriage proposal."

"That'll be a great story for the grandchildren."

Alex glanced down to see Athima nibbling at the crabmeat, licking the sauce from her lips with a look of delight. She tilted her head to flash him a warm smile. When Alex returned his attention to his friend he found Jess' gaze fixated on Athima. It was a strange kind of stare, his eyes were narrowed in such a way it made Alex uncomfortable. He started to speak but Jess quickly interrupted.

"When are you going to let me have a go with her?" he said.

The tone of his voice caused Athima to stop chewing. Shyly she looked up to find Jess' eyes locked on her face.

"Stop joking," said Alex. "Try the asparagus. Ellora really outdid herself."

Jess reluctantly shoved a wad of vegetables into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. His gaze didn't leave Athima.

"It's not like sharing an actual girlfriend," he blurted out. "She's not even human. Just let me have a little fun with her, man. Unlike you, I can't skip on down to the sevil shop and buy a two-million-*drano* fuck toy."

"Don't call her that," Alex scowled.

"Oh, I'm sorry. What's the proper term for a creature whose sole purpose in life is to spread her legs?"

Alex's fork hit his plate with a sharp clank. "It isn't like that," he said. "She has feelings, thoughts, emotions. I have a bond with Athima that you'll never understand."

Athima had become very aware of the tension that coated the voices. When she caught Jess gazing down at her with a look of contempt she took a nervous step backward, looking to Alex for reassurance.



"Over the last three weeks you've only invited me over once," said Jess. "We used to hang out every day—every single day! And I'm trying to understand the situation. I'm trying to understand why this creature is worth abandoning a friend for—"

"I'm not abandoning you!"

"And you won't even let me take her for a spin!" he laughed bitterly. "Some friend! I told all my buddies that Alex is buying a sevil, Alex is actually going to own a sevil! And of course they all want to know what it's like to screw one—after all, I am his best friend and of course he's gonna let me in on it, right? No! He pulls this arrogant shit and says, 'No, Jess, we have a special bond. You mustn't interrupt it.' What the hell? This isn't even a real relationship!"

"I love her!" Alex screamed. "That's as real as it gets!"

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The day before the party, Alex found himself in a thick gloom. Jess had called and apologized profusely for his behavior at dinner. "Too much drink and not enough brains," he had said when they talked over the teleportation module. "I'm really sorry, man. I guess I was just scared. You're my best friend, Alex. When you dropped me like a hot *Tacelet* pastry I was hurt." Alex conceded that he had been wrong to barricade himself from the world, thinking only of Athima. "It was the honeymoon period," Alex joked. "Can you forgive me for losing my senses?" Jess had been a good friend. They had been there for each other through numerous breakups, through poverty, through the death of his parents. Of course Alex forgave him for reacting bitterly. But he wondered if there was a bit of truth to what his friend had said.

As Alex and Athima walked the parameter of the garden, taking in the warm breeze that licked at the *cresnia* leaves, he stared at her with listless eyes.

"Is it strange to love something that can't say I love you back?" he asked.

Athima paused and leaned her head against his knees, the somberness of his voice making her frown. He ran his hand through her hair and stared at the sunlit hills. Dusk's gray fingertips crept over Orion, washing over the garden and muting the vibrant colors.

"Sometimes I wish you could talk," he said softly.

Athima comforted him as best she could, rubbing her head softly against his hand.

They sat for a long time watching as the distant suns sank like lemon drops behind the hills. A gust of wind parted purple petals from tree branches, sending them fluttering to the ground in a cascade of color.

Ellora's voice echoed from the house. "Master Alex! Master Loveland is on the teleportation module! He says it's urgent!"

Alex sighed. He smiled as Athima swiped a playful hand at a passing butterfly.

"All right," he yelled back. "Be right there!"

Athima was so enamored by the silver butterfly, spinning and leaping like a child, that he didn't have the heart to drag her back inside the house.

"Be right back," he said, patting her head as he darted inside.

Ellora stared at him crossly as he closed the door.

"You took your sweet time," she huffed. "He said he had to go—I think his mistress had arrived."

"Ellora!" Alex grinned.

"Oh, he's got a mistress all right. I saw them together in town when I last fetched groceries. They were arm in arm like a regular married couple."

Ellora chuckled when she glanced out the window and took in the sight of Athima spinning like an asteroid in an attempt to apprehend the butterfly.

"Anyway," she said, "he wanted to know if we'd found those records from the fundraiser."

"Well, have we?"

"We?" Ellora snorted. "I haven't yet come across them in my attempt to sift through mountains of junk in that labyrinth of an attic."

"Oh."

Ellora's tone grew somber. "But I have been meaning to tell you, I've come across some rather strange things up there. I found a box full of old notebooks—your uncle's notebooks. You might want to take a look at them, Master Alex. There's some odd stuff in there about evils—"

"Athima!"

Alex had turned to check on Athima and now he felt panic seize him as his eyes combed the empty garden.

"Where'd she go?" he cried.

Startled, Ellora said, "Calm down, she was right there. Perhaps she wandered 'round the corner. The garden's surrounded by that tall hedge. It's thick as brick and it would be impossible for her to—"

Alex tore open the terrace doors and raced around the corner all the way to where the hedges merged with the house. No Athima.

"Oh no..."

Hysteria washed over him. He heard Ellora's footsteps, felt her hand clasp his shoulder.

"The telescope in the library," she said. "Quickly, it overlooks the bulk of the countryside. If she's beyond the property, you'll spot her."

Ellora went to comb the backyard again while Alex sprinted to the library. He ran past the piles of books and gripped the telescope, pulse racing as he scanned the area. A flash of white caught his eye and made him freeze. He zoomed in on the movement and his heart leapt—it was Athima, wandering in a daze through the tall grass about half a

mile beyond the hedges. She was moving rapidly as if she were unsure where to go but confident that speed would help. The telescope fell to the floor as Alex took off toward the stables, he wasn't going to take any chances on foot. He went numb at the thought of what would happen if she wandered into town, if some guy happened to see her and—he ran faster. He had to get to her before she reached the labyrinth of the hills and became swallowed by the impending night.

The dragons reared in their stalls when he made his burst of an entrance. Timor was the largest of the creatures and though not known for his affectionate disposition he could cut through the air like lightning. Alex yanked the bridle around his neck and tugged him from the stall, leading him into the dying daylight. The dragon made low huffs as Alex climbed onto his broad back.

Clicking his heels against the beast's ribs, Alex ordered, "Timor, fly," and the dragon spread his wings like fans and bolted toward the sky. They glided nearly a hundred feet above the ground, sweeping over Rhysen and charging toward the hills as the wind howled in their ears. Alex's eyes narrowed on the white speck in the distance, urging Timor toward the ground as they tailed the fleeing creature.

They were just yards away now, trailing the terrified sevil like a shadow.

"Athima, it's me!" he called but she glanced over her shoulder and her eyes went wide with terror as she caught the dragon's face. She propelled her body faster through the tall grass.

"Timor, land!" Alex cried.

The dragon dove toward the ground, his feet greeting the earth with an awkward thud. Alex leapt from his back and took off after Athima. The tall grass whipped at his face as he struggled to catch up.

"It's all right, Thima!" he cried. "It's me—the dragon isn't going to hurt you!"

But as she turned her head to glance at him it struck Alex like a punch to the gut, she wasn't running from the dragon—now she was running from *him*. With a frantic cry Alex compelled himself forward, her look of fear seared into his mind.

"Thima!" he choked out.

She darted sharply to the right, trying to shake him off. But he was slowly gaining on her. When the tip of her tail brushed against his pants he summoned all of his endurance and hurled himself forward. As he hit the ground he felt his fingers snaring her tail. He pulled with all his strength, yanking her backward so that she fell against him with an angry cry.

His arm circled her rib cage, tightening until she was firmly locked to his body. From her throat sprang a wail of defeat that cut him to the core. She kicked and clawed and snapped her jaws, fighting him as if he meant to do her harm. With a cry of shock he wrestled her to the ground, subduing her beneath him. He pinned her wrists to the earth as she blasted his ears with a scream of outrage. Athima continued to kick with such force that he almost toppled backward.

"Stop it!" he yelled.

She hissed and twisted her body until she was panting with exhaustion. Alex struggled to control his rage.

"What the hell were you doing?" he roared. "Running away from me? I've treated you like a princess, given you everything you could ever want and you flee from me like I mean to hurt you!"

His eyes narrowed with disgust, with contempt, with an anger that concealed his anguish.

"How could you?" he screamed.

She had stopped fighting, her eyes shimmering with guilt as his emotions poured over her.

"I love you," he choked. "All I wanted was to make you happy and you—you—"

He felt the anger flood his brain like a tidal wave. She gasped as he grabbed a chunk of her straw-colored hair, wrenching her head forward so that his eyes scorched her face.

"I understand what this is now," he said bitterly.

Athima flinched when he wedged his knee between her legs, prying them apart with a snarl.

"I'm nothing to you." His hand grasped her breast with a brutality that caused tears to spring to her eyes. "If after all this I'm still nothing to you then from this moment on you're nothing to me."

He grasped her tender nipple between his fingers, squeezing until she was forced to cry out in pain.

"Everyone else seems to regard seivls as whores. Well, that's what you are to me now. No soft kisses, no affectionate words, no gifts—you're a whore to be used at my whim."

His lips seized the tip of her breast, taking it between his teeth and tugging until her body shook beneath him. He drove his hand between her legs, probing her with a ferocity that made her whimper.

An image of Athima curled against him, staring up at him with smiling eyes caused Alex to stifle a sob. He pulled his pants down, pausing for a moment to let her feel his hardness against her trembling pussy. Athima looked him in the eyes, her gaze soft now, and lifted her hips invitingly. He entered her with an intensity he had never fathomed. She bucked against the ferocity of his thrusts, arching her back and thrashing her head against the earth. He paused, suddenly ashamed.

She gazed up at him earnestly, her eyes soft pools of empathy. Alex closed his eyes as she leaned forward to gently lick the outline of his lips.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as her tongue gently probed his mouth. "I didn't mean what I said—I was scared. If anything were to happen to you..."

She nibbled at his bottom lip, raising her hips again and urging him to continue thrusting.

Surprised, he said, "You really want me to – really?"

She stared at him expectantly.

He plumbed her insides with the power of a machine, her moans drowned out by the relief that thundered through his veins. She met his thrusts with equal power, twitching her hips and allowing him to plunge deeper. He felt himself coming and she winced as he scorched her body with a hot lust that bled within her. His body went slack against her, dripping sweat onto her burning flesh. When he lifted his head to glance upon her face he felt his heart swell. Athima's eyes were soft and tender, she seemed relieved that she was still the object of his lust. Her lip was swollen from where she had driven her teeth into the soft skin, the muscles of her neck strained from thrashing. He brushed a strand of hair from her eyes, amazed at how she'd welcomed the thrusts that stemmed from fury. Alex started to slide out of her but she stopped him, gripping him tight, as if she wanted him to stay there forever.

"Why did you run from me, Thima? I don't understand."

He shook his head, trying to make sense of what had just happened. She leaned forward, pushing her tongue between her lips to lick a small bead of sweat from his cheek.

"I just don't understand..."

She brushed her lips gently against his as if to reassure him. When she finally pulled away there was no trace of anger or fear on her face, her stormy eyes still pleaded silently for forgiveness.

She curled against his chest, allowing him to take her in his arms. He carried her through the bush, making his way toward the dragon that lumbered nearby. She twitched nervously when the beast lifted its head, narrowing its beady eyes on her. But when Alex lifted her onto the dragon's back then climbed behind her, she relaxed against him, turning her head to rest her cheek against his chest. She bristled when Timor leapt into the air, gripping Alex with a fear that compelled him to whisper reassuring words in her ear.

When they reached the stable and Timor had been left to the pleasure of his food trough, Alex carried Athima through the front door. Ellora's head popped out like a *chemen* from around the corner. She drew a sigh of relief at the sevil then disappeared into the kitchen. By the time they reached her bedroom Athima's eyes had fallen shut, sleep claiming her weary body. Alex laid her across the mattress with the lightness of a feather and slipped beside her, wrapping his arms around her until he heard a soft purr rustle from her lips. He didn't sleep. Alex spent the night caressing her shoulders, gliding his hands through her hair and vowing that he would never lose his temper again. Not that she had seemed to mind...

## Chapter Seven

The walls of Rhysen pulsed with the cheery voices of nearly a hundred socialites. The majority of them had swarmed the massive ballroom, keeping close to the open bar stocked with red algae extract and imported Earth Chardonnay. The band Alex had hired missed their rocket, so Alex had simply set up the teleportation module in the corner and a vibrant image of the foursome was projected into the air above the crowd, spanning the length of the ceiling. Their music streamed from speakers and filled the room with an energy that made guests step lively as they mingled and trotted to the bar. Satin ball gowns trailed across the smooth floor as women rushed to greet each other. Some of Alex's old schoolmates surveyed the scene from the corner of the room, raising glasses of red algae extract to their lips and smiling jovially.

The crowd of voices combining in a spirited chorus was infectious and Alex felt a sense of gaiety that only a party atmosphere could conjure. He smiled at the many faces, making his way through the crowd to greet business associates, friends, charity representatives. Mick shuffled through the partygoers, carrying a tray of *Tacelet* pastries that he sampled with abandon. As the band began to play an old-fashioned waltz, he spotted Jess' gold hair from across the room. Beside him stood a young woman with a giddy expression. Her hair had been manipulated into an ornate updo and her makeup was just as meticulous. She wore a thick capelet of dragon skin, but the neckline of her black gown left very little to the imagination—in fact Jess' eyes burned into her cleavage like a laser beam as she giggled at the finale of her own story.

"Alex!" Jess smiled as he turned to see his friend approaching. "Have you met Melinda?"

Alex took her hand, shaking it lightly.

"I don't believe so."

She took a step forward, her smile shot into his eyes.

"Melinda is Arron's cousin," said Jess. "She's visiting for the summer."

"Ah. How do you like Orion?"

She studied him with the intensity of a carnivore sizing up its prey.

"Well," she answered slowly, "there are a few things I'd like to see much, much more of."

Alex managed a polite smile. "Well, I hope you enjoy your stay, Melinda—and the party."

She nodded, her smile dripping with coyness.

Jess patted the woman's shoulder and whispered, "Excuse us for a moment, will you? We're going to talk about juvenile, disgusting guy topics but we'll be right back."

She giggled as they strolled to the edge of the room. Couples had gathered on the dance floor, their feet tapping lightly to the jubilant tune wafting through the air.

"Jeez, Alex," Jess whispered. "I went to a lot of trouble to find a chick that was both single *and* hot and I didn't see one drop of drool fall out of your mouth."

They stood near the corner.

Alex shot his friend a confused look. "Jess, what are you talking —"

"This girl is perfect for you!" Jess said excitedly. "She works with the Interplanetary Peace department, she loves kids and I'm pretty sure she's in heat!"

The smile disappeared from Alex's face. "You want to set me up with her?"

"Al, perception ain't your strong suit tonight. Of course I want to set you up with her! You've barricaded yourself from the world for nearly two months now with Little Miss Fur-ball and I'm telling you it's not healthy. You need to settle down with a girl and start living a normal life, man. And Melinda's amazing! Did you check out her rack? Her boobs are like a prison riot in that tight little dress."

"If she's so amazing than why aren't you pouncing on her?"

Jess grinned, "Because rumor has it she's got a wicked case of nether region pox." He saw Alex's expression of horror and quickly said, "I'm kidding! Lighten up, man. Seriously, she's great. She'd never even consider a guy like me because she's from your little bubble of aristocracy — and I'd have to work a lifetime just to buy the chick an engagement ring anyway."

Alex shook his head. "I don't want a girlfriend, a wife or any other woman. I have Athima."

Jess crinkled his nose as if a foul odor had crept up his nostrils.

"You're going to regret it," he said. "Once your new plaything loses her luster you're going to regret it."

Alex started to turn away but Jess quickly put a hand to his chest.

"Just indulge me a bit," he said. "Talk to her. I've been telling her about your garden all night and she's been waiting for you to show her the topiaries — chicks love that stuff. So go on and show her."

Alex flashed him an irritated look before sullenly making his way back to the dark-haired girl in the black dress. Before he reached her, someone's voice rose above the crowd, calling out to him.

"Hey, Alex! Why don't you show us this sevil that's been keeping you busy?"

A choir of voices rose around him, seconding the motion.

"Yeah, I wanna see a million-*drano* screw!"

"Come on and bring her out!"

Alex quickly called out, "Er, she's sick! Not tonight, fellas! Some other time perhaps."

There were huffs and disappointed sighs.

"Well," Melinda smiled, "one would think you'd killed their dog the way they reacted."

Alex shrugged. "Um, Jess tells me you might like to see the garden?"

Her eyes glittered. "I'd adore it! He's been telling me it's quite breathtaking."

He offered her the minimal courtesy of his arm and they drifted toward the open doorway. Jess had joined a small group of friends on the opposite side of the room, giving him a thumbs-up from afar. Alex shot Jess a murderous look as they exited the ballroom. The swell of the music began to fade as he led Melinda toward the terrace. When he pushed open the great doors she stepped gleefully into the moonlight, her eyes sweeping the landscape.

"Oh, it's beautiful," she murmured. "If I lived here I'd spend every second right where we stand."

Alex nodded. "Ellora and I have shaped it into a lush little sanctuary. If it wasn't for her the place would be a weed resort."

"Mm."

He felt Melinda's body lean into his. When he brought his eyes to her face, the predatory look had returned.

"Tell me," she said, "why are you still single, Alex? That cat creature can't fulfill the role of a girlfriend."

"Actually it's been the first relationship where I've been able to get a word in edgewise."

He chuckled.

"I'm serious," she persisted. "Don't you ever long for real affection?"

He looked her firmly in the eye. "No."

Her crimson lips formed a pout.

"Maybe it's just been a while," she said. "Perhaps you just need to be reminded of what you're missing out on..."

Before Alex could open his mouth to protest, she had lunged forward, grasping his head with her hands and digging her lips into his. Her tongue burrowed with determination between his lips. When he felt her body pressing against him, a sickness swept through his veins. He pushed her backward with more force than he'd intended, sending her reeling toward a topiary.

"I-I'm sorry," he said earnestly as she struggled to regain her balance. "I didn't mean to —"

"I'm fine," she snapped, adjusting her dress as she raised her chin indignantly. She slapped at a small branch that had snagged her dress. "It's my fault. I thought you were a man."

Alex opened his mouth to say something but the cry from upstairs clipped his voice. He recognized the sound of distress, recognized the panic in Athima's cry. Like a



bullet he took off toward the house, charging up the stairs so quickly that the air whistled behind him. When he rounded the corner and ran down the hallway, he saw the open door to Athima's chamber and panic consumed him. A frightened cry—her cry—flew from the room.

When he burst into her chamber he found himself staring at a scene that ignited fire in his veins. In the corner of the room, Athima cowered against the wall, whimpering in terror as a group of young men surrounded her.

"I think she just needs to loosen up!" one of them cried. "Let's see if kitty knows how to chug..."

The group cheered as one of them leapt forward, a bottle of red algae extract in hand. His arm coiled around her neck until Athima was gasping beneath him. The bottle slid between her lips and liquid flooded her throat in a torrent. She gagged and coughed as garnet fluid spilled in all directions, trying to swallow as best she could before she began to choke. When Alex saw the man's hand slip down below Athima's neck, fondling her breasts with a roughness that made her cry out, his blood boiled beneath his flesh.

Alex's voice raged across the room, cutting through their cheers like a knife. They whipped their heads around just in time to see Alex's fist explode from his side. He clawed and punched his way through the group, ignoring their terrified screams. One of his old schoolmates jumped forward to calm him but was quickly thrown against the wall, groaning as his body smashed into the hard surface.

"Whoa! Cool it, man!" one of them yelled. "We weren't going to hurt her!"

"Take it easy, Alex!"

But Alex had his eyes narrowed on the man who clutched Athima by the scruff of the neck. When she raised her eyes to Alex her face filled with relief as liquid dribbled down her chin. But Alex wasn't staring at her—his eyes were narrowed on Jess.

"Let her go and get the hell out of my house," he said in a voice so low that Jess' hands flew from the sevil.

"A-Alex," he stammered. "I was just—my buddies wanted to see her, is all. We were just fooling around."

"Jess said it was okay!" a voice rang out. "He said you share her all the time!"

The full impact of what they had been planning hit Alex like a cannonball.

Alex shot forward until he felt his fingernails digging into Jess' flesh. He hauled Jess to his feet and hurled his body against the wall.

"Fuck, Alex!" Jess cried dizzily. "I was just showing the guys your stupid sevil! Lighten up!"

Alex's hands gripped his shoulders, driving Jess with a thud into the wall again. Overcome with a rage that blinded his senses he began kicking and punching—anything that would hurt him. By the time the other guys managed to rip Alex away he was screaming in a tone that sounded more animal than human.

"I'll kill you!" he screeched. "If you ever set foot on this property again I swear I'll rip your beating heart from your miserable body!"

Jess' mouth hung open in shock. He climbed to his feet in a daze, staring at Alex in disbelief.

"We were just goofing around," he said, his voice shaky. "I wasn't—I wasn't going to hurt her. She's just a whore, Alex. We were only gonna do what you do every—"

"Out!" Alex snarled. "If I ever catch you within fifty feet of Rhysen I'll kill you."

The other members of the group quickly dispersed. Jess slumped after them, staring at Alex with an eternally wounded look. When he reached the door he said softly, "You don't really mean that."

Alex was kneeling over Athima, wiping the liquid from her face and stroking her hair.

"Consider our friendship terminated."

Jess cupped a hand to his jaw, running it over the bruised flesh. He glanced at Alex one last time before slipping quietly from the room.

Athima rushed into his arms, sounds of pain, of confusion falling from her lips. Alex hugged her tightly.

"It's okay," he said gently. "Nobody's going to hurt you. You're all right, Thima."

He kissed her cheek as he took her in his arms, carrying her to the bed. When he tried to lay her across the mattress she suddenly tensed and resisted, clinging to him, hesitant to leave the comfort of his arms. So he turned his back to the bed and guided himself back against the mattress, with Athima clutching him tightly. When he ran his fingers through the golden avalanche of her hair he felt her body relax against him, obviously glad for the safety of his touch.

When Ellora burst into the room she was out of breath, her cheeks flushed. Her silver hair twisted wildly around her face.

"Master Alex!" she said, rushing to the bed. "What happened?"

Alex narrowed his eyes on the old woman. "Did you let Jess and those other guys into Athima's room?"

Her dark eyes trembled. "I only did what you ordered, Master Alex. Master Jess told me you had given him permission to show his friends the sevil and I handed him the key."

Alex's fist clenched against the mattress. "That bastard."

Ellora stooped down to place a wrinkled hand on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I-I didn't know."

"How could you? Jess has never acted this way before. I just don't understand it. He's always been such a good friend and tonight I came in here to find him..."

He hugged Athima tightly to his body.

"Oh no," the old woman murmured. "They didn't hurt her?"

"I got here just in time," he assured her. "But I've never in all my life seen Jess look so malicious. He was grabbing Athima with this look in his eye that just made me want to-to kill him."

Ellora shook her head, pursing her lips in astonishment.

"He's always carried a bit of jealousy in him," she said softly.

"I don't care why he tried to hurt Athima tonight." Alex's voice hardened. "Who needs friends like that? From now on it's just Athima and me."

## Chapter Eight

"You can't be serious!" Ellora scoffed. "She'll loathe you for weeks if you make her."

Alex waved his hand at her. "Oh, she'll love it once she's in the sky."

"I'm telling you," the old woman said. "She hates those dragons. Once you're in the air she'll probably panic and go straight for the dragon's throat. Is that how you want to leave this world—diving toward the earth on the back of a dead dragon?"

Alex raised an eyebrow. "You don't think you're being a little overdramatic?"

She shuffled through the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water from the sink.

"I had a rough night, Master Alex. You'll have to bear with me and forgive my less than cheery demeanor."

Alex scooted closer to the table, shoving a wad of omelet into his mouth.

"Rough night, huh?" he said with the hint of a grin. "Was old Mick feeling a little randy?"

Ellora's brown eyes widened in shock, making her look like an owl.

"Hardly proper conversation!" She paused then muttered, "Mick hasn't been feeling randy for a while. Do they sell male seivils?"

Alex laughed. He ordered Mick to saddle Timor then went upstairs to fetch Athima. She was in a pleasant enough mood—until they entered the stable. Ten minutes later Ellora popped her head out of the kitchen to find Alex carrying a very disgruntled Athima toward the staircase.

"Did she—"

"Yes," Alex snapped. "But don't look so smug. And she didn't lunge for the dragon's neck, Mrs. High-and-Mighty—for your information she latched onto Timor's wing and tried to unhinge it."

As Alex carried Athima up the stairs Ellora's voice was a cheery singsong. "Toooooold you so!"

"That's all right," he whispered. "I can think of a better way to spend the next few hours."

He carried Athima into his bedroom and set her on the mattress. She stared at him quizzically as he trotted toward the bureau, where a silver package encased in thick metal gleamed.

Through a small speaker built into the side of the box, a monotone voice chirped, "Package recipient, Alex Raylen. Please confirm identity to access contents."

Alex pressed the pad of his finger to a small white square near the top of the box, which lit up and slowly scanned his fingertip.

"Access granted," the voice announced. Athima cocked her head and watched as the top of the box slid open. Alex peered inside and his eyes lit up.

"I took the liberty of ordering you a little gift," he said.

She watched as he pulled a long, glittering rod from the box. It was thick and ruby-colored, with smooth jewels encasing the length of it. It had a round tip that blinded the eye with the dazzling sheen of silver diamonds.

"The gems on this little rod cost more than Orion's town hall. They're only found in a small handful of mines in the most dangerous quadrants of the west galaxy."

He walked, grinning, toward the bed.

"These stones," Alex explained, "possess a unique energy that emits a slight charge when exposed to heat." He lowered his lips to her ear. "And they're going to make you come."

Her ears pricked as he let the rod's tip brush against her collarbone. She lowered her chin to watch as Alex traced teasing circles around her nipple. Alex smiled as it hardened beneath the smooth diamonds.

"So far, so good," he whispered. "But to really test its power..."

He gripped Athima's shoulder and guided her backward until she lay sprawled across the mattress. She watched with curiosity as he let the rod dip between her legs then shivered at the coolness of the jewels against her smooth flesh.

"Don't worry," he said. "They'll warm up. They just need a good source of heat..."

Athima drew in a sharp breath as he let the rod nudge her clit. The jewels flickered slightly, emitting a subtle glow. She lifted her head off the mattress, staring at the rod incredulously.

"Does that feel good?"

A soft purr escaped her lips as Alex lowered the rod to the tight pink folds nestled between her thighs. She whimpered slightly when he let it glide inside her, easing it gently until only the curved handle remained. He let it linger there, allowing her to take in the smooth sensation of it. He felt a soft charge course through the rod, Athima must have felt it too, and her head fell back against the mattress. Alex withdrew the rod slowly and found the gems glowing an electric red. Athima rocked her hips, beckoning him to slide it back inside her, and he was quick to oblige. He watched her bear down on the rod, embracing its heat. He let his free hand drift to her clit and a moan rumbled from her throat as if the two sensations were too much for her.

"Too intense? Do you want me to stop?"

Her body certainly didn't. Her ass rose and fell against the mattress in quick pulses, driving her toward release. Alex lowered his lips to her clit, keeping a firm hand on the rod. His tongue flicked the tiny nub in a soft rhythm that mirrored the rod's thrusts. Athima's eyes flashed open and her mouth fell open, poised for a scream. A wild sound

streamed from her lips and suddenly Alex felt her thighs grip his head so tightly he let out a cry of his own. Her body trembled violently and Alex shook with her, his face pressed against her skin. Another scream pierced the air and Athima's hips bucked wildly, tossing him backward with a force that left him gasping on the floor. He still held the rod in his hand and as he heard Athima struggle to catch her breath he tilted his head dizzily toward it.

The jewels glowed so brightly they caused Alex to wince. Then he smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alex tried to make sense of the barely legible notes on the page. He sank into the velvet chair and flicked on the table lamp as the sinking suns left the library flooded with darkness.

He heard the bustle of Ellora's skirt then the clink of a tea saucer on the side table.

"It doesn't make sense," said Alex. He flipped through the muddled pages. "He just rambles about dark forces – conspiracy theories."

Ellora peered down at the journal.

"Maybe there's no sense to make of it," she said. "Your uncle was babbling nonsense on a daily basis toward the end. This little notebook of his is a sorry way to remember him if you ask me. I'd rather look through one of his old scrapbooks."

Ellora's eyes were soft when he gazed up at her. "Was he that bad before he..."

She nodded. "Oh, Master Alex, it was absolutely heartbreaking. The man was slurring his words, talking incoherently. It was like he was a half-functioning version of himself. Oh, and he'd scream Cossani's name every day after they took her away. I think your Aunt Arianna regretted that."

Alex flipped a page. "But you were right, Ellora, there's an odd sort of conviction in these scribbles."

Ellora stooped over to read one of the passages, "Cossani the innocent. Cossani the martyr. Were I to know what to do, I'd do it. Worldwide."

Alex shook his head in bewilderment. He pointed to another line that stretched across two pages. "Must not find her. Must not. Must find—" Several words were indecipherable. "So the world knows."

Alex let the journal sink to the floor.

"I've been here an hour and I'm still on the first two pages. I can't make heads or tails of any of it."

"Time for you to get some sleep," the old woman said. "If you sit here all night reading that drivel you'll go mad yourself."

Alex sighed and set the journal aside. He allowed Ellora to lead him toward the bedroom. They halted in front of the door.

"Master Alex," Ellora said gently, touching his elbow before he could enter. "Master Jess called again this morning. Perhaps you should return his calls."

He bristled at Jess' name.

"It's just that he's been your friend for so long..."

Alex shot Ellora a look that warned her the subject wasn't open for debate.

She sighed. "All right, all right. Sleep well, Master Alex."

When he pushed open the bedroom door he smiled at the familiar sight. Athima was perched near the end of the mattress, her white body a stark contrast to the garnet walls and bed. Her ears flicked back and forth as he approached the bed.

"Sorry, Thima," he said, ruffling her hair. "I got caught up in something."

Lately he had taken to letting the sevil sleep in his room. Ever since the night of the party he'd grown firmly protective, his mind at ease only when Athima was nearby. The feeling of her soft body curled against his chest normally lulled him into a tranquil sleep and when he woke up he'd often find Athima hovering over him with eager eyes. After a brief struggle where Athima eventually conceded and swallowed her pill, she would quickly rub the curve of her body against his legs, letting her tail tease his flesh until he'd haul her toward him and smash his lips against hers.

Her eyes had that shimmery look of longing now as he peeled back the satin sheets. He slipped out of his pants and tunic, letting them fall in a rush to the carpet. Athima's ears pricked at the sound. She draped herself across him and slowed her breathing until her chest rose and fell in tandem with Alex's.

Athima's nose nudged his arm and the soft, feathery whimpers flooded his ears. Her body squirmed against his, begging Alex to fill her with heat. He felt the weight of her breasts pressing against his chest and felt his blood stirring.

"I don't know, kitty cat," he said softly. "I'm awfully tired...I might need a little convincing tonight..."

She slid forward and Alex saw her eyes glittering through the darkness as she leaned down and let the tip of her nipple tickle his nose. He parted his lips in anticipation, waiting for her to slide it between his teeth so he could suck a hot moan from her. Athima's giggles filled the room as she dragged the tip of her breast over his cheek, around his lips, the curve of his chin. Alex growled and his tongue struggled to find the small nub through the darkness. She giggled louder when he lapped at air and let her nipple graze his forehead teasingly then sharply withdrew it. His hands flew to her shoulders and he gave a victorious cry as he pushed her forward, lowering the soft breast to his lips. He flicked the tip with his tongue, battering it with hot saliva until it hardened with obedience.

"Meow for me, kitty," he said and smothered the hard nub with his lips. He sucked until a low groan caressed his ears and when he finally pulled away he saw the aching gleam of her eyes as she struggled to peel off the sheets that separated their warm bodies.

"Now if you ask me nicely," he said, "then maybe I'll —"

She dove beneath the covers and he stifled a moan as he felt her slide on top of him, straddling his hips. He felt for her face, cupping the back of her head with his hands and bringing her lips down to his. For a moment the heat of her breath washed across his flesh and then she was devouring him, kissing him with an urgency that made him get hard immediately.

She rubbed her pussy in little circles against his cock, teasing him until it strained with desire. When he felt little droplets of moisture coating him, his hands flew to her waist. She gave a surprised yelp when he brought her hips down hard upon his cock, plunging it inside. She quickly shifted her weight, leaning backward to urge it deeper. Her hips rocked gently back and forth. Alex raised his hands, holding on to her body. He ran his fingers over her breasts, grasped the curve of her stomach, teased her clit with his thumb.

When Alex felt her rapid contractions, a flurry of moans spilling from her lips, he thrust hard, rubbing her wetness until he was shaking with his own explosion. His body went slack against the mattress and he waited for Athima to wiggle forward, to let him slide from her warmth and curl against his chest. But she paused — she seemed to be contemplating something — and he suddenly felt her body stiffen. Her mind made up, she rocked her hips in a burst of motion, shocking him with her intentions.

"Again?" he said between bursts of breath. "I can't, Thima — ahhh —"

He lifted his hands to her waist to guide her forward, to lay her next to him. She hissed and gave his chest a warning swipe with her claws. Her hands flew to his chest, pressing him firmly against the mattress.

She pumped furiously and Alex felt her walls throb with another burst of heat. Slowly, his cock yielded to her determination, aching and tingling all at once. He grew hard inside her and heard her utter a victorious purr. Athima's claws curled into his chest, scratching the flesh as she clenched down on his cock. Bursts of sweat tumbled from her body and sprayed his skin, he'd never seen her grind her pelvis with such force. She squeezed hard, sucking another orgasm from his body. He clenched his teeth as she squeezed again, beginning her orgasm as he trembled from the exhaustion of his own. Quick flutters surrounded his cock and he shook his head in disbelief as she rode the last wave. She made a sound that made Alex think she was quite amazed by her own capabilities. When she wiggled toward him, little puffs of breath brushing across his neck, he caught the gleam of her teeth shining in the darkness — she was grinning.

"You little nymphomaniac," he laughed, ruffling her hair with his fingers. "Please, please, *please* make that a habit."

As his head fell dizzily against the pillow her tongue lapped at his cheek, tickling him until he smiled and pulled her close. His arms curled around her body, hugging her tightly until he felt her breathing deepen with sleep.

"I wish you could understand," he whispered, "exactly how I feel about you."

She twitched against him then went slack against his body and began to snore.



\* \* \* \* \*

The bang was so loud that the walls groaned from the force of it. Alex's eyes flew open at the scream that echoed through the air. It was Ellora's voice—at least he thought it was—he had never heard her scream before. He leapt from the bed as Athima raised her head from the pillow, eyes wide with fear. She sprang to her feet, ready to follow.

"No, Thima," he said, pushing her roughly back onto the bed. "Stay here, don't move!"

She ran after Alex as he rushed for the door, slamming it with a thud behind him and stopping her short. Her wails seized his eardrums as he tore down the hallway. He could hear Ellora's voice, loud and frightened, but couldn't make out what she was yelling. A deep, male voice rose above hers, the tone antagonistic.

Alex halted at the edge of the banister. Ellora stood trembling in the entryway, her hands raised defensively. He couldn't see who she was talking to but the fear in her voice told him she was in physical danger. He charged down the spiral staircase, ready to fight.

He froze when his feet hit the marble floor. He had just descended into a nightmare.

"Jess."

Jess was standing very still, his chin raised with impending triumph as his eyes fell upon Alex. Maliciousness churned behind the lightness of his eyes. Alex saw the glint of the gun in Jess' hand and Jess, following his gaze, shot him a cold smile. Alex recognized the gun as one of the new government models issued to police. With the flick of a tiny switch near the trigger a laser shot through the barrel, the settings ranged from stun to kill.

"Morning, asshole," Jess said. "Sleep well?"

"W-what are you doing?"

Jess took a leisurely step forward. "Well, I was using Mother Nature here for target practice but now that you're awake we can move onto less tedious things."

Alex turned his gaze to Ellora, who was quaking against the wall, where several fresh holes smoldered. He rushed toward her but halted abruptly when Jess pointed the gun at his head.

"Don't move!" Jess snapped. "This isn't going to be a lengthy visit for me and I need your cooperation if you want to live." He paused, his eyes drifting to Ellora. "Granted, I've never been fond of Old Raisin Face and I'd have no qualms with blowing her brains out right here but I need her as leverage."

"You'd better start explaining yourself before I tear off every noteworthy appendage on your miserable body."

A condescending smile spread across Jess' face. "I've decided that life's not fair, Alex. Life's not fair—and I'm going to do something about it. The way I see it, you've already declared our friendship beyond repair, so..."

He ambled forward, pressing the glowing tip of the gun sharply against Alex's chest.

"I figured I'd respect your decision to hate me," he said. "And step out of your life forever – after you let me have the contents of your vault."

Alex shook his head incredulously. "Money? This is about money?"

"Money – and one other thing," Jess snarled. "But *she's* just the icing on the cake."

Alex felt his knees go weak. "Listen, you pathetic weasel. I'll give you money, jewels – whatever the hell you want. But if you even try to hurt Athima I'll –"

"Oh, hurt her is the key word, Al, but I intend to do it from the inside out."

Alex was seized with a rage he'd never known. He stared at Jess, at the mad resolve in his eyes, and fought the impulse to lunge at his throat.

"Jess," he repeated through clenched teeth, "I'll give you whatever you want but you're not touching –"

"Less talking, more vault opening! Come on, up the stairs. You too, Ellora dearest."

Jess nudged Alex's back with the sharp tip of the laser gun, driving him toward the stairs. Ellora followed silently.

"Jess," Alex tried again, "let's be reasonable –"

"If you say one more thing about it I'll blow Ellora's head off."

Alex clenched his fists and took slow, heavy steps.

"Actually I think we'll get along swimmingly," Jess mused. "Tell me, does she like having her hair pulled?" He paused, smiling at the way Alex stiffened. "How about slapping? I bet she'd fall in line real nicely with a good slap to the face."

Alex fought the urge to scream and lunge forward, to slam Jess' head into the wall. But he couldn't risk Ellora's safety. He'd have to bide his time and strike when the opportunity was right.

"Why, Al, I do believe there's a vein throbbing against your forehead. You might want to have that looked into."

Ellora's voice rose up from behind them. "You leave Athima alone!"

Jess turned sharply on her, raising the gun to her forehead.

"Bang!" he yelled, bursting into peals of laughter when Ellora screamed and clutched her chest. "Oh, that was great! You thought that was it! Ha ha!"

When the novelty of her reaction wore off Jess urged them onward. Alex stared furiously at the door as they walked down the hallway. Jess pushed open the door and it slammed back against the wall.

"Open the vault," Jess said.

The hot tip of the gun burrowed into Alex's spine, he walked calmly toward the titanium door, lifting a clenched hand to type in the security code. His eyes darted quickly to the corner of the room and he felt a surge of relief when he saw that Athima was nowhere in sight. But he could feel her tense presence from beneath the bed, saw

the tip of her tail poking out of the shams. *Stay there*, he thought. *Stay hidden and maybe he'll just take what he wants from the vault and go.*

"Hurry up," Jess said impatiently. "Enter the code."

Alex typed in the security code and there was a loud click as the titanium door swung open.

"Now step inside and grab me some sparkly things."

Alex stepped reluctantly into the vault. Inside the small room were steel shelves lined with jewels, bricks of rare minerals now thought to be extinct and ancient coins worth millions of *dranos*.

"I want a grab bag," Jess called. "A little bit of everything. I know all that shiny crap in there is worth rocket-loads of *dranos*."

Alex slid two thick bars of glittering *manekstone* from the shelf and threw them at Jess' feet. Jess looked down approvingly. When Alex tossed him a handful of jewels he snatched one of the necklaces and examined the gemstones.

"I've always offered to help you out financially," Alex said. "I don't understand why you'd stoop to this."

Jess' eyes narrowed. "Oh yeah, you've been real great to me. Always acting like I'm some pathetic charity case who needs you to rescue me. Then you and your snob friends would all have a good laugh, wouldn't you? 'Oh, Alex, here comes that little beggar friend of yours. Do you think he'd dance for us for fifty *dranos*?'"

"It wasn't like that."

"Did I say stop fetching? Hurry up and get more of the diamond stuff."

Alex disappeared inside the vault. When he returned with a small pile of jewelry, Jess and Ellora were arguing.

"Would you shut your wrinkled trap?" Jess was glaring at her. "It's none of your business."

"Master Alex has always been wonderful to you!" she said. "He was the best friend you ever had!"

"Yeah, he was great," Jess said bitterly. "Until he inherited all *this*."

Alex was genuinely confused. "What do you mean?"

"I liked it when we were poor, Al. Not the hunger and the crappy clothes but I liked how strong we felt. It was you and me against the world, remember? We had a plan. We were gonna get out of Orion and make it big. We were gonna have adventures. But then...you inherited your uncle's estate, all the money. You went to university and chose some frivolous major—ancient Earth studies or something worthless like that—you came home and life was easy. Meanwhile I had to work, do you understand? Work! I was barely scraping by."

"I would have helped you."

"You were too busy living it up," said Jess. "You were always traveling, always having some grand adventure. And you know what the worst part was? When I did manage to get some decent-looking girl to go out with me and she found out I was friends with you, suddenly I became this stepping-stone. 'When are we going to meet your famous friend? Is he really as rich as they say? Is he still single? I have this idea for a business, do you think you could convince him to invest?' None of them wanted me when they found out Alex Raylen was within reach."

Alex's eyes remained cold slits. "I didn't know that, Jess. But if you expect me to give you the smallest amount of sympathy right now then you're both selfish *and* dumb."

Jess stared out the window at the distant horizon, continuing, "And then you got Athima. That was the kicker. As if you weren't living the highlife enough as it was, you had to bring home this gorgeous creature to screw. All day I get to hear about how her tongue feels like velvet on your skin, how she lives to please you, how happy she makes you. Meanwhile I, in my destitute state, could never even dream of affording something as amazing as her and so I ask if I can have a tiny taste of that pleasure—we're friends, right?" His face darkened. "And you look at me like some vile creature that's just crawled out of a swamp and wants to defile your precious toy."

"I never thought you vile," said Alex. "Not until this moment. I wouldn't have let the emperor touch her. And I won't let you. I love her and anyone who tries to harm her will have a much shorter lifespan than they'd prefer."

Jess stared at him blankly for a long moment before he exploded with laughter.

"Adorable!" he crowed. "That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard. Vomit-inducing but sweet."

Alex felt the rage boiling in his gut. Without turning his head he glanced quickly at the bed. He could still see a tiny tuft of white fur beneath the shams and immediately felt a sense of relief.

Jess examined his heap of wealth. "Let's see—these *manekstone* bars will fetch a cool million *dranos* each. The jewelry maybe five or six million. What the hell? I'm not greedy. We'll call it good. Now let's go find your little lady love—"

"No! She's—she's not here. Mick took her to town."

"Uh-huh. That's the best your college-educated mind can come up with?"

"Just go!" Alex roared. "Go scuttle off with your bounty like the insect that you are!"

Jess took a step forward and contemplated something as his eyes narrowed on Alex. Then with a loud crack he whipped the gun across Alex's jaw, sending him reeling toward the floor. Like a white bolt of lightning Athima sprinted out from under the bed, lunging at Jess with bared teeth. She tore at his chest with her claws, startling him so profoundly that the gun almost slipped from his hand. Ellora's terrified shrieks roared above the commotion. Finally Jess shook his arm free from Athima's teeth and hurled

her like a rag doll against the wall. She hit the wall with a sharp thud, her eyes rolling dizzily in her skull.

"No!" Alex watched her hit the ground in a limp pile, her hair draping across the floor. He started to rush toward her but Jess whipped around and aimed the gun at his head, rooting him where he stood.

"Don't move!" Jess yelled. "You stay right there, pal."

He lifted his arm, examining the tiny droplets of blood staining his shirt then glared at Athima. She lifted her head meekly, her hair falling across her eyes. When she saw the maliciousness that flickered in Jess' face, Athima's head slumped against her shoulders.

Alex gritted his teeth when Jess took several pensive steps to where she lay rasping. He knelt down, examining her with sadistic triumph.

"I think," Jess said slowly, "that for the moment this lovely creature would be much more convenient to me unconscious."

He brought the gun swiftly down upon Athima's head. She made a low moan before her eyes slumped shut, her cheek hitting the carpet.

"I'll kill you!" Alex screamed. "I'll rip out your —"

"You'll step inside the vault with the old hag is what you'll do," Jess said. "Now — or Ellora's going to have a few more holes nobody wants to screw."

Jess waved the gun violently, yanking Ellora by the arm and shoving her into the vault. When Alex resisted Jess grabbed him by the collar, pushing him forward. Alex spun around sharply, hurling his fist toward Jess' face. Jess gave a surprised yelp as Alex lunged at him, his hands poised to wring the life from Jess' body. Jess squealed and brought the gun in front of his face just as Alex raised his fist to deliver another blow.

"Vault," Jess said, shaken. "Get in or die now."

Alex couldn't win—not right now. He walked into the vault and put his arm around Ellora's shoulders to stop her trembling.

Jess stared at them with satisfaction and leaned against the door.

"You know," Jess said, "this pile of loot will get me at least ten or eleven million *dranos* but I have a feeling you left me a pretty nice chunk of change in your will."

Alex's mouth fell open.

"I guess I'll find out in a couple of days when your obituary is on the telecasts."

Ellora choked out a sob, curling her fingers around Alex's arm.

"What?" Jess laughed. "You thought I was gonna let you live after this? So you could go crying to the police? Jeez, Al, you really are a dim bulb."

Alex started to speak but Jess went on, "Your uncle was a smart man, you know that? Too bad nobody believed him."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Jess' grin widened. "That's right—you still haven't figured it out, have you? Oh, this is too great!"

"You're not making any sense, dammit!" Alex yelled.

"Good, you'll never know. Your precious Athima has quite a little secret she's been hiding from you. Your uncle died trying to protect it and now you'll die without the knowledge that evils are actually —"

He paused, examining a fingernail for drama, then laughed.

"It's unimportant now," Jess boasted. "At the moment I'm rather eager to enjoy my new acquisitions. I'm thinking of buying a modest twenty-bedroom beach house over in the east galaxy. And then of course there's Athima. Don't worry, Al, I'm sure she'll be thinking of you when I've got her on her back." He noted Alex's pained expression and grinned. "Well, I must be going as I've a long way to travel. So do you actually—hell ain't exactly ten inches from the ground."

An explosion crackled from deep within the laser gun's chamber. Alex roared when he felt Ellora go limp against him, his head spinning with the realization that she'd been shot. He stooped to grab her falling body when another shot rang out. He felt the pain tearing through his chest, sending a wave of numbness through his body and with a shocked gasp he plummeted toward the ground. Jess' laughter echoed through his brain as the door to the vault slammed shut, the darkness beckoning his body into unconsciousness.

## Chapter Nine

Alex wasn't sure if he had groaned himself awake but as he felt the stinging in his chest a steady howl of curses poured from his lips. His eyes twitched open. His mind reeled as he remembered the smirk on Jess' face as he pulled the trigger. Their bodies had fallen like stones to the floor.

Ellora lay motionless beside him, her gray hair draped in a tangled explosion across her face. He quickly crawled to her side, shaking her with halted breath.

"Ellora," he said. "Please, please open your eyes."

He wanted to cry out with relief when he saw her lips tighten, her eyelashes fluttering until she was staring up at him in bewilderment.

"Alex." Her voice was so hoarse he could barely make out the words. "What happened?"

Alex ran his fingers along his chest, grappling for the source of his pain. When he looked down he was surprised to find that there were no smoldering holes singed into his chest—not even a superficial wound.

"I..."

His nostrils caught a strange scent permeating the air. It was an acrid, chemical smell. When he caught the glimmer of orange flickering through the crack beneath the door a horrible realization gripped his mind. Fire! The smoke from the flames was scalding the walls, gathering in a thick cloud above their heads.

Ellora lifted her head, eyes wide with alarm. "What is it?"

"He shot us with the stun setting," Alex said. "He only wanted us unconscious..."

The metal walls had begun to radiate a dense heat.

"So he didn't mean to kill us?" Ellora asked.

"Not that way," he said. "Jess doesn't want our deaths to be traceable."

Ellora sat up, steadying herself against him.

"He's set fire to the place," Alex said, feeling the hope leave his body. "There won't be anything to trace, no fingerprints—only our charred remains."

Ellora's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my stars!"

Alex stood swiftly and ignored the panic washing over him. He forced his mind to think, to find a way out.

"Wait, we'll be safe in the vault, won't we?" Ellora cried. "The flames won't burn through the walls!"

Alex shook his head. "The vault's made of metal," he said. "When the fire heats the walls they'll melt—like lava—and scald us alive."

Ellora's lips trembled.

Alex ran his fingers along the titanium wall. The heat reddened his hand.

"What'll we do?" said Ellora. Her voice was rising, the hysteria crackling her words. "We have to get out!"

Alex knelt down, pulling her into a tight hug. He felt himself sinking into despair, felt tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Athima's silver eyes, wavering with terror as she cowered at Jess' feet, haunted him.

From outside a voice pierced their ears like an angel's trumpet. "Ellora!"

Ellora's eyes bulged. "It's Mick!"

They flew to their feet and pressed their bodies frantically against the door.

"Mick!" Ellora cried. "We're in the vault!"

"Mick!" Alex yelled. "In here!"

They smashed their fists against the door.

"Why are you nutballs in the vault?" Mick cried. "The damn place is on fire!"

"Mick! Hurry, Mick!"

"It's all right!" he shouted. They heard a loud clank. "I've got the fire extinguisher. If I can just clear out these flames in front of the door —"

They listened as a heavy spray pounded the door.

"Success!" Mick cried. "If there's anyone who knows how to —"

"Mick, I want you to listen carefully," Alex said. "Enter the numbers five-one-six-five on the touch pad. Hurry!"

They heard Mick fumbling with the buttons. Ellora squealed when the door lethargically swung open, rushing into her husband's arms. He looked confused but patted her shoulder anyway.

"We've got to get out of the house," Alex said, yanking them toward the bedroom door.

Flames licked at the curtains, circling the room in a blinding flurry. For a moment Alex was glad he'd had the flame-retardant carpeting installed in the house's bedrooms. The hallways, however, were another story. When they ran into the hallway they were immediately hurled into a gauntlet of fire that had climbed all the way to the ceiling. The roof was a sea of orange flames, hissing and crackling in a deafening roar.

"The whole upstairs is burning!" Ellora said.

"That's what I was trying to tell you," Mick grumbled as Alex herded them down the staircase. "You two were acting bloody insane barricading yourself in that vault."

They scurried across the marble floor, bursting through the front door in a sweaty heap. Alex turned to see the orange flames dancing behind the library windows. All the priceless books he'd collected over the years would be lost and he was surprised to find himself undaunted. There were irreplaceable paintings and statues that would be eaten by the fire but it was Athima's face that tore at his heart. As Rhysen smoldered before



his eyes he hardened his senses, willing his body to resist all until Athima was safe in his arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Athima opened her eyes. Her ears perked at the low hum of an engine. When she tilted her head to take in her surroundings she gasped, Jess was staring at her with cold eyes, watching her the way a cat watches a mouse.

"Welcome back," he said. "I do hope your head is throbbing mercilessly."

Her eyes darted in all directions, taking in the interior of the spaceship with confusion. The vastness of space filtered through the windows, scattered with round planets and freckled with stars. The first-class cabin was empty except for Athima, who lay curled near the window and Jess, who watched her, unblinking, as her head bolted upright. As she went to leap from her seat she tumbled back against the chair, her wrists and legs tethered.

"After your earlier display of feminine demureness do you really think I'd let you frolic about the craft unrestrained?"

She lowered her mouth to the rope, rubbing the pointed ends of her teeth against the material until Jess yanked her head back against the seat.

"Sit back and relax, kitty," Jess said. "I bought up all the seats in first class so you just stay right there and enjoy the scenery. There's quite a few passengers on this spaceship and I have no intention of causing a commotion that would blow my cover. You're safe for now."

Athima's gaze drifted to the passing stars. Her nose contracted in little sniffs as tears began to cloud her eyes. Jess' hand grabbed her cheek, turning her head so that she was staring into his narrowed eyes. He smiled as he watched a silver tear roll down her fur. She choked down a sob when his fingers grazed the tip of her breast.

"Don't waste your tears," Jess whispered. "I want nothing less than a flood from your eyes when we're alone tonight."

\* \* \* \* \*

The top half of Rhysen looked like burnt toast, still smoldering as the last of the flames was finally extinguished. Mick and Ellora held each other with feeble arms and stared at the wound inflicted on their home. Alex stood watching silently, unfazed by the damage. The moment they had fled the burning manor and tumbled into the safety of the sunlight Alex could only think of one thing. Athima. He had millions of *dranos* in the Orion Intergalactic Bank and unlimited resources at his disposal but despair gripped his heart as he realized that he had no clue where to look for Jess and Athima.

"We'll find her, lad." It was the first time Mick had spoken since they had escaped the fire, he and Ellora had kept their distance, leaving him to his pain.

Alex turned to meet the old man's eyes but he couldn't force a smile.

“Master Alex,” Ellora said gently, “now that you’ve filed a report, every law enforcer from here to the outer galaxy will be looking for Jess.”

Mick nodded enthusiastically.

“That’s hardly comforting,” Alex said. “Every hour that goes by, Athima is being terrorized by that bastard. If he hurts her I swear I’ll—” He went pale. “Oh no, her pills.”

Ellora cupped a cheek with her palm. “Oh no...”

Alex’s voice crackled with hysteria. “Jess doesn’t know! He doesn’t know those pills are her lifeline! If we don’t find her soon she’ll-she’ll—”

He pushed past them, rushing to the cluster of officers twenty yards away.

“I need a teleportation module!” he screamed.

His voice frightened one of the officers into immediate compliance. He ferreted through his pocket then nervously handed Alex his portable communicator.

The machine flicked to life and the image of a smiling blonde filled the air.

“Hello—operator?” Alex cried. “Get me Hayden Maverick.”

## Chapter Ten

"You're gonna want to kiss me." Hayden Maverick grinned. "I'm talking a big wet kiss right on the mouth. But try not to or I'll have to deck you for going queer on me."

"What?" Alex blurted out. "What is it?"

Hayden glanced at Rhysen's charred roof and shook his head.

"Well?"

"Mr. Raylen," Hayden smiled, "you'll be pleased to know that every sevil that comes out of my barn is microchipped."

Alex cried out so joyfully that Hayden staggered backward.

"I thought you knew," said Hayden. "Didn't you read my company statement at the end of the manual?"

"No, but you're right about wanting to kiss you! But I think I'll stay on your good side and show my affection with wads of cash."

Hayden's eyes sparkled.

"I need your help." Alex's eyes grew somber.

Hayden nodded. "I got the gist of it on the module. I can't believe that friend of yours would pull a stunt like this."

"I have reason to believe he's heading toward a small planet in the east galaxy," Alex said. "Ever since we were kids he always dreamed of living on Adamus near the beach."

"Adamus, yes! Lovely, lovely place! I took a young lady there years ago for a weekend getaway. Gorgeous beaches. The water's a dark magenta and when the sun rises over the ocean it's absolutely —"

"Right, Adamus," Alex said impatiently. "Great place. Anyway, I booked two spaceship seats."

Hayden's mustache twitched. "You mean you want me to accompany you, Mr. Raylen?"

"Depending on whether Jess spends any of his money on security, you may be immensely helpful to me. He doesn't know you, Hayden. You may be able to help me infiltrate wherever he's decided to hole up. Please, Hayden — for Athima."

"Who?"

"The white witch."

"Ah."

"I'll pay you fifty thousand upfront and fifty thousand *dranos* when we return. I can't leave this matter to the police, I won't risk Athima getting killed if they charge in with guns blazing. Please, Hayden, you said if I ever needed anything I could call you. I need you now – without Athima I'm nothing. I've never been closer to anyone in my life. I love her, Hayden. I don't know what I'll do if she..."

Hayden scratched his chin, debating the proposal. "The government has been taxing me rather heavily on my sevilts lately and the ex-wife cleaned me out pretty good. I could use a little extra cash..."

"Three hundred thousand *dranos*."

"Congratulations! You just renewed our friendship indefinitely."

Alex pulled him into a tight hug, hope flooding his body.

"Don't worry, kid." Hayden smiled. "I would've helped ya whether I was on commission or not. This bastard isn't gonna take the white witch out like that – not on my watch. Besides the government won't be too keen to renew my breeding permit if I have her death on my hands."

"You're a real sentimentalist," Alex said. "Now come on – Athima's a ticking time bomb without those pills."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jess stepped into the expansive entryway, his face glowing with entitlement. The ceilings seemed miles away and made the house appear more like an entrance to heaven than a family residence. Beyond the sprawling gold-flecked tiles were windows showcasing the breathtaking ocean views, sparkling from the sunlight flickering across the magenta waves.

Jess tightened his grip on the leash, smiling with satisfaction at the creature by his side. Athima had struggled and hissed the moment the spaceship had landed and Jess had hoisted her over his shoulder, tossing her squirming body into the nearby coach with ease. But now she was quiet, her head drooping in defeat. The electric gleam of her eyes had become glazed, lifeless.

She stared at the sterile walls closing in around her then looked up at her captor when she felt his eyes upon her.

"What? Are you telling me sevilts can't appreciate a three-million-*drano* waterfront property?"

She looked away.

"Ah, well," Jess shrugged, "you aren't going to have much of a view where I'm putting you."

He yanked at the leash and pulled her toward the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hayden popped a protein pod into the air then snapped his mouth around it, catching it like a seal. He turned to Alex to make sure he'd seen. Alex stared out the window, his face scrunched in concentration as stars whizzed by. All the flights to Adamus had been booked up when Alex had called and they'd had to wait an entire thirty-six hours before setting foot on the spaceship. His eyes were red from sleep deprivation. He'd been silent ever since they boarded the spaceship and now his face darkened with emotion.

"Aw, come on," said Hayden. "I don't want the next ten hours to be a spitting image of this. You like card games?"

Alex shrugged.

"We're gonna find them," Hayden said gently. "Sounds to me like he doesn't have any plans to hurt her. If you ask me, the fellow grabbed her out of spite."

Alex pulled his gaze away from the window. "I know he doesn't want her dead — he means to hurt her in other ways."

"Sick bastard."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Weren't *you* the one who almost sold Athima to a foreign sadist?"

"Entirely different."

"Uh-huh."

An attendant parted the curtain and came smiling toward them. Hayden nodded with approval when she dropped a bag of protein pods and bent over to scoop it up.

"My, you've made a meal out of these things!" she said, staring at the carnage of wrappers clustered in a little circle around Hayden's feet.

"My constant request for sustenance in the form of snacks is just an excuse to see your pretty face up close," he replied.

Alex rolled his eyes as the girl's giggles filled his ears. When she skittered back behind the curtain Hayden's lap was piled with bags of protein pods. He saw that Alex was brooding again and frowned.

"Enough with the malice look."

"I'm deciding how I want to do it."

"Do what?" Hayden said.

"Kill Jess."

"A man of vigilante justice, I see."

Alex turned to Hayden. "He robbed my personal vault and that doesn't mean much to a guy with millions of *dranos* in the bank. He tried to kill me and it became personal. But taking Athima..."

"You know," Hayden said, "you're one of a kind, Mr. Raylen, and I believe you really do love her. A guy like you deserves to get her back."

"I'd marry her if it were legal," Alex said softly. "It kills me sometimes that she can't talk but I know she understands me. I've never had someone ask nothing from me and then look so surprised and grateful when they receive a kiss or a kind word in their ear."

Hayden was contemplating something. "It's better that they can't talk," he said. "Who knows? Maybe Athima would have one of those nasal voices and then it would be all over."

Alex laughed.

"Tell me about the microchip," he said.

Hayden pulled out a small device from the bag beneath his seat. "Cool, cool stuff. I bought this when I first got into the sevil business. I figured that if men were gonna shell out a million *dranos* for a feline concubine—" He grinned. "Then they'd sure as hell want assurance that the things wouldn't be gone forever if they left a window open or if their place was robbed. So I bought this little baby and had each sevil microchipped. It's a really easy process. You just insert a teeny metal chip beneath the skin—they don't even feel it. Then we turn on the tracker..."

He clicked a button and the small machine spit out a series of shrill beeps.

"I enter Athima's tracking code," he went on, typing on the tiny keypad. "B-I-T-C-H."

Alex glared.

"Sorry," said Hayden, "every sevil has a five-digit code. Hers just came to me."

He shoved the tracking device into Alex's hand and pointed at the small screen.

"See that little dot blinking? That's Athima. Press your thumb against that dot."

Alex touched the dot. There was another beep, followed by a brief message that appeared on the screen that read, *East Galaxy. North Sector. Exact coordinates unknown.*

"Once we get closer it'll give us a more specific reading," Hayden explained. "We'll know the exact town, neighborhood and street by the time we're through. Neat, huh?"

Alex said, "I can't ever begin to repay you for this."

"Sure ya can." Hayden grinned. "Your gratitude will be reflected in three hundred thousand *dranos* on my account."

Alex stared out the window, watching bright orbs and clusters of stars drift by, and he felt himself sinking into a troubled sleep. Athima's silver eyes glittered in his mind, bright and loving, but as his body sank into the chair they turned flirtatious, narrowing into seductive slits. He closed his eyes as flashback after flashback shot through his restless mind. There was the time he'd had to leave Rhysen on business and Athima had thought he'd skipped out on her. The days without her had been torturous. He'd ached for her wet pussy each night and found himself restless without her soft body curled against him.

Alex turned in his sleep and suddenly they were in his bedroom. Athima's lithe body stretched across the mattress then her unforgiving eyes as she stared at him for deserting her...

*He was standing at the doorway watching her. When she turned and caught him there she pinned her ears back.*

*"Thima," he said softly, walking toward her.*

*He held out a large bunch of flowers, letting her take in the lavish scent. But she wasn't staring at the present with sentiment.*

*"Thima — no!"*

*He stumbled backward in surprise as she leapt forward, claws raised. She sliced the bouquet maliciously, shredding the pink blooms until they lay in a tattered heap on the floor.*

*"Thima!" he said. "I'm sorry I had to leave you but I wasn't —"*

*She hissed and sat rigidly on the mattress, turning her back on him. With a sigh Alex walked to the edge of the bed.*

*"Hey," he whispered, "it's all right — I'm not leaving Rhysen again for a long, long time. And if I do, I'm not leaving you behind again. It was no fun for me either."*

*He reached out a hand, placing it on her shoulder and rubbing softly. In a flash she spun around, eyes pouring fury, claws raised. Alex felt her claws swipe his chest, leaving his flesh blazing in their wake.*

*"What the hell?"*

*Athima darted to the other side of the mattress and stared at him smugly.*

*She let out an indignant shriek as he lunged across the bed, seizing her by the waist before she had time to react. She gave a surprised gasp when he hauled her across his knee.*

*"I'll sweeten you up, little spitfire," he said, his voice low.*

*She moaned as he gently brushed aside her tail and started caressing her ass cheeks. He stared for a moment, watching them twitch and flex. She pushed her ass high in the air, revealing a tiny flash of pink. Alex felt the blood rushing to his groin, making him swell as her body continued to writhe against him.*

*"Are you going to be sweet?" he demanded.*

*She gave a low hiss then pressed her pussy against the hard bulge throbbing beneath his pants. He drew in a sharp breath when he felt her wetness seeping through the fabric, teasing his cock.*

*"Hiss at me all you want," he smiled. "But do you realize how much your body is enjoying this?"*

*He held her waist and gently guided Athima onto her back. She released a sensuous groan as Alex slid on top of her. He smiled into her flickering silver eyes.*

*"Don't look like that," he said softly. "You don't hate me. And you don't really want to fight me."*

*He rubbed his knee against her pussy, watching as her narrowed eyes went wide, the lashes fluttering.*

*"Do you want me to fuck you, my love?" he asked.*

*The look on her face provided a vivid answer as he let his knee tease her pussy in light circles.*

*He unfastened his belt and when his pants sank down to his knees Athima released a breathy moan then suddenly glared as if to remind herself that she was angry at him.*

*He slowly let his cock slide between her legs. She opened up for him, eagerly. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting her hot juices bathe his cock.*

*Her eyes went wide with longing as he began to thrust. Alex stared down into her eyes and was surprised to see Athima lift her head from the mattress, her lips slightly pursed.*

*"You want a kiss, hm?"*

*He drove himself inside her in a burst that made her stiffen and moan all at once. Alex lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers, smiling as her velvet tongue lapped at his lips. When her lips parted to let out a breathy sigh he shot his tongue into the wet recesses of her mouth.*

*When he began to pound Athima's body again, her chin dropped to his shoulder and she released a burst of hot, ragged breaths onto his neck, prickling his flesh and spurring him to fuck her harder.*

*"You're coming, aren't you?" he whispered.*

*Athima tilted her hips and let the little jolts wash over her body. She writhed beneath him as her soft flutters were seared by his unrelenting thrusts. She had no time to recover, no time to melt into tranquility. Alex continued to fuck her until his cock began to twitch. He pulled out suddenly. Athima gasped as her body was showered with hot, milky droplets. She watched as he came on the smooth curve of her stomach, her hips, her thighs. Alex smiled at the sight of her covered in his seed. He lowered his head and pressed an adoring kiss onto her lips. Then he whispered, "I love you."*

*She sat up suddenly, startling him. She crawled forward and her lips parted to lick a warm, lingering droplet from his cock. She licked and sucked with a tenderness that made him sigh.*

*As his dream washed over him, Alex smiled in his spaceship seat.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*"You know," said Jess, "I think I rather like you in chains. Alex had the wrong idea spoiling you like some interstellar goddess – makes you forget your purpose."*

*He secured the thick metal clamp around Athima's neck, yanking on the long chain to test its resilience before securing it to the bolt on the wall. He tugged it hard, smiling at the soft gagging sound that echoed from her lips as her head was jerked upright. He backed away slowly, taking in the sight of her shackled to the corner of the room. With a smirk he fell back against the bed, sinking into the thick satin comforter.*



"This is how it always should have been," he said. "Alex had more money than a small solar system, and what does he do with it? Gives half his dough to charity right off the bat. Then he sells most of the mines, spends most of his time reading his wretched books. If that isn't a waste of power, what is?"

Athima pressed her back against the wall, staring at him with somber eyes.

"Then," Jess continued, his eyes narrowing, "he gets you. Granted, I was all for it at first—I really was. He'd had this little sevil fantasy ever since we were young. But from the moment you made the scene he changed. Suddenly he's canceling our weekly rides through the countryside, calling to tell me he'll be busy all day, saying he can't get together to go fishing that weekend."

He curled his fist.

"I've been his best friend for over ten years," he said. "And I watched as the world was handed to him on a silver platter while I barely scraped by. Oh, occasionally he offered me some pity cash so he could feel high and mighty but I'm not some charity case." He smiled. "As of thirty-six hours ago I earned my fortune."

Athima sank to her feet, draping her body across the cold marble floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry—am I boring you? Perhaps a nice thrashing with a curtain rod would teach you to be more polite." He rolled onto his side. "I know you can understand me."

She raised her head.

"I know your secret."

She stared at him unblinking but her eyes flickered with some silent emotion.

"That's right, kitty." He grinned. "I figured it out. Alex couldn't see it even though it was right in front of his face the whole time. But I'm a bit more perceptive."

Her eyes narrowed, incited by his smirk.

"I like that Alex died without knowing," he said. "Did you get that, kitty? He's dead. I locked him inside his own vault and burnt the place to the ground while you were unconscious. Alex Raylen is D-E-A-D."

## Chapter Eleven

Alex pressed his face to the window and peered over the wide expanse of city as the craft descended. Adamus was a thriving metropolis whose modern buildings pressed right against the rose-colored ocean. Alex had visited Adamus once for a charity event. He found the bulk of the locals distasteful in their gaudiness, their arms heavy with sparkly bracelets, their hair rigidly coiffed and scattered with diamonds. The majority of the universe couldn't dream of affording a house in this fashionable cosmopolitan locale, which was probably why anyone Alex had ever met from the planet took great pains to emphasize where they were from. "Oh, I've got a little place on the beach in Adamus," they'd say modestly but their eyes were condescending. Jess would fit right in.

Hayden had fallen asleep. When he felt the spaceship touch the ground he opened his eyes groggily and smiled at Alex.

"I was dreaming about this gorgeous, insatiable woman," he said. "Huge breasts—I mean monstrous. She just couldn't get enough of me. It was one of those dreams where you wake up wishing there was a hot girl next to you to finish you off."

Remembering his own dream, Alex couldn't help reciprocating the feeling. He sighed then said, "I'm glad we've established a borderline creepy level of comfort with each other."

"Oh, come on," Hayden said, giving Alex a shove, "it's not like I sold you a coach, remember? If you can't be candid with your sevil dealer, what's the universe coming to?"

The craft came to an abrupt halt.

They grabbed their bags and pressed their way through the crowded spaceport. Hayden frowned as he took in the women with platinum bouffant hairdos, the men with watches so large that their arms drooped from the weight of them.

"Jeez," he said, "you suppose if we squeezed one of these folks hard enough a diamond would pop out of their ass?"

"Garishness, thy name is Adamus," Alex chimed.

They stepped out into the open and winced at the brightness of the blood-red sun.

"I kind of like it," said Hayden, nodding his head at the giant orb. "It gives the place a nice red-light-district glow."

The streets were bustling with coaches pulled by dragons in myriad colors. Alex found one with the word *Taxi* written on the side and whistled. The driver grunted and pulled over.

They loaded their bags into the coach and sank against the velvet cushions. The dragons lunged forward and flew several yards above the road, gliding through the busy metropolis. Neon lights blinded them from all directions.

"Where to, pal?" the driver called.

Alex turned to Hayden. "Let's see, do we have an accurate location for her yet?"

Hayden removed the tracking device from the bag.

"Hold on, it'll take a minute. Once it fires up we'll know exactly where she —"

There was a jolt so tremulous it threw Alex forward. He whipped his head around just in time to see the tracking device fly from Hayden's hand, plummeting out the window like a cannonball.

"No!" Alex screamed.

He threw his body toward the other side of the coach, watching the small device shatter as it crashed onto the earth.

"Oh man!" Hayden cried.

"No, no, no!" Panic gripped Alex's mind. "We've got to go back for it! We've got to fix it!"

Hayden rubbed his forehead with his palms. "It's a goner, kid. Did you see the way it hit the ground? It's in no less than a thousand pieces now. Cheap north galaxy crap!"

Exasperated, Hayden threw his head against the cushion. "This is a damn fine situation we're in now," he grumbled. "That was the only device programmed with Athima's information. Now we're really going to be looking for a needle in a haystack!"

"No," said Alex, his voice determined, "we can do this without the tracking device."

"Like hell we can!"

Alex shook his head. "While you were asleep on the craft I called the Adamus authorities and made them aware of the situation but I doubt they'll be of much help. So far there's no trace of him. Their database doesn't show any purchases made under his name. The only thing we know so far is that he did buy two tickets to Adamus. Now it's just a question of where to look."

"So how the heck are we gonna find this guy?"

"I know Jess," Alex said. "He's impulsive—like a child. I bet he's already hocked the gold and jewels and bought a house." He paused and his eyes lit up. "I've got it! We'll check the local real estate firms, the big-name ones dealing with large estates. I guarantee you the bastard bought a ridiculously sized place on the water."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I always wanted an oversized place on the water," Jess said, looking out the bedroom window with approval. "The guy said the place only had nine bedrooms but

I'm not choosy. Compromise is what the world's all about. Speaking of which, I think it's time for you to serve your purpose."

Athima raised her head, eyes alarmed as Jess strode across the room. He stood over her for a moment, taking in her expression of fear with satisfaction.

He lowered his face, pressing it close so that he could see her pupils wavering. He knelt before her, drowning her with his shadow.

"I'm your master now," he said. "And you, kitty cat, are the servant. Nod if you understand."

Athima's eyes narrowed and she shook her head. She cried out as he yanked her by the collar, pulling her roughly onto his lap.

"Understand one thing," he whispered, "you live right now because I allow you to. Got it?"

She gasped as his hands gripped her breasts, shoving her backward against his chest. She shivered as the heat of his breath blasted her ear.

"If I say bend over, you do it," Jess hissed. "If I want you to lick me from head to toe, you don't stop until your tongue is bleeding."

She choked down a sob as he forced a hand between her thighs.

"Open your legs."

She kept her thighs clamped tightly, whimpering when she felt his fingers digging into her shoulder.

"Now!"

Athima shook her head defiantly. In an instant he spun her around. She quivered when she caught the rage flaming in his eyes. Jess wrapped his hand around her hair, yanking her head back and baring the smooth flesh of her throat. She squirmed when she felt his cold lips on her neck, his tongue lapping at her fur like a thirsty dog.

Jess raised his head to study her terrified face, his eyes drifting to her lips. He held her head still as he smashed his lips against hers, his tongue lunging down her throat with so much ferocity she nearly choked. Athima clenched her fists, closed her eyes and with obviously all the strength she could muster, drove her pointed teeth into his tongue. He immediately pushed her to the ground, gagging and gripping his mouth in shock.

"You little bitch!"

He leapt forward and hauled her toward him but she quickly swiped his cheek with her claws, causing him to release her and stagger backward. Athima's eyes widened when she saw the bright red scratches blazing on his skin. She darted to the corner, her chain clinking loudly.

"You wanna play rough?" he snarled. "We can play rough, kitty!"

He raised his hand to strike her but stopped when he saw the insubordination still gleaming in her eyes.

"I've got a better idea," he said, his voice calming. "Before you can ride a horse, you have to break it."

He turned abruptly, flicking on the telecast device near the bed. The chipper voice of a blonde reporter filled the room. As Jess settled himself on the mattress he stared at Athima with cold eyes.

"Let's see how your willpower fares without food." He smiled. "And if you're still feeling bold after tomorrow, you'll discover the joys of a dark basement until you learn to obey."

## Chapter Twelve

"Finally! Hayden, I think we've found her!"

Hayden was sprawled across the bed, staring lethargically at the telecast projection. The hotel room was bright with the early morning sunshine, a stream of soft rose light filtering through the curtains. Alex slammed down the portable teleportation module and rushed to the bed.

"Hayden, did you hear me? I think I've found them!"

Hayden lifted his head. "It's about bloody time. Sheesh, after four days of watching *Triskilion* cartoons, I think my brain is thoroughly mushed."

Alex had spent the last four days rushing from one town to another in a desperate effort to uncover Jess' whereabouts but each day nothing had turned up—not a single trace of them. Finally a realtor had called him back with incredible news, a mansion had been sold several days ago to a blond man with a sevil a few towns over.

"The reason none of the realtors knew about it was because the house wasn't sold through a real estate agency," Alex explained. "The guy who owned it was some kind of mob boss looking to get out of town quick. Jess paid in cash."

Hayden called to switch off the telecast then said, "Looks like it's time to get down to business then."

He rolled off the bed and shuffled through his bag until he procured a small gun.

Alex's eyes widened. "How the hell did you get that thing past spaceport security?"

"It's coated in a brand-new plastic-and-nylon-hybrid material." He grinned. "Throws the sensors."

Alex shook his head.

"What?" said Hayden. "You thought we'd just go tromping into your friend's pad—the friend that tried to *kill* you—and he'd just hand over the sevil?"

Alex sighed. "Good point."

"Don't worry about it," said Hayden. "We'll infiltrate his digs, you'll go find Athima and I'll keep an eye on him with this."

"Right," said Alex, "come on—not a moment to waste. I've got the pills—"

"And I'm packing the heat!"

They rushed from the room and hailed a coach outside the hotel. Alex felt his spirit surging back to life as he pictured Athima's face. The last four days had been a nightmare, with Alex racing all over the planet, pressing everyone who might have the slightest insight on Jess' whereabouts. At night he sat rigidly on his mattress, Hayden's snores grating his ears as he searched his mind trying to think of other people he could

ask, other places he could go. But now Athima was so close—soon she'd be back in his arms, her eager lips parting to receive his kiss.

"So how do you wanna go about this thing?" Hayden asked as they neared the coastline.

"That's the easiest part," said Alex. "The door will be open."

Hayden raised an eyebrow.

"I've known the bastard for over a decade, remember?" said Alex. "He lives as carelessly as he acts. He's always left his car, his apartment, everything unlocked. Even kept thousands of *dranos* in a sock in his kitchen drawer."

"This guy sounds like he's one planet short of a galaxy."

"He's always been a little erratic," Alex said. "He always had a bit of a temper. But I never imagined in a million years that he would turn on me like this. I can't believe I left him seven million *dranos* in my will!"

Hayden grinned. "Yeah but when he spends it on frivolous things like diamond-encrusted watches and private rocketships I'm sure he'll have the occasional twinge of guilt."

"You're appalling when it comes to consoling people," said Alex.

"Aw, cheer up," Hayden said. "You're just cranky because you're going through sevil withdrawals. Soon the witch, er, Athima will be back in your life and the world will be lemon drops and marigolds once more."

Alex nodded. His heart raced when he saw the massive, solitary mansion at the end of the coastline.

"That's it," he said then to the driver. "Don't park too close to the place! We don't want to blow our cover."

As they drew closer and the details of the house became more glaring both of them crinkled their noses.

"That is the most obscene dwelling I've ever seen," Hayden grimaced.

"It's Jess all right."

The house was an electric green that competed loudly with the magenta ocean. A neon arch curled over the doorway, shooting off a stream of light that made Alex wince.

"What the hell," said Hayden, "we might as well pull right up to the place. He probably won't see us coming—bastard's probably blind."

They stopped several hundred yards from the house.

"Here's the plan," Alex said. "I don't want to do anything that would put Athima's life in jeopardy. So don't just burst in there with laser gun blazing, got it?"

Hayden rolled his eyes.

"You go through the front door—quietly—and search for Jess. I'm going to sneak in through the back and try to locate Athima."

"And when I find Jess?"

Alex started to speak but the confliction running through his mind made him pause. Finally he said, "If Athima isn't hurt then we'll take him to the authorities and let him rot in a cold cell. But if Athima's been harmed in any way...you'll receive my full permission to blow his brains out."

Hayden brightened. "So either way this guy's gonna have a bad day."

Alex's foot tapped restlessly against the seat. He stared at the house with its thick curtains drawn across the windows and pictured Athima inside, frightened and despairing. With a snarl he propelled himself from the coach and stormed across the landscape. Hayden stumbled after him, huffing as he cocked the gun.

"Easy there!" he called. "Everything's gonna be okay, remember? If shooting small forest creatures is any indication of my weapon skills then you've got nothing to worry about."

"Ssh, don't blow our cover. Remember—you're going through the front door and I'll take the back. If he immediately sees me then I'll distract him while you corner him with the gun."

Hayden nodded and they broke like a wishbone, rushing stealthily to each side of the house. Alex climbed onto the back patio and was relieved to find it vacant. Purple gulls hissed and screamed, swimming the water's surface, as jewel-colored waves smashed against the shore behind him. He crept to the open window and peered into the kitchen. Also vacant.

The window was just wide enough for Alex to climb through and he struggled to be as quiet as possible when he wedged his body through the square space. When he hopped down onto the kitchen floor he stared at his surroundings with disgust. Gaudy pictures of leering, half-dressed women were framed like a museum display while a chandelier emitting at least seven glowing colors hung like an oversexed rainbow near the hallway entrance. He heard the soft creak of the front door. Heard Hayden slip inside.

Alex started to tiptoe toward the long hallway but froze when he heard the coldness of the voice from across the kitchen.

"Come for the kitty, did you?"

Alex whipped his head around to see Jess smiling at him from the kitchen table. A small gun dangled from his fingertips, the metal catching the light.

Alex's hand curled into a fist. "How did you—"

"I may be a little forgetful," Jess said calmly, "when it comes to locking doors and turning off lights but I do keep up with the telecasts. Imagine my surprise when last night I saw a news blurb—really well-done story—about the heroic millionaire who managed to save his elderly servants from a deadly fire."

Jess traced a slow circle with the barrel of the gun across the table. His eyes sparkled with a sinister delight as if he were thrilled with the prospect of killing Alex a second time.



"Know what I like about this house?" he said. "I bought it from a former mob boss so the place comes with a built-in sense of paranoia. I've got security cameras in almost every room, an electric force field encasing the outside of the house that can be activated with the push of a button—"

"Then why didn't you activate it?" Alex glared. "Why did you just let me waltz in here?"

Jess smiled. "Because I wanted to show you that no matter how favorable your circumstances are, I'm ahead of you. Get it? I'm better. I'm smarter. And in five minutes, I'll be the one who still has a pulse."

Jess rose and stepped forward. He looked as if he were fighting the urge to bludgeon Alex to death with the gun.

"Where's Athima?"

"She's alive," Jess said coolly. "Though I can't say she's been very comfortable."

Jess watched Alex's face turn pale and laughed. "She hasn't been quite the willing submissive I expected—I blame her previous owner. In any case, she's learning a little lesson about defiance in the basement. I'm fairly new at this but I fully believe that after days of being chained in a dark room without food that she'll blossom into quite the eager beaver, so to speak."

Alex felt the rage coursing through his veins until he released a scream that caused Jess to stagger backward.

"Easy there." Jess smiled. "Nobody likes an Angry Andy."

Jess walked slowly, methodically around Alex in leisurely circles. Alex's fury only seemed to fuel his delight.

"So you still haven't figured it out, have you, Al?"

"Figured what out!"

"Sevils," Jess said. "You're still clueless, aren't you?"

Jess stopped in front of the hallway, facing Alex with a knowing smile. "Come on, dim bulb, think!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Alex saw Hayden moving slowly down the hallway, drawing his gun as he crept toward Jess.

"You're not making any sense," Alex blurted out, eager to maintain Jess' attention.

"Do I have to slap you in the face with it, Al? Listen carefully, sevils aren't—"

"Drop the gun, asshole!" Hayden cried.

Jess' eyes went wide, his mouth flew open when Hayden pressed the gun to the back of his head.

"What the hell is—"

"Drop! Gun! Now!" Hayden barked. "Or these nice marble floors are gonna get messy!"

The gun fell from Jess' hand and clinked against the floor. Hayden immediately pushed Jess aside, leapt forward and snatched the gun. He spun around and pointed both weapons at a very flabbergasted Jess.

"You!" Jess choked. "What are you —"

Hayden snarled and struck the side of Jess' face with the weapon, sending him reeling to the ground. Jess shook and gasped where he lay, looking like a fish that had been plucked from water.

Hayden's head snapped quickly in Alex's direction. "Go find your girl. I'll keep an eye on this bastard."

Alex tore down the hallway. Near the entryway a large spiral staircase beckoned to the first story but a small flight of stairs led down to a single, foreboding door. Alex turned the knob and pushed open the door so hard it rattled against the hinges. He was instantly met with darkness. His hands grappled for the light switch.

"Athima?" he cried.

He thought he heard movement. When his fingers found the switch he jerked it upward, sending a shower of light through the room. At first he didn't see her. The room was barren, with cold hard floors and windowless walls. Then he spotted the soft white fur, the gray eyes squinting to adjust to the light. She was huddled on the ground, her body curled into the corner.

Alex stood stock-still, overcome with a paralyzing joy at the sight of her. Then he saw the chains. Heavy metal links that clamped around her feet, kept her pinned to the wall while a thick leather collar bit at her neck.

She was rubbing her eyes, shaking off the darkness when she saw him. He started to rush forward but her action quickly brought him to a halt.

Athima rose slowly until she stood on two legs. Alex felt his hands tremble as she took a step forward, the chains clinking against her body.

"Hello, Alex," she said.

## Chapter Thirteen

Dizzy. He felt as if the room was spinning and everything dissipated into an intangible blur except for Athima's shimmering gray eyes. The sound of her voice echoed through his mind.

He saw her joy turn to worry as he staggered backward.

"Y-you can talk," he said, nearly choking on the words.

She rushed forward but was quickly yanked back by the chains.

"You were lying to me," he said. "All this time you could talk..."

Her eyes grew wide with alarm. "No—you don't understand. I couldn't! I really couldn't, Alex! Please, I'll explain everything—just get me out of here!"

Despite his shock Alex felt himself running toward her, throwing his arms around Athima's white satin body. When his lips pressed against hers a choked sob spilled from her throat. She hugged him as if she were drowning.

Alex pulled back to look into her tear-flecked eyes. "Did he hurt you? Are you all right?"

"I'm okay, Alex. The key—it's hanging on the wall, over by the door."

Alex dashed across the room and snatched the key then quickly began to unlock her chains. When the last clamp grasping her ankle was unhinged Alex pulled her tightly to him.

"I thought you were dead," she murmured. "He told me he killed you."

"Well, Jess is a lousy murderer."

She smiled. "Is he—"

"He's upstairs," said Alex. "But it's all right. Hayden's keeping an eye on him."

Athima went pale. "H-Hayden?"

"Yeah. If it wasn't for Hayden I would've been killed ten minutes ago."

Her eyes were glazed with fear. "He's here? He's in the house?"

Athima's body was trembling violently. Alex took her palm in his hands and stroked the warm flesh with his fingers.

"What? What is it?"

"We've got to get out of here," she said. "Now—before he—"

A gunshot echoed through the basement, rattling the walls. Athima screamed and gripped Alex's arm. A heavy thud shook the ceiling.

"Oh no," Alex whispered.

"Listen to me, Alex. Your uncle wasn't crazy. There *is* a conspiracy and now you're in the middle of it. Hayden is—"

Athima froze when the sound of footsteps creaked down the basement stairs. She turned to Alex with frantic eyes.

"The pills," she blurted out, "it was those green pills. They prevent us from—"

"So, the white witch lives."

Hayden stood smiling in the doorway, the gun dangling from his fingertips. He smiled at Athima but it was a smile Alex had never seen grace his lips before—cold and sinister. He leaned against the doorway, watching with interest as Athima gripped Alex tighter.

Alex stared at the gun. "Jess—"

"Dead," said Hayden. "And if he isn't dead he's very unhappy."

A whimper escaped Athima's lips.

Hayden nodded at her. "Talking, I see."

"No thanks to you," Athima spat out. Her eyes burned fiercely but her voice quavered.

Alex instinctively stepped forward and shielded Athima in a protective stance. Hayden's smile broadened.

"She's got a pretty voice, hasn't she?" he said cheerily. "It's kind of a pity she never got to use it."

Alex cried out in frustration. "What did you do to her, you bastard? I don't understand. Why couldn't she..."

Alex shook his head.

"The harsh reality of the world," said Hayden, "must be overwhelming to a guy who's lived such a sheltered life."

He stepped forward into the light.

"Your recently deceased buddy," he continued, "figured it out pretty quick. As did your uncle."

Alex stared at him in confusion.

"Ya see," said Hayden, "if I had known your uncle was a retired scientist, I would've never sold him that sevil. Turns out retired scientists get pretty bored and restless when they're sitting around in a stuffy mansion with nothing to do all day. Your uncle got a bit too curious for his own good when it came to those dandy multivitamins. One day he decided to bring out his chemistry set and analyze the compounds in the pills. Not good. He found out about our little secret."

"He's not the only one." Alex glared.

"That sevil's aren't exactly mute." Hayden nodded. "They can talk—and they ain't so eager to live the life of a millionaire's plaything. This, as you might guess, doesn't bode well for me, being a sevil breeder."

Athima's eyes blazed with hatred. Hayden winked at her.

"The man who discovered sevils – the great conservationist Michas Demprey – was an explorer, a scientist and a good chum of my grandfather. When Michas came upon these sexy critters he had been working on a neurotoxin designed to sedate violent criminals. The stuff proved to be too strong in test studies, putting the subjects in a bit of a daze and catapulting their libidos to dangerous levels. And it had an interesting side effect – paralysis of the tongue. The test subjects were able to make basic sounds but because the neurotoxin numbed the tongue, subjects were unable to enunciate words. They were basically reduced to animal noises."

"Athima always had the ability to talk," Alex said.

"Congratulations, Mr. Raylen," said Hayden. "The last horse finally crosses the finish line!"

"But how –"

"I'm getting to it," Hayden snapped. "Michas Demprey was stationed on Abilonia to conduct a pollution analysis and when he discovered the planet's atmosphere was a ticking time bomb the Arcadian government ordered an evacuation. But old Michas decided that humans weren't the only creatures that were going to make that trip. He'd seen the small group of sevils weeks before – mostly females. Like most human males he was immediately overcome with lust for the creatures. He tried to approach them on several occasions but they wanted nothing to do with him. On the day the evacuation was ordered he approached the sevils again and informed them of their fate. The humans were evacuating and the sevils were up shit creek without a paddle. He gave them a choice. If they swallowed the neurotoxin capsules he would sneak them aboard his ship. If not...well, their gorgeous little bodies would be filled with deadly gas by the end of the week. I assume their choice was pretty obvious."

"He gave them the pills," Alex murmured. "And from then on –"

"They swallowed them every day without question," said Hayden. "Ya see, Michas had a plan. He now had about a dozen sevils, mostly female, but he had enough males to start a little breeding program. Now that the creatures were voiceless and receptive to any sexual advances thrown their way, Michas knew they would be quite the coveted item. The government wasn't too keen on his proposal to sell sevils as bedroom companions for humans – until he presented the Commissioner of Galactic Agriculture one of the creatures as a gift. Then – surprise, surprise – Michas got his permit. My dad helped him breed the sevils until it became a multimillion-*drano* business. And why? Because rich assholes like yourself were more than happy to pay a onetime fee for a lifetime concubine."

"That's not why I bought her," Alex said furiously. "We had a bond – not just a sexual one."

Hayden rolled his eyes.

Athima's voice was steady as it filled the room. "He never treated me like anything less than human. That was your job, Hayden."

Hayden grinned. "You know, that first week after he took you home I actually missed you. Before, whenever I was having a bad day I knew there was a little bitch of a sevil tied up in a barn out back that I could work out all my aggression on. Oh, don't look at me like that, Mr. Raylen—your little rose was still a virgin before you popped her cherry in the barn. I'm like a drug dealer—I sell, but never sample, the merchandise. What can I say? She provided some nice stress relief. And then—sob—Mr. Raylen whisked my little hellcat away. After you were gone I had to start kicking the dog."

Alex started to lunge forward but Hayden cocked the gun and rendered him motionless.

"Easy," he chided. "We haven't even gotten to the best part yet!"

Alex gritted his teeth. "Which is?"

"Your uncle." Hayden smiled. "He was blessed with quite the intellect. After he analyzed the chemical compounds in the pills and did his research, he gave me a call and said that he was very alarmed by his findings. 'Did you know this vitamin supplement contains powerful chemicals that are illegal? Chemicals that may have dangerous effects on the body? I think they may be harming the sevils—possibly altering their state of mind.' 'Oh dear, Mr. Raylen! That's terrible! I'll investigate this immediately. I love my sevils and would be very upset if this were true. We'll get to the bottom of this right away.' And do you know what I did?"

Alex's lips curled around his teeth. "What?"

"Well, I called up his lovely wife—Arianne or Arianna or something like that. I explained that her husband called me and that I was very concerned for his mental health. You see, he was rambling about government conspiracies and ranting like a madman—he even talked about harming Cossani. Well, of course your aunt was immediately distressed. I told her I thought it would be best if I came for the sevil that evening and she was quick to agree. So we hauled away his little fluff ball while he was out riding. I called him shortly afterward and told him that if he ever spoke of anything he'd discovered I'd slit Cossani's throat. If you know how much your uncle loved the creature then you know it was a secret he took to the grave."

"You bastard," Alex shouted. "He loved that sevil more than life itself! You're the one who killed him, you crushed his soul when you took her away!"

"She was a rather pretty sevil," Hayden mused. "Not quite as beautiful as this one but a pretty little thing in her own right."

"Cossani," Athima murmured. A flood of pain washed over her face.

"Ah," Hayden said, "that's right. I almost forgot. Your Athima is Cossani's little sister. Not much of a resemblance, is there?"

Alex looked at Athima gently. "She was your sister?"

"I-I hardly knew her," Athima whispered. "They—" Her eyes burned with hatred as they narrowed on Hayden. "He sold her when I was very young. And now she..."

"Oh, she's alive," said Hayden. "I kept her as leverage so that your uncle wouldn't be tempted to blow my little operation. When he died—how lucky is that?—I sold Cossani to a man in the east galaxy, where she lives today."

"She's alive?" The dull film of despair fled from Athima's eyes and they sparkled at the revelation.

Hayden grunted. "You say that like you're going to have the opportunity to visit her—like I'm not going to blow both your heads off in approximately thirty seconds."

Athima's fingers gripped Alex's arms. Alex's jaw tightened as he stared at the man he had come to befriend over the last few days.

"Your buddy Jess," Hayden smiled, "was smarter than you gave him credit for. He called me about a week ago after swiping a notebook from your house—some kind of journal belonging to your uncle. He read the whole thing and figured out my little secret. Called me up. Then the bastard tries to blackmail me—six million he wants! I don't have that kind of dough—not with all the new agriculture taxes and my ex-wife's green fingers. So he threatens to blow the lid off the whole operation and hangs up. I of course was not peachy keen with that development so I called up my boys downtown and told them to pay your buddy a onetime visit—" He made a slicing motion across his neck. "But it turns out Jess had decided to pay you a visit of a similar nature that night. I nearly had a coronary when I found out he'd gotten away! I didn't know what I was going to do—just knowing that bastard was out there, knowing my secret, ready to ruin my life..."

Sweat dripped down Hayden's brow as if it were still a tangible threat. He drew a deep breath then resumed his speech.

"Then you called." A smile crept across his face. "And I figured I was the luckiest bastard alive—I'd get to kill three birds with one stone! I wasn't sure what you knew but I couldn't take my chances. And now that you've heard Miss Kitty's lovely voice and know the details of her heritage..."

His eyes moved to Athima. "She was always a bit smarter than the others. The drugs never seemed to have the same effect on her. Sometimes I thought that this one—with the gray eyes and the pouty lips—this one would be the death of me someday. But now I'm going to make sure that it's vice versa. Sure, I could drug her up again, sell her for a pretty penny, pay off my mortgage—but for my own peace of mind I think I'd rather watch you two die in each other's arms."

He took a sharp step forward, raising the gun to Alex's face.

"Alex, I'm sorry," Athima whispered, tears dotting the corners of her eyes. "I tried to tell you—I tried to show you. I'm sorry. This is all my fault."

He hugged her close. "I don't regret anything. My life was better for having known you, Thima. I just wish—"

"You're making me nauseous." Hayden glared. "You two are like a bad *Northurian* love sonnet. Well, goodbye and good riddance—hey, do you guys want to be buried holding hands? See, I'm a romantic..."

Alex felt a wild surge propel his body into action. He charged like an animal toward Hayden's throat, screaming and driving his knuckles into the hollow of his cheek. Athima leapt forward. With a swipe of her claws the gun flew from Hayden's hand.

"You little bitch!"

Alex watched Hayden's hand fly from his side to strike Athima and with a fierce cry he pushed Hayden with a brutal force that sucked the breath from his body.

Hayden staggered backward, his eyes wild as Athima's claws swiped his shoulder blade. Alex's hands snared his collar, gripping Hayden tightly before throwing him to the floor. Hayden groaned as his back slammed against the hard surface. He lay there, puffing and gasping, as Alex's and Athima's shadows loomed over him.

"Wait!" Hayden croaked, defeat gripping his throat. "It doesn't have to be like this. I can cut you in on the operation – you'll make a fortune!"

Alex shook his head with disgust. "You're pathetic."

"Just hear me out! We could –"

"I know a judge in the east galaxy," Alex said. "A very unorthodox guy. You'd better believe that I'm going to make you suffer for everything you did to her." He looked at Athima, whose eyes shimmered with optimism. "Perhaps we can arrange to place you with a cellmate with a history of taking out his lonely urges on previous prisoners."

Athima grinned.

"Thima," said Alex, "why don't you grab those chains over there and we'll let this wretch know exactly how it feels to be bound like an animal." Athima trotted toward the chains. "Then we'll call the authorities to make sure he gets exactly what he –"

Athima turned just in time to see Hayden's hand dart into his pocket and pull out a flash of silver. She screamed at the loud boom. Alex stumbled backward and groped at his shoulder.

Hayden scrambled to his feet. "You think I'd carry only one laser gun when my balls are on the line? Ha!"

He pulled the trigger again but Alex dove to the floor. Athima cringed as the bullet exploded against the wall. Hayden's fingers fumbled for the trigger again so fast the gun fell from his hands and slid toward Athima. She lunged forward and stooped to snatch it.

"Aw, screw it!" Hayden snarled. He fled the room, his feet plowing up the stairs like thunder.

Athima rushed to Alex and knelt down to examine his injury. A dark cloud of blood stained his tunic near the top of his shoulder.

"Oh!" Panic shone in her eyes.

"It's all right," he said quickly, grasping her hand and rising to his feet. "He only grazed my shoulder."



A sharp groan echoed from his lips when he ran his finger over the splintered flesh.

"Come on." He pulled Athima swiftly toward the door. "We can still catch him."

Athima gripped the gun tightly as they rushed up the stairs.

"Alex," she blurted out, "Hayden always said if anyone ever found out about his operation, he'd –"

They ran toward the entryway and plunged toward the door that still rattled where it had been flung open. Alex pulled Athima toward the sunlight pouring into the hallway.

"That he'd do what?" Alex cried.

Athima's breath was ragged with fear. "He can't get away, he just can't!"

Alex's hand tightened around Athima's. They rushed through the open door and toppled into blinding daylight.

## Chapter Fourteen

Athima grabbed Alex's arm and pointed to the sky, where Hayden's hunched body was straddling a dragon.

In front of them the coachman's voice spilled a river of fury. "Your friend stole my best dragon! The best one!"

Alex's heart sank as he watched Hayden speed stealthily toward the horizon.

"No!" Athima's eyes were wild. "He's going to kill the others!"

"What?"

She turned to Alex, clinging fiercely to his shoulders. "Hayden always said that if anyone ever discovered his secret that he'd have no problem—"

"Destroying the evidence."

Alex turned his head sharply to the coach, where three disgruntled dragons and one shaken coachman remained. Alex grasped Athima's arm and they sprinted to the coach.

The man cast them a look of bewilderment. "The jerk tried to hijack my coach! When I kicked him down he tore the harness from one of my dragons! My best one! I don't know why he—"

"We need your coach," Alex blurted out. "We have to follow him."

"Coach won't fly straight without the fourth."

"We have to try or—"

The coachman shook his head firmly. "You'd be swinging sideways the moment you hit the sky. You'd get dumped out in less than five seconds."

Alex gave a frustrated cry. He stared at the remaining dragons for a quick moment then sprinted to the front of the coach. One of the dragons tossed his head as Alex began to unfasten the harness that looped under his belly.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing?" the coachman yelled.

Alex didn't answer. When the dragon's body was free of the harness he grabbed the bridle that clung to the creature's face and pulled until the dragon lumbered forward.

"Alex," cried Athima, "what are you doing?"

He grabbed Athima's arm and pulled her toward the dragon. "Come on, I can still see him. We'll catch the bastard yet!"

Athima recoiled. Her tail twitched in nervous spasms.

"I-I can't. I can't ride that thing! I'm afraid, Alex."

He grabbed her by the waist and thrust her high onto the dragon's back. With a grunt he hoisted himself behind her.

Athima's head whipped around to flash him a look of terror. "No, really, Alex, I can't—I can't—"

"Can't wait to nab Hayden so we can save your species and get back to what we do best." Alex grinned. He kissed her cheek, held her tight and drove his heels into the dragon's ribs.

Athima's scream tore through the air as the dragon lunged for the sky.

"What about my dragons?" wailed the coachman. "My babies!"

"I'll give you fifty thousand *dranos* if either of them is harmed!" Alex called back.

"Screw 'em!"

"Call the authorities!" Alex yelled. "Tell them to hurry and—"

The wind smothered Alex's voice, as the coachman became a distant blot.

Alex's spirits soared when he saw Hayden's dragon in the distance. The beast was snorting and hovering rigidly in the air, refusing to go forward while Hayden screamed curses and kicked the creature's belly.

"See that?" Alex said. "We may just be able to catch up to them!"

Athima's fingers tightened around the gun. Alex dug his heels into the dragon's flesh until its wings were flapping in frantic, rhythmic pulses. Athima's body was rigid and though she had stopped screaming her look of terror remained.

"You always did hate dragons," Alex said.

"Still do!"

The wind howled at their ears as they flew along the frothy coast. They were gaining on Hayden, the reluctant gait of his dragon had given them the edge they needed. Hayden seemed unaware that he was being followed. Athima stared down at the foamy magenta water that swirled thirty yards below them. She shuddered.

"Are you all right?" Alex wafted the words gently against her ear.

"Y-yes."

"I won't let him hurt you—or any of the other evils."

Athima turned her head and suppressed her fear long enough to give him a genuine smile. Alex felt his strength renewed by the faith in her eyes. At that moment he was ready to fight for that face, to die for it. He had never cared about anything with such fierceness and his heart winced at the thought of losing her again. He drove his boots into the dragon until foam flew from the beast's mouth.

They were closing in rapidly, their dragon's nostrils snorted steam on the other's tail. Hayden's ears pricked at the flapping sound that had suddenly doubled. His head whipped backward and his eyes bulged wildly.

"Hey, there!" Alex yelled. "Mind if we join you? Athima wants to show you something!"

Athima raised the laser gun.

Hayden yelped. He swiftly tugged the reins and jerked the dragon to the right. Alex followed him like a shadow.

The ocean roared below them, swirling madly against the shore.

"Give it up, Hayden!" Alex called. "Land on the shore now and we'll consider letting you live!"

Hayden's reply was a loud snarl cut short by the rushing wind.

Athima aimed the gun at his back.

"I have to do it," she whispered to Hayden. "We can't risk—"

Athima's words boiled into a scream when Hayden stopped his dragon abruptly, sending them crashing into the other creature. The gun flew from her hand. It fell silently to the ocean below and was quickly consumed by the ravenous waves.

"No!" she wailed.

Hayden flashed a nasty grin before spurring his dragon forward. Alex clicked his heels and they continued the chase.

Suddenly Hayden reached into his pocket and a small portable teleportation module gleamed in the sunlight. His eyes glanced over his shoulder and this time they sparkled with triumph, narrowing on Athima.

"See this?" he yelled. "With one word from me, all your little pals are dead! You're about to be a ghost!"

Athima cried out when Hayden's fingers fumbled to push the buttons. She looked at Alex, a gritty determination shining from her eyes. Alex pulled alongside Hayden and tried to bump the other beast. He swung so close the two animals nearly tripped over each other's wings. And then Athima propelled her body in an act of frantic desperation.

Alex felt her body shift against him as she pulled her feet onto the dragon's back.

"Thima, no!"

With a cry she sprang forward, leaping onto Hayden's dragon with such force she had to dig her claws into the dragon's back to keep from bouncing off. As Hayden's head spun backward his cry of shock was cut short when Athima lunged forward, her leg shooting out like a bullet to kick the device from his hand. It ricocheted against the dragon's wing before it was flung to the ocean below.

Hayden's eyes blazed with a rage that caused Athima to freeze. He leaned back to drive his fist into her face but she ducked quickly and grazed his shoulder with her claws. His howl ripped through the air.

"You little bitch!" he screamed. "I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

The reins fell from his hands and he whipped around in a fury, grabbing a tuft of her golden hair that blew like a ribbon in the wind.

"No!" Alex screamed.

Hayden's dragon, without the rigid hands guiding the bridle, swooped downward, gliding toward the water. Alex yanked his dragon's reins frantically, forcing the beast to follow.

Hayden pulled Athima forward with a brutal jerk. She met his viciousness with a swift blow to his face, inciting him to tear her body from the dragon. With a malicious cry he pushed her into the open air. As she fell she summoned all her strength and snared Hayden's tunic, clenching her claws around the fabric until he was dragged from the dragon's body, tumbling with her into the churning water. Alex watched their bodies slam into the bright water. In an instant he was hurling himself after them.

Alex hit the cold water like a wall and his body began to sink toward the murky depth before he managed to compel his limbs to thrash toward the surface. His eyes darted in all directions, seeking Athima as salty water beat against his face. Hayden was flailing against the current and making a feeble attempt to swim toward the shore.

"Thima!"

The roar of the waves thundered through his ears. He called her name again as his heart was pummeled with fear. Then he saw the glimmer of gold, the tendrils of hair slipping silently below the water's surface.

Alex paddled as fast as he could. When he reached the spot where she had vanished, his arms burst from his sides and cut through the water like knives. He dove down beneath the swirling waves and felt his body engulfed by the somber darkness of the abyss below. The dull echo of the waves above pulsed like a distant heartbeat that became softer the deeper he dove until there was nothing but cold silence. He felt his lungs howling for air but he wouldn't stop until he found her.

When the tips of his fingers bumped against the warm flesh of her arm he thrust his hand forward and pulled with all his strength, struggling to drag her toward the sunlight. Her limp body trailed after him as he kicked and fought his way to the surface.

When Alex felt the salty air prick his face he gulped it down in ragged, choking breaths. He grabbed Athima's shoulders and hauled her up. Her head slumped back against his chest.

"Thima!" he yelled.

Athima's eyelids fluttered. Her nostrils twitched at the air flooding her lungs. Soon she was coughing, the sound like magic to Alex's ears. He held her tightly, spinning her around to smile at her disoriented face.

In a hoarse voice she said, "Thanks for noticing I can't swim."

Alex laughed and kicked his feet in a slow rhythm, keeping their bodies bobbing above the water.

"There's a bad riptide," he said, his eyes darting to Hayden, who was paddling in exhaustion but couldn't reach the shore.

"What'll we do?"

Suddenly the water whipped around them in choppy circles. Alex tilted his chin back and his heart soared with relief. A government spacecraft hovered above them, the engines humming loudly as a long rope ladder was tossed down.

“Oh!” Athima cried. “I can’t believe it!”

Alex snatched the ladder with a joyful laugh. He pushed Athima up onto the last rung until her body gripped it firmly. Then he climbed behind Athima, his body blanketing hers as they were lifted toward the sky.

## Chapter Fifteen

The fluorescent lights were starting to blind Alex's pupils and he rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. Athima sat next to him, nervous, attentive, clutching a blanket around her shoulders. Little drops of saltwater still dripped from her hair. The long table in front of them was the interrogation room's only décor, the plain white walls and the obvious two-way mirror giving the place a sterile feel. The tawny-haired man sitting across the table leaned forward as he talked, his eyes reassuring.

"And rest assured, Mr. Raylen, the precinct in the west galaxy has already uncovered a substantial amount of evidence at Mr. Maverick's farm. Once he was rescued, he was pretty talkative. All the sevilts have been evacuated from the premises and are recuperating in the Orion women's shelter until the pills wear off. Once their strength and voices return, the government has agreed to provide them with a generous financial restitution." He looked at Athima and smiled. "They'll be able to start new lives of their choosing, as free citizens."

Athima's face lit up like a sunrise.

"And Cossani," she said eagerly. "My sister—have they found her yet?"

"I couldn't tell you," he said. "Although I do know that a tracking system was found on Mr. Maverick's property. Apparently he microchipped every sevil under his ownership so I can guarantee that all of them will be accounted for within the next twenty-four hours."

Athima's lips burst into a smile and she squeezed Alex's hand beneath the table.

"We'll be in contact with you over the next few days," the detective said. "I do apologize for keeping you two at the station for so long. I know you've had a very rough ordeal and are anxious to get home. But I do need to ask you one final question, Miss—"

"Athima."

"Miss Athima." He nodded. "As a free woman, you need not be under Mr. Raylen's care anymore if it is your wish. You are no longer his property. If you choose not to accompany Mr. Raylen home, I have an officer that will escort you to the Orion women's shelter where you may reside as long as you wish—until you decide where you wish to go from there."

Alex turned his eyes to Athima. She now had a choice. No longer bound to him as property, she could wander through the universe as she pleased. He felt his heart twisting at the thought of Athima leaving him. He lowered his eyes.

Athima stared straight ahead at the detective and without blinking, said, "I want to stay with Mr. Raylen. Try to separate us and you'll have my claws to contend with."

The detective smiled. "As you wish."

Alex was dizzy with joy at the finality of her words. She was his. And now she was his not because he had paid for her but because she chose to be.

The detective rose slowly and gave them a cordial nod. "Thank you for your cooperation. I'm going to get your statements to the chief now—you two are free to go whenever you like."

He shook each of their hands and walked briskly from the room, the door lurching shut behind him. Alex remained in his daze for several moments, still unable to comprehend everything that had happened over the course of the day. When he lifted his eyes to Athima she wore a smile that instantly infected him until he grinned back at her like a child. As he dove deeply into her soft gray eyes he watched her smile wane as some sad thought entered her mind.

"Alex," she said, "I want you to know something—I never hated you."

"Hated me?"

She nodded. "When you first brought me to Rhysen I acted horribly. Despite my attraction to you, I didn't want to let down my guard. You have to understand that given my situation I didn't have a lot of trust in humans. But you showed me that not all men are bad. I started to let go of my hatred under your care."

He grasped her hand. "But why did you try to run away from me that day in the garden? Were you that unhappy?"

"Oh, it wasn't that!" She squeezed his hand. "No one has ever been kinder to me, Alex. I was sold like an animal but you treated me like a princess. I tried to run away because I made a vow that if I ever had the opportunity to reveal the truth about sevilis then I would take it in an instant. As happy as I was with you, my soul was burdened by the plight of my species. I thought of Cossani—I don't even know whether her master is cruel or kind. I thought of all the other females sold into captivity and I knew I had to try to help them. I can't read but one day when we were walking past your library I saw a book with a sevil on the cover. I thought that maybe there was some clue buried within the pages and I tried to draw your attention to it..."

Alex remembered that day. She had run to the book excitedly, pawing at its glossy cover and he had brushed it off as silliness. A pang of guilt gnawed at his stomach.

"I'm sorry," he said earnestly. "I didn't know—"

"Of course you didn't. How were you to gather my situation from that small incident? That's why I tried to run away. But I would have returned to you—please believe me, Alex. I just knew there was no way to convey my situation to you. I thought that if I could make it back to Hayden's compound I could sneak into the place and find some kind of evidence... I don't know what I was expecting. But I couldn't sit back in luxury while my people were being sold like cattle. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do! I just wish I had understood sooner. If I had known the true purpose of those pills I would have never forced them down your throat."



"They weren't so bad," Athima said. "I felt constantly as if three or four glasses of wine were coursing through my body. My mind was always cloudy but the pills couldn't suppress my emotions. How I felt about you was genuine, Alex."

He pulled her into a relieved hug and breathed in the sweet smell of her hair.

"Just tell me something," Alex whispered, his features darkening. "Did-did Jess hurt you? Did he force you to—"

Athima pulled back to give him a reassuring look. "No," she said, "please don't tear your heart into pieces. Jess had planned to but he wouldn't take me by force. He wanted my full submission and when I refused to bend to his will he exploded with anger and chained me in the basement. He thought he could break me by leaving me alone in darkness without food—without anything but my misery. Each day he would enter the basement and ask if I was ready to bow at his knees and call him master but I refused. Yesterday my voice returned and when Jess came down the steps and asked if I was ready to play nice I spoke my first words in years, 'Go fuck yourself'."

She grinned as Alex burst into laughter.

"You're even better with narration," he said.

Her head tilted to the side and she looked at him with smiling eyes. In that moment Alex was unable to suppress his emotion any longer. He warmed her lips with the eager heat of his breath before their mouths met in a frantic collision. Athima's lips parted and suddenly Alex was pouring into her the kiss he'd been holding back since he first caught sight of her that morning. She kissed him with a ferocity that made his fingers tremble, pressing her body forward until she slid from her chair and straddled his lap.

"I love you, Alex," she whispered.

Many times he'd uttered the words to her and each time his heart sank a little when his words were met with silence. But now there was no wondering, no question. Her voice drove the words into his brain.

"I love you too, Thima."

He squeezed her until her body threatened to burst.

Athima's eyes darted to the closed door. "Alex." She smiled. "We're alone...and it's an awfully long journey back to Rhysen."

His eyes widened. "You want to—*here*?"

In response she rocked her hips boldly against the seam of his pants. Alex's feet twitched for a moment before the pain became unbearable. His hands grasped her waist and he lifted her onto the table, smiling at the way her ass smacked against the surface. When their eyes met Athima's face was sparkling with mischief. He'd ached for that impish smile so badly its shadow had haunted his dreams in her absence. But glistening in her eyes was a deeper emotion, a flicker of genuine happiness. As he urged his pants down his thighs Athima spread her legs wide, biting her lip and staring at him without blinking. With a groan he seized her by the hips and drove himself between her legs until her heat engulfed him. She clung to his shoulders, sliding her hips forward until

he couldn't go any deeper. Alex drank thirstily from her lips, her sighs rumbling down his throat as he began to thrust. Her breasts bounced in quick little thuds, the rosy nipples dancing before his eyes until he couldn't resist lowering his head and taking one in his mouth. Athima's moan vibrated in her chest, spurring him to pump harder. Her nipple slid from his lips and Alex stared into the gray eyes that burned with electricity. For a long moment they gazed in silence at each other until Athima leaned forward and flicked her wet tongue across his lips.

She clenched down on him, her spasms milking his cock. She shook and twitched until her orgasm poured over Alex, urging him to release his own tension. Hot liquid flew from his body and she closed her eyes as it seared through her. Alex gripped the table to stop himself from melting into the floor.

As his lips covered Athima's dewy flesh with kisses two men watched in awe from behind the narrow mirror.

The younger one wasn't blinking. "Think they know this is a two-way mirror?"

"Everyone knows," said the other. "Difference is these two don't care."

Alex's forehead slumped against Athima's and he took her face in his hands, letting her little heaves of breaths waft across his lips. When their pulses stopped screaming and the dizziness fled from their bodies Alex stooped to grab his pants. Athima smoothed the ruffled hair that fell in wild tangles around her body. They exchanged childish grins before Alex took her arm and led her toward the door.

From behind the mirror the younger officer scratched his head. "Did you *see* them?" A whistle rattled through his lips. "They went at it like it was the end of the universe! Where can I get some of that?"

The older man shook his head at his comrade. "Can't go out and just pluck something like that off the street. Those two have that one-in-a-million connection."

The young officer rolled his eyes.

"It's true, kid," he said. "If your heart's on fire then your flesh will be an inferno."

They watched as the two flaming hearts left the room, kicking the past behind them.

\* \* \* \* \*

The suns dropped below the distant hills, lighting the thin layer of clouds like an orange lampshade. Streaks of pink and gold fell to the earth, caught the tips of the tall grass and bathed Athima in a wash of pink. They sat at the peak of the large hill half a mile from the manor. Alex was eager to share the view that always lulled his heart into tranquility. He ran his palm over her hand, wanting her to understand that she belonged here, it was hers now.

Athima's gaze roamed the landscape tucked beneath the blanket of dusk. She let her body fall back against Alex's chest, sinking into his arms with peaceful eyes. Alex squeezed her tight as if he half expected her to disappear.

"Happy, Thima?"

"Happy," she whispered.

The warmth of spring kept the breeze balmy and it wafted against their flesh like the warm breath of a lover.

"Why don't we kick your happiness up a notch?" Alex smiled.

Athima tilted her head to flash him an inquisitive look.

"I got a message this morning," he said, "while you were asleep. They tracked down Cossani. She's on a ship heading toward Orion as we speak. She'll be here by early afternoon tomorrow."

"Oh Alex!"

Her lips pressed excitedly against his, pouring her joy into him.

He managed to break away from her flurry of kisses and say, "And she can stay at Rhysen as long as she wants. Indefinitely if you both desire it."

"I-I don't know what to say."

"I'll help you out." He grinned. "'Alex, you're a god. A being of grace and perfection. Oh, how I worship you, Alex! I tremble beneath your mighty shadow of goodness!'"

She laughed and swatted his shoulder until he couldn't suppress his own laughter.

Alex's face was sincere when he said, "Athima, anything you want is yours. Rhysen is yours as much as it is mine and you don't need my permission—for anything. Got it?"

She nodded but her face told him that she was still unable to comprehend the breadth of her freedom.

A low hum pricked at their ears. It sounded like a soft chorus of whispers but slowly grew to loud chatter.

Athima turned her perplexed face to Alex. "What is that sound?"

He smiled and pointed to a *cresnia* tree in the near distance. Along its branches hundreds of tight pink buds trembled with restless vigor.

"Keep watching," Alex whispered. "It's part of the reason I brought you to this spot. In the winter horned sparrows lay their eggs inside the small blossoms of *cresnia* trees. Spring sunshine incubates the eggs until —"

Athima gasped as hundreds of rose-colored flowers burst open, releasing a swarm of bright little birds, like jewels thrown into the darkening sky.

"There's so many!" she exclaimed.

The sparrows hovered in the air, looking around them and taking in the strange new world they'd been thrown into. They quickly formed a chirping flock and rushed forward, swooping down low and flying past Alex and Athima. A look of wonder decorated Athima's face as the birds whirled past them, their ruby wings so close they

nearly brushed her cheek. The birds raced toward the sloping hills, anxious to see what waited for them beyond the horizon.

"I thought you might like that."

Athima turned to press her warm lips against his. She curled her body until she faced him, her legs wrapping snugly around his hips. Alex deepened the kiss, coaxing her mouth open until the caress of her tongue burned a fiery trail straight to his cock. His lips stole a hungry groan from her throat and the sound made him dizzy.

"One of the best things," he whispered, "of being able to finally hear your voice, is that I get to enjoy all these lovely moans and sighs of yours."

His lips pressed hot kisses along the soft flesh of her throat.

"That's nothing," she said, a smile in her voice. "Now that I'm able to talk I can finally tell you that I've been dying to try anal."

Alex's mouth fell open, his fingers trembling until Athima's laughter snapped him out of his daze.

"What?" She grinned. "Can't a girl make a simple request?"

"I love you."

Athima tilted her head back, letting playful laughter shake her body. "You'd better get used to this," she said. "You may have always suspected I was insatiable but now you've got verbal proof."

She squirmed backward and crouched on all fours. She turned her head to flash him a wicked smile as she slowly raised her ass high in the air, caressing it invitingly with her tail. Alex felt a wild rush sweep from his brain to his groin and by the time he unfastened his belt his cock was already throbbing with urgency.

"Now don't go all gentle on me," she purred.

Her tail flicked his cock teasingly. Separating Athima's soft cheeks, he let his cock linger at her tight entrance. She held her breath.

"Thima, unless you beg very sweetly, I will *never* fuck you gently."

He eased himself inside her ass, groaning when she involuntarily clenched.

She whined a little as he slid deep inside her. As Alex began to move in slow, fluid thrusts, he savored the sensation of having his cock squeezed and sucked at the same time.

Athima began to relax and enjoy the intensely pleasurable sensations that bordered on pain. She closed her eyes and began to rock her hips, meeting his thrusts. She wiggled her ass and pushed back against him, turning her head to flash him a smile that made his cock threaten to burst.

Alex plunged inside her with a renewed sense of desire – a bit too sharply – and she whimpered from the force of it.

He stroked her ass and whispered, "Come on, Thima – you can take it."

"Mmm...but can you?"

She let him pump for a while then suddenly slammed her ass against his cock, wrenching the orgasm from his body. He groaned dizzily and gripped her hips, holding her tight as the tension poured from his cock. She tilted her head, a wild strand of hair falling across her face and Alex saw that her smile had turned thoroughly wicked.

Between breaths he said, "You're evil. Deliciously evil." He pulled out slowly. "But if you think we're going back to the house before I see that sweet little body tremble then you're mistaken."

Her eyes sparkled as he flipped her onto her back and pressed her firmly into the soft grass. She bit her lip in anticipation as his tongue trailed down her neck toward the hard nipple crowning her breast. She arched her back, rising to meet his warm lips. He sucked hard. She sighed. Athima's flesh poured fire and he sucked until his tongue burned with it. Alex kissed his way down to the wet, velvet flesh between her thighs. Her pussy was flushed with desire, aching for release. He hovered there for a long moment, teasing her with hot breath, his lips barely brushing her pink heat.

"Alex...Alex, please..."

He savored the sound of her voice carried between pants, a sound Alex never thought he'd get enough of.

"You're an angel when you beg. Do it some more."

Athima flicked her tail between her legs and batted his cheek, making him laugh. He grasped the smooth flesh of her thigh and lowered his face to give her pussy a slow, torturous lick. She squirmed against his lips, pleading for more. His licks became harder, more demanding as she rocked her hips frantically, eager to release the tension Alex had created. Athima's body strained as the first wave hit. He grasped her hips and pulled her closer, driving his tongue into her wet crevice so he could feel the pulse of her orgasm from the inside. She whispered his name as the last contraction flooded her body and Alex fell in love with her voice all over again.

As he scooped up Athima's body and pulled her gently to his chest a low hum vibrated from her throat. Alex couldn't help but smile when he discovered Athima hadn't lost her ability to purr.

## About the Author

While not yet the Ernest Hemingway of erotic literature, carnal story ideas swarm Courtney Bee's mind faster than she can write them down, so expect to see more moaning maidens and femme fatale fairies in the near future. Her stories have appeared in *Hustler*, *Playgirl*, and numerous anthologies. While candles and rose petals can be lovely, Courtney has always craved erotic encounters with a little more bite. Bondage? Spankings? Sex on the rough side? This is what happens when Catholic girls gone astray get their hands on a computer.

Courtney currently lives in California and can often be found watching *Strangers With Candy* reruns and listening to the Rolling Stones. To make her feel special please visit [www.courtneybee.com](http://www.courtneybee.com).

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