

Loose

The Sirens: FOWND

Sara Ruston

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage, voyeurism, homoerotic sex, and BDSM).

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Chapter One

Shayla stared at the poisonous green letters announcing the sender of the new message. *The Jheknan Full Employment Office*. “Damn!” She counted backward quickly to her last job. It had been ... four months ago. A wave of queasiness rushed through her. She had lost track of time. How could she have been so stupid?

She leaned her head against her hand and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. Visions of crowded, poorly maintained subsidized housing cells danced through her brain, followed by images of the tasteless but healthy food served in the government cafeterias. It was enough to keep you alive -- they were careful about that. But making it enjoyable smacked of waste and coddling.

She had done the whole trip for two endless months when she’d first come to Drobery six years ago. She had survived physically, but being constantly surrounded by the other government clients and their emotions had almost dragged her down into the abyss. The depression, the hopelessness, the loneliness -- struggling against the waves of negative emotion had taken every bit of strength she could gather.

She did *not* want to face it again.

She knew the message was still there. She wasn’t going to wake up and find this was a dream, and pretending would only put off the inevitable. With a deep sigh, she opened her eyes. When she touched the screen of her ancient computer, her fingertip felt cold. *You have exceeded the maximum time allowed without work. Report in person to the Full Employment Office.*

She remembered that place -- remembered it with dread. She had spent a number of miserable hours there after moving here. With a tap, she closed up the computer and turned to face her room. It wasn’t much -- it was only a small room with a bed, some cheap but beautiful tapestries, her clothes, and a small collection of entertainment chips -- but it was hers. She had earned it all herself.

After arriving in the city, she had tried many jobs, but nothing worked out. Her damned empathy caused problems one way or another every time. When she finally tried acting and her empathy actually helped, she breathed a sigh of relief and figured that she would work her way up to full-time employment. But it hadn't worked out that way. Many theatrical productions used computer-generated actors instead of live actors, so the availability of work depended on the current fashion. As a source of income it was clearly not enough; she needed another occupation.

Maybe she didn't belong here on Jheknan. She was an empath -- an unrestricted, illegal empath. The penalty for being unregistered was time in prison -- and they would install the inhibitor chip. Some people tolerated the chip, some people went crazy, and the older you were when it was installed the more likely you were to break. Shayla didn't know how she had escaped getting the chip as a child, but by the time she realized that she had empathic abilities she knew enough about the chip to hide her talents. That made it impossible to apply for the best jobs.

There had to be a settled planet somewhere that would welcome her and her abilities, but it would take her decades to save enough money to afford a ticket to even the closest planet. And it had restrictions against empaths, too.

She stood shakily and leaned against the window, looking out at the crowded street several stories below. She loved watching people from the safe distance provided by her third-floor room. The quiet privacy had never seemed so wonderful as it did now that it was threatened.

She had to fix this somehow. One thing at least she had learned about government bureaucracies: delaying the process served no useful purpose. They would only be harder to deal with later. She might as well get the interview over with. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed her cloak from the hook and headed out.

Janis, her roommate, was curled up on the soft couch, reading the daily news on her personal comp, absent-mindedly chewing on a strand of her long, light-brown hair. She was still in her sleeping clothes, since her job at a gallery didn't start until early afternoon.

Shayla wrapped the cloak around her shoulders. "I'm going out for an interview. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Janis looked up and raised her eyebrows. "Interview? What interview?"

Shayla scowled. "The Full Employment people want to see me."

"Shayla, I'm so sorry." Janis put down the news display. "You didn't get your hours in this quarter?"

"I guess not. I hadn't been paying attention." Shayla sighed. "Do you know anybody that's casting right now?"

Janis shook her head. "No. It's off season, and money has been tight. Most of the theaters have been doing audience participation shows instead."

Shayla bit her lip. "Looks like I'm going to have to find some more job options."

"It does look like you need to cast a wider net." She looked down at the news display in front of her. "Look at this ad for personality adjustments. What about something like that? Have you ever thought about relationship counseling? You're always doing it for free."

Shayla rolled her eyes. "And just how would I advertise? Non-registered empath will take money and give advice?"

"Damn, I keep forgetting that you aren't legal." She shook her head. "We'll think of something. Go talk to the jerks. When you get back, we'll brainstorm."

Janis's very real concern warmed Shayla. At least she had friends now. That was a huge improvement over six years ago. "Thanks. I can use all the help I can get."

She waved and headed for the stairs instead of the people-mover to the ground floor. Exercise was better for her in this state anyway.

Outside it was a cool, gray day, like most days in Drobery. The jokers claimed that Drobery had two seasons -- dark and rainy, and light and rainy. Occasionally it was clear and sunny, and when that happened the whole city took a holiday. People headed to the beaches, the parks, and the hills outside the city. Shayla liked the cool, moist grayness, but a long stretch of it could be depressing. Today it matched her mood perfectly.

The buildings were a mixture of permofab structures from the settlement of the planet and every architectural fashion since then. Any kind of building you could want -- square, rounded, intricately decorated, plain -- as long you wanted pastel. Pastel blue, pastel yellow, pastel green, pastel pink. The pastel covered hills were beautiful in their own way, and she loved the sheer familiarity. Drobery had been so big and frightening when she had arrived here from the small, rural city where she had grown up. Now it was home, even if it wasn't a perfect home.

She passed several neighborhood cafés crowded with people drinking stimulants and socializing with friends. Bookstores, art galleries, licensed sex shops, virtual stim parlors, old-fashioned art vid theatres: the old quarter was stuffed with all kinds of creative and marginal businesses. Those who believed in sin -- like the Reformed Messiah cultist preaching on the corner -- probably thought it was the source of all sin in the city, too. But she had walked around all parts of the city, and she *knew* that the old quarter had not cornered the market on sin. The suits in the downtown offices were just as lustful as the musicians and writers hanging out here.

As she walked south, she passed the offices of lawyers, insurance companies, importers, and less identifiable businesses tucked into the smaller, darker alleys. Finally she reached the block of government offices between the old quarter and the financial and business center of the city. The Full Employment Office was a bland but irritating peach color. She scowled at the outside. It ought to have a skull and crossbones or some other ominous symbol; it ought to be colored something dark and lurid. But of course they were pretending that they were destroying people's lives for their own good, so that would've been too obvious.

There were two other people in the waiting room. Shayla gave her name to the uninterested clerk at the counter and plopped down on a cheap turquoise ceramic chair. It was impossible to find a comfortable position, and the air smelled stale and musty. One of the men waiting looked like he hadn't bathed in about three weeks. She breathed in deeply and changed her estimate to four weeks. Her chest tightened. She hated being lumped in with this total loser.

Finally her name was called. With a resurgence of the queasiness of anxiety, she went through the open door to a back hallway, and then into a small, even more stuffy office. The bureaucrat sitting behind the desk looked like she was trying -- but failing -- to assume an expression of sympathetic support. Her skin was dry and dusty looking, her smile tight. "Hello." She glanced quickly at the comp on her desk. "Shayla. I'm Quara Shot." She looked down again. "You're an actress?"

Shayla nodded and then realized that Quara wasn't looking at her. "Yes."

"You haven't had any paying work in more than four months, is that right?" Quara looked up through narrowed eyes.

"I guess. I've worked with Jerrod Herglass and the Artful Viewer, but they haven't done any new performances lately." She felt like a child called to the principal's office for not doing her homework, coming up with inadequate excuses.

"You do realize that if you don't get your hours in, your stipend will be reduced to forty percent standard, and you will be required to live in government housing?"

Her skin got cold and clammy. "Yes, I do know that." And she knew that it forced her to deal with judgmental, obnoxious bureaucrats like this one. Maybe that was why these people were so difficult. It was a form of punishment.

Quara peered at her, then turned back to her holo keyboard. "The first thing that I'll do is search requests for employment. Sometimes we find that people are not searching well enough or are too picky." She paused, frowning at something on the screen. "You're not too picky are you?"

"No, I'm not too picky." Shayla repressed a scowl as she realized that Quara had enjoyed making her say that. She wished she could turn off her empathy. Without it, she could have pretended that this woman really was helpful and sympathetic.

Quara tapped away while she waited quietly. She felt a surge of surprise and looked up. Quara looked puzzled. A few more taps, and the comp display opened up on a flat, white area on the wall of the room.

"You're in luck. A job is listed that you might be qualified for." Quara frowned. "You probably wouldn't have found it because it lists acting as a backup skill. It's an unusual job. It's just a short contract to start with, but there's the possibility for additional contracts if they're satisfied with your performance."

Shayla looked at the display. *Jheknan Security Organization*. Her head felt light. The spooks. The Organization. The government bureaucracy in charge of spying, covert operations, and national security. God, she was in for it now. If they found out that she was an unregistered empath ...

"I've connected your profile with the job. You're scheduled for an interview tomorrow right after lunch. Details will be sent to your personal comp."

She fought down her fear and cleared her throat. "I'm required to interview for this job? It's not a real acting job."

Quara lowered her eyebrows and pursed her lips. "It matches your profile well enough. It would look very bad on your record to turn it down. And you'd be required to go straight to reduced stipend."

"No, that won't be necessary. Appointment tomorrow. I've got it." Shayla stood up. "Thank you for your help."

Quara waved her hand. "You can show yourself out." She turned back to her desk as Shayla quietly left the room.

It was raining. Shayla turned her face up and closed her eyes, letting the wetness cool her face. Maybe they wouldn't find out about her. She had made it this far without being discovered. The Organization was just another bureaucracy. She would be just another employee. Finally she sighed and turned toward home. The only way through this mess was forward.

* * * * *

Gavin Trelgan wrapped his arms around the woman and gave her one of his hottest, full-tongue kisses. What was her name anyway? Tanya? Terry? With a minor eddy of irritation he opened his mind to hers. Terry. And she was imagining herself as a slave girl and him as her master. Damn. Not the cuffs *again*. He was getting dead tired of all the women with fantasies of being chained up while he did all the work.

He ran his hands over a well-rounded ass and pulled her against his erection. Some straightforward sex would be a nice change of pace. But no, they all had to imagine themselves being forced by some dark, vicious brute -- who also just happened to be deeply in love with them.

He would've rolled his eyes if he hadn't been in the middle of a seduction. He double-checked. She wasn't budging on the fantasy. Time to get out the cuffs. Since he was going to consume her sexual energy, it was only fair to give her what she wanted. But next time he was going to check out the hidden desires first. He didn't want to do the master and slave girl thing again for at least another month.

"Finally I have you at my mercy," he growled. Her eyes fluttered open. "I will fasten you to the bed and have my way with you."

Her eyes were wide open and glazed. That had done it. Her sex was throbbing in anticipation. His empathic abilities were minor compared to his telepathic skills, but even a level one empath could recognize that reaction.

She cleared her throat. "Oh, master. I'm an obedient slave. I would never do anything to displease you." Sounded like she'd done this one before. It must be a favorite.

"I'll teach you to look at a man without permission." He opened a drawer in a cabinet next to the bed and took out the cuffs. The chains were already in place. Terry hopped up on the bed and positioned herself, spreading her legs.

If this was his fantasy, he would have punished her for that. It was enough to destroy the whole coercion illusion -- but this was for her, not him. He snorted, climbed up on the bed, and snapped the cuffs on her wrists, fastening them to the chains. Then he fastened her ankles, with enough slack in the chains so that she could bend her knees.

He was busy licking and sucking various tender parts, when he heard his communicator beep. He paused. He recognized that beep. It was the one he had assigned to messages from the Organization. What the hell did they want now? He went back to his stimulating task, opening his mind to hers so he could maximize the effect. She was right on the edge. He moved up her body until his cock was positioned in front of her lips.

"Slave, suck your master." He seemed to have hit the right note. She eagerly slurped his cockhead into her mouth and proceeded to suck enthusiastically. It didn't take too much to bring him up to her level. He scooted back and positioned himself.

"Now accept the manhood of your master." He plunged into her with one smooth, deep stroke, and soon found the most effective rhythm for his thrusts. When orgasm seemed imminent, he opened to her. Energy rushed into him like water filling a container, but he controlled the energy flow carefully to avoid draining her. He didn't want her passing out. Several strokes later they both came and he collapsed.

After a moment he rolled over on his back. His skin was hot and tingly, and he buzzed with power. The energized, almost high feeling of brimming with sexual energy was wonderful, but sometimes it made him restless. This was definitely one of those restless times -- plus he was curious about the Organization message. No operations were on the schedule, so something new must have come up. What could it be?

He turned to look at Terry. Her eyes were closed, and her arms and legs sprawled across the bed in total relaxation. Damn. It didn't look like she'd be moving for hours.

Frowning impatiently, he unfastened the cuffs, and shook her shoulder. "Terry. Time to get up. You need to go home."

She half-opened her eyes. "Hmfph? Home? Wha' time is it?"

"Uh, it's late. You've been here for hours. I'll get your clothes."

After dressing Terry, he shooed her on her way with a telepathic suggestion that they had spent several hours hanging out.

Stretching his arms out to each side, he yawned deeply. He was tired of having to find food a couple of times a month. He grimaced at the thought of what Lillorian would say if she heard him call the women “food.” *They deserve our respect for providing us with the energy that we need. Do not denigrate them.* Okay, he was tired of having to look for *energy donors* every month. It was definitely one of the worst parts about being a Siren.

Not that he had much chance of experiencing the best part -- a true mating with a Siren female. There was little chance of that for him, since there were no Siren females of the right age on Jheknan. He had accepted that a long time ago. But he was determined to make the world safe for his people, or even find a whole different world if it came to that.

He sat down at the desk and activated his personal comp. The message was from Harl Cogger, the person he worked with at the Jheknan Security Organization. Some people might call him boss, but not Gavin. It was a voluntary association of equals for mutual benefit. Or even better -- for the benefit of Gavin and his people, if he could manage it. He wasn't quite sure why they were willing to hire Sirens for their undercover operations. Sure, he had special abilities, but that didn't seem to make any difference with other branches of the government -- they still wouldn't hire Sirens. Whatever their reasons were, the information he had access to through the Organization had proved invaluable in the past, so he kept working for them.

The message was short: *Operation on Kimur planned for one week from today. Female operative will accompany you. Candidates for review available in three days.* Damn. The Organization and an operation on Kimur -- this was going to be tricky. He already had several secret Siren undercover teams in place on Kimur, investigating it as a place of refuge. He had to keep all knowledge of that from the Organization.

They were foisting a female operative on him, too. He ran a hand through his hair. If she followed the Organization's orders, they would be working for opposite goals. She might even figure that out and rat on him. Why was the JIO doing this now? Oh, yeah. He smiled. Their efforts to keep Kimur a closed planet must be working even better than he had thought. The Organization must have realized the vote was going to go the wrong way -- for them -- and this was a last minute attempt to fix it.

Gavin sat back in his chair. He couldn't think of a legitimate reason to refuse an assistant. It could be, though, that there weren't any qualified women for the position. He was positive that nobody could fill his particular requirements.

Chapter Two

Shayla arrived early at the café, located in an alley just west of the old quarter. The two tables set up outside were empty today -- it was cool and damp again. She stepped inside, waited a moment to allow her eyes to grow used to the dark, and looked around. It wasn't a new or fashionable place. The molded fabstruct was grimy around the edges, but the floors were clean enough, and the drink and food dispensers looked functional. There were a few scattered people sitting by themselves in the booths, but nobody who matched the description of the man she was supposed to meet.

The Organization flunky who made the appointment said that this Gavin Trelgan had the final word on her acceptance for the job. He apparently didn't work out of the actual Organization offices. Shayla hadn't been sure what to wear to an undercover job interview in a café. Somehow normal interview clothes seemed inappropriate, so she had worn her everyday clothes -- stretchy black pants and shirt with embedded sparkle thread.

She slid into one of the booths, and considered the choices on the drink dispenser. Normally she avoided stimulants at this time of day, but the fluttery feeling in her stomach didn't seem compatible with sugary or alcoholic drinks. Finally she punched in an order for lo-stim and settled back with a deep sigh.

She needed to make a good impression. Despite the danger of the Organization finding out about her empathy, the danger of ending up in the housing cells was even greater. And this job would take her off-planet. She might not get a chance like this for years. If she found Kimur a better place than Jheknan, maybe she would ... just disappear. From the job description, though, it didn't sound like she would actually be seeing a lot of Kimur. She looked restlessly toward the door. She was an actress. What sort of impression should she try to create? If only she knew more about what this guy was looking for.

The door on the drink dispenser lit up. She removed her cup of lo-stim and took a sip. At least it was hot, even if the flavor resembled old shoes. She wrinkled her nose.

A few minutes later the café door opened. A dark figure in a long cape entered the room. The bright outside light was behind him so she couldn't see his face, but it must be Gavin Trelgan because he headed straight toward her.

As he approached she could see him more clearly -- curly dark hair, regular features, good-humored mouth. Her eyes slid down his body. He was an impressive hunk of masculinity. Broad chest, great arms, interesting bulge. Her eyes slid back up to his. And he was observant. The look in his eye and the quirk of his eyebrow told her he had seen her reaction.

Shayla stiffened. She didn't do gorgeous guys anymore. In her experience, they were nothing but trouble. It didn't matter that her body had gone on high alert. She had learned to ignore her body -- or at least keep it under her control.

He held his hand out to her. "You must be Shayla."

She hesitated, then touched his hand with hers. His skin was warm, almost hot, and he gave the impression of resilient strength. "Yes, I'm Shayla." She waved to the other side of the booth. "Have a seat."

Gavin slid into the seat. "I'm Gavin Trelgan, and I'll be leading the Kimurian operation."

He seemed large in the confined space of the booth, making her feel small and feminine. She wasn't sure that she liked the feeling.

She cleared her throat. "So, do you come here often?"

He shrugged his shoulders out of his cape, and she was careful not to let her eyes drop down the line of his muscular arms. Nope, didn't see them. And she didn't see that fine, broad chest either.

His warm green eyes met hers. "I meet people here occasionally, but it's not really my neighborhood. Do you live nearby?"

"Not really. I have a place in the old quarter."

He nodded. "I'm in the Western Gate district myself, but I'm in the old quarter often." He pulled his pocket computer out and set it on the table.

"Do you normally have meetings like this in cafés?"

"I prefer not to advertise to the whole city that I'm working for JIO. Do you have a problem with the location?" He raised his eyebrows.

"No, not at all. Just curious." Shayla bit her lip. Telling a reclusive leader of an undercover operation that she was curious probably wasn't a career move. She tried to detect his emotions but got nothing. Her gift was sometimes unreliable.

But Gavin just turned to the drink dispenser and punched in an order. "Did the Organization brief you on the job?" He looked down at the computer, tapped on the holo-keyboard a few times, and looked up.

"Yes. They gave me the sublim training on Kimurian language and culture, and sent me home with the anchoring texts, which I'm working through."

He waved his hand impatiently. "Sure. I mean, did they tell you what you would be doing on Kimur?"

"I'll be playing the part of a Kimurian noblewoman from an isolated area. I'm supposed to gather information from designated targets on their attitudes toward off-planet access, and possibly try to influence them."

"That's the brief story." He glanced down at his comp. "You don't have any experience at this kind of work." His voice was flat.

"No. But it's just a form of acting, and I've done a lot of acting. I've taken all the free-study courses available and worked with a number of professional actors."

He settled back in his seat and looked at her levelly. "Acting is not the same as undercover work."

She tightened her lips. "If you explain what you think the differences are, maybe I could relieve your mind."

"For one thing, you have to act all the time, not just for a brief time onstage."

She took a sip of her drink. "Perhaps I misunderstood the job," she said carefully. "I was told that I would have a private room at this ... this house party. Surely I'll only be in company at meal times and for a few entertainments. That's hardly twenty-four hours a day."

Gavin looked at her for a minute from under lowered brows. She got the strong feeling that he didn't want to give her the job. It didn't seem to be coming through like her usual empathic perceptions, but she was convinced of it anyway. This beautiful piece of male was trying to give her the brush-off, even though he knew nothing about her.

He looked down at his comp again. "You haven't been working in a while, I see."

She tilted her chin up. "The market for acting has been poor lately."

"You have no other talents or skills? No other job possibilities?" There was a note of incredulity in his voice.

Shayla firmed her shoulders and glared at him. "I have lots of talents and skills." She paused. Of course she couldn't even mention her main talent -- her empathy. "I just haven't found the right occupation to use them. Yet." She crossed her arms. "I don't see that my job history is relevant. I can do this job. That should be all that matters."

Damn. Was she arguing with him? Talk about stupid moves. If she kept this up, she'd blow this entirely.

He settled back in his seat, and crossed his arms, a look of frustration on his face.

She had to try another approach. Instead of fighting the sexual awareness between them, she would use it. This was just an interview. It's not like she was committing to anything, and she needed this job. Discreetly taking a deep breath she soaked up his spicy, masculine fragrance. This wouldn't take acting. All she had to do was give free rein to that inner slut that she tried to keep under control. She ran her eyes up and down his finely muscled body and smiled. She smiled with her mouth, her face, her body. "Hey, I promise I can handle it. I've got it covered."

Gavin sat up and looked at her with more attention, then settled back in his seat and slowly ran his eyes down her body. His eyes flicked back to her face. He smiled back, an incredibly sexy smile with heat in his eyes.

Shayla felt her body clench. God, no. It was one thing to use the energy between them. This surge of lust scared her. This wasn't some boytoy she could pick up in a bar and never see again. She had to concentrate on getting the job. She could control this.

Her eyes lost focus as she consciously relaxed and thought of scary, disgusting things. The government cafeteria, for example ... Her desire dissipated. She looked across the table and found Gavin looking at her intently, a look of curiosity replacing the heat.

He lowered his eyebrows. "What did you just do?"

"What? I didn't do anything." She looked around in surprise.

"Okay. Don't tell me. But I'll figure it out eventually." His voice sounded confident.

Shayla was confused. What *was* he talking about? Why would he have this peculiar reaction? Damn, could she have been broadcasting? Normally she just felt other people's emotions, they didn't feel hers -- as far as she knew. If he received and recognized emotions that she had broadcast, he would know she was uninhibited, since only uninhibited empaths could broadcast. Her eyes widened, and she stared at him in shock. This had never happened to her before.

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You do fill the basic requirements for the job, but before I can give you a green light you have to pass a test scenario in the virtual reality room." He looked down at his comp, entered something, and looked back up. "I've made an appointment for you tomorrow at the Organization office. Any questions?"

"Do I need to bring anything?"

"No. The costume will be there. Study your materials." He shrugged. "Don't get too nervous."

"Right." This would only decide her entire life. She controlled the urge to make a sarcastic remark.

One of the other patrons got up to leave. She waited for him to pass before continuing the conversation. As he passed their table, he glanced at them. She recognized him at the same time that he recognized her. Billy Cochrane.

"Shayla! I didn't know you hung out here." He held out his hand.

Shayla touched her palm to his. "Billy. I don't hang out here. I was just meeting ... a friend."

Damn. Billy was one of the most social beings in the old quarter. She would never get away without introducing them.

Billy held out his hand to Gavin, raising his eyebrows. She gave in to the inevitable. "Billy, this is Gavin Trelgan. Gavin, Billy Cochrane." Gavin touched Billy's hand, murmuring something appropriately polite.

Billy frowned. "Trelgan, Trelgan. Sounds familiar." His face lit up. "Hey, are you one of the Trelgans that owns the Pink Palace?"

Gavin smiled faintly. "It's a family business." She looked at him in surprise. What was someone who worked for the Organization doing owning one of the biggest entertainment and sex establishments in the city?

Billy sat down on the edge of her bench. "You guys give great parties. I've heard good things about them." He smiled genially at Gavin. "Hey, a bunch of Shayla's friends are getting together to give her a party tonight. Since you're a friend of hers, too, how about we all come down to the Palace?"

She flushed in embarrassment. Here she was trying to impress a prospective boss and her friend was hitting him up for a favor. "No, that's not necessary. I'm sure we'll have a great time at the Seven Strands."

There was a short pause before Gavin said, "Please come. Just give the bouncer Shayla's name to get in." A muscle jumped in his cheek but he didn't look upset.

Shayla's face felt hot. Maybe she could come down with a sudden illness and derail the whole plan. Yeah, and maybe one of the moons would turn blue. Free entrance to the Palace party? Trying to keep her friends from going would be like trying to turn aside a planetscraper.

She looked at Billy pointedly. "See you later, Billy. It was nice."

He winked. "Right. I get the picture. I'll see you tonight." He stood up and with a wave, left the café.

She turned to Gavin. "I'm sorry about Billy."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "No problem." He shrugged. "It's a big party. A few more people won't make much of a difference. We are just talking a few people, right?"

She counted mentally. "Oh, not more than ten. Or twelve." She flushed.

"Sure." He nodded. "I may see you tonight -- or maybe not. I don't always attend, but I'll see you tomorrow for sure."

Shayla sat and watched as he left the café. Did he realize she was an unregistered empath? Would he turn her in? Registered empaths weren't common, but weren't unknown either. None of her friends except Janis knew she was unregistered, and they had no way to

recognize the difference -- but it looked like Gavin could. She rested her head in her hands. It was starting to ache.

What would she do if she didn't get the job? She had to come up with a plan. Time was running out.

* * * * *

Gavin slipped through the private, backdoor entrance into the Pink Palace's party area. He looked around as he considered the choices. Loud music came from the asteroids-themed room to the right. That didn't appeal. The room to the left, with a water planet theme, catered to serious drinkers. He sighed. The middle room was designed for conversation and small social groups and was the only real option.

He almost hadn't come tonight. These parties happened every Friday, so they weren't a special event, and he didn't need to feed. But he was curious about Shayla Pelter. She was beautiful, of course. He would love to wrap one of those dark curls around his finger or stroke that soft, pale skin, but that wasn't what had piqued his interest. There were plenty of beautiful women in the city, some of them available at a snap of the fingers or a ring of the communicator.

There had been that moment in the café when he had received a surge of her emotions, right through his usually effective empathic shield. It had been a peculiar mixture of emotions. If she could broadcast like that, she had to be a strong empath. There were such empaths outside of his people, of course, but most of them were registered and inhibited and therefore incapable of broadcasting. Government paranoia about empaths required it. Who was Shayla? If she was an empath, why wasn't she inhibited?

Gavin looked around the room but didn't see her. He strolled over to the bouncers at the entrance. Finally there was a break in the line of people waiting to get in. "Have Shayla Pelter and her friends showed up?"

"No, sir. Not yet. Should I beep you when they arrive?"

"Yes, please." Gavin walked to the back of the room, and sat down on a comfortably padded low couch. He caught the eye of a waiter, signaled for a drink, and settled back to wait for his friends to show up. The Pink Palace existed as a convenience for single Sirens who needed to feed, so many of his friends and relatives were here almost every Friday night.

It was early so the room wasn't crowded yet. The lighting was low, the music pleasant and melodic. Each conversational grouping in the room used special sound engineering to allow people to hear each other clearly without interference from other noise, giving a feeling of intimacy.

Gavin leaned back and closed his eyes. He was feeling tired, but it wasn't because of low energy, thank God. He wasn't in the mood to orchestrate another seduction. Could he

possibly be bored? He snorted. How ungrateful of him to be bored when surrounded by the biggest party in town and hundreds of available women. But if the tiredness was due to boredom, this trip to Kimur should take care of the problem.

What should he do about Shayla? Bringing her along would threaten his plans, but his original idea to find some excuse to turn her down for the job was harder to do when faced with a real person. It looked like she really needed the work. He sighed. He should probably stay away from her tonight. If he treated her like a friend, it would make it that much more difficult to make a decision. If it wasn't for his need to protect his secret operation, he might have enjoyed having her along.

"Hey, Gavin, what's up?" Gavin opened his eyes. Jordash. It was time for him to show up -- every Friday night like clockwork.

"Have a seat." Gavin waved at a nearby chair, and glanced around. They had this cell to themselves and the sound barriers would keep his words private. "The Organization is sending me to Kimur again in a couple of days."

Jordash whistled. "Damn. That could turn into a real mess. What's the mission?"

Gavin smiled faintly. "They want me to engineer a positive vote for uncontrolled access. In other words -- undo everything we've accomplished on the vote so far."

Jordash frowned. "They're not going to be happy with you when that fails, are they?"

"No." Gavin rubbed his chin. "It may be time to end the relationship. I'm playing this one by ear. And ... they also want me to take a female assistant."

"Damn, that could be a problem."

"She might be here tonight. Her name's Shayla. If you meet her, let me know what you think."

Jordash tilted his head. "Is there something in particular I'm supposed to be looking for?"

"It's possible she's an unregistered empath."

Jordash raised his eyebrows. "An empath? This gets better and better."

"It does give us some leverage over her if there's a problem."

"Still. It would be pretty hard to conceal the truth from an empath." Jordash frowned. "And could you really turn in an empath for being unregistered? If the government had their way all Sirens would be inhibited to the max. If it wasn't for our medical waiver ..."

"No, of course I couldn't really turn her in. But she wouldn't know that, so I could still use it as a threat." He sighed. "Or maybe not."

Gavin's personal comp buzzed in his pocket. Shayla had just arrived at the front entrance. He turned to Jordash. "Don't look now, but she just came in."

Jordash pretended to stretch, and glanced over the group at the front. "The blonde or the brunette?"

“The brunette. White skin, black dress.”

Jordash pursed his lips and nodded. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“She’s beautiful -- and dangerous,” Gavin said.

Jordash laughed. “The beautiful ones are always dangerous.”

* * * * *

Shayla gave her name to the bouncer and counted off the friends accompanying her. Before she was even inside the club, her head ached and her emotions swirled in a constantly changing kaleidoscope. Too many people, too many emotions. She hoped she could last the evening. It was risky to be in such a crowded place. When she was swamped by empathic feelings, her brain tended to shut down, but she hated to let her friends know about her weakness. So she pushed the envelope a bit.

She moved deeper into the large, dimly lit room and glimpsed Gavin in a conversational group to her left. She headed right. It would be best not to risk unnecessary contact or confuse their business relationship. She turned to her friends. “I’m going to settle in here.” She waved her hand at the glowing signs in the back -- *Asteroids*, *Oceania*. “Have fun in the rest of the party. Come back when you’re ready for a break.” With a spattering of farewells and humorous comments, most of the group, including Janis and Billy, headed for the other options. Three of her friends sat down with her in the circle of comfortable armchairs and couches. She breathed a sigh of relief. She could handle three people.

She turned toward Laren, who sat on her right. His long blond hair was tied back with a glittering strip of dark flicker cloth. His clothes were more notable for their absence than their presence, consisting of strategically placed strips of the same cloth connected with jewel-colored rings. Laren was an artist and thought of his body as another canvas for his art, and a fine canvas it was, well-muscled and graceful.

Shayla smiled at him. “Hey, nice look. Did you make the outfit or buy it?”

He fluttered his eyelashes. “What do you think?”

“I think you made it. Looks like one of your pieces.”

He stood up and struck a pose, then turned slowly in a circle. “Good guess. This is the latest. Do you think it will sell?”

She blinked. “Wow. It almost covers you. Sure it will sell -- especially if you’re the one modeling it. Are you selling anything in that new gallery?”

Laren sat down next to her. “The sales aren’t great, but the word-of-mouth has been good.” He glanced over at Borden and Merry who were deep in a heavy political discussion. He moved closer to her and lowered his voice. “Shayla, I wondered ... I wondered if you could tell me if anything is up with Pyotr and Kath.” He looked at her and bit his lip.

Shayla suppressed a sigh. Laren constantly worried that the other members of his trio were losing interest in him and about to go off on their own. "Laren, you know what I've told you before. You need to talk to them, not me."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm afraid that if they weren't already tired of me, my constant insecurity would drive them off. So I can't make myself do it." He looked at her with pleading, puppy-dog eyes.

She gave up and released the sigh. "Laren, Laren. I don't know what I'm going to do with you. Pyotr and Kath love you, just like you love them. I felt their emotions as we walked over. Nothing has changed. Now scoot. Go and make lovey dovey with them in the other room."

Laren grinned widely. He grabbed her hand, gave it a big smacking kiss, and rushed off. Shayla winced. Paroxysms of relief could give her an emotional hangover, too.

Borden and Merry looked after Laren in surprise. "What's up with him?" Merry asked.

Shayla rolled her eyes and flapped her hand.

"Oh. Feeling insecure again, is he? You're a saint to put up with us."

Shayla's cheeks got hot. "Nonsense. It's you who put up with me."

Merry laughed. "Okay, I'll compromise. We all put up with each other."

Shayla moved closer and the conversation became general. An hour later the group had grown, as others drifted back from the more frenetic activities in the other rooms. Her head ached, her body throbbed. The struggle to maintain emotional equilibrium took its toll. Normally eight people were not a problem, but these were eight excited, tipsy, aroused people. It was too much.

Maybe it would be better in the center of the room, away from their privacy shield. It looked pretty empty right now. She stood up and took a few steps away from their section. Just then, a crowd of newcomers passed by on their way through. Sensations flooded over her, and the room started swimming. She could see Gavin looking at her from the other side of the room. The image receded away from her, making her dizzy, and she closed her eyes. Sounds became hollow and echoed in her ears.

Strong, warm hands engulfed hers. "Shayla?" Who was talking to her? "Shayla?" It was a deep, rich voice. She swayed again, and an arm wrapped around her waist. "Shayla." She opened her eyes. Gavin. Why was he holding her? It sure felt good, though. He was warm and beautiful and ... and she couldn't feel his emotions. How odd. How nice.

Gavin's arm directed her to the side of the room. She clutched him as everything swam around her. When they passed through the privacy shield, the emotional pressure lifted from her brain, and the fog started to thin. His hands pressed her shoulders and she collapsed into a comfortable seat. The room stopped swimming and came into focus. She was sitting in a section with no other occupants except Gavin.

She leaned back, and breathed in slowly and deeply. Her skin, which had been cold and clammy, started to warm up. Her hands were still engulfed in Gavin's, his thigh pressed against hers.

She looked up into his warm green eyes. "Thank you for rescuing me."

He tightened his hands on hers, and examined her face closely. "Are you feeling better?" He moved his right hand up to the nape of her neck, resting his arm on the back of the couch. His fingers stroked her skin.

A warm, liquid feeling seeped through the lower part of her body. She sighed and allowed herself to coast and just enjoy it, rather than struggle against it. Her emotional reserves were depleted. "Yes, I'm feeling much better," she murmured.

She rested her eyes on his face. He was good looking and easy on the eyes, but he also looked ... nice. As though he had a sense of humor and could be kind. The warmth of his hand on hers, the almost electric connection with the back of her neck made her feel safe, almost protected.

He lifted her hand toward his mouth, and her gaze flew to his face. He paused as though asking permission. Shayla's eyes widened. All she could think about was how his lips would feel on her skin. Apparently reading her response, he slowly touched his lips to the back of her hand, then turned her hand over and pressed a kiss to her palm. His lips were soft and warm, and moved sensually on her sensitive skin. Things tightened low in her belly, and arousal started to steam through her veins.

Shayla pulled her hand away and closed it into a fist. Her eyes fastened on the lips that had just been pressed to her palm. She licked her lips. She wanted to feel those lips against her own. Her gaze flicked to Gavin's eyes.

They were heavy lidded, barely open, and fastened on her. His eyes closed slowly as he lowered his face to kiss her. The second he paused before his lips touched hers lasted forever, but finally they touched. His taste, smell, and touch caused an explosion of lust. With a soft moan, Shayla wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him closer. He tasted just right, he felt just right. Her body roused to attention.

Finally Gavin pulled back, and she drew a deep, shaky breath. She had to try to think about what was happening here.

He ran a finger down the side of her face. "Shayla ... sweetheart." He looked like he didn't know what to say.

It wasn't surprising. She hadn't expected this instant attraction herself. "Uh, we probably shouldn't ..." Her voice trailed off. Even though it had to be a bad idea to kiss the man she might be working for, her body was leaning toward his, and she was still holding onto his firm, muscular arms. She relaxed her grip, intending to let go, but instead found herself rubbing her hands in circles. Her gaze was locked on his; the world held just the two of them.

Gavin started bending toward her again, when several people entered the privacy grouping. He shook himself as though to clear his head. Pulling away from her, he stood up, and turned to the newcomers.

At least the interruption saved her from further indiscretion, though part of her was really disappointed. She would just have to live with the disappointment. Gathering herself together, she pasted on a social smile and stood up next to Gavin.

He gestured with his hand to the three men standing in front of them. "Shayla, I'd like to introduce my cousin Ryan and my friends Jordash and Quentin. This is Shayla."

Shayla reached out and touched their hands in turn. They were all attractive men, with regular features and warm smiles. Did the attractive guys always hang out together? But they didn't pull on her senses the same way that Gavin did. She also couldn't feel their emotions. Puzzled, Shayla glanced over the group. Did they all have naturally high shields, or was their some other reason for her inability to feel them empathically?

Jordash smiled warmly. "Shayla. Pleased to meet you. Any friend of Gavin's is a friend of mine." Shayla's face tightened briefly. She wasn't exactly a friend of Gavin's, more like a potential employee. But she supposed that the comment was understandable considering that he had probably seen them kissing. She shouldn't have given in to her attraction to Gavin. She was normally pretty good at resisting, but apparently not good enough. She would have to try harder -- starting with putting some distance between them.

After exchanging greetings and a few remarks on the club and the weather, Shayla turned to Gavin. "I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks for the rescue."

Gavin murmured, "It was nothing." He touched her lightly on the arm, and said, "Until tomorrow."

She hurried back to her friends and sat down in her original place. Her friends were laughing and talking and having a good time. She hated to be a party pooper, but she had to leave. Her earlier moment of weakness might recur. One rescue by Gavin in an evening was all she could handle. What had he thought about that anyway? She had never explained her moment of faintness, and he hadn't asked.

Janis leaned toward Shayla. "I didn't know you knew Gavin Trelgan."

"Didn't you hear that he was the one that let us in?"

"Really? Where did you meet him?"

Shayla glanced at her other friends, but nobody was listening. She leaned closer. "He's in charge of this job I'm not supposed to talk about."

"Really?" Janis lowered her voice. "They say he's a Siren. Did you know that?"

Shayla's mind blanked. Gavin a Siren? Had he been playing with her, enthralling her? No wonder she hadn't been able to resist him. A flush of anger heated her face. "No. I didn't know that."

“If you get him in bed, I want to hear all the details. Sirens are supposed to be really hot lovers.” Janis made a fanning motion with her hand.

“It’s not likely. I barely know the guy.”

Janis raised an eyebrow. “I saw you kissing. That’s a little more than ‘barely know’ to me. And if you end up working with him --”

“It’s not going to happen again.”

Janis shrugged. “Hey, your call. I would jump at the chance, myself.”

Shayla got to her feet. “I’m kind of overloaded here. I’m going to walk home. Don’t tell the others until I leave, will you? I don’t want to ruin their evening.”

Janis blew her a kiss, and turned back to the conversation.

Shayla hurried out of the club. Outside it was cool and dark and damp. There were a few other people on the street, but it wasn’t enough to bother her, and they all moved past quickly. She shook her head and rolled her shoulders. It was a relief to be away from all of those people. And Gavin. She finally gave in to physical attraction, and he turned out to be a Siren. This was not her lucky week.

Chapter Three

Shayla picked up the Kimurian costume and examined it doubtfully. Kimur had been settled by two main groups of colonists: wealthy people with a desire to be aristocrats, and advocates of free and open sexuality. Over the eight hundred years that the planet was isolated after the breakdown in interplanetary travel, the two groups combined. This costume was the result.

She turned it over and shook it out. It was designed to show off the body and sexuality of the wearer, and to display her wealth and status through the expensive fabrics and complicated construction. It didn't look like it would be very comfortable, but that obviously wasn't the point.

She stepped into the dress and pulled it up. She lifted up her breasts and settled them into the rather stiff cups at the top of a stretchy lace body. The lace ended in a point with gathered flounces emphasizing her hips. The front panel of nearly transparent cloth stopped somewhere between her knees and her ankles. The fabric was deep magenta, decorated with raised patterns of a shiny, jewel-like material. It pushed her breasts up, and was tight around the waist, but it didn't feel as uncomfortable as it had looked.

Shayla shook her hair back, fastened it with a jeweled clasp, and stepped back to get a whole body view in the mirror. She was shocked at how unlike herself she looked. She looked sexy and rich and mysterious. The makeup emphasized her eyes, and the deep magenta lipstick drew attention to her mouth. Her breasts were plumply displayed, the dark lace enhancing the whiteness of her skin. The transparent front panel didn't quite conceal the dark curls between her legs.

God, would Gavin be watching or was he acting with her? The sexiness of her costume already had her aroused. It was going to be a real challenge to resist him. She had to keep her mind focused on her goal.

This test would decide whether she got the job. She sighed deeply, and turned for a side view.

Did Sirens have some kind of empathic or telepathic ability? She had never heard it mentioned, but considering the distrust of psi talents, they would probably keep it quiet if they did. She frowned, realizing that she had never actually seen Siren enthrallment documented anywhere. But everybody seemed to know about it anyway. Would Gavin recognize her as an empath? Would he turn her in? She didn't know enough about him, about Sirens, or about this job.

At least she knew something about acting. She should be able to handle that part, at least.

She stretched her arms back and forth, and slowly leaned down. Good acting required being physically present; stretching helped. Already some parts of her body were more present than usual. There was dampness and an achy awareness between her legs. Wearing sexy clothes to a meeting with the most attractive man she'd met in years wasn't designed to tamp down the libido. Shayla snorted. At least she'd be in character.

She picked up the scenario description. Her character was a Kimurian noblewoman, Lady Shala, who had a relationship with a nobleman, Lord Aron Sheldon. They were attending a house party in a country manor; she should be prepared to converse on various topics. Had Gavin set this up? If he used this as an excuse to seduce her ... well, part of her would be happy, but the rest of her would be seriously irritated.

Shayla closed her eyes briefly and imagined herself into her role. She was no longer Shayla, out-of-work actress, but Shala, a Kimurian noblewoman. She was self-confident, sexy, rich, and not about to let some man take advantage of her.

After settling the virtual reality headpiece on her head, she blinked her eyes while it personalized itself to her. In a few seconds her vision settled down, and she acknowledged the test pattern. "Setup okay." She had used similar models in previous acting jobs, so she quickly ran down the standard functions. Everything seemed to be in order, though the response was quicker than she was used to. The Organization undoubtedly had more money to spend on hardware than struggling artists.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her chin, and opened the door into the adjoining VR room. It was a high quality simulation, with detailed wood paneling, carved woodwork, and paintings on the walls. The tall windows displayed a view of trees and rolling hills. The trees even moved in the breeze. Kimurian nobility apparently lived very well. She briefly flicked on the function to check out the substantiality of the environment. All of the visible furniture had a physical component, so it was safe to sit. She walked to the windows and looked out at the countryside. Very pretty.

The other door into the room opened, and Shayla turned around. It was Gavin, dressed as a Kimurian lord. Tight, stretchy hose encased his muscular legs and trim hips. A separately cut piece of cloth emphasized the size and shape of his sex and preserved the smooth lines of

ass and thighs. An embroidered vest stopped at his waist and left a large v-shaped portion of his chest bare. Translucent fabric draped down his strong arms.

Heat washed through her, and the bodice of her dress felt suddenly tighter. She couldn't remember ever reacting so immediately. Or was she? Was she feeling this, or was he making her feel it? She frowned in frustration.

Gavin smiled, his gaze hot and intent, and moved toward her. "Good morning, Shala," he said in Kimurian. With a conscious effort she shifted into Kimurian-speaking mode. "Greetings, Lord Sheldon." Damn. That didn't seem quite right.

He reached out and grasped her hand, raising it to his lips. His lips were warm and soft against her skin. "My dear Shala, why the formality? Did last night not meet your expectations?" He looked at her with sultry eyes.

He was taking full advantage of their roles, the rat. She tried to relax the demanding parts of her body and fluttered her eyelashes. "All of my expectations were met and exceeded." She couldn't help a quick glance in the direction of his cock. It certainly looked like it would exceed most expectations.

Gavin released her hand and smiled seductively. "I, too, was well satisfied with our ... activities."

They sat down at the table where there was a real pot of chai. Avoiding his warm gaze, she carefully served the chai, using information from the Organization's sublim training. It was safer to concentrate on the chai -- far safer than looking at him.

Sublim training was not the same as learning from real life. The disconnected, jerky feeling reminded her of a theater production she had worked on last year. Recruited at the last minute after the lead character came down with a sudden illness, there wasn't time to learn her lines the old-fashioned way, so she learned them with modern sublim techniques. Her role in that production took on a peculiar, dream-like quality, as her lines floated to the top of consciousness. It was not her favorite way to act. This time she had no lines to memorize, but the information she needed about Kimurian customs had a similar disconnected feeling.

With a sideways glance, she offered a cup of chai to Gavin. "Please accept a humble offering of chai, Aron."

As he took the cup from her, he ran his fingers lightly down the back of her hand. "I'm always willing to take anything that you offer, darling," he murmured.

She repressed a sigh. This was not the easiest acting assignment. With a bright, if somewhat plastic smile, she said, "We've had great weather lately, haven't we?"

He smiled ironically. "Oh yes, the weather has been simply marvelous."

They weren't acting from a script, so their conversation consisted of small talk about weather and places and imaginary people. It was typical casual social conversation, but in a different language about a planet she had never visited. And then there was the distraction

problem. The Gavin distraction. He kept *touching* her -- touching her hand, touching his knee to her thigh, brushing against her arm. Shayla wished that she could label it inappropriate, but it was completely appropriate for the relationship depicted in the scenario. Of course, that was between two people who were sexually involved.

Shayla jerked to attention, realizing that she had been lost in thought. Gavin looked at her expectantly, waiting. Oops. Looks like she had dropped the conversational ball.

"Excuse me, Aron. I was distracted for a moment." She looked up at him through her eyelashes and touched his hand.

He grasped her hand, and smiled warmly. "There's nothing to excuse. I'm a bit distracted this morning, too." He leaned over and touched her lips with his. His tongue stroked hers, and her mouth flooded with his taste, rich and addictive. She would have liked more of him, all of him. But this wasn't real. This was an *act*. She must resist him. He was forcing her to feel things she didn't want to feel. She would hate herself if she gave in to him, if she allowed his manipulation to succeed.

With an effort she pulled herself back. His hands reluctantly released her arms. "My dear lady, is something wrong?"

She glared. "I'm not your dear lady."

He raised his eyebrows. "You are my Lady Shala, right?" he said with careful emphasis.

She took a deep breath. Back in character, she had to get back in character. "Right." She smiled sweetly, showing too much teeth. "Certainly, Lord Aron."

He settled back in his chair with a quirk of his eyebrow. "Will you be attending the party on Saturday?"

"Of course. I wouldn't miss it for anything. I'm particularly looking forward to the dinner. I hear that the cook is quite phenomenal. And you?"

"I'm planning to be there. Now that I know that you will be attending, I will look forward to it with even more enthusiasm. Perhaps we will be able to find a few minutes to ... be together." He looked at her with heat in his eyes, and stretched his body sensuously, drawing Shayla's attention to his muscular thighs and the shape of his cock underneath the stretchy fabric.

Suddenly, her heart was pounding. Her nipples pebbled against her bodice and her body tightened. She wanted him, all of him. Her eyes slid away from his. "I'm sure that some opportunity will arise ..."

"I'm sure that more than opportunity will arise," he murmured.

A wave of anger swept over her. She had to be angry to fight off her physical feelings. "That's it." She took off her VR headpiece and threw it on the floor. The beautiful room faded away and was replaced by utilitarian ceramic furniture and bare walls. "I'm not going to put up with this any more. No Siren is going to screw with my feelings." Gavin's eyes opened wide.

* * * * *

Gavin stared at Shayla. *What was she talking about?* He hadn't used any telepathy or empathy on her at all. He opened up his mind to hers, trying to figure out what had happened.

Her voice was loud and high. "What a rotten thing to do!" *She thought he had caused her desire for him. She must not know anything about Sirens ...*

"I may not know anything about Sirens, but I know when someone has screwed with my feelings."

He looked at her in surprise. *Had she heard him?*

"What the hell are you talking about? I heard you loud and clear." She stormed out of the room.

The Siren telepathic channels had been open. Only another Siren should have heard him. Gavin sat down hard on the nearest chair and looked blankly after her.

All babies on Jheknan were genetically analyzed at birth. Almost all Sirens were born to Sirens or their kindred, but every couple of years a Siren child was born to two people carrying the recessive genes. All of these babies were identified at birth by the standard genetic analysis, and identified to the Siren community.

If Shayla was a Siren, her genetic analysis would have had to be ... wrong. Falsified. There were no female Sirens her age in the community. They had all been killed by a mutated virus. Or had they? Gavin felt sick. Dreknan had made wild claims of a plot against them, but no evidence had ever been found. Maybe they should have looked harder.

He took off his VR receiver and went to the control panel at the entrance to the room. He reviewed the recording of Shayla's test, and deleted it. It hadn't been his imagination. She had responded directly to his thoughts. And she had been broadcasting her emotions last night at the Pink Palace. The evidence was piling up.

He grabbed Shayla's costume from her dressing room and headed for the old quarter. There should be enough genetic material on the costume to test.

An hour later he sat waiting tensely as Simon, the family medical technologist, turned to him with a peculiar look on his face. "Yes?"

"It's Siren DNA, all right. But it's from a baby that our records say died twenty-four years ago."

Gavin closed his eyes. "Who are the parents?"

"The Brogarths."

Gavin sighed, and opened his eyes. "They aren't close relatives, but I know them."

Simon looked grim. "Who is she?"

“My new assistant.” Gavin rubbed his head. The implications of this were immense. Someone had stolen Shayla and told her parents that she had died. She must have been adopted. Whoever had done this had the ability to interfere in hospital operations, falsify genetic records, and supply an adoption agency. This was not a one-person operation. They had to have connections in a number of government agencies. A lot of connections.

And Shayla was their only evidence of the plot. If someone were to take her out, they would have nothing.

Gavin’s communicator beeped. He recognized the tone for the Organization. He took it out and glanced at the message. They wanted a response on the operation candidate he had been interviewing. He snorted. How ironic. It looked like she had the job qualifications he wanted after all. He answered the message, *Candidate accepted*. Kimur would be a safer place for Shayla right now than Jheknan. That he would be the only member of the Siren community with access to her was purely coincidence. He licked his lips. But a nice coincidence.

* * * * *

Shayla picked up her cup of hot Kalanian chocolate, and took a long sip. Ah, that tasted good. She closed her eyes, leaned back in the armchair, and enjoyed the warmth moving through her body.

Janis closed the door of the autochef with a snap. “So are you going to tell me what happened at the test?”

Shayla opened her eyes. “I totally blew it. I got angry with Gavin, broke character, and stomped off.” She grimaced. “If I had been trying to lose the job I could hardly have done better.”

Janis’s eyes widened. “Why’d you get angry with Gavin?”

“He enthralled me.” Shayla scowled.

“Uh, Shayla ... Gavin’s male.”

“So?”

“Male Sirens don’t enthrall people. Female Sirens enthrall people.”

Shayla stared blankly at Janis. Oh, no. “How do you know that?”

“Remember Ryliss?” Shayla nodded. “He had a relationship for a while with a Siren pair. He said that the females are empathic and can enthrall people. The males can’t.”

“Damn.” Shayla felt like the world had tipped sideways. “I didn’t know that.”

Janis smiled. “So I’d guess you were wildly attracted to him, weren’t you?”

Shayla leaned her head on her hands and whimpered. “You might say that.”

“Burned a few bridges, did you?”

Shayla sat up and rested her head on the back of the seat. "I guess. Janis, what am I going to do now? I've blown this job, and everything I can think of to make money takes too long to get started."

Janis rested her hand on Shayla's shoulder. "I could sponsor you."

"No. The financial risk is too high. I won't let you do that."

A quickly repressed look of relief crossed Janis's face. "You could teach acting."

Shayla shook her head. "Nobody would pay me. There are people out there with decades more experience doing a wonderful job."

"You could work at one of the sex shops."

"You know I can't do that."

Janis rubbed her nose. "It's not all direct touch work. You could be a domme."

Shayla grimaced. "It's not the physical touching that's the problem. It's the emotions." She shuddered. "Up and down, up and down. Can't do it." She took a sip of chocolate. "What about seasonal agricultural jobs?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's hard work, though. And the real season for that kind of work isn't for a couple of months." Janis looked at her out of the corner of her eye. "You could accept a prelim contract with Marek. He'd jump at the chance."

"After what happened with Sorval and Denton? No way in hell am I ever doing that again."

"Marek might not be as jealous as they were."

"They weren't jealous in the beginning either. And that's not the only problem. The breakups wasted me for months." Of course, she hadn't been as attracted to them as she was to Gavin. He had felt so good, so right. On the other hand, Gavin wasn't exactly geno-typical either. Imagine the issues in having a Siren for a boyfriend. Not that there was any possibility of that, of course. She'd be lucky if he ever spoke to her again.

Shayla leaned forward and rested her head on her arms. Janis sighed and started tidying the kitchen. "Shayla, your message light is on."

The message was from the Organization. Even though she knew what it would say, her stomach still felt queasy. She took a deep breath and read the few lines. That couldn't possibly be right. She read them again. It still said the same thing. *You have been accepted for job 0106783. Please pack and report to Gate 71 at the spaceport tomorrow at 10:00. You will be responsible for the content of all of the following documents ...*

A rush of intense relief rolled through her. Was she dreaming? Gavin had approved her for the job. Why? There was no way she could have passed the test. Did he just want to seduce her? She snorted. It's not like he had to even enthrall her. She might as well just hand herself over on a platter if she ended up alone with him on a strange planet.

"Uh, Janis?"

Janis turned to stare at her. "What? Is it from the Organization?"

"Yes. I got the job."

Janis grinned widely. "That's just great, Shayla. What a relief!"

Shayla pursed her lips. "I hope."

"Damn, girl. Are you still going on about Gavin being a Siren? Get off it already. Enjoy him. I sure would."

"But what about afterward?"

"Even you have sex occasionally. Yes, I know you make sure it's totally casual. So have casual sex with Gavin. Sirens are supposed to be world-class lovers. You keep saying you don't want to get married, so he ought to be perfect."

Maybe she was being irrational. She had hated it when she thought he deliberately manipulated her. It was difficult enough being inadvertently aroused by the lust of men, having someone do it deliberately was intolerable. But -- now that she thought about it, she hadn't felt Gavin's emotions. Strange. Was that because he was a Siren? He had told her that she didn't know anything about Sirens. It looked like she was going to learn.

Chapter Four

Gavin entered the elevator to the secret levels of the Pink Palace, leaned against the wall, and closed his eyes. He had been so busy the last few days investigating Shayla and the conspiracy that he had hardly had a chance to breathe. At this rate, it was going to be quite a relief to head off to Kimur. The Organization had originally wanted him to leave at the same time as Shayla, but he had claimed a family emergency and put off his departure for a few days. It was a family emergency. Just not the family emergency that they were imagining.

Ironically, discovering that Shayla was a fellow Siren had taken her out of the category of someone with whom he could have casual but mindblowing sex. Sirens were protective of their women; the standards of behavior toward fellow Sirens -- and their kindred, too, of course -- were not the same as the standard of behavior toward norms. He had been very attracted to her, and she had been attracted to him. That kiss at the Friday night party had been in the earthshaking category, so her resistance to that attraction in the virtual reality room had come as a surprise to him. He rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand as the elevator chimed the arrival on the lowest level.

Now everything was complicated. His duty as one of the protectors of their people was to guard her, and as a Siren female she had to be allowed to make her own choices. They were going to be in each other's company a great deal for a week or two. With such a strong attraction between them, he was going to have to walk a careful path. A thread of yearning wove its way through him. If this worked out between them -- he might not have to live his life without the joy of a true mate.

With a sigh, he palmed the door and it opened.

Gavin's four closest friends stood in front of him and blocked the door into the reception room of the Pink Palace's secret downstairs suite. It looked like the grapevine had

been busy. Maybe he should re-think his self-sacrificing, noble attitude. These close friends were his competition for Shayla.

Jordash glared at him. His voice was soft. "Either you tell me who she is and where she is, or I'll wipe the floor with you." He leaned back and crossed his arms. "Is that clear enough for you?" The three other men in the room nodded in agreement. He should have expected something like this. They had grown up knowing that there were no Siren females of their age for mates. Shayla's discovery changed everything.

Gavin sat on the arm of a nearby chair and looked at them levelly. "Her name is Shayla. She should be on Kimur by now."

They all spoke at once.

"She is a Siren, isn't she?"

"Where did she come from?"

"Why didn't we know about her?"

"When can we meet her?"

Gavin held up a hand to stop the eager questions. "She *is* a Siren. We did a genetic analysis and found out that her records had been falsified. I think she was kidnapped as a baby and adopted out. This wasn't any accidental loss and rediscovery. It had to be a pretty big operation."

Jordash face blazed with hope. "You mean that there might be more Siren women hidden away? Who would have done this? Why?"

"I'm not absolutely positive yet, but so far the information points to the Jheknan Intelligence Organization. If they did this to us, we have to stop them -- and try to make them pay." Gavin looked at each one of them in turn. "Are you all in?"

They all agreed without hesitation.

"Quentin, you're up on the latest computer hacks, right?" Quentin nodded. "Can you take the differences between Shayla's true genetic record and her falsified record, and look for similarly changed records?"

"I'm right on it," Quentin said.

Gavin looked at Jerome. "Can you fly out to Plethys and talk to Shayla's adoptive parents and other people in the community?" Jerome nodded.

"Lesoth, you're familiar with the dark underbelly of the city ..."

"I resent that!"

"No, no, it's a good thing." Gavin smiled. "You'll get whatever information possible out of Jubal Shratten and his associates."

Lesoth's face paled, but he said, "Yes, sir!"

"I'll do what investigating I can in the Organization's records. Jordash will gather all the information that we have on Siren females who might be missing, including reported

deaths.” Gavin looked very serious. “One last thing. Say nothing to anybody outside this room. Particularly not to anybody in the Organization.”

Jordash looked at him sharply. “Do you suspect the whole Organization or just particular people?”

“I suspect everybody. I doubt that the peons know about it -- that would be too difficult to keep a secret. But the Organization has the capability to do this, and I believe that they had the motive, too.

Jordash looked puzzled. “What motive?”

Gavin’s voice was grim and flat. “They fear and mistrust us. If we remain unmated, we are much less powerful. If we don’t mate Siren women, our children won’t be Sirens. If we hadn’t started avoiding the hospitals for our births, they might have wiped out an entire generation.”

“Damn. I knew they didn’t trust us, but I didn’t realize that they would take things so far.” Jordash’s hands clenched.

Gavin flicked a hand toward the elevator. “Go get the information we need. I’m going to talk to Jonathor.”

His friends left to work on their assignments, and he shook his shoulders to release the tension. He stood straight and took a deep breath. When his friends returned with new information, he’d have a more complete picture of the plot and its ramifications. But he needed to tell Jonathor what he knew now -- and Jonathor was not going to like it. He knocked on the door of Jonathor’s study.

“Come in, Gavin.”

Gavin opened the door and entered the room. The ceilings were high; the walls were lined with shelves of books. Heavy, golden velvet draperies hung at the windows, creating a feeling of isolation. A cold and shivery wind blew over him. His nerves tingled and his thoughts stuttered as he fought to relax under the feeling of exposure.

“Greetings, sir. I have important news.”

Jonathor looked up from the documents on his desk. “I see that.”

Gavin cleared his throat. “I’m afraid that I may have been wrong when I insisted that working with the Organization would be good for us.”

Jonathor settled back in his chair and looked at him calmly. Ghostly fingers gently turned over Gavin’s thoughts and examined them.

Finally Jonathor said, “You suspect them of being involved in the betrayal.”

“Yes. You’ve heard about Shayla?” Gavin looked at Jonathor with raised eyebrows.

“The Siren female that turned up a few days ago.” He stood up and paced around the desk. “She is indeed Siren, I take it?”

“Yes. She was adopted as an infant on the other side of the continent. Her genetic records were altered, but we matched her true genetics to the Brogarth family. They were told that their baby died at birth and were given a body to bury.”

“You used our private records?”

“Yes. That part was easy. We looked into the hospital where the baby was born, and investigated the records of the people who raised her. We found a loose thread, and traced it back to Jubal Shratten.”

Jonathor breathed in deeply and slowly exhaled. “Jubal. The person that the Organization uses sometimes for their dirty work.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Do we know for sure that the Organization was his employer? Why would the Organization do such a thing?”

“We don’t know for sure yet that it was the Organization. But if it was them, I think that I could guess why. Since none of us who work for them are mated, our telepathic powers aren’t very reliable. A couple of times I’ve suggested using a mated pair and overheard a few stray thoughts.” Gavin pressed his lips together. “I didn’t think anything of it at the time, since it’s pretty common for norms to be uncomfortable around our talents. But I think that they are afraid of the power of mated Sirens. This was a way to use us but keep us under control.”

“But removing our females would only be a temporary solution. If it turns out that they did this, what will they do when they are exposed? Kill us all?”

“I don’t know. But whatever their plan, we won’t like it -- to say the least.” Gavin paused. “When we stopped using the public hospitals, the deaths stopped. At the time we thought it was because we were avoiding exposure to the virus. Now it looks like we were avoiding exposure to this plot.”

Gavin straightened and looked directly at Jonathor. “I think we should move immediately on the Kimur option. We may all be in danger.”

Jonathor paused briefly, with a look of concentration on his face. “I’ve called Lillorian. She’ll be here shortly.” He moved to the counter at the side of the room and poured a couple of small glasses of a sparkling liqueur. He looked at Gavin with a raised eyebrow and a gesture toward the liqueur. Gavin nodded, and he poured a third glass.

The door to the room burst open with a swirl of warmth and passion, and a small human whirlwind entered the room. Gavin smiled at her. “Hello, Mother.”

She threw her arms around him, and hugged him tightly. “Gavin! How good to see you. Why don’t we see you more often? How have you been? What’s going on with that girl?”

Gavin laughed. “Slow down. I’ve just been telling father about it.”

Lillorian smiled warmly at Gavin. “We’ll go over the information later. But now tell me about this young woman. I can tell that you are already enthralled by her. Is she beautiful? Is she perceptive?”

“She is beautiful and very attractive, but she doesn’t know yet that she is a Siren.”

“Not know? Where was she hidden? How did they hide her nature from her?”

“She was raised in a small religious community on the other side of Plethys. Her genetic records were altered.”

“Where is she now? I must meet her.”

“I sent her to Kimur. I thought she would be safer there, but if it turns out that the Organization was behind the plot ...” Gavin scowled.

A feeling of intense, controlled anger filled the room. Jonathor stood abruptly. “You’re right. I think that it’s time to put the Kimur plan into effect. Does it look like the refuge that we hoped for?”

“I think so. I’m leaving for Kimur tomorrow, so I’ll be able to send you the final word from there.”

“We’ll ask the kindred to start to pack. Those of us who are known to be Sirens will have to be last.”

“I think that’s a wise decision.”

Jonathor turned to his son. “You’ll be alone with Shayla on Kimur. Be careful of her. She wasn’t raised as a Siren, you know.”

Lillorian bit her lip. “It’s very hard for Siren women to be raised outside of our culture. You know how protective we are.” She shook her head. “Without training, things can go very badly.”

Gavin nodded. “I know. But from what I’ve seen of her, she seems emotionally healthy. We’ll hope for the best.”

Lillorian smiled. “She’ll certainly have a wide choice of candidates for consort.”

Gavin scowled.

Lillorian shook her finger at him. “As your mother I’d love to see you win her, but don’t you dare take away her freedom of choice.”

Gavin rolled his eyes. “Yes, mother.”

* * * * *

Shayla settled into the soft, comfortable seat on the shuttle from the spaceship to the Kimurian surface. It was a relief to be so close to the end of her journey. She had expected to find the space journey interesting since she had never been off Jheknan, but after the initial excitement it had been a tedious couple of days. Her fellow passengers hadn’t been very amusing, either. The other operative being transported to Kimur had been close-mouthed and bland. Howard, the liaison, was an abrasive and officious little man.

At least she had been able to go over the information on Kimur carefully and review her assignment. She was supposed to develop social relationships with several men at the

house party with the goal of finding out their opinion on an upcoming vote to allow or restrict free access to Kimur by the Federation of Planets. They also laid out in detail the Organization's preferred opinions on the topic, with arguments that she might use to convince her targets.

It seemed like a straightforward goal, but she had the impression that there were parts of the plan that they weren't telling her. For one thing, when she considered the role that she was playing -- that of a young noblewoman from a rural area -- it was hard to see why older, more sophisticated members of the aristocracy would listen to her opinions at all. She tapped her finger on the small, portable table surface in front of her. Were they counting on her having sex with these men as part of the process? They hadn't come out and said so, but they had spent some time discussing the promiscuous nature of Kimurian society. She scowled. If that was the case, they should have been looking for an actress with sex work experience.

Speaking of sex -- Gavin was going to be joining her at some point; the schedule wasn't precise on exactly when. It also didn't go into much detail on his role. Shayla felt her mind drift to fantasies about him. If his role was similar to the one they had been playing in the test scenario, they would at least have to pretend to be lovers. Gavin, naked in her arms ... Her body clenched in enthusiasm, and she moved restlessly. She was going to have to apologize for her wild accusations in the VR room. If only she had known then what she knew now, there might have been a different end to that scenario. She contemplated the kisses they had shared, and her head grew light. Just imagine ...

A gentle bong sounded, waking Shayla from partial sleep. It took her a minute to shake off the effects of her dream. The landing message was flashing.

She put on her coat and positioned her carry-on bag. She had been warned that the shuttle would be on the ground for a very short time in the middle of the night in order to reduce the chance of discovery. A brief thud, a few shudders, and they had landed. She stood up and edged through the short aisle behind the other two Organization employees.

Shayla breathed deeply of the cool, crisp night air. A faint smell like drying grass and moist earth drifted by. It was not a familiar smell, but since she had been a city resident for the last six years, even rural Jheknan would not have smelled familiar to her. She couldn't see any stars in the sky, and had a second of sharp anxiety wondering if she had missed something in her training, until she realized that the sky was probably just cloudy. *Calm down. If you go around overreacting to little things you'll give yourself away in no time.*

Howard trotted over. "Hurry up," he said in a sharp whisper. "Get inside at once. We can't be seen." He turned toward the rounded darkness to the left. Shayla suppressed her irritation at his tone. Thank goodness he wasn't going to be at her location. She strolled toward the dimly lit door ahead of her on the barely visible path.

As soon as she entered the room, Howard turned on the door's camouflage shield, double-checked the outside viewers, and turned on all the other security precautions. She

dropped her bag by the pile of luggage just inside the door and sat down at the tiny table against one wall. The other employee, John, had vanished, probably into another room. She leaned back against the wall, almost too tired to go to sleep. She knew that she needed to rest for the big day tomorrow, but moving seemed like too much work.

Howard finished bustling around and sat down across from her. He looked like he was going through lists on his hand-comp. After a few minutes, he looked up at her and frowned. "Weren't you advised to leave all of your non-Kimurian clothes on the ship?"

Shayla opened her eyes and looked at him blearily. "They said I could wear one set of off-planet clothes."

"You might as well change and hide those in the storeroom. Your transportation will be in here in about three hours, and you probably want to sleep as long as possible."

"Sure." She didn't move.

"You're scheduled to arrive at Branham manor at about 3:00 p.m. You should be able to take a nap in the carriage. You got the information about your contact, your targets at the house party, all that?"

"Yeah."

Howard pursed his lips. "This is a very licentious society. It's not a proper place for well-brought-up young girls."

Shayla lifted an eyebrow. There didn't seem to be anything she could say to that. Either she wasn't well brought up, or she shouldn't be here.

He didn't seem to expect a response. Maybe he hadn't directed the comment at her. "But all that will change once we're in charge. We'll clean this place up so fast, they won't know what hit them." He settled back with a self-satisfied smirk. "Just look at what we've done on Jheknan. Why, twenty years ago there were prostitutes all over, and known Sirens, and lewdness in the vids and public entertainments. We've cleaned all that up there, and we'll do the same here. We'll establish laws against indecent sexual acts, public lewdness and licentiousness, and put in place dress codes and curfews." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "That will teach them proper behavior."

Shayla gazed at Howard in fuzzy-headed astonishment. Was he just an eccentric crackpot, or was this actually the goal of the Organization here on Kimur? One of the things she had hated about her repressive rural hometown was their insistence on the indecency of normal sexual feelings. She had watched church elders punish and castigate young women for public lewdness at the same time they themselves were quivering in arousal from talking about the same acts. They took normal physical and emotional feelings and turned them into something dirty and sinful.

She cautiously asked, "Who is it that decides what constitutes proper behavior?"

Howard looked at her in surprise. "Why, the True Church of the Returned Messiah, of course."

Shayla caught her breath. He was a member of the same narrow-minded sect that had controlled her rural province. “Does the Organization management also subscribe to the True Path?”

Howard pursed his lips. “Well, they can’t publicly say that.” He leaned closer, and lowered his voice. “But I know that some of the top brass have found the truth.”

She repressed a shudder. Who had she gotten involved with? And why was Gavin working for them? If the Organization leaders belonged to the Returned Messiah cult, they were against all Sirens, including Gavin. Something just didn’t add up. This job was only supposed to last for two weeks, until the vote on off-planet access. She was a pawn on somebody else’s chessboard. She only hoped she could stay on the board long enough to get back home.

Chapter Five

Shayla entered the breakfast room as though it was a stage, with a sinuous glide and a swish of her skirts. She had been at Branham Manor for four days, so she felt like an old pro at playing Lady Shala. Her empathic ability helped her recognize when something she had said or done caused confusion or surprise. She found that a lot of her mistakes could be passed off as the result of an isolated, rural upbringing -- which had the advantage of being the truth. She *had* grown up in an isolated, rural area. It just happened to be on a different planet.

She didn't find the people difficult to understand. Knowing what they were feeling made it much easier, of course, but Kimur wasn't that far culturally from Jheknan. They had both been settled by colonists from Earth about a thousand years ago, and neither had gone in a wildly different direction. It wasn't like trying to fit in on one of the Neo-Muslim worlds, or into one of the hives in the Liberal Communalism.

True, Kimur's technical level was a couple of notches lower than Jheknan's, and they were obviously more tolerant sexually, but they lived pretty comfortably. They didn't even seem that serious about their aristocratic roles; it was more like role-playing than anything else. The boundaries of the nobility were quite fluid; some members of the aristocracy even took an occasional turn at being body servants. According to some of the jokes she had heard, it was a role that was popular with those who liked to be submissive sexually.

It reminded her of the receptions for wealthy patrons of the arts that she occasionally attended in connection with her acting jobs in Drobery, full of wealthy pleasure-seekers looking for another distraction. The main difference was that here she was pretending to be one of them.

She helped herself to a plate of food at the sideboard and sat down next to Lord Hilgard, one of her targets. He was a genial man in his early thirties who enjoyed flirting.

One of the purposes of house parties like this was the making and breaking of sexual liaisons. Most of the visitors were either unmarried or had been married for several years and were looking for a little variety -- or in some cases, a third. Several of the guests had issued invitations to her already, but so far she had successfully avoided an outright refusal.

After the edge was off her morning appetite, she turned to her neighbor. "Quite a nice morning we're having."

"Yes, certainly. Looks like we'll be having great weather later on for the horcup races. Haven't seen a good race since last year's fall Festival race at Grantham." He shoveled a large forkful of eggs into his mouth.

Shayla repressed a sigh. If this weren't a job, she wouldn't waste a minute on this man. He wasn't a bad sort. He just had extremely limited conversation skills and was, well, rather boring. She slanted a look at him through her eyelashes and stretched in her seat, drawing his attention. Kimurian clothes left very little to the imagination. His eyes fastened on her chest, she lowered her voice to a sultry purr. "Perhaps you would be interested in joining me for a drink when you return from the races?"

His mouth showed a regrettable tendency to gape open. He seemed quite taken aback at her attentions. "Uh, sure. How kind of you. Be glad to meet you later."

She fluttered her eyelashes. "I'd love to hear your opinion on the off-planet contact policies that are up for vote soon. I'm sure that with your knowledge of politics, you could soon set me straight." She threw in a coy little duck of her head. "I just have no head for that kind of thing."

Lord Hilgard's chest expanded. It probably wasn't often that someone admired his knowledge of politics. There weren't many people that ignorant even in this backwater society. "Well, I do pride myself on keeping in touch. The important thing is to maintain the rights of the aristocracy. We don't need off-planet interference in our government."

Shayla saw another of her targets enter the room and load up a plate. Time to move on, thank goodness. "Oh sir," she fluttered, "I'm so looking forward to talking to you this afternoon. I must go and talk to Sir Manfred about some advice he was giving me on --" She tried to blush. "-- well, some private matters. You will excuse me?" Without waiting for an actual response, she stood up and with a caressing touch of her hand moved away.

Feeling relief at such an easy escape, she moved to the sideboard and poured herself a cup of the local stimulant, kaff. It was apparently a derivative of coffee, but seemed to have a bigger kick than the coffee served back on Jheknan.

Her next target walked by, heading to an empty place at a nearby table. "Why, Sir Manfred. Just the person I was looking for!" She turned to face him, brushing against his arm in the process. "Oh, do excuse me. I'm just not myself until that first cup of kaff." Sir Manfred was probably the most highly sexed of her targets. Rumor had it that he was always ready for a little activity, and wasn't really particular about what it was. Shayla reached out

empathically and felt minor arousal, despite the casualness of the contact. Rumor was undoubtedly correct in this case.

Manfred nodded at her. "Please join me at the table -- that is, if you haven't finished breakfast?"

"Why, thank you. I have already eaten, but I would like to sit and drink some kaff." Shayla settled down next to him at the table. "Perhaps you could explain who some of the other guests are. We are so isolated in Beckwit. You are such a man of the world compared to what I'm used to."

Manfred was looking at her in surprise. Perhaps that last had been a bit heavy handed. "I'd be glad to tell you anything you want to know. But I'm sure that a beautiful woman like you has already sampled everything society has to offer." He ran a lingering finger along the décolletage of her dress. "Perhaps we could get together after dinner?"

Oops. A little too much encouragement there. Shayla hadn't had any other instructions other than to keep each of her targets dangling, but this was taking careful balance. If she didn't pair up with one of these men soon, people would start to wonder why she was attending the house party.

She was about to give some equivocal response, when the household procurer -- the head servant in charge of sexual services -- walked up and bowed to her. She raised her eyebrows in inquiry.

He said, "You have finally been assigned a body servant. Your new servant will be waiting when you return to your room after supper. We apologize profusely for the delay."

Damn. Shayla had hoped they wouldn't get around to assigning her a body servant. "No problem, Herodric. I'm sure he will be perfectly acceptable. I would expect no less in such a well-run establishment."

She turned to Manfred. "I look forward to seeing you at dinner." At least the interruption had allowed her to leave without responding directly to his invitation.

* * * * *

Shayla lay back on her bed and let her body relax into the soft mattress. Her eyes drifted shut. It was a relief to be alone and therefore offstage. When was she going to find time to herself after a body servant moved in here? Although she supposed that even Kimurian aristocrats were allowed to take a nap now and then.

The whole concept was strange to her. Servants who were supposed to provide sexual services -- it was like having a living, breathing, human sex toy. Except how was she supposed to forget that he was a real person? Maybe if you grew up with the idea it would all seem very natural. She would have preferred to skip the whole thing. But since Kimurian noblewomen had body servants, she had to have one.

A knock sounded at the door. She sighed. That break hadn't been nearly long enough. She was going to have to last through dinner without breaking down, so she needed to be rested. Damn. "Yes?" she answered without enthusiasm.

"It's me, Maralee. Could I come in?"

Shayla stood up. Maralee was an older widow who had decided that she was Shayla's friend. She considered herself quite the expert in the bedroom, and was fond of long-winded reminiscences of past conquests. She did have a good heart, however, and in other circumstances Shayla wouldn't have minded being friendly. She opened the door.

Maralee looked around curiously. "Don't you have a body servant yet?"

"I'm getting one this evening."

Maralee looked delighted. "Let me come to your room with you this evening. I love to check out the new men. If you don't mind?"

Shayla shrugged. "Why not?"

* * * * *

Shayla and Maralee entered Shayla's bedroom suite after dinner. Shayla glanced at the male servant waiting for them, and stopped dead. It was Gavin.

Gavin in the tight, abbreviated costume of a body servant. This was even worse than him in the costume of a Kimurian noble.

He was wearing stretchy black underwear that barely covered his substantial male sex. His shirt was panels of cloth with lacings tying the sides together in front and back, emphasizing his powerful muscles. The vast majority of him was simply naked skin. Very touchable, enticing, naked skin.

Shayla's eyes finally raised to his face. His face was studiously blank, but his eyes flicked a meaningful glance at Maralee. Ah, he wanted her to get rid of the stranger.

Her gaze slid to Maralee, who was slowly circling him. Was she drooling? She certainly looked enthusiastic. "I've never seen a more attractive body servant." She ran her hand down his muscular arm, and circled around behind him. "Come try him out."

Shayla's brain didn't seem to be working well, between her surprise at finding Gavin here and the mesmerizing effect of his bare flesh. Her body, however, was very happy to have him here. Particularly here dressed like this.

Maralee ran her hands over his firm buttocks. "I love a nice, tight ass," she murmured. Maralee grabbed Shayla's hand and pressed it to his chest. "Get a feel of that."

Well, since she didn't seem to have a choice ... Shayla ran her hand across his broad, muscular chest. The skin was hot and smooth. Her fingers seemed to move of their own volition, running along the edge of the skimpy vest until they encountered his flat, brown nipples. She circled them slowly, and his cock swelled in the tight, stretchy fabric. Her

fingers stretched toward him with an overpowering urge to touch, but she resisted, closing her hand and leaving it by her side.

Maralee came around to his front. "Would you look at that? What a handsome dick." She put her hand on his cock, and kneaded firmly.

Gavin breathed in sharply. *Get her out of here!*

Was that Gavin? Had he said that? Shayla looked sharply at Maralee, but she was oblivious, concentrating on her hand squeezing his erection.

Get her out of here!

Shayla's eyes flew to Gavin's face. Telepathy?

Out!

"Maralee, I'll talk to you later. I think I'd like to be alone now."

Maralee chuckled. "I certainly can't blame you for that." She moved to the door and paused. "Take notes and let me know about his special skills. Perhaps we could arrange a trade ..." She cast one last admiring glance at Gavin. "Not that he even needs skills with that package."

The door had barely closed behind her, before Gavin's arms were around Shayla, his mouth on hers. Their tongues tangled, their bodies rubbed, and their hands clutched. She pressed herself against as much of his hot, smooth skin as she could reach. If only she could get close enough to him, the hot arousal steaming through her could be relieved.

In between kisses he said, "Shayla." He plunged his tongue into her mouth and withdrew it. "You've got to stop." He pulled her into him, pressing her against his rigid cock.

She pulled back an inch, confused. "I've got to stop? What about you?" Her lips nibbled along his chin.

"You're broadcasting too much lust." His hands rubbed over her ass in narrowing circles. "I can't ... overcome it."

Broadcasting? She was broadcasting? She pulled away from him. It was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Breathing in quickly and shallowly, she thought about the disgusting stuff that stuck to your shoes in a jhekken pen.

Gavin flopped back on the bed and breathed deeply. "Yuck." He breathed in again. "I think that did it." He reached over to grab a robe from the end of the bed.

"You're reading my mind." Her voice was flat.

He rolled his eyes. "You enthrall me with one of the most overpowering surges of desire I've ever experienced, and you're complaining about a little telepathy?" He snorted. "Give me a break."

I'm enthralling you? You're the Siren, not me."

Gavin frowned. "Actually, I need to talk to you about that."

"Talk about what?" She was confused. "About you being a Siren?"

"No, about you being a Siren."

She glared at him in outrage. "I'm not a Siren! You are."

He shook his head. "Wrong. You're also a Siren. That's why telepathy works between us."

Her mind went blank as she stared at him.

"You remember a few minutes back when I asked you to get rid of that woman? That was on the Siren telepathic channel. Only another Siren would have received the message."

Her thoughts swirled. "That can't be true. My genetic record would show it. I'm *not* a Siren."

He sighed. "They falsified your genetic record. Have you ever had an analysis done?"

"No, of course not. It's in my ID chip and in my citizen profile. There's no reason to rerun it." Gavin started to say something, but she held up her hand and stopped him. She needed to think. This might explain some of the mysteries of her life. Normally empathic talents were recognized from a baby's genetic analysis. If her gene record had been falsified, it would explain why she hadn't been registered as an empath as an infant. As she turned the idea over and over, it seemed more and more likely that it was true. Gavin certainly believed it.

A vast sense of surprise grew within her, mixed with an element of relief. She had never fit in. Maybe this would give her a chance to find out who she really was. Had her adoptive parents known? Was that why they had kicked her out at thirteen? And how had this affected her relationships?

Her thoughts stopped on one question -- did she have a family?

She cleared her throat. "Do I have birth parents? Do you know them?"

He looked at her with sympathy. "Yes, you do have parents. I know them, but not well. They live outside of Drobery in a Siren enclave. Your name was Saltha Brogarth when you were born." He paused. "You have a younger brother and sister."

She collapsed back on the bed and put an arm over her eyes. "How did I end up adopted in Plethys? Why would someone do that?"

"As far as we can tell, the Organization did it. We're not exactly sure about the motive, but it's pretty obvious that they have it in for Sirens in a big way."

"*The Organization?* As in, the Organization that we work for?" She took her arm away from her eyes to glare at him. "Are you *crazy*?"

Gavin sighed. "It seemed to make sense at the time."

Shayla covered her eyes with her arm again. "Can you prove that I'm a Siren?"

"What kind of proof do you want?" he asked cautiously. "Genetic records, telepathy, pictures of your parents? It explains your empathic talents, you know."

"So you *did* recognize my empathy. I wondered about that."

He rolled his eyes. "Of course. In the café, at the Pink Palace, in the virtual reality room. I couldn't have missed it."

She cleared her throat. "Ah, speaking of the virtual reality room ... I owe you an apology for that."

"Don't worry about it. You were just misinformed." He grinned. "And I was flattered, of course. How could I possibly object to someone finding me so attractive that --"

"Okay, enough already." She took her arm down to scowl at him and scooted back to lean against the pillows on the bed. "I think that has been pretty well established, considering what just happened. Could we move on to some other topic? Like my alleged Siren nature? Hmmm?"

"Anything you say, sweetheart." He sighed. "You do have a lot to catch up on. To start with -- all of our women are empathic, and are particularly sensitive to sexual feelings. That's why we're called Sirens, even though it's not an accurate term. Siren women can broadcast feelings of sexual arousal. It makes them pretty hard to resist." He ran his hand gently down her arm. "You have experienced that, haven't you?"

God, that explained a lot. All the trouble and drama with Sorval, the accusations, the jealousy ... And Denton. Whenever he was out of her presence, he seemed to forget how he felt about her. Shayla groaned. That whole relationship had been running on one cylinder, not two. She bit her lip. "Yes, I think I probably have." Were the problems with the relationships her fault? Well, not *fault* exactly, certainly not in the legal sense. If she didn't know what she was doing --

Gavin interrupted her thoughts, "Shayla? How long has it been since you fed?"

What was he talking about? "Dinner was an hour ago."

"No, I mean since you had sex."

She scowled. "What business is that of yours? And what does it have to do with being a Siren?"

"Believe me there's a connection. So?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Last week. Why?" She knew he was going to tell her something else she didn't want to hear.

"You should be okay for a week, then."

"Is this some weird Siren thing?"

"You don't know anything about us, do you?"

She said stiffly, "I think that's obvious."

He sighed. "I bet that even when you're not in a relationship, you find someone for sex every couple of weeks, right?"

She flushed. She hated the compulsion to find a casual fuck-buddy. "Pretty much."

“An unmated Siren feeds off sexual energy. If he -- or she -- doesn't feed regularly, the need builds to a point where it's not very controllable.”

Damn. She knew that she didn't want to know this. She was some kind of sexual vampire. Although -- oddly enough, it made her feel better about her character. She wasn't weak-willed or a slut at the mercy of her physical urges. She was a ... a *Siren*. She couldn't help it. Somewhere inside a feeling of relief flowed through her.

But what about relationships? A vision of endless one-night stands passed before her. Did Sirens ever get married?

“You said *unmated* Siren. How is it different for a mated Siren?”

“Mated Sirens can exchange energy. It's not exactly the same as feeding, but it serves some of the same needs. Mates only need to feed off sexual energy if their energy store gets low or they need more energy for telepathy or empathy.”

Her head was starting to hurt. This was too much information, too fast, but there was so much she needed to know. “So you're telling me that if I don't have sex for a couple of weeks I'm kind of like a bomb ready to go off?”

He smiled. “I wouldn't call you a bomb, exactly. But you would feel strongly compelled to do something about it.”

She let her gaze slide from his face down his body. Even wrapped up in a fluffy robe it was worthy of attention. “Are you volunteering?”

He sighed. “No can do. Don't get me wrong, I'd love it. But you have no training. I can't afford to get accidentally drained. There's no time in the schedule to recover, and my skills may be necessary for our mission, so I'm off the menu.”

She narrowed her eyes. Was he making this up? Maybe he wasn't attracted to her and this was just an excuse.

Gavin shook his head emphatically. “No, that wasn't an excuse. And I *am* attracted to you. Those reasons are real.”

“Could you stay out of my mind, please?” She huffed in irritation.

“Well, I'm trying. You kind of shouted that last at me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Now you're telling me that I'm *thinking* too loud?”

“You're just ... untrained. You should be able to control that pretty quickly.” He bit his lip and said, “There's also some risk of binding accidentally. That is, you ... we ... might not want to ...”

“Binding? What is that, like being married?”

He hesitated. “It's kind of hard to explain. It's like falling in love to non-Sirens, but because an emotional and telepathic bond forms, it's more permanent. The bond is most likely to form when energy is exchanged ...”

“So you’re telling me that you can avoid draining and ... binding with some kind of training?”

“Yes. You have to know how to control the energy flow, how to open and close channels, shield against other people -- that kind of thing. If you know what you’re doing, it’s a simple matter of choice.”

She shook her head. There was no end to the good news tonight. If she had to be a Siren, it at least should have made Gavin more available, not less. The irony was piquant. She should have appreciated those passionate kisses more when they were happening, since it sounded like there might not be any more for a while. But what if the same thing happened again? “You said I was enthralling you. What does that mean, exactly?”

“You’re an empath. You can broadcast your feelings. When people say that a Siren enthralls, they are talking about the empathic broadcasting of sexual desire. If you broadcast your desire it gets added to mine. I have some control over my own feelings, but I can’t control what you’re sending. Usually I would be able to shield, but you were too strong and we got caught in a feedback loop.”

“You can’t do that?”

“No. Male Sirens can read emotions to a limited extent, but we mainly depend on reading the fantasies of our partners and fulfilling them.” He smiled. “Of course, mated pairs can use all of the talents of both partners. It makes them very powerful.”

Shayla felt like she was in some strange surreal dream. She tried to picture herself as part of a mated Siren pair, and her mind balked. She just couldn’t imagine it. Hell, five minutes ago she had never even heard of mated Siren pairs and had no idea they existed. This was going to take a while to absorb. Her eyes drifted to Gavin again. And if she had to keep her hands off, it was going to be a very long two weeks.

She could fix this. “When can we start the training?”

He slapped his hand to his forehead. “Damn. I should have expected this.”

“Well, yeah. You should have.”

He sighed. “I’ve never trained a female Siren. Sure, I’ve helped with some of the ... uh, exercises ...” He shook his head. “Are you sure you want to do this? This has been a pretty big day already.”

“Didn’t you just tell me ‘no training, no sex’? What do you think?”

“I think you want training.” He closed his eyes. “This is going to be strange. Let me think.”

After a few minutes, Gavin said, “The first thing you need to be able to do is to open and close the Siren channels. You’re wide open right now. Stay that way, while I open and close to you telepathically, empathically, then both at once.” *Can you hear this?*

“Yes, I heard that.”

Now I'm going to cut it off. "You're not hearing my thoughts now, are you?" She shook her head. "This time I'm going to open the empathic channel."

Her emotions *shifted* and she was feeling background anxiety about the difficulties faced by an untrained Siren, and curiosity about how she would absorb the new knowledge, then her emotions *shifted* again, and she shook her head as though the action would shake her back to herself. "Wow. That was weird. Normally, when I pick up other people's emotions there's not such a clear beginning and end."

"Now I'm going to open both channels, and leave them open for a few minutes so we'll be sharing mental and emotional space. Are you ready?"

She breathed in deeply. "As ready as I'll ever be."

All at once his thoughts were there with hers. It was like listening to two people talking at the same time. *How are you feeling?*

Can't you tell how I'm feeling? This is really strange.

I meant, how are you feeling physically? Can you feel my body? I can feel yours. Gavin was amused.

She concentrated on feeling the limits of her body, but there was another set of limits that must be his body ...

Close your eyes. It might help to reduce the sensory input.

It did help. Shayla reached out with her hand. *Maybe she could orient his body to hers by relating what she was touching to what she was feeling.*

Gavin shifted positions to get more comfortable. His cock needed to be rearranged slightly in the new position.

Cock, now that would be interesting ...

Shayla, that might not be a good idea.

But her hand was already reaching. There was an explosion of lust as her hand grasped him and she felt herself grasp him and her pussy grew wet and hot and Gavin imagined his cock thrusting inside and the idea of his thrusting caused everything in her to clench.

Suddenly all channels from Gavin slammed closed and he rolled off the bed. He was breathing slowly and deeply and was also rigidly erect.

Shayla ached to have him inside her -- but there was some reason they weren't supposed to do that. Wasn't there?

"Well. I forgot to mention that it wouldn't be wise to do anything sexual. Yet." Gavin glanced wryly down at his erection. "I'm sure you're not much better off. This would be the time to use your jhekken pen imagery."

"Right. Jhekken shit. Not the way I'd prefer to finish this off ..."

He waved his hand. "Feel free to finish yourself off any way you like."

She frowned. Some part of her wanted to object to his casual attitude, but another part applauded.

He sighed deeply. "I think that's enough for me for today. We should probably get some sleep."

She rubbed her neck. "Yeah. This has been a big day." She looked around the room. "Where do you sleep, anyway?"

Gavin smiled faintly. "Well, I could sleep with you in that big, comfortable bed, or I could sleep on the hard, lonely cot in the corner for the body servant."

She glanced at the corner. "Didn't notice it." She yawned. "You'd better sleep on the cot." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "At least until I'm *trained*."

"If I live that long," Gavin said.

She glared at him.

Gavin grabbed a robe from the end of the bed, and put it on. After turning off the light, he settled down on the cot and turned to the wall. "Sleep well. It may be a long day tomorrow."

Tomorrow might be a long day? What about this one? It was right up there with the day that she left home when she was thirteen, as far as things happening in her life.

She settled down into the covers and listened for the faint sounds of Gavin's breathing. Her mind was whirling, but finally she drifted asleep.

Chapter Six

Shayla woke up with a peculiar sense of disorientation. She knew that the universe was askew even before she remembered why. Oh, yeah. Last night Gavin told her that she was a Siren and that she had a birth family on Jheknan. And he was sleeping -- she turned to look on the other side of the room -- on the body servant's cot. This was definitely a different universe than the one that she had woken up in yesterday.

And then there was the part about her employers being the villains behind everything. It had never occurred to her that the Jheknan Security Organization had anything to do with her, and now it turned out that they were responsible for *everything* -- growing up with adoptive parents who didn't love her but were only doing their duty, not knowing anything about her real nature. Then there was Gavin, his telepathy, her empathy, the Siren talents ...

She took a deep breath and stood up. One day at a time. She could only live one day at a time.

She sat in front of the mirror of the dressing table and frowned at her reflection. Her eyes looked tired and her skin was blotchy. It must be some kind of law -- if you had to spend the day with a gorgeous guy, you never looked your best.

In the mirror she saw Gavin stand up and stretch. She let her eyes rest on his broad shoulders and muscular arms. It was marginally safer than letting her gaze drop to lower parts. She needed to learn how to control her talents, and the sooner the better. Their eyes met in the mirror, and he smiled.

"Let me do that." He moved toward her.

"Do what?"

"Brush your hair." He picked up the brush and with a gentle touch he untangled her hair.

"You don't have to do that."

"Ah, but it's my job." He worked his fingers through the length of her hair and followed them with the brush. "Not everybody actually uses a body servant for sex, you know. Body servants also act as valets and lady's maids."

"Except that the female servants are the valets, and ... I guess that makes you a lady's maid." She snorted.

He smoothed her hair with his hand. "What? You think I couldn't be a good lady's maid?"

"I'm sure you could." She looked at him in the mirror. "But I think your talents lie in other directions."

He smiled and gently tucked her hair behind her ears. "You might be right." He laid down the brush. "I'm going to take a shower. Will you need any help getting dressed?"

"No. Will you come with me to breakfast or go to the servant's hall?"

He frowned. "We didn't talk much about what you're doing here. Our goals and the goals of the Organization are not exactly aligned here."

Shayla raised her eyebrows. "Our goals?"

"The goals of the Sirens. You know, your newfound relatives and family?"

"Oh, *those* goals." She opened her eyes wide. "So what's the story?"

He bit his lip. "The short version is that we want to keep Kimur a closed planet." When she raised an eyebrow, he continued, "We're going to leave Jheknan and move everybody to Kimur, and we would like to prevent the Federation from knowing anything about us."

"Everybody?"

"All of our kindred and families. Including you, since you're one of us now. Unless you decide you don't want to?" He raised his eyebrows.

She shrugged. She had no reason to love Jheknan, but this was a little too soon to commit herself to a bunch of people she didn't know.

"I'll explain everything in detail later when we have more time. Right now we'd better get to breakfast." He paused, obviously thinking about the choices. "I'll go to the servant hall. You've been covering the upstairs, but we don't know what's going on downstairs. And our Organization contact will be there."

She felt a flash of regret. She would rather be with Gavin than the Kimurian nobility in the breakfast room. It was odd, but she felt less lonely with him.

He smiled at her, and stroked her cheek with the back of his finger. "I'll accompany you to dinner."

She scowled at him. On the other hand, it was pretty disconcerting being around somebody who could read her thoughts. It didn't leave her much privacy.

“You can learn to shield your thoughts from me. It’s one of the first things a Siren learns. We’ll work on it later.” Gavin leaned forward and touched his lips to hers, before vanishing out the door.

* * * * *

Shayla consumed a hearty breakfast in the dining room. Life-changing news didn’t seem to affect her appetite. After finishing her eggs and meat, she politely wished everybody a good day and wandered off, declining several offers of company. The backwash from all the emotions strained her ability to cope, and it was worse today than it had been yesterday, oddly enough. Maybe the exercise she had done with Gavin had increased her sensitivity. In any case, this was going to be a good day to spend as far away from everybody as possible. Except for Gavin, of course.

Shayla returned to her room a few hours later, to find him closing a suitcase. She glanced around and saw that all of her personal belongings had been packed. “What happened?”

“Have you spoken to the Organization contact who works as a servant?”

“Not yet. They gave me his name, but I had nothing to tell him.”

“Well, he was in the servant hall, and I could hear what he was thinking.”

“I assume it was bad?”

Gavin pressed his lips together. “You could say that. If you think being put on a list for immediate termination is bad.”

Her stomach flip-flopped, and she sat down on the closest chair. “What? They want to kill us? Both of us? Why?”

“Yes, both of us.” He put the suitcase down by the door and glanced around the room. “They must realize that you’re one of the stolen Siren females. I can’t think of any other reason to get rid of you. There must have been a leak.”

“What has the Organization got against Sirens anyway? Besides the religious nuts, I mean.”

“Religious nuts?”

“The liaison that landed with me was spouting Reformed Messiah gibberish and said that some of the Organization leaders also belonged to the cult.”

He frowned. “That’s news to me. We’ll have to look into that connection.” He opened a closet to check for stray belongings. “The Organization has never trusted Sirens. They’re afraid of our powers, particularly the power of mated Sirens. I assume that’s why they stole you and the others in the first place. No females, no mating. No Siren children.”

She was feeling shaky. “What do we do now?”

He sat down next to her. "The most important thing is to stay alive. But we also need to arrange places for the families when they start arriving, which will be really soon." He rubbed his forehead. "I'm going to send a message to Jheknan, telling them to start the exodus immediately. They're all in danger if the Organization knows that we've discovered their dirty little plot. That means that they'll be here in about a week. We also need to finish our mission -- the real mission. The Council of Lords must vote to strictly control off-planet contact." He smiled wryly. "On top of all that, it would be nice if the Organization didn't realize that we were on to them for a while."

She laughed shakily. "Oh, is that all."

He reached over and pulled her to him, nestling her face into the soft skin at his neck. "Don't worry, Shayla. Everything will work out."

"I guess. What do we do now?"

"A couple of the servants are willing to do discreet jobs for extra money. I'll get one of them to take the luggage to the village. We'll both stay in the dining and living areas with other people at all times, so they can't touch us. After lunch you'll go for a walk, and we'll sneak off to the village. We'll hire a carriage under a different name, and head for a manor near the central city. I was planning to go there anyway. We'll just move the timing up." Gavin rubbed his nose. "I'm not sure what to tell the Organization. Maybe that our cover was blown, and we're going to lie low for a few days?"

Shayla sighed. "Whatever you think will work. Anything that will keep them from looking for us for a few days is a good thing, I guess." Shayla laughed wryly. "I suppose this means that I'm out a job." Shayla paused and narrowed her eyes. "Actually it's much worse than that, isn't it? Jheknan certainly wasn't perfect, and I was hoping to find something better. But now I can't go back. Ever. Can I?"

He sighed and looked sympathetic. "Probably not. I'm sorry that this will be so hard on you, but you're one of us now. We'll help you with whatever you decide to do. But you don't have to make any decisions right now."

Gavin locked the door and sat down at the table. He took a leather wallet from his pocket and unfolded a flexi-comp. He typed on the holo keyboard a few minutes, frowned, typed a few more characters, and folded it up.

"I hope messages are getting through to Jheknan. At least the commsat doesn't belong to the Organization, or we'd be in serious trouble." He pulled a couple of pieces of paper out of the drawer of the table and scrawled a few words. "I'll leave a letter for our contact to be delivered tonight. No sense in giving them advance warning. And a letter to your hosts, saying you were called away suddenly. We'll probably run into these people again."

She frowned. "What will you say if someone notices that you were a body servant and are now ... uh, something else?"

He raised his eyebrows and assumed a haughty look. "If someone were rude enough to question me, I would just explain that you have a fetish for sex with body servants, so it's a little game we play."

She groaned. "Thanks a lot. Now they'll all think I'm some kind of pervert."

"Not on this planet." He smiled wryly. "Just about anything is acceptable here. But very few people have seen me, so it may never come up." He folded the note and placed it on the desk. "Now tell me about your three targets on the off-planet vote."

She frowned. "One of them is for restriction, two are for open access."

"Damn. We need to have at least one more of them on our side of the vote. Who would be the easiest target?"

"Easiest how?"

"Who would change his mind easiest?"

"Manfred, probably."

He narrowed his eyes and looked at Shayla for a minute. "Why don't you watch while I change his mind? We'll go find him before lunch and get him someplace private." He grinned wickedly. "It might help with your training."

Her eyes opened wide. "Me? I don't know anything about it."

"You don't really have to know how. You can link in the background. We'll both feel Manfred's emotions and hear his thoughts. I'll do the tinkering." He tipped his head. "So, are you up for it?"

Shayla felt a strange combination of excitement and fear. She would be using her abilities as a Siren for the first time. She looked at Gavin. "Yes. I'm up for it."

* * * * *

Later that morning Shayla invited Manfred into a private parlor, with Gavin kneeling submissively next to her where she sat in an armchair.

Manfred's eyes were drawn to Gavin's impressive body. "I see you have a new body servant." He circled around him. "I don't think I've tried this one before."

Shayla murmured, "Maybe we could get together later and put him through his paces." She tossed her hair. "But first, would you mind explaining this off-planet vote to me?" She hoped she sounded sufficiently petulant and bubbleheaded. "I just don't understand what people are talking about, and I'm getting tired of it." She opened her eyes wide and leaned closer to him.

As Manfred pontificated, she tried to stay open to Gavin empathically and telepathically. She kept cutting off accidentally, and having to consciously relax and re-connect. But she did pick up bits and pieces of what he was doing, adjusting Manfred's conscious thoughts as the conversation continued.

Okay, I'm done here. Get us out of here, Gavin finally told her.

She looked at Manfred with what she hoped would pass for admiration. "Thank you so much for explaining that to me. Nobody else was able to make it nearly so clear."

She stood up and tapped Gavin on the shoulder in a command to rise.

Manfred's eyes stayed glued to Gavin's groin, and he licked his lips. "When did you want to get together?"

"Oh, talk to me after dinner. We'll discuss it then." Grasping Gavin by the arm, she pulled him after her down the hall. Thank God she wouldn't be here after dinner. No way did she want to do that with Manfred.

* * * * *

After lunch, Shayla murmured excuses to the offers of afternoon games, and wandered into the garden. Gavin was waiting at the back of the property, near the path to the village. Keeping to the trees whenever possible, they hurried down the path.

Shayla looked around with interest. She had passed through on her way to Branham Hall, but hadn't paid a lot of attention since she had been thinking about her arrival at the manor only a few minutes away. The original houses were made of common fabstruct, but later additions were a hodge-podge of handmade and nano-constructed materials. You could almost see the ebb and flow of wealth and technology in this society by mapping out the construction materials. Nonetheless, the village was charming with its small scale and community feeling. Shayla would have liked to see more, but they didn't have time. No doubt there would be other villages to explore.

The coach they had reserved was waiting behind a small inn on the outskirts of the village. She looked at it with a jaundiced eye, having already spent quite a few hours in a similar coach, pulled by similar equines. It was not a comfortable way to travel. This planet really needed a few aircars. Shaking her head, she climbed into the coach and stretched out on one of the seats. After speaking briefly to the coachman, Gavin climbed in and gave the command to start.

She sighed with relief. "We made it. Now we just have to survive the trip."

"Not a fan of equine-drawn carriages, I take it?"

She shuddered. "No, I'm not. What I wouldn't give for an aircar." She rubbed her temples and grimaced. "Remind me to avoid house parties until I learn to shield. The emotional tensions in that lunch room have given me a splitting headache. Please help me learn to filter better."

"With practice you should have enough control so that you can filter out anybody you're not interested in." He let his head flop back against the cushions. "If we live that long, of course."

"At least we found out Manfred's new opinions on off-planet contact." She bit her lip. "There was something ... I don't know ... something creepy about the whole thing. I'm not sure I like mucking around in somebody's mind."

"I know what you mean." He turned his head to look at her. "We Sirens have principles, you know. All of our children learn them. We don't interfere with thoughts or emotions for trivial reasons. When we get back to normal -- whatever normal is -- you should talk to my mother about it."

She opened her eyes wide. "You have a mother?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, I have a mother."

Shayla, attempting to get comfortable, pressed against Gavin's side, and rested her head on his shoulder. After a minute, she became aware that the contact with her body was starting to arouse him. "Well, really. Maybe I should sit over there ..."

He smiled darkly at her. "You can't fool me. I know what you're thinking about. You're picturing my naked body, and imagining --"

"I know what I'm imagining, no need to repeat it. Damn. It's certainly easy to set each other off, isn't it?"

"Are you complaining?" He raised his eyebrows.

"If I can't do anything about it, you're damn right I'm complaining." She snorted.

"Yeah, that is a problem we'll have to do something about." He stroked her cheek. "If we get too aroused, we'll have to find other partners, you know."

She frowned. "Something about that seems really wrong. You arouse me and I find someone else for sex. It's totally unappealing."

He wrinkled his forehead. "I know what you mean, but we only have a couple of days before things are going to get iffy." He grinned lopsidedly. "So you'd better study fast."

"So start the lessons, *teacher*."

"Okay, but tell me if you start to feel overwhelmed. As you discovered this morning, exercising these talents can make you oversensitive," he said. "We're going to be at Horton Hall by dinnertime, so normally I wouldn't advise doing this now, but it doesn't look like we have a lot of choice. You're going to get overstimulated by being around me, anyway." He sighed. "It's your turn to try the exercise that I did with you yesterday. Let's start with empathy since it's your primary ability. Try to open and close your emotions to me."

How had it felt when he had done that? She had felt his emotions start and stop, but what had he done? "You have to tell me if you feel it work." He nodded. Shayla tried to push her feelings out, tried squinching her brain this way and that, and finally said, "It's not working."

"How did they teach me when I was a child ...?" His face brightened. "Images help. Imagine your emotions as a stream, or a searchlight, or clouds -- whatever works for you."

Then imagine a barrier, like a dam stopping a stream, or a wall around a field, or even an actual shield.”

Shayla closed her eyes, relaxed, and thought of her emotions as a roaring stream. She dropped a dam in front of the stream.

“Yes! That was it.”

Gavin’s exclamation broke Shayla’s concentration, and the stream roared over the dam.

“You closed it off ... for a second.”

She smiled widely. “Wonderful. Now if I can just do it again ...”

They worked for an hour on Shayla’s control of her empathy, and her ability to open and close the Siren telepathic and empathic channels. She felt as though her mind was just worn out by the time they stopped, and she slumped against the carriage seat. Or maybe it was her emotions that were exhausted. She wasn’t sure she was even capable of telling the difference at this point, she was so tired.

He smiled faintly. “Well done. You’ve made a lot of progress in a short time.”

She scowled. “But it’s not enough. And now I can’t do anything.”

“It’s not exactly like exercising unused muscles, but in some ways the analogy fits.” He shrugged. “You’re getting better, you’ve just tired yourself out.”

Shayla looked at Gavin in the flickering afternoon light from the carriage windows. Her mind might be exhausted, but her body was getting damn restless. The shape of his arms, the line formed by his hips, the softness of his lips -- it was all fuel for her imagination. Her gaze drifted down to the tights covering his loins. As she gazed, his cock swelled, straightening to a rigid shaft covered by the stretchy material.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the seat. “Here we go again.”

“Does this mean you’re going to be unable to control yourself again?” she asked hopefully.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” He smiled but didn’t open his eyes. “I had more warning this time, and we’re not in a feedback loop.” He half-opened his eyes and looked at her. “You will pay for this, and sometime soon, I hope. Meanwhile, I’d appreciate it if you could try to shield.” He raised his eyebrows.

She flushed, and imagined herself surrounded by a sphere of polished marble.

“Much better. Do you think we can refrain from thinking about sex long enough to discuss the plan at Castle Horton?”

“If you can do it, I can do it.”

“Right. Okay, we ignore sexy feelings and thoughts for the next half hour. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

He sighed deeply. “The vote on off-planet relations will be taking place next week. Every noble family sends one representative to the council. At this point it looks like we

would win the vote, but just a couple of people changing their minds would throw it up into the air. Lord Horton has a piece of property that we want to buy, and he's on the council. We can take care of two things at once here."

"This is property for settling some of your people?"

"Yes. It has an excellent location close to the capital city. It also has the big advantage of a title that goes with it." He grinned. "Don't you think I'd look good as a Count?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course." Outside the carriage the countryside passed by, a patchwork of wild-looking forest and the occasional small settlement or farm. If someone with modern transportation were following them, this painfully slow progress would make them an easy target. "Do you think that the Organization has any idea where we are?"

"I'm trying to keep it as fuzzy as possible. I told our contact that we were in danger of being exposed, and needed to make ourselves scarce. I tried to give the impression that we'll be hiding out in some quiet location until the pickup."

"I hope it works." She frowned. "I've been thinking, Gavin. We want the Organization to fail loudly and obviously, right?"

"Sure, if we can manage it."

"What about revealing one of the Organization operatives as an off-planet plant? Wouldn't that mobilize feelings against them?"

"That's a good idea." He spent a few minutes in thought. "They don't know our new personas. We might even be able to get away with claiming credit for the revelation. That would start us off with some positive points."

"The Organization wouldn't recognize us?"

"I think we can manage to avoid visual records. This planet is G-class, so they don't have cameras." He bit his lip. "But we can't be sure what the Organization has planned. We'll keep thinking about it. Meanwhile ..."

"Meanwhile, what's the plan with this Lord Horton?"

"Let's feel out the situation first. We may be able to handle the situation with our talents."

"Is he good looking?"

Gavin gave Shayla a chiding look.

She shrugged. "If I'm going to have to make up to him, he might as well be good looking."

"Picky, picky."

"There's another thing. What's our cover story? Am I still Lady Shala? Who are you? What's our relationship? If I'm going to pull off this act, I need to know the story."

"You're right, we need to get all the details straight. We also need to create a good introduction letter to Lord Horton." He glanced at his chronometer. "Time to get to work."

Chapter Seven

They arrived at Horton Hall late in the afternoon. As they turned into the drive leading to the hall, Shayla peered out the windows of the carriage. It was a large manor house, about twice as big as Branham Hall, with four stories and two wings branching off the main house at an angle. The Hall was built of an old-fashioned, reddish nano-stone, now covered with vines and moss. Meticulously maintained gardens surrounded it, with a stream and artificial lake behind. She had never been in a private house of such magnificence before. A thread of nervousness coiled inside.

As they emerged from the confines of the carriage, she breathed deeply, enjoying the fresh air and stretching her cramped muscles. If she stayed on this planet, she must look into importing some reasonable form of transportation. Carriages pulled by equines just were not comfortable for long journeys. There had to be some kind of vehicle that would fit into Kimur's technological classification yet would be faster and less bumpy and bruising.

The butler ushered them into the entry hall, a space larger than Shayla's entire apartment back on Jheknan. Elaborately carved woods and stretches of satiny polished stone covered the walls and floors. It didn't resemble any type of nano-composite she had ever seen. For such conspicuous consumption, it was probably handmade. Lord Horton must be truly rich. A wide stairway curved to the upper floors, and hallways ran off in three directions. It looked like there was a wing going straight back in addition to the two side wings.

She felt travel worn and shabby compared to her surroundings. The butler looking down his arrogant nose at them with excessive politeness didn't help her feel more comfortable, either. She shook her hair out and adopted a look of equal arrogance. She could do a rich bitch.

Gavin presented their forged letter of introduction, and they were shown into a small parlor. Lord Horton turned out to be a man in his early thirties, still rather handsome but with an alcoholic flush on his face and thinning, colorless hair.

He glanced at the introduction without much curiosity. "Always glad for a few more guests," he said. "The housekeeper will show you to a room."

From what Shayla had learned from the Organization's briefing and conversations at Branham Hall, the aristocracy in this country apparently spent most of their time at one house party or another -- until it was their turn to host. Those who were rich enough might host a party for most of the year. Clearly Lord Horton was in the "rich enough" category. Total strangers showing up for a house party seemed like business as usual.

Lord Horton waved them toward the stairs. "Join us for dinner at eight. We can chat then." He wandered off toward the back of the house, where they could hear the sounds of laughter.

They were assigned a suite with two bedrooms, a bath, and a connecting sitting room. The rooms were light, airy, and even more luxurious than Shayla's room at Branham Hall, with plush carpeting and elaborately embroidered hangings. With a feeling of relief, she escaped into her bedroom. She needed to lie down and just let her mind wander. Her body relaxed into the soft mattress; her skin was soothed by the silky coverings.

Her whole concept of herself had been uprooted and turned about. A little peace and quiet and privacy let her pause and work on putting her self-image back together. Her life with her adoptive parents, with her foster mother, and the last six years in Drobery -- everything looked different when viewed through her new perspective about her nature. Finally, tired of re-inventing her past life, she drifted off to sleep.

She woke up just as Gavin returned to the suite. "Hey, sleepyhead," he said from the sitting room.

Shayla stood up and stretched. She felt much better, more relaxed and energetic. "I checked the messages. The kindred will be arriving in seven days. All known Sirens will leave at the same time several days later. If we can't get Lord Horton to sell us Lexfield, we'll have to settle on an alternative location."

She looked at him blankly. "Lexfield?"

"Did I forget to mention the name? It's the estate to the west of here, which we were hoping to make our homestead here on Kimur. It belongs to Lord Horton."

"Okay. Vote against open off-planet access, sell us Lexfield. Anything else on the list I should know about?"

"No, I think that's it."

"The Organization doesn't have any people at Horton Hall?"

"Not that I know of," he said. "But we should still be careful. We're on the outskirts of Centralia here, and they have an embassy in the central city, so they're not far away."

It was time to prepare for dinner. She looked through her wardrobe, wishing she knew more about current fashion on Kimur. The Organization training had covered standard dress, but hadn't included what colors and styles were most popular with the upper crust this year. The people at Branham manor had been from the noble class, but most of them had been of the provincial sort. She suspected that standards here, so close to the capital city, were much higher. She sighed. She might not be the best dressed here, but she could be charming. She'd have to remember to ask Gavin whether that was a Siren talent.

In the end, she just picked her favorite dress, the gold one with red-wine accents. Luckily their clothes looked Kimurian but were made of high-tech fabrics that didn't wrinkle or retain dirt. A good shake, and the dresses and shirts looked fresh and new.

Gavin emerged from his room looking truly gorgeous in a deep purple Kimurian costume much like the one he had worn in the virtual reality room. Goddess, he had a nice ass. And she knew from personal experience that there was no padding in those tights.

His gaze drifted from her face down her body. "You look mighty fine, sweetheart."

She breathed in deeply. "And so do you."

"Don't worry. This will be easy. With our looks and talents, we'll have them eating out of our hands." He grinned.

She held out her hand. "Let's go knock them dead."

* * * * *

For dinner tonight there were about twenty guests gathered in the parlor next to the dining room. The guests were more cosmopolitan and a bit more debauched than at the last party. And better dressed, though Shayla was relieved to see that their appearance was unremarkable. They introduced themselves as Lord and Lady Trelanian, and merged seamlessly into the socializing, Gavin concentrating on the older women and Shayla on the men.

Dinner was announced by the butler, and everybody drifted toward the dinner table, with much vivacious chatter and laughter.

The food was some of the best that she had ever eaten, with delicate sauces, complicated salads, and mysterious meats. She enjoyed chatting with the guests on either side until the dessert course was served, and her head started aching from the sea of emotions. Somehow, in worrying about how she would fit in, she had forgotten about her oversensitivity. It wasn't as though she could have done anything anyway. She tried the shielding she had practiced but could only maintain it for a few minutes. Her head pounded; she couldn't concentrate. Many of the guests looked forward to nighttime liaisons, and their waves of lust flooded her. She leaned her head on the support of her hand.

Her left-hand neighbor peered at her with concern. "Lady Trelanian? Are you feeling well?"

She managed a brief smile. "I just have a headache. It's nothing to be concerned about." Of course in addition to her headache, her body was vibrating with sexual stimulation. She throbbed and ached, and her eyes kept drifting to Gavin, halfway down the table. She tried to pick some other focus for her lust, but it didn't work. None of them could compare to him.

The dinner finally ended, and the social activity moved to a large salon scattered with chairs and couches. Shayla moved as far away from everybody as she could and collapsed on a comfortable chair. The music drifted over her, soothing her senses. She certainly wasn't in any state to work the room. She should leave and go back to their suite -- if only it wasn't so much work.

Gavin was in the middle of the action, looking down at a petite but voluptuous blonde with admiration. A surge of irritation inspiring her, Shayla sat up and thought at him, *Gavin, I need to leave.*

He turned to look at her, a quick frown passed over his face, and seconds later he was heading in her direction.

Good. He would save her from drowning in this sea of social tensions and deferred lust.

He put held out his hand. "You're losing control, aren't you?"

"Control, what's that?" Shayla swayed. "Could you help me back to my room?" She took his arm and leaned against his shoulder. What a nice shoulder, firm and muscular ... and it smelled so good. She took a deep breath and Gavin-smell filled her, musky and sweet and wild. Her body melted against his.

Gavin put his arm around her waist and walked toward the hallway. As they passed through the crowd, the emotions of the people they passed surged through her. She gave up entirely trying to shield since it didn't seem to be working anyway and concentrated on living through it. They had almost reached the door when Lord Horton stepped in front of them.

"Hope you enjoyed the meal," he said heartily.

She looked at him dizzily. His emotions -- frustration and bitterness -- didn't match his words or his tone. And the blonde woman standing rigidly by his side was one unhappy woman.

Gavin smiled urbanely. "Wonderful meal, just wonderful. My compliments to the cook." He lifted his eyebrow. "And is this your lovely wife?"

"Yes, of course. Lord and Lady Trelanian, this is my wife, Lady Phylla Horton. She's not much to look at, but she's good at managing the house." Lord Horton laughed sharply, as though trying to turn his cruel comment into a joke.

Lady Horton flushed and her face stiffened even further. "Pleased to meet you. Let me know if you need anything." She bowed and stepped back.

Shayla looked from Lord Horton to Lady Horton and back again. There was some undercurrent going on here that she didn't understand, but she was in no condition to figure

it out. She murmured, "Thank you both for your hospitality. Please excuse me, I'm not feeling very well."

Gavin gave her a gentle push toward the door. "I'm afraid that something we ate on the journey doesn't agree with my wife. I look forward to seeing you in the morning." He bowed and moved briskly after Shayla.

Shayla's legs shook, but her dizziness receded quickly in the cool darkness of the hallway. He tugged her firmly in the direction of her room. When she started to speak, he shook his head.

Once in her bedroom, he closed the door, locked it, and turned to face her. Frowning, he ran his hands down her body impersonally. Her body went cold and hot and cold again. "Shayla, you're dangerously low on energy. That might be why you were so overwhelmed downstairs. You're going to have to feed soon. Really soon."

Oh, no. How could she pick up a casual sexual partner in front of Gavin? It had always been a private shame to her, the regular one-night stands. To do it right in front of Gavin, whom she knew and was attracted to ... inconceivable. "I thought you said I would probably last a week. Besides, I don't want to even touch one of those men."

"Shayla. You're being irrational. This is just *sex*. You need to do something about it."

"I refuse to pick up one of these *kanigh*. I just can't do it, I can't."

"You might have to eventually." He took a deep breath. "It's not a perfect solution, but I think I can help."

Her eyes flew open. "You can? I thought we couldn't have sex because I have no *control*."

"Well, fucking is out. But there are other things ..."

"Like what?"

He sighed. "The simplest thing is actually used as an exercise for developing control. We each pleasure ourselves, with open telepathic and empathic channels. If you want the practice, you switch back and forth from open to closed channels." He grinned faintly. "It may not do any good as far as your total energy supply is concerned, but it should take some of the sexual edge off, and clarify what energy you do have."

Shayla was confused. "So won't I just have to ... feed anyway?"

"Eventually, yes. But this might put it off for a day or two more."

She felt a sullen expression settle on her face, but she couldn't help it. Her emotional control was almost non-existent. "I'd rather be able to touch you. That would be a lot more fun."

"Sweetheart, I'd rather touch you, too." He sighed. "But it's a bit risky right now. If we don't physically touch, you can't accidentally drain me." He smiled mischievously. "Besides, you've never done mind sex before. Believe me, it's more like real touching than you might think."

“Oh, all right.” She ran her hand down his bare arm. “Since I can’t have the real thing.”

“Uh-uh. No touching.”

She rolled her eyes.

“We’ll start, and if you want to stop at any point, believe me, I’ll know. First you’ll need to get naked.”

Slowly, her gaze fastened on his, she removed her shoes, and then pulled off the evening dress and dropped it on the floor. She stretched her arms over her head, enjoying the feeling of being naked in front of him.

He cleared his throat. “Now sit against the pillows at the head of the bed.”

She crawled onto the mattress, moved the pillows into a pile, and leaned back.

He grabbed some cushions and positioned them at the foot of the bed. He quickly stripped off his clothes and settled himself on the bed, leaning back against the cushions.

She looked at all those muscles, the powerful thighs, the graceful line of his shoulders. Her gaze dropped to his darker cock, already half-erect, with the plum-shaped head peeking out of his foreskin. Veins wound around to the base, to a nest of dark curls. Her hand itched to reach out and touch it, to explore the satiny skin and the width of his shaft. Moisture grew between her thighs; the arousal she’d been fighting surged as she dropped the reins. She spread her knees and settled back against the pillows. She resisted the urge to pump and rotate her pelvis.

He was watching her, a faint smile on his face and heat in his eyes. As their eyes met, his cock swelled even further to a full, rock-hard erection. It was big and thick. Shayla imagined that big dick shafting her, and cream slithered from her core.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t think arousal is going to be a problem here. Now relax, and open up empathically and telepathically as much as possible.”

She dropped all of her shields and opened to the max. God. Now Gavin’s arousal overlaid hers, doubling it. It almost felt like having a cock and balls herself, in addition to her own equipment. Wow.

“Can you feel me?”

She opened her eyes. “God, yes, I can feel you.” She raised her eyebrows. “Can you feel me like that?”

Gavin smiled slowly, deliciously, and closed his eyes. “Oh yeah.” He opened his eyes, but only halfway. “Now I’m going to touch my nipples.” Carefully, deliberately, he pointed his finger and moved it to his nipple, circling it and then flicking it several times.

Pulses of electric pleasure ran from her nipples straight to her sex. She breathed deeply. “That is so strange. It feels like *my* nipples are being touched, but it’s not exactly the same.”

His hot, dark gaze fastened on her. *Okay, now touch your own nipples.*

Keeping her eyes locked on his, she slowly sucked her fingers, circling them with her tongue. Tracing the areolas with her cool, damp fingers, she felt his cock surge even harder, longer. She knew she must be feeling it in her clit, but it felt like she had eight throbbing inches instead of her little feminine button. *God, it feels like I have a cock, but the feelings are going straight to my clit.*

Yeah, well all of that arousal in my pelvis is pretty delicious, too. He pinched his nipples and spiraling heat spread through her belly. Four nipples being stimulated at once. Damn, if this kept up she would orgasm from nipple stimulation alone.

Now I'm going to flick the channels open and closed. Pay attention to the difference in sensations.

A rhythmic and deliberate pulsing of sensations pounded through her body. On. Off. On. Off. She moaned.

Touch yourself. He grasped his cock firmly and fisted the thick shaft.

It hardly seemed necessary to touch herself when his hand was pumping her phantom, dick-long clit. But she bravely moved a hand to her hot, creamy flesh. The additional stimulation caused a sparkling wave of pleasure to rush through her veins. She circled the nexus of sensation with a feather-light touch. Any more would have been too much, particularly when she could also feel -- and see -- his hand bringing his aching hard-on to an ever tighter coil of arousal.

She could feel his balls tightening as he worked his cock, but he managed to ask, *Do you want to try opening and closing the channels?*

She looked at him sitting across from her, legs spread, hand pumping rhythmically. His dark curls were tousled and sweaty, the muscled ridges of his abdomen framed his beautiful, swollen shaft. His hips lifted in little thrusts, while she rotated her hips, searching for completion. *Are you kidding? Of course not. I want to come!* And she really wished that thick length was thrusting into her soft, wet interior.

There was a touch of amusement in the flavor of his thoughts. *Try it once, just once. I know you want this deep inside. The sooner you master your talents ...*

I know, I know. She breathed deeply. *Here goes.* The hardest part was concentrating on her mental powers, when her body was clamoring for attention. She opened and closed the telepathic channels. Unable to isolate the channels completely, she tightened and loosened her internal muscles at the same time. *I did it! And that's damn well enough.*

Gavin groaned. *Yes! Come now!*

At the command, they both let go and pleasure pulsed through them both in hot, intense waves. His orgasm interwove with her orgasm, slow rhythmic spasms shook her as she could feel his cock spurting in short, fast bursts. She was female and male, she was both, together and separate.

Their emotions and thoughts were tightly entwined together, but gradually drifted apart, leaving behind a sated, voluptuous relaxation.

She lay like a puddle of warm honey, gradually coming back to reality, when he rolled toward her and cuddled her body from behind, tucking her head underneath his chin, and draping his arm around her body.

She muttered sleepily, "Aren't we supposed to avoid touching?"

"Shh. Go to sleep. We should be safe for a while, as long as we're not having sex."

She was warm and safe in Gavin's arms. Sleep beckoned.

Chapter Eight

Shayla's dreams thinned out and she drifted awake, gradually noticing the male body curled around her and a hardening ridge pressed against her bottom. Warmth curled around her heart.

Gavin rolled to his side, away from her. "Sorry about that." He cleared his throat. "I probably should have moved to my room last night."

She grinned. "Oh, don't apologize on my account. I don't mind." In fact, she wished he would stay and ...

"Shield, please." He scowled at her. "Please don't make this any harder --"

She laughed.

His scowl grew more severe. "Any more difficult than it already is."

"Sorry. I'll try to be good." She bounced out of bed, and grabbed the robe hanging by the bed.

"You're certainly feeling cheerful this morning."

"I guess I do feel good." It had been a long time since she had woken up in the morning next to a man. Could this chirpy feeling be due to that? Nah, the last time she had woken up next to Denton -- several years ago -- she had not felt cheerful at all. She had been rather depressed, in fact, since it had become clear the relationship was doomed. She frowned at the memory as she selected a dress from the wardrobe. Her eyes slid over to Gavin, who was wrapping a robe around himself. Gavin was so much more ... everything than Denton had been.

He crossed his arms and frowned at her, looking her up and down. "That's odd." Moving closer, he ran his hands up and down a couple of inches from her body. "Your energy level is up a little." He scratched his head. "Last night should have stabilized your

energy level a bit, but it shouldn't have actually gone up. Normally that doesn't happen unless ..." His voice trailed off and he looked thoughtful.

"Well? Unless what?" she asked impatiently.

"Either energy consumption or an energy exchange is necessary." He shrugged. "I probably just misread you last night."

She turned back to select the accessories and shoes to go with her dress. It was just more of this complicated Siren stuff. She needed to learn it all, but not necessarily before breakfast.

He moved to the door of the room and looked back at her. "I'll meet you downstairs at breakfast."

"Sure. We'll start to work on what's-his-name, Lord Horton."

After dressing, Shayla went down to the dining area. Compared to yesterday she felt invigorated and easily able to deal with the people. Her ability to shield seemed to have gone to the next level, so she jumped into the task of investigating Lord Horton using her empathy.

The emotions that she received from him seemed brighter and more sharp-edged than before. The training seemed to have increased her focus and reception. After hanging around Lord Horton for a while, she practiced shielding and opening up to single individuals at a time, like a child playing with a new toy.

She must have overdone it, because gradually the shininess of her expanded abilities wore off, and her ability to shield grew slow and clunky. Shayla took advantage of a break in the afternoon socializing to drag Gavin into an empty room away from the other guests.

"I was doing so well this morning, but now my head is starting to hurt." She rubbed her temples. "I guess I don't quite have the trick of shielding for long periods of time. How do you do it?"

"I imagine myself behind thick concrete walls, with a single window, and then have the window look into my target. Other people use similar visualizations -- whatever works."

"I'll have to try that. At this point I'd try anything." Shayla frowned. "Did you get what I got from Lord Horton and his wife?"

"You mean he's an asshole, and she's unhappy and depressed?"

"Yeah, that. But there's more than that. Lord Horton makes eyes at all the women, but you know what? He doesn't like women that much. He's attracted to the men."

"Hmm. That might explain some of the thoughts I was picking up."

"There's something else odd about him. He acts really dominant. But at one point I said to him 'What a naughty boy!' and he almost got a hard-on."

His eyebrows rose. "So you think he'd respond to domination or punishment?"

She bit her lip. "I'm not really sure what combination would be best. But I think we could find out. Do you think you could act all dominant over him so we could read his reaction?"

Gavin snorted. "Dominant? I think I could manage it. Did you get a chance to ask about Lexfield?"

"I keep bringing it up, and he keeps changing the subject. There was something odd there. He had emotions about Lexfield, but I couldn't quite figure out what they were." Restlessly, she walked to the window and looked out at the clear, sunny weather. The gardens were quite beautiful and she had spent most of the day making small talk with strangers. Maybe she should take a break and go for a walk in the gardens. Her empathy could certainly use the rest.

"How's your ... energy problem?"

She sighed. "I'm fine so far today. I think. I'm not sure I have a clear handle on the whole energy issue. Do you think I'll be able to master the skills before my energy runs out?"

He smiled slowly, his eyes hot and intent on her. "We'll have to see, won't we? It hardly seemed possible a few days ago, but you're making wonderful progress." He touched a finger to her chin. "If we get the vote thing under control, we could take a chance on the rest."

"Really? That's an option?"

He shrugged. "Do you want to bind?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Was that a proposal?"

"I keep forgetting that you don't know how things work," he said. "It's not like someone proposes and the other person responds. At least not usually. Each step toward greater intimacy increases the danger of binding telepathically and empathically. An energy exchange is the most intimate of all, so it's the most likely to lead to binding. But it's not like you can bind without wanting it."

She was confused, and this whole conversation made her nervous. She had decided years ago that marriage wasn't for her, but things were different now -- she just wasn't sure how different. "Okay, fine. You can explain all the details to me later. Right now I'd better get back to the game playing, and you ..." She frowned. "What were you doing, anyway?"

"Well, I *was* talking politics in the den, but now I'll go check out Lord Horton and his sexual proclivities."

"Sounds good." She raised an eyebrow. "Just don't enjoy it too much."

He laughed. "Don't worry, he's not my type. But in any case, I think we should both be there. You're the expert at picking up emotions, not me. If he started fantasizing I could get that, but I might miss simple arousal."

She sighed. “Just what I wanted to do -- not. Hang around and eavesdrop on somebody else’s sexual feelings. Let’s get it over with.” She grabbed his hand and headed toward the room where the men were hanging out talking about hunting and sports.

That walk in the garden would have to wait. When this was all over she was going to take a vacation. A good, long vacation.

* * * * *

After returning to their suite after dinner, Shayla traipsed restlessly back and forth in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. She wished she didn’t know so much about Lord Tony Horton and his wife. She had been listening in on emotions that he had intended to keep private. In a way, it made it worse that her sensitivity had increased. When her reception had been fuzzier, she could pick out positive or negative or general tendencies, but this ... this specificity seemed to drag with it additional responsibility.

Finally, Gavin lost patience. “Would you please let it out, or sit down. The pacing is driving me nuts, and you’re thinking so loudly it’s getting through my shields.”

She sat down and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. I just think that we should tell Lady Horton what we’ve found out about her husband. I know we gathered the information to help us with the vote and the estate, but I just don’t feel right letting this all go without doing anything about it.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you think that would be interfering?”

“Well ... maybe. But it seems to me that the main problem is that they aren’t communicating and Lord Horton’s needs aren’t getting met. Of course, that doesn’t excuse his incredible surliness, but if Lady Horton had more information to help balance the power in the relationship ...” She sighed.

“What about Lexfield and the vote?”

“Oh, I don’t know. We haven’t gotten anywhere with Lexfield. And he doesn’t have any strong feelings about the vote as far as I can tell. Maybe if he were ... happier?” She smiled hopefully at Gavin.

“But, Shayla, how would you tell Lady Horton that you got this information? A little bird told you?” He raised his eyebrows.

Her face fell. “Damn. I didn’t think about that part. He keeps it all very secret. I don’t see any reasonable way of knowing about this except through empathy.” She rubbed her temple. “I don’t remember learning about this in the training, and it hasn’t come up in conversation. What do Kimurians know about empathy? How do they feel about it?”

“Well ...” He tapped a finger to his lips. “It’s not illegal here, and there’s no requirement for an inhibitor. They’re not high-tech enough to be able to perform that sort of operation, anyway. There are people who have higher than human standard empathic ability, like most

worlds, and it doesn't seem to be a big deal. But nobody would even come close to your ability." He shook his head. "Siren talents take special genes, special brain structures."

"I wouldn't say I was a Siren. I would claim just generic empathic ability." She shuddered. "But it *would* seem strange to admit to being an empath. I've only told a few people in my life. You know, of course, and I told my friend Janis, and the woman who cared for me after my adoptive parents threw me out. That's all."

"I'm sure you could make up a believable background story. You could claim that it runs in your family, but that you prefer to keep it secret. That would probably work. And I'm not going to stop you, because I don't think there's enough time for there to be any repercussions from Jheknan." He sighed, and smiled at her. "It's you who have to decide if this is important enough to you to come out of the closet."

Shayla closed her eyes for a minute, thinking over the options. She had hoped to live someplace where she wouldn't have to hide her empathy. She just hadn't expected that the open part would happen quite this soon. Telling some stranger about her empathy felt risky, unsafe. But she also felt compelled to help the Hortons. She drew a deep, rather shaky breath and opened her eyes. "Yes, I think that it is important enough. I'll do my best to control the risk, though."

Gavin smiled sympathetically. "Do what you feel you must. But if nothing has happened on the vote or the estate in two days, we're going to have to make a move."

She flung her arms around him. "Thank you! That makes me feel so much better." His chest smelled so good; his body was so firm and strong. Arousal coiled around her spine. *Damn, this wasn't a good idea ...*

No, sweetheart, it isn't. Amusement colored his thought. Amusement and a matching arousal.

With a sigh, she pulled away. "So what's the next lesson?"

* * * * *

The next morning after breakfast, Shayla asked Phylla Horton to speak with her on a private matter. Puzzled but accommodating, Phylla escorted her to a small sitting room and closed the door.

Shayla wished that she had chosen a different character to portray for this house party than that of the young and rather flighty noblewoman, Lady Trelanian. A little more age and a little more respect would come in handy now. She had gone over and over the conversation in her head, trying to come up with a script that would make this difficult conversation more easy, and she wasn't totally satisfied with the result.

But she took a deep breath and dived in. "Are you familiar with the empathic talents?"

Phylla tilted her head. "Not particularly. I know that they exist, but they aren't that common."

“Well, I’m an empath. It’s a skill that runs in my family.” Shayla hoped that wasn’t too blunt.

Phylla raised her eyebrows. “Oh, really.”

That wasn’t what Shayla would call an encouraging response, but she plowed on anyway. “We usually keep it a secret because it just makes people uncomfortable. I’m only bringing it up now because I wanted to talk to you about your husband.” There. She’d managed to get that part of her script out.

Phylla stiffened. “My husband?” Her voice was cool.

Shayla rushed on. “I know it’s not my place to give you advice, but -- are you aware that your husband is aroused by other men and by being dominated?”

There was an arrested look in Phylla’s eyes. “That’s hard to believe, since he’s always making negative comments about submissive men.”

Shayla shrugged. “I don’t know where he got his attitudes, but he is ashamed of his desires, and so --”

Phylla finished her sentence, “-- he puts them down to cover up his own feelings.” She breathed in deeply. “Well. That explains a lot.” She shook her head slowly, then looked at Shayla with a tight face. “How does he really feel about women?”

Shayla said slowly, “I assume that he can perform with women?” She raised her eyebrows at Phylla, who nodded. “He is attracted to women, but not as much as he’s attracted to men. He doesn’t have a problem with being dominated by women.” She sighed. “I hope this doesn’t come as bad news to you. I thought that the truth could only be an improvement over the current ... situation.”

Phylla nodded briskly. “You’re absolutely right. Anything would be better than what I’ve been living with. I wish he had been able to share his frustration with me, but I can work with this.” Her face acquired a look of grim resolve. “He’s going to have his sexual needs met whether he likes it or not.”

She touched her finger to her lips. “I have a couple of big strapping servants who are devoted to me, and will enjoy helping. And if he ever treats me badly again, I can threaten to tell everybody. In this society, it’s not like anybody would even care. But apparently he does.”

She turned to Shayla. “Is there something that I can do for you in return?”

Shayla hesitated, then said, “We’re interested in purchasing the Lexfield estate. My husband brought it up with Lord Horton, but he wouldn’t discuss it. Perhaps you could use your influence with him?”

“The reason that he won’t discuss it is that it’s actually mine, not Lord Horton’s.” Phylla looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded in decision. “If you agree to empathically monitor the scene with my husband this afternoon, I’ll sell it to you for the current appraised value. Do you accept?”

Shayla nodded again, so surprised she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Good. I'll send you a message with the location and time." With a graceful bow of her head, Phylla disappeared down the hall.

Damn. Gavin wasn't going to like this public use of her abilities. It had been risky enough revealing her empathy to Lady Horton, but this was much worse. There were more people involved and this type of empathy was known to be a Siren talent. On the other hand, she hadn't known that about Sirens, and Kimur was isolated, so maybe it wasn't general knowledge. She couldn't turn down the chance to acquire Lexfield. They needed that estate.

* * * * *

She found Gavin and broke the good news -- and the bad. She also asked him to join her in monitoring Tony and Phylla. She had never done anything like this before and was afraid that it would be overwhelming. Considering the effect that even a fairly small group of people could have on her emotions, she wanted him there to support her.

After taking lunch in their suite to recoup, they made their way down to the room Phylla had named in the note she sent to their room.

Shayla gazed at the scene in the next room through a one-way window. It was predictable that this sex-obsessed culture would allow a technological exception for voyeurism. Only Lady Phylla could see them through the selective glass.

Lord Tony Horton was fastened, naked and chest down, to a high, padded stool with his legs spread and his ankles cuffed to the legs of the stool. His chin rested on the padded edge. He wasn't well-built like Gavin, and he was starting to lose the effortless muscular definition of the young, but he wasn't bad. He had a firm, rounded ass and lightly furred, muscular thighs quivering in the restraints.

Lady Phylla stood regally at one side, directing the action of two large, muscular men, partially dressed in complicated black leather costumes, their large shafts already erect and strapped into cock harnesses. A third man, of a more slender build, wore simple cloth garments instead of leather.

What had Phylla said to Tony to get him here like this? She apparently had hidden depths, because he was clearly there voluntarily, filled with a mixture of shame and anticipation.

Phylla said, "You have been a bad boy." Shayla felt a surge of arousal at the words. She was picking up on Tony's emotions. Throbbing heat built between her thighs, and she wiggled restlessly.

Gavin's arms wrapped around her waist, and his body pressed against her back. He whispered in her ear, "Enjoying the fruits of our meddling?"

Shayla flushed in embarrassment.

Gavin snorted. "You have such a prudish streak. I wasn't scolding. Since she asked you to monitor this, we might as well enjoy it." His big, warm hands stroked up the front of her body until he reached the lower part of her breasts, where they cupped her fullness and his thumbs softly circled her nipples.

"I thought we weren't supposed to be touching?"

"Hmm. Your control has gotten a bit better. And you'll be paying attention to what's happening in the the next room, not me ..." He sighed. "But you're right. Sorry." He slid his hands down and rested them at her waist, but didn't move away from behind her.

That was a pretty flexible definition of touching, in which hands counted, but a thick erection against her back didn't. But she wasn't going to mention it, because she really didn't want him to move away.

The two men in harnesses were stroking their cocks in a businesslike fashion, right in front of Tony's face. His gaze was glued to their hands.

Phylla said, "What a bad boy. You want to feel those huge cocks pounding your tight ass, don't you? Or maybe you'd rather have them rammed in your mouth? I'm going to have to punish you for your wicked desires." She whipped him across the buttocks with a soft, leather flogger.

Shayla felt a surge of arousal from Tony as his white buttocks quivered in excitement and additional jolts from everybody else in the room. Four hard, aching cocks, plus Phylla's throbbing sex. Her reading of Tony's desires had certainly been accurate, but she was drowning in all that hungry lust. She whispered, "Gavin, help me handle this."

Gavin's hands kneaded her waist. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather just relax and enjoy the blowback? Looks like it's going to be pretty hot." His lips nibbled softly on the skin of her neck.

The flogging in the next room continued, and Tony's ferocious pleasure mounted to new heights. Shayla shuddered. "Not yet, not now. It's too much. Help me, please."

"You could always leave, you know."

"I didn't say I wasn't enjoying it. I just want to learn to control it. Besides, I have to stay to get the estate."

Gavin sighed and settled her more firmly against his body. "First you need to sort out the emotions you're feeling. There are five different people. The more intensely involved will overshadow the lesser players. I can feel that Lord Horton is coming through loud and clear. Now concentrate on Lady Horton. Look for clues from physical orientation. Her emotions should have a female flavor and female physical arousal instead of male. Who doesn't have feelings in a cock?"

Shayla closed her eyes and concentrated. It was almost like an emotional smell, a faint flavor of *female* from ... a particular direction. With a snap, the various emotional threads

acquired a sense of space and direction -- all of them intensely aroused. She opened her eyes and all of the emotions jumbled together again.

Gavin murmured, "Yes, that was great. Close your eyes again, that seems to help."

She closed her eyes, and concentrated, and the sense of space returned.

"Can you feel Phylla?"

"Yes, she's aroused, too, but in a different way than Tony."

"Try to cut off the emotions of the extras. There's no way you can monitor them all."

With a conscious effort she narrowed her focus to Tony alone. It helped that he was by far the loudest emotional presence. Tony's mouth was filled with dick, and the taste and feel of it was filling him with dark, forbidden satisfaction. From Gavin's telepathy she was picking up visuals from him, too. It was really very ... interesting. He was seeing and feeling cocks everywhere.

Tony's shocked delight crashed over Shayla and her eyes flew open. One of the studs was working his lubricated thickness into Tony's ass, centimeter by centimeter. Shayla groaned. A firm thrust, and the cock buried itself in Shayla ... no, buried itself in Tony. She could feel the sense of fullness and his dark thrill at the same time that she could feel Gavin's erection against the cleft of her buttocks. God, this was confusing.

Tony sucked cock in synchronization with the pounding of the shaft in his ass. Shayla's mouth fell open as though it were her mouth that was full of that hard, satin length. Breathing deeply she managed to hold on to herself and not get lost in all his emotions, but sympathetic heat was steaming through her.

The massive length pounded into Tony, and he enthusiastically sucked on the dick fucking his face for what seemed like a long time.

A strong need was rising in him, and with the help of Gavin's talents it was clear that he wanted a mouth on his own aching hard-on. When Phylla glanced in her direction, she made a gesture with her finger and hand. Phylla nodded acknowledgment and directed the fourth man to the task.

At the hot, wet suction Tony's body leaped in reaction. His balls gathered tightly as heat spiraled up his spine. Shayla's own body wound tight and paused on the edge. Finally his orgasm pulsed through him in fiery waves. Shayla followed him over in a long rolling wave.

She sagged against Gavin's body, her head whirling, her body drained. But not everybody in there had come. Arousal was leaking back in from Phylla and the cocksucker.

He murmured against the top of her head, "Now that was a mighty fine scene. Phylla seems to have a gift for this sort of thing."

She breathed in deeply. "I can see it now. She turns into a famous dominatrix, and it's all my fault."

"There are worse fates."

She could feel Gavin's body tense and become still. He turned her around, and pushed her down into a nearby chair. He looked puzzled as he ran his hands along the edge of her aura. "That's very odd. Your energy level has gone up a little again. Last time I thought I had just made a mistake, but this time I'm sure." He frowned. "You're pulling in a small amount of energy without touching. That's not supposed to be possible."

Shayla glanced into the next room. The participants were disbanding, Tony had been unlashd from the padded stool and was being helped into a velvet robe by one of the assistants. "Let's talk about this later. I'd like to get away from the emotional aftermath first."

* * * * *

Up in their suite, after a nap and an afternoon snack, Shayla and Gavin continued to discuss the anomalous increase in Shayla's energy.

"So you're sure that I didn't get it from you? You were touching me," Shayla said.

"Yes, I'm sure. I would have felt it if you had fed from me."

"Well, either way it's supposed to be impossible." She shrugged. "I don't see why one impossible event is any more likely than the other."

"But you weren't touching me the first time."

"Maybe not at the point of climax, but I was certainly touching you later."

He frowned. "Damn. You're right."

A knock sounded at the door. Shayla said, "It's Phylla."

Gavin opened the door to their suite and Phylla Horton entered their sitting room, closing the door behind her.

She placed the sheaf of papers she was carrying on the table and scrawled a signature on the top sheet. "I deposited your payment and registered the property transfer on the computer, but the law still requires paper forms." She shuffled the papers together and handed them to Shayla. "You'll need to keep those in case of questions."

Shayla murmured, "Thank you."

She carefully looked both of them up and down with an air of curiosity. "You're Sirens, aren't you?"

Shock rang through Shayla, before she managed to control it.

Gavin raised an eyebrow. "Sirens? Are you referring to the creatures from mythology?"

Phylla snorted. "I'm not stupid. And even though we're isolated here, those who are interested can still get the Federation news and read the net. I've known all about the Siren human genetic variant."

"Excuse me, Lady Horton, but what are you accusing us of?"

Phylla clucked impatiently. "I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm saying that I know that you're Sirens."

“Oh, really?”

“Don’t worry. I have nothing personal against Sirens. “ She narrowed her eyes as she gazed at them. “But I know that there are no Kimurian Sirens, so you must be from off-world. I would really like to know what you’re doing here.”

Shayla opened her eyes wide. “Why, we’re normal people living here, just like you.”

Phylla tilted her head slightly with an amused smile. “I see no reason to tell anybody that you’re not Kimurian. Yet.” She paused at the door. “Good luck with whatever you’re involved in. If you ever decide to tell your story, I’d love to hear it.” With a small smile, she left the room.

Gavin slumped down onto the settee. “Damn. I don’t know why I didn’t think that she would guess. I counted too much on the isolation. The average Kimurian pays very little attention to the rest of the universe. But I see that they aren’t all average.”

“Will the fact that she knows we’re from a different planet affect the rest of the plan?”

“I hope not. The schedule is pretty tight. If she’s really not going to tell anybody ...” He frowned. “Did you get a reading of her emotions? Was she telling the truth?”

“I think so,” she said slowly. “But if she hears anything else that makes her afraid of our intentions ...”

“Like, for instance, the mental manipulation of her husband? Or the arrival of a couple of thousand of our kindred?”

“Yeah. Like that. Who knows what she would do?”

“Damn. We’re going to have to skip adjusting Lord Horton’s opinion and hope for the best.”

Shayla slumped back in her chair. Her intentions were so altruistic when she suggested telling Phylla about her husband. And it *had* helped them to get Lexfield. She just hoped that the vote didn’t fail by one, with Lord Horton on the wrong side. That would be hard to live with.

Chapter Nine

Shayla was packing again. She folded up her favorite golden gown and placed it in the trunk. Was this how it felt to go on one of those whirlwind tourist trips? If it's Tuesday, it must be Horton Hall? Thank God for modern fabrics. At least she didn't have to worry about wrinkling her clothes. She dumped in the drawer of socks and panties.

She was tired of moving so often. She was tired of hanging around with strangers. She was tired of speaking a strange language. Although at this rate it wouldn't be strange for very long. Her dreams last night had been in Kimurian -- which was probably a good thing, since this was going to be her new home.

With a twist of the wrist she locked the trunk and put the old-fashioned key in her bag. The room looked like an abandoned hotel room now, with all of her personal belongings packed up. They weren't even her things really, they belonged to her invented persona. The only personal thing that she had was her Jheknan identification medallion, and it was useless to her now. If she showed up with it back on Jheknan, they would probably arrest her immediately. Even her personal computer, a miniaturized one made specially for undercover agents on low-tech planets, had been issued by the Organization. Wistfully, she thought of the hangings and vids she had left behind in Janis's apartment. She would probably never see them again.

She dragged the trunk into the sitting room and curled up in the settee, waiting for the servants to come for the luggage. Her problem was that she was emotionally worn out, and not from other people's emotions this time. Her own emotions were tiring enough. At least they were done with the damned house parties for now.

She sighed and leaned her head against the cushioned back of the seat. She and Gavin would be alone at Lexfield, except for the servants. That would be a relief. It also looked

likely that she might be living there for a while. It wasn't as though she had anyplace else to go. Even if -- when -- her birth family arrived, she couldn't see living with them at her age.

Then, of course, there was Gavin. His presence had made this whole experience bearable, even fun at times. Somehow, she felt at home when he was there, even though neither Branham nor Horton Hall were anything of the sort. She closed her eyes and started picturing the curve of his muscular shoulders, the line of his jaw and the way his black curls fell over his forehead ...

Shayla?

Oops. She closed her shields. At least she was getting better at that.

Gavin opened the door to his bedroom and looked out. "Were you looking for me? I'm almost done packing."

"Take your time. I'm just enjoying a few minutes of down time before we get in one of those thrice-bedamned carriages again."

He turned back to the table in his room, folded up his computer, and tucked it in a pocket of his cloak. "Did you realize that we are now legitimate nobles of Kimur? That estate we just purchased has a title that goes with it." He joined Shayla in the sitting room, collapsing into the armchair.

"A title? Really? What is it?"

"Count of Lexfield."

"So you're Lord Lexfield, and I'm Lady Lexfield?" She frowned. "Wait a minute. We're not really married."

"The Kimurians think we are. The property was sold to us in our current personas." He looked up at her with a reassuring smile. "We'll think of some explanation. It's no big deal."

She felt a small surge of panic. She wasn't quite comfortable with even this illusion of commitment. She took a deep breath. Things were different. She was different.

* * * * *

Shayla loved Lexfield at first sight. It was big, but not too big to be comfortable. The location, in a beautiful, private valley with a small lake and a stream, was perfect. It was surrounded by thickets of paylow trees, the masses of fine foliage providing a beautiful backdrop to the creamy ceramic of the house. The front gardens were filled with fire flowers and modified Terran roses.

Their carriage drove them up to the front of the manor. A fresh breeze was blowing, and she could hear the hum of the creakits from the stream. It would be so wonderful if this place was really hers. Somehow it didn't feel like it was. She wasn't Lady Shala; she wasn't Kimurian; she wasn't Gavin's wife. Her legitimacy as owner was extremely tenuous. But she was here now; she had a role to play, and she might as well enjoy it.

Because Lexfield was only a short distance from Horton Hall, they had arrived before lunch. After introducing themselves to the servants as the new owners, choosing rooms, and touring the house, Shayla headed for the garden.

She lay on the soft, spongy moss, feeling the sun on her face and sinking into the ground. The closest person was far enough away that she didn't pick up anything more than a faint flavor of drifting emotion, so she could drop all her shields and just relax for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime. The breeze cooled her skin; the hum and chitter of insects and birds were the only noises. It was an intense relief to be able to take some time for herself. Tomorrow she would have to start working on the plans for the refugee distribution. But today was free.

It was even good to be away from Gavin. Oh, she loved being around him. She felt more alive and everything was more intense, but just looking at him was enough to send heat steaming through her veins. Keeping her reactions under control and shielded was tiring.

With a sigh she rolled over and pillowed her head on her arms. She suspected that she was almost out of time. If she hadn't learned enough, if Gavin didn't agree to ... A surge of irritation rolled over her. Why couldn't it just be a simple thing, that they liked each other and wanted to enjoy sex together? If, when, they finally did make love, would she feel like she was being refueled? Like a ... a pity fuck? This was where growing up Siren had to make a difference. This need for energy would be a normal part of life, routine and understood.

Gavin was easier for her to be with than any man she had ever known. Was that because he was a Siren or was it just him? With Sorval and Denton she was always aware of every little change in their feelings toward her. It was like being on a rollercoaster. She had to keep adjusting her own feelings, keep reminding herself that just because they were irritated or angry, it didn't mean they didn't love her. And it was always so difficult for her to sort out whether they were sexually aroused or she was.

Maybe those problems were a thing of the past, now that she knew how to shield herself from broadcasting and receiving. But it was so much easier with someone else that understood and had the same issues -- and could shield himself. How often did a Siren marry a non-Siren?

The nearby flowerbed overflowed with brightly colored flowers -- tiny little white ones in lacy clumps, large floppy yellow ones, tightly furled crimson. She must study up on Kimurian plants. It was in areas like this that sublim language learning was most useless. New words without matching knowledge of the varieties did very little good. She knew that *limala* was a red flower, but she had no idea which one.

Tomorrow. She would do it all tomorrow. Letting her thoughts drift, she relaxed her body one muscle at a time, until she felt like she was soaking into the ground beneath her.

The air was starting to cool and the sun was low in the sky, when Gavin touched her mind. *Shayla? Do you want to join me for dinner or stay out there?*

I'll be there in a few minutes. Just give me a chance to change.

Take your time, sweetheart. You're feeling much better, I see. His mental touch withdrew and she stood up, shaking out her clothes. See, there was another benefit to being a Siren. They didn't need communicators and didn't have to guess how you were feeling.

* * * * *

The next morning, Shayla was sitting in the study working on her plans for refugees, when the butler interrupted her. "Lord and Lady Menaz are visiting, ma'am. I've placed them in the small sitting room."

The names were not familiar to Shayla. Could they be neighboring gentry? As she walked down the marbo-struct hallway Shayla wished that Gavin hadn't left to investigate the capitol. This was the first time that she would be in a social situation as Lady Lexfield, and she didn't want to make a mistake. Before now she had been acting a temporary role, but this might end up being a longterm identity.

Three people sat on elaborately carved ceramic chairs in the sitting room: a dark-haired man, a red-haired woman, and a teenaged girl. They looked like a family.

On entering the sitting room, the red-haired woman stood up and offered her hand. "So pleased to meet you, Lady Lexfield." Her eyes flicked to the butler, who was retreating down the hall.

Shayla was puzzled. She reached out cautiously with her empathy and immediately retreated. The woman felt oddly like Gavin.

As soon as the butler had vanished around the corner, the woman smiled widely at Shayla. "You can never be too careful. I'm Lara, this is Jak, and our daughter Simalee. Gavin told us about you. You're one of the lost girls, aren't you?"

Shayla raised her eyebrows. "Lost girls?"

"The Siren girls that we thought had died."

"Yes, I am one of the lost girls. And you are ...?"

"We've been working for Gavin here on Kimur. Normally we're located in Extonia, but when we heard through the net that the kindred are coming next week, we packed up and came to help. There's a lot to be done in the next few days."

"How long have you been on Kimur? What I need most right now is help deciding the best places for the kindred."

"We've lived in about six different provinces in the last two years, so we'll definitely be able to help with that."

"Wonderful!" Shayla was relieved. Their knowledge would make her job a lot easier.

After chatting a while longer about Kimur and the local weather and politics, Shayla asked the housekeeper to show them to a suite of rooms on the first floor, and then continued her work until Gavin returned from his errands.

He entered the room in a burst and she felt as though the lights had been turned on. When she was with him the colors were brighter, the noises more distinct. She ran her eyes down his body and felt her own body open in welcome, but was careful to keep her shields up.

"Shayla, hope you had a good day. Mine seriously sucked." He tossed a bundle of papers down on the desk. "I just found out that Lord Everly is going to vote for open access. We had him down as a sure thing for our side. Damn. We might not have enough votes."

"What would happen if we lost the vote?"

Gavin frowned. "The Federation would pay the inhabitants far less for their resources than they are worth, set up dummy corporations to control the economy, and generally run over them roughshod. If the Organization found out that the Sirens and kindred had moved to Kimur, they would round us all up and take us back to Jheknan. They would find something to charge us with, lock us up, and throw away the key. If the political situation supported it, they might even have us all executed."

"But *why*? I know they don't approve of Siren sexual practices, but that's not a good enough reason to oppress --"

Gavin interrupted. "Of course it's not because of sex. They're afraid of our telepathic and empathic talents. They just use our sexual practices as an excuse to raise feelings against us." He shrugged. "From their point of view, they're right to fear us. Look what we're doing here on Kimur. We're not entirely taking over the planet, but mainly because we don't need to. We could have done something similar on Jheknan if we had been so inclined."

"Everything gets so complicated." Shayla sighed. "Did the butler tell you that we have some visitors?"

Gavin shook his head.

"A Siren couple, Lara and Jak, and their daughter. They said that they worked for you."

Gavin's face brightened. "They do. They've been on Kimur for two years, gathering information and preparing for the vote and the relocation. It will be good to see them."

* * * * *

Shayla dressed for dinner with more care than usual. It was odd. When she was playing a role her appearance reflected on her persona, not herself. Tonight she was going to be herself. Well, partially herself. There were still the servants to worry about. But with Lara and Jak she wouldn't be this fake Kimurian countess. Except that it seemed very strange to think of herself as a Siren woman. Last week she was Shayla Pelter. This week she was Lady Shala Trelanian, now Countess of Lexfield. Next week she might be Saltha Brogarth.

Lara was the first Siren woman she had ever met. Would Lara like her?

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. This particular dress was a deep gold fabric, silky and luxurious. At least she looked like a rich and successful person, even if inside she had all the confidence of a bowl of pudding.

She waited for Gavin in the sitting room between their bedrooms. When he saw her, his eyes grew hot and intense. It wasn't necessary to peek at his emotions to recognize that he liked the way she looked.

He looked fine himself, his trim hips and muscular legs showing well in the tight pseudo-suede pants. Her hand itched to stroke the rounded curve of his ass, feel the shape of his cock. Her lips yearned to feel the softness of his lips, to taste his mouth. She clenched her fist, resisting. Moisture grew between her legs.

Gavin clasped her hand and raised it to his lips. His warm lips on her hand were like an appetizer to someone starving. Unable to resist the temptation, she thinned her shield just enough to taste his lust. He was shielding too, but the leakage was enough to cause heat to surge through her. Slamming her shields closed, she closed her eyes and swayed.

He cleared his throat. "Shall we go down?"

She pulled her hand back. "It wouldn't be polite to head back to bed, I suppose."

"No." His lips quirked. "The dinner would probably get cold."

"Let's go, then." With a deep sigh she headed for the stairs. "Do you think that Lara and Jak will like me?"

"Why shouldn't they?" he asked in surprise.

"Well, I'm not really one of you. I don't know if I'll fit in."

He laughed. "They'll love you. Don't worry about it."

Shayla shook her head. It was easy for him to say. Would she ever fit in? She hadn't felt right on Jheknan. Maybe she wouldn't be quite right here, either. She lacked a whole shared past and family knowledge. She would always be different than she would have if she had grown up with her birth parents. At least she had lot of experience being different.

They gathered for dinner in the small dining room. It was only the five of them, so the large dining room -- suitable for dinner for twenty -- was too big. Shayla had to admit that it was fun acting as the mistress of all this magnificence. It was as though one of the stories she had acted in had come true. She could get used to this part of her new life.

While the servants served them the meal, they all stuck to their Kimurian personas and discussed neutral, Kimurian subjects. The food was good; the company was good. They chatted, they laughed, they told jokes about Kimur, they discussed the personalities of the Kimurian aristocracy. Shayla learned a lot more about the areas of Kimur where Lara and Jak had been stationed.

She relaxed over the course of the dinner. Their guests had been very open and friendly, and they all seemed to like each other. Even Simalee, a sweet and pleasant teenager, had joined in the conversation.

After the dessert was served -- a sweet cake that was one of the local specialties -- she dismissed the servants and closed the door.

As soon as she returned to her seat, Lara turned to her. "Do you realize that we're second cousins?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Our mothers were first cousins. My mother's father and your mother's mother were siblings."

Shayla tilted her head to the side. "I've never had any real relatives before. It's all very strange to me."

Lara grasped her hand. "Well, you have family now. Lots of family."

A surge of emotion bubbled up in Shayla's throat. Maybe this would turn out for the best. She had family now. Maybe she would finally belong.

The discussion moved on to the serious business, the vote and the exodus from Jheknan. After analyzing the situation in detail, they all sat back to enjoy the hot kaff and dessert.

Lara said, "I'm so glad that the exodus was moved up. It was fine having Simalee here at this age, but soon she's going to need to have the support of Siren society as she goes through puberty. It must have been hard for you, being all alone."

Shayla swallowed a bit of sweet cake. "My life wasn't easy, I guess. But I don't know much about your family life, or how you treat your young people, so it's hard for me to compare."

"We're very protective of our young women, because otherwise their emotions are at the mercy of any horny male who comes along. Until they've learned to filter and shield ..." Lara shuddered. "It's not quite so hard for the boys, of course. Hearing other people's thoughts can be confusing or bewildering, but it's not like being flooded with someone else's desires."

Yes, Shayla could vouch for that. It was not easy being flooded with male desires. It had taken her a long time to learn to resist as much as she had. And it had not been good for her self-image, either. She had managed to hold on to the belief that she was a good and worthy person, but it hadn't always been easy. Shayla smiled briefly. "No, it isn't easy to be in that position. You're right to protect your daughters."

Lara patted her hand. "You seem to have survived quite well. I only hope that the other lost girls have done as well."

Shayla thought over all the points at which her life could have taken a very bad turn. Somberly, she replied, "We can always hope."

Simalee broke in. "Mom, you're being too serious. Let's play a game or play some music."

“Just a minute, honey.” Lara turned to Jak, who had been discussing the political situation with Gavin on the other side of the room. Shayla, looking from Lara to Jak, could tell from the expressions on their faces that they were exchanging private telepathic conversation.

Jak stood up, and asked Gavin, “Does your household have the usual procurer? Lara saw a couple of nicely formed young footmen that she’d like to try. We’ve been living in a fairly isolated rural area without too many opportunities and the energy is getting a trifle thin.”

A thread of shocked surprise went through Shayla. This wasn’t what she was used to from a married couple. Even though she had rejected the narrow-minded attitudes of the people who raised her, she had grown up on Jheknan. Apparently she hadn’t totally escaped absorbing some their attitudes. On many levels she didn’t know the Siren culture very well yet. No doubt there would be other surprises, too.

Simalee rolled her eyes. “Oh, Mother. It’s our first night here.”

Gavin ignored Simalee. “Certainly, just inquire with the butler. He can let you know which servants have registered and are current with their inspections. We’d be glad to entertain Simalee for a few hours, if you’d like to leave now.” He raised his eyebrows.

Lara stood up to join her husband. “Why, thank you. I’m sure Simalee would appreciate that.” She directed a stern look at her daughter. “Won’t you Simalee?”

With only a touch of sulkiness, Simalee answered, “Sure, I could use some new partners at glotan. I’m tired of beating my parents.”

After playing cards for several hours with Simalee, who had won almost every game, they all left the salon. Simalee said goodnight and headed up the stairs, while Gavin paused in the hall.

“Do you want to go out into the garden for a while or go upstairs?” he asked.

“I’m a little tired; I think I’ll head to bed.”

As they climbed the stairs he said, “You did great at dinner tonight. Your shields were nice and tight, with no leakage and no accidental broadcasting.”

Shayla assumed a mock-haughty look. “Well, of course. After all, I’m the best.”

Gavin snorted.

“Uh, Gavin?” He met her gaze with a raise of his eyebrows. “Do Siren couples always ... do the threesome thing?”

“Well, certainly not *always*. But most mated pairs indulge occasionally because if you use your talents heavily, you can get depleted enough to be pretty uncomfortable.”

“Is it possible to skip the whole thing?”

He frowned. “In theory, yes. But you’d have to keep your energy expenditure down to a really low level. Everybody produces some sexual energy. But using your empathic or telepathic abilities spends it faster than you make it.” He shrugged. “Besides, most of us

consider it one of the benefits of being a Siren, not something to be avoided. It's not like anybody would think of it as ..." His voice died away and he looked at her sharply. "It made you uncomfortable that they were looking for a third, didn't it?"

She flushed. "Yes, I guess it did. I'm pretty open-minded, but I just hadn't ... I'm not used to thinking of a married couple sharing ... that." She smiled briefly. "Don't worry about it. I can get used to anything."

Gavin sighed, and touched the backs of his fingers to her cheek. "You've gone through a lot this week with a great deal of grace. I think you could do anything."

She gave him a brilliant, if slightly forced, smile and blew him a kiss. They had reached their suite. Her body complained bitterly at the stupidity of moving away from him, but her mind still ruled and tonight was not the right night. But she needed to have sex with him soon. Very soon.

Chapter Ten

Shayla was in the estate office with Lara and Jak, working on a plan for distributing the refugees throughout Kimur, when Gavin stuck his head in the door.

He smiled at Shayla. "I've got to go talk to Lord Everly this morning. I'll be back this afternoon."

Shayla had woken up with her heart pounding, her nipples tight, aching buds, her sex wet and throbbing, but the symptoms had lightened up while she worked on their detailed and careful arrangements. But Gavin's presence swamped her with even more ferocious need. She took a deep breath. "I need to talk to you as soon as you get back."

Gavin looked at her and frowned. "Yes, I see. Take it easy until I get back."

"I'll try."

He turned to Lara and Jak. "Keep an eye on her for me, please."

Shayla rolled her eyes. "I'm a big girl now. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, but you've never used your Siren abilities like this before. I don't want you collapsing."

Lara waved a hand at him. "Don't worry. We won't let anything happen to her."

Shayla shook her head in exasperation and watched him hurry down the hallway, wishing she could have settled the sex or no sex issue before he left. Now she had to wait until he got back. She didn't even know whether she should hope for his quick return or not. If the news was going to be bad, she'd just as soon put it off.

She turned back to the computer records of Kimurian communities that she had been examining, but her mind was not on her task.

If she couldn't have Gavin, she didn't know whether she even wanted to pick a footman. She had to live here, damn it. Surely there were discreet houses nearby. That had to be better than being reminded every time the *energy source* brought her afternoon snack.

She had been in this state in the past. It ought to be easier, now that she knew what was happening. Well, part of it *was* easier. The part where she didn't have to feel like a weak-willed slut. But thinking about her past, she realized that she must have used her ability to enthrall without even being aware of it. This feeling of lusting after somebody and not being able to have them -- it was a new feeling to her.

She closed her eyes, sighed, and leaned her head against her hand. When she reached the point of being overwhelmed by lust, all she had to do was go to some public meeting place, pick her ... victim, and that was pretty much it. Always careful to avoid married men and men with a commitment, she had looked over the possibilities and chosen. There must have been some time when she had failed, but she couldn't remember when. She had just figured men were attracted to her.

Just great. Now she could learn all about getting rejected. Meanwhile, she might as well engross herself in work. That was a technique that she used in the past to defer the feedings. Now there was a thought. She had actually been *feeding* Siren-style for eight years. She used to think the intense, addictive rush was just because she had put off sex for so long, that it was something everybody felt. Was she stupid, or what?

Lara looked up from the notes she was making with Jak. "How are you doing with the list of locations?"

Shayla had researched the known Kimurian settlements on this continent, trying to come up with a story that would hold water, yet not be susceptible to contradiction. "I think we're probably best off using communities we're familiar with. We just don't have time to do enough research right now." If someone noticed the holes in their story, they would just have to brazen it out.

Lara nodded. "Once everybody is here, we'll have a lot more time to organize."

There would be a concentration of refugees here at Lexfield, of course. This would be the headquarters for now. They chose four locations for other concentrations. Some of the younger, unattached Sirens and kindred would live in non-Siren areas and households, like typical young Kimurians.

The other continents were sparsely settled, which had both pluses and minuses. But at least to start with they would need the resources available from the civilized areas of Kimur, so the fringe areas would have to wait.

The refugees wouldn't have a complete set of costumes provided by the Organization like Shayla and Gavin, so they provided the coordinators on Jheknan with descriptions of clothes that would be simple to create yet wouldn't be too remarkable on Kimur. There was still the risk that somebody might notice when almost a thousand strangers showed up dressed in a mildly peculiar fashion.

Finally, throwing down the computer stylus, Shayla stood up and stretched. Her head was aching from the effort of staying shielded.

Lara looked at her with concern. "Your energy is really low, do you think ..."

"Yes, I do think." She stood up abruptly. "I'm going up to my room. Would you ask Gavin to come up when he comes home?"

"Sure. Don't worry about this. We'll finish up here."

* * * * *

Gavin tried to rush through the meeting with Lord Everly as much as possible so that he could get back to Shayla. Unfortunately, Lord Everly turned out to be a placid, slow-moving man of middle years, who appeared to be enjoying the opportunity to discuss the political ins-and-outs of Kimur's relationship with the Federation at length. At *great* length.

Finally, a servant reported that lunch was served, and he used the excuse of a prior engagement to depart.

Once he was a short distance from the house in the carriage, he let his thoughts drift to Shayla. His cock swelled immediately to steel hardness. His head filled with images of the curve of her hip, the line of her neck, the tilt of her eyes when she laughed.

This level of arousal was unfamiliar. Hell, had he ever had to deny himself sex for more than a day or so? Well, there had been that trip to the falls of Tennora when he was nineteen. Not since then, though. At least denial had the advantage of intensifying the anticipation. They *were* going to have mind-blowing sex this afternoon. He was pretty sure that her control had gotten good enough that she wouldn't accidentally drain him. In any case, with Lara and Jak here, they had backup if the worst happened.

He lay flat on the bench seat of the carriage, relieving the abrasion of the cloth on the sensitive head of his dick. Then he couldn't resist rolling his hips slightly to move the cloth just a bit -- but not too much. After all of this anticipation, it would be a shame to go off too soon.

Shayla was important to him. His mind shied away from dwelling too much on how important. He had tried a relationship with a kindred woman four years ago, having given up hope of a true mate. It hadn't worked out.

He had never experienced an energy exchange. As a third with established pairs, he got to be the snack. None of the unpaired Siren women were old enough yet to need tutors -- and energy exchanges were discouraged for that relationship, anyway. He frowned. He wasn't Shayla's tutor, was he? No way. She was mature and experienced, even if she had missed the usual training given to teenagers.

The carriage drew up in front of Lexfield, and he bounded up the stairs to the house. Lara peeked out of the study door and smiled at him. Or maybe that was a smirk.

"Shayla needs you -- but it looks like you know that already."

He snorted and shook his head. Sometimes it was irritating that his people always knew what was going on. Even when everybody was polite and shielded most of the time, emotional states leaked and auras revealed the truth. There wasn't a lot of privacy in a Siren household.

As he approached the door to their suite, he dropped his shields to Shayla. Her mind was in a whirl, her emotions strongly colored with lust. He took a deep breath, and entered the room, closing the door behind him.

Entering the bedroom was like entering a sauna from a winter-chilled room -- but instead of moist heat the room was cloudy with lust. All Gavin's skin tingled with it, and heat steamed through his veins. He almost instinctively shielded, then stopped, remembering that it was finally not necessary.

Shayla scowled at him from the bed where she was lounging. "You know, there's something about this whole situation that I really dislike." Her curly black hair was a tangled cloud on the pillows, her legs and arms sprawled in seductive tension.

"You don't want to have sex?" he asked cautiously. Sirens who put off feeding or exchanging energy too long tended to be emotionally unpredictable. He opened wide to Shayla on all channels.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course I want to have sex. Don't be stupid. But I feel like a shuttle that's run out of fuel, or like ... like a household power supply that somebody forgot to refill." She sighed. "I wish this was more about us."

He sat next to her on the bed and stroked her cheek, letting the energy sparkle back and forth from his skin to hers. It was starting to sink in that he didn't have to worry about control, or getting carried away. The sweet relief of giving in to his feelings started to steal over him. "Sweetheart, my Shayla, of course this is about us," he murmured and stretched out next to her, twining his leg around hers, winding his arm around her waist.

He could feel her barely banked sensuality roar to full blast at the touch of his body against hers. Fire was surging through her veins and his.

She breathed in deep pants, as though she couldn't get enough air into her lungs. "I don't know if I can stay in control."

"Let go. Release your control. The need for control is over. Don't worry, I'm here to keep you safe." He caressed the soft skin of her cheek with his lips, glorying in the velvet texture and her taste.

"But what if ..."

"You won't drain me. And even if you did, we have backup now." He traced the shape of her body with his hand, kneading delicately at her breasts, sliding his fingers lightly over the conflagration between her legs. "Let go," he commanded.

And she let go of all vestiges of control, of the shields between them.

They were two minds, joined, two hearts, joined, two bodies -- about to be joined. The two streams of sexual energy flowed together to make a river. In Shayla's mind it made a beautiful shimmery spiral, filled with color. *Wow. Shiny. Is that the sexual energy that I see? Why do I see it like that?*

Not everybody perceives it visually, though it isn't unusual. It's a kind of synesthesia. Some people hear music ...

Shayla rolled over on top of Gavin. She felt his firm body with hers, felt the thick ridge of his erection, and, through their connection, felt her softer body on his, the pressure of her weight on his cock. It was too much sensory input at once. She closed her eyes.

Shayla, let's take this slowly, okay? I want to appreciate every second, to make this the best ever.

Amusement colored Shayla's thought. *I don't think we can actually blow this. If I came in the next two minutes, it would still be an incredible experience.*

Let's try for at least three minutes this time. And we can always do it again.

No, really? You think?

That's it. You asked for it. Gavin rolled them over again, and ducked his head to her nipple. He swirled his tongue around and around, and sucked it into his mouth. Fireworks went off in her sex. In retaliation she reached down into his tights and grasped his hot, rigid length. It was almost like she was grasping her clit, except it was a phantom clit that had grown to the size of a cock.

Gavin reached under the filmy skirts of her dress and slowly ran his finger along the aching, wet flesh. He paused at her clit and rubbed her in soft little circles, flicking now and then. The movement was perfectly calibrated to arouse her, since he had instant feedback. And arouse her it did. Fiery, glittering pleasure surged through her body. But she wanted to take more time, so she withdrew from the precipice, breathing deeply.

Let's get these clothes off. They're in the way.

Good idea, sweetling. They rolled apart, and hastily undressed. There would be time later to turn disrobing into part of foreplay.

She turned back to him and found Gavin's engorged cock right in front of her face. She pulled back the skin with one hand to reveal the broad, plum-colored head, while she gently rolled his balls in her other hand. She swiped the moist, velvety skin of his cockhead with her tongue. His taste exploded in her mouth. She wanted more of that delicious taste, more of that hard length. She sucked his shaft into her mouth, and moved her hands around to grasp the firm, rounded muscles of his ass.

God, Shayla. That's so good. Open up to me, open now. Gavin's fingers were entangled in her hair, as he pumped in and out of her mouth.

Open up? What ...? Oh yeah, open up mentally. While undressing, Shayla had accidentally raised her mental shielding. She opened to Gavin, and was almost overpowered

by the feeling in his cock, his addictive taste, and the feel of velvety skin over diama-steel hardness. Her clit swelled and throbbed in sympathy.

Ease up, sweetheart, or this will all be over in two minutes. We should pace ourselves. Hop up on the bed; it's your turn now.

She slowly pulled her mouth off him, giving the soft, broad head a lingering swipe of her tongue. Dropping her hands from the lower part of his shaft, she breathed in deeply. Her gaze locked on his face, she took a step back to the edge of the bed, scooted up unto it, and lay back. The concentrated passion in his eyes caused the fire in her veins to spiral even higher.

She let her knees fall apart, exposing her creamy, aching flesh to him in invitation. She licked her lips at the sight of his thick, impressive erection. She imagined it filling her, stuffing her full, and from its eager shudder she was reminded that Gavin knew what she was thinking. Her eyes drifted half-closed and she slowly licked her lips. He was imagining licking her to orgasm.

She raised an eyebrow. *So what are you waiting for? Enough of the mind sex.*

He opened his mouth and ran the tip of his tongue around his lips. Her body clenched even tighter. *Your wish is my command.*

He leaned over and parted her dark curls with his fingers, and began to lick lightly in circles. His hands reached up to her throbbing nipples and gently twisted and tugged them at the same time. A bolt of electricity went straight from there to her clit, and she moaned.

Round and round he licked, never quite on the one spot that was aching for his touch. *What a tease!*

Yeah, but you love it. You can't fool me. Dark amusement colored his thoughts.

She whimpered. *Either get to the point or fuck me. Now!*

He gave her one last, flat stroke with his tongue. *Normally I'd like to make you come a couple of times, but we'd better save that for some other time, just to be safe.*

He moved up her body, resting his weight on his arms but matching his legs to hers, in a full-body embrace. His hot, rigid length was pressed against her belly and her mound, almost at that small, right spot. His mouth was on hers; his tongue and his rich, deep Gavin-taste flooded her. She wanted more of him, all of him; she couldn't get enough of him.

He pulled back an inch. *Pay attention to what I'm doing when the energies flow, okay?* He breathed deep. *You ready?*

As ready as I'm going to be.

He lifted his hips, positioned his cock, and slowly, deliberately, worked himself into her. Finally he was all the way in -- or almost all the way. "More." Shayla tilted her hips and the last thick inch slid home. Ahhh. That felt so right. She was so full. Their bodies were joined. Part of him was inside her, she was around him, all of their sensations, their feelings,

their thoughts were woven together until it was impossible to tell where one person started and the other person ended.

Slowly, he withdrew, with a hot, slick movement of his aching hardness, and then thrust forward again, driving his thickness into her wet heat. In and out he thrust, developing exactly the right rhythm. He reached between them and kneaded the center of her arousal, pumping away.

Gavin could feel the orgasm building in both of them. The wave was about to crest, and he could direct the energies through one path or through another. The sensible, rational thing to do was to use the feeding channels. But he didn't *want* to do that. He had never in his life experienced energy exchange, and this was Shayla, he wanted ... he wanted ... The moment was upon them and there was no more chance for thought.

Shayla's emotions and Gavin's joined together. As one they made their choice and the explosion of release was upon them. He could feel his cock spasming and flooding her with come, and he could feel Shayla's orgasm through her whole body.

The energy closed a circuit between them, and spiraled around and around through every cell of their bodies, an electric, iridescent river of sex, until it faded away with intermittent sparkles and glitters.

Neither of them moved for a long, long time. Finally, with voice sounding rusty from disuse, Shayla asked, "Is it always like that?"

"No. It's never been like that before for me."

"I recognized the point of decision, but I couldn't follow what happened. That was an energy exchange, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I thought we weren't going to do that."

"I wanted it, you wanted it. I had to choose, and it seemed to be the right thing to do." He rolled over and pulled her tightly against his body. "I don't regret it, either. It was wonderful. How do you feel?"

"Wonderful, incredible, energized, but somehow clear and bright. It's hard to put into words."

"Yes, it is. Fortunately we don't have to."

Shayla relaxed into the heat of Gavin's body. He could tell that she was happy and only temporarily satiated. She was already thinking about doing it again. And so was he. It was only late afternoon. They could have dinner in their room and spend the rest of the evening having passionate sex. Paradise.

Chapter Eleven

Gavin tromped around the boundaries of the Lexfield estate, looking for places to put the new village he wanted to build for the kindred. It was a gorgeous day, and he was fresh and relaxed from the energy exchange.

He could tell through his connection to Shayla that she was in the garden and that she was happy. If only he could be as unreservedly light spirited. He sighed, wondering why nothing could ever be totally straightforward. Making love to Shayla yesterday had been a wonderful experience. Maybe ... too wonderful. Now that he had experienced a true exchange, it would be hard to never have that again. He was starting to think that he could spend the rest of his life with Shayla. But he knew, from their tight binding yesterday, that she was not yet ready to make such a choice.

If he just ignored the issue, they might end up bound together. Being bound to an unwilling partner was a nightmare. The process of dissolving the binding was painful and slow, and meant no contact between them at all.

But how could he tell her that they shouldn't make love again? It would feel like a rejection to her. He knew it. And the thought of hurting her that way was intolerable. Not to mention -- how could he say no to such bliss?

He looked over the valley behind him, the rolling fields and cottages, the road leading toward Centralia in one direction and Horton Hall in the other.

This location looked best for the village. It was close enough to the manor for easy communication, but far enough for privacy. There was a large, relatively flat meadow and a nearby stream.

Now, what could they get away with for construction? As he recalled, the Kimur charter allowed high-tech house construction, but all of the original equipment had fallen into disrepair over the centuries. If they brought their own nano-fab equipment, they would

need a believable explanation. That sort of thing didn't come cheap. He frowned, contemplating the pyramid of fabrications. Their story was getting too complicated.

Oh, well. He was done here. Time to go back and see Shayla for lunch. Warm, headily sweet emotion expanded in his chest. Maybe it was too late for him to think about pulling back. How could he, feeling like this? Perhaps he would just have to take the chance.

* * * * *

Gavin and Shayla were eating lunch in the small dining room when his communicator beeped with an urgent shriek. With a frown he picked it up.

Shayla couldn't hear the conversation because of the dampening field, but she could tell that he was disturbed. She opened up the Siren channels, only to find that he was tightly shielded. This must be something really important. "Gavin? What's up?"

He put the communicator down. "Bad news. We're definitely one vote down from what we need. We need to change a vote within the next 24 hours."

"Whose vote?"

Gavin sighed. "Any vote would work. It has to be somebody that we can get close to." He looked at Shayla grimly. "And it has to be a sure thing."

Shayla shook her head in sympathy.

Gavin said softly, "Shayla."

She looked at him sharply. He thought she wasn't going to like this -- whatever it was. "What?"

"I need your help. It would be best if both of us worked on it. A little telepathic tweak will work if the person doesn't have emotional attachment to the idea, but everybody that we have access to needs more than that. I can't do it without you."

"But, Gavin, I don't know how. I've never done anything like this before."

"I can direct the whole thing, but I need your talents joined to mine. My empathic skills aren't strong enough to handle emotional changes."

Shayla was troubled by the idea of altering someone's emotions. How often did they interfere this way? She could understand the Organization's fear of Siren power. It scared her, too. She frowned. "Gavin, is it right to interfere with people this way?"

Gavin rested his head on his hand. "We actually try very hard not to do it. A trivial tweak here and there to protect us or provide pleasure to our partners without substantially changing memories or opinions we consider acceptable. But for something big like this, we try to have what we call a 'warrant to change.' It means that the purpose is important enough that a majority of our council of elders has approved it. We have that approval for this operation." He sighed. "Of course, you can't always know in advance when it's going to be necessary. And there is the danger of a rogue Siren breaking all of our rules."

Shayla's eyes widened. "A rogue Siren? Has that ever happened?"

"Yes, but not often. The last one that we know about was fifty years ago. We handled the problem." Gavin looked grim.

Shayla looked away. The ethics were too complicated to figure out tonight. She would have to think about it when this complicated drama was over. Meanwhile, she had to help Gavin, if she could. "What do I have to do?"

"There are three people within easy access from here. We'll look at everything we know about them, talk to Lara and Jak, and pick a target. We'll get as close as possible to the target physically and change his mind. We want to do the absolute minimum necessary to achieve our objective." He headed toward the door. "The sooner we get started, the better."

* * * * *

Shayla lay back on the couch and moaned. This was so embarrassing. She hated being stuck in such a silly script. It offended her pride as an actor to be associated with such a flimsy excuse for a storyline. A twisted ankle, indeed! What a weak excuse for getting into Lord Shaldor's home.

Gavin leaned close to her ear. "No point in overdoing it."

She opened her eyes and glared at him. "This was your idea, not mine," she said in a hoarse whisper.

He flicked his eyes to the servant waiting at the door, and murmured, "Open channels."

Shayla opened her mind to him. She was getting much better at this.

Yes, you are getting better. With a little more practice you'll be almost as good as an eighteen-year-old Siren.

Gee, talk about damning with faint praise ...

Behave yourself. You've been doing this for what, one week? And you expect to be better than someone who's been trained to it from birth? He snorted. *Get real.*

Gavin turned to the servant. "We would like to thank Lord Shaldor in person for the hospitality of his house, if he's receiving visitors."

The servant hesitated, glanced into the entryway behind him, and finally bowed. "I'll check to see if he's receiving today. Excuse me."

"Shayla, join with me and let me drive. I'm going to see if I can touch Lord Shaldor from here. Let go of control as much as you can."

Shayla closed her eyes and relaxed her body. She let her thoughts drift, and just observed what Gavin was doing mentally. She could feel him reach out, feeling for the presence of other minds. They followed the servant down the hallway and into another room, only vaguely aware of the location in space. There was another mental presence very close to the servant. Gavin caught hold of the whispery presence and focused. The mental

signature became clearer, impatience colored it. *Interruption ... don't know ... busy ... go away.*

Gavin blew out in irritation. *He's not going to come to us. We'll have to do this from here.*

Shayla could hear the servant coming back in their direction. He bowed in the doorway and said, "The master is not free at the moment. May I get you some refreshments?"

"No, thank you. I'll close the door while my wife rests for little while, and we'll be on our way."

Gavin sat down beside Shayla on the couch, and held her hand. A surge of sexual energy flowed between them.

Is that a good idea?

Physical contact can help maintain our mental bond. While we're concentrating on our task, I think it's pretty safe. Gavin was a bit amused.

Shayla had a flash of irritation at his amusement. Maybe he found their physical susceptibility amusing, but --

Sweetheart, I promise you we'll indulge as much as you want -- when we're done. Now stop thinking about sex.

Shayla was outraged. *I was not thinking about sex.*

Gavin laughed. *I know what you were thinking about. I'm right here, remember?*

Oh, all right. I'll try. Now she was grumpy.

Gavin concentrated on Lord Shaldor, who wasn't thinking anything particularly interesting. He was examining his financial accounts on an imported computer. Various numbers and items and account categories floated by. *Shayla, get ready to broadcast some low-level anxiety when I give the word.* Gavin carefully and gently floated the concept "cheap goods from off-planet" through Lord Shaldor's mind. *Now.* Shayla took the feeling of anxiety she had felt about the Full Employment interview, and *pushed* it into Lord Shaldor.

The anxiety drew Lord Shaldor's attention to the thought. *Would cheap goods be a bad thing? Of course, if his manufacturing concerns had cheap off-planet competition ...*

Gavin grabbed that thought. This was the kind of ammunition he had been looking for. *Get ready to push fear of losing money, of being poor.* Now he placed the thought "uncontrolled off-planet access might make me poor" and thought *Now* at Shayla.

She easily brought up feelings of having no money or resources and worry about where she would live, and *pushed*.

One last emotion -- be ready for a feeling of wealth and abundance.

Shayla frowned at that one. Where would she find that feeling? The closest she could think of was looking out over Lexfield with Gavin at her side. It would have to do.

Gavin took the thought “restriction on off-planet access,” worked it into Lord Shaldor’s mind, and signaled Shayla to push.

Gavin took another few minutes and linked the emotions and thoughts firmly together, so that the thoughts would trigger the emotions. After waiting for an appropriate point in the ruminations of their target, he gently introduced the question: “How will I vote on off-planet access?” He quickly inserted “Against, of course,” and waited. Lord Shaldor came up with very acceptable rationalizations of his decision, even some natural relief that he had figured out the danger in time. Gavin used Shayla’s empathy to strengthen the relief. Then he slipped out of the stranger’s mind, pulled back into himself, and disengaged the Siren channels. They had used a lot of energy; it would be wise to conserve.

He pulled Shayla up to him, and hugged her tightly. “We did it!”

Shayla said, “Wow. I had no idea what you ... what we can do. No wonder the Organization is scared shitless.”

Gavin chuckled jubilantly. “Yes, they ought to be scared!” He tilted his head and looked at Shayla quizzically. “There was something a bit odd about that feeling of wealth and abundance, though. There were definite sexual overtones in that one.”

Shayla blushed and swatted his shoulder. “That’s your fault. Where exactly was I supposed to come up with emotions of wealth and abundance in my life?”

Chapter Twelve

That evening, Gavin and Shayla were in the study after dinner. Jak, Lara, and Simalee had walked down to the village to check out the local shops. Gavin was at the desk using his personal comp, while Shayla was half-heartedly making checklists and playing solitaire.

"Look at this," he said urgently.

She moved to his side and leaned over to look at the holographic screen.

"The Organization is ordering us to rendezvous with their contact. They've lost patience with our story." He settled back, a tense look on his face.

"How can we get them off our tail permanently? Could we convince them we're dead?" She rubbed her temple. "That would be best, don't you think?"

He sat back and narrowed his eyes. "I think we have to do that. We don't want them looking for us. That could be disastrous."

She turned over the possibilities in her mind. The damn Organization. What a way to ruin a perfectly nice day. "Remember what you said about revealing them to the Kimurians? If we combine the two ideas ..."

"Absolutely. We'll figure out some way to die in a convincing way, in front of Organization witnesses. And make them out as the guilty parties to the Council of Lords." He turned back to the computer. "Let's do some brainstorming."

After hammering out the details of a rough plan, a servant brought kaff and sweets, and they moved to the comfortable settee. Gavin lounged lengthwise, and Shayla tucked herself around his body. The physical contact was enough to turn her thoughts to more interesting activities. A hum of sexual energy twinkled along her skin where it touched his. But maybe she shouldn't let herself get so comfortable with him. This was just short term. Wasn't it?

Then she remembered a question she had been meaning to ask. "Gavin?"

“Hmm?”

“What about Kimurian citizenship? If we get the vote that we want to close the planet, what happens to the Sirens and kindred that we bring in afterward?”

Startled tension telegraphed through his body, and he sat up, dislodging her from her cozy position. “Damn.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I can’t believe I didn’t think about that. If someone discovers who we are and that we came in after the vote, they would have every right to throw us out.”

“If we get the vote put off until after landfall...” She frowned, and rubbed her forehead. “Is there some way to have wording put in the resolution to grandfather in citizenship for everybody on the planet?”

He gave her an enthusiastic, noisy kiss on the mouth. “Yes! That sounds like a perfect solution. It could be tricky getting the right words in though. I’ll take a look at the current proposal,” he said. “What did I ever do without you?”

* * * * *

The room for the Council of Lords was filled with rows of comfortable seats in front of narrow tables holding paper and pens. Almost every seat was occupied. The majority of the lords were men. Gavin looked around the room, making a note of those he recognized and those who were unfamiliar. A murmur of private conversations filled the room until a person at the front called the meeting to order. The proceedings of the Council of Lords opened with a ritual in archaic language that sounded like the Standard in the historical vids from a thousand years ago.

He breathed in deeply, preparing for his performance.

Once the old business was over, the master of ceremonies, Lord Fodor, announced, “We have a new peer to invest. He is a member by right of purchase, having recently acquired the noble estate of Lexfield. Will the prospective count of Lexfield please stand?”

Gavin stood up and bowed in three different directions, smiling genially.

The master of ceremonies continued, “Is there anyone present with reason to contest this investiture?” He looked around the room. A few of the lords shook their heads, but most did not react.

“I pronounce Aron Gavin Trelanian a member of the Kimurian House of Lords, holding the title Count of Lexfield.” Lord Fodor looked down at the paper in front of him. “Next order of business is the matter of the treaty with the Federation of Democratic Planets.”

Gavin sat down and breathed a sigh of relief. He had not anticipated a problem with the investiture, but something unexpected was always possible. Although the sloppiness of the procedures worked to their advantage now, he would suggest improvements once he and his kin were firmly installed here. There was no point in allowing some other faction to get in quite as easily.

The council settled in for a long session on the treaty. People sat back in their seats, consulted documents, and whispered to their neighbors. Lord Fodor read a paper containing Federation arguments in favor of uncontrolled access, undoubtedly provided by the Organization.

Gavin glanced around. It would be best to present his ploy as soon as possible. Lord Fodor finished the document and looked up. "Questions from the floor?"

Gavin raised his hand. Lord Fodor peered over his spectacles. "The Count of Lexfield has the floor."

Gavin stood up. "I know that I'm new here and don't have the experience of my honored colleagues --" He bowed to the room. "-- but I've received some alarming news regarding the Federation and hope that you may be able to counsel me on the best course of action." They looked at him with interest. "Cousins of mine have discovered that the Federation has placed spies among us. In addition, the Federation hid from us the value of the mineral ore in the Upper Reaches. They plan to cheat us of its full value."

Everybody started to talk at once. One voice called over the hubbub, "Do you have proof of this?"

Gavin raised his hand. Gradually the noise died down. "I brought with me what proof I have, which I will show you." He looked around the room. "My advice is to send an expedition to check the situation for yourselves. I have a map showing the location of one of their secret installations."

The discussion was long and argumentative, but finally Gavin's suggestion prevailed. An expedition was planned, with departure scheduled for first thing in the morning. The vote on off-planet access was delayed for one week -- two days after the Sirens were supposed to land. He hoped that nothing delayed their departure.

* * * * *

They had worked late yesterday and early today putting together the cart that was supposed to convince the Organization that they were dead.

Shayla looked doubtfully at the cobbled together bodies in the back of the cart. They certainly didn't look real -- skeletons from an old abandoned gravesite and fresh meat from the butcher stuffed into Shayla's least favorite dress and a torn suit of Gavin's. It was macabre. "Are they going to believe these things are us?"

Jak said, "It wouldn't work on the Organization, but the only people that are going to see the remains are Kimurians. After the explosion turns them into bits and pieces, nobody here is going to look too closely. Forensics is not one of the strong fields here."

Gavin picked up Shayla's ID tag and placed it in the bodice of the dress wrapped around one of the skeletons. "I'll suggest that we turn the IDs over to the Federation. Without access to additional information, it should be enough for them."

“I still think that I should go along with Jak. I’m perfectly capable --”

“Of course you could do it, if we needed you to. I just want to make sure that we both have an alibi in case there’s any question at all about our involvement. I’m the one that’s dragging the council there. My wife shouldn’t be anywhere around. Besides, I’m hoping that the Organization will be recording a video of the performance. You can’t be on that video looking alive after you’re supposed to be dead. “

Shayla scowled. “You can’t fool me. You’re trying to protect me. That’s leaking out awfully clearly.”

Gavin sighed. “You’re right. I do want to protect you. But that doesn’t mean that there aren’t other perfectly good reasons for you to stay out of it. I shouldn’t really be there myself, but I can’t get around that one.”

“Oh, all right. You win. I’ll stay here.” She looked at the cart. “Are we done here?”

“Looks good to me,” Jak said. “I’ve got the controller for the explosives. If Lara’s ready with the extra equines, we’ll start in a few minutes. Take good care of Simalee for us.”

Gavin shook Jak’s hand. “The council expedition is set for early afternoon. Since we’re using the aircar donated by the Federation, we should arrive on location at the 10th hour. If you run into difficulties, just abort your part of the operation.” He smiled. “We can always arrange to die some other way.”

A shiver went down Shayla’s back. What would they tell her friends? They would think that she was dead. Would she ever see them again? Even though she wouldn’t actually die, this was a death of sorts. The death of her former life.

* * * * *

As the aircar filled with Kimurian nobles settled down in a clearing, the ambience inside turned serious. Gavin peeked in on the thoughts of the others in the group. The council members were eager to investigate Gavin’s claims. This was a pivotal point in the history of their planet. They didn’t want to make a mistake.

The engines turned off, and everybody got out. With a finger to his lips, Gavin reminded them to be silent. They had landed on the other side of a small hill from the bunker where Gavin and Shayla had started their tour of duty on Kimur. He pressed a pre-programmed button on the comp in his pocket to tell Jak they had arrived. In a few minutes their wagon should be passing by on the nearby road, on its way to the staged explosion.

He carefully led the group around the hill, pausing in the woods when they had a good view of the road and the bunker. He pointed to the barely visible door in the side of the hill, and whispered, “There’s the secret Federation installation.”

Lord Fodor whispered back, “It just looks like an abandoned settler’s shelter. Are you sure there’s something there?”

He couldn't say that he'd actually been inside. That wouldn't look good at all. "Yes, I'm sure. All of the information from my source has checked out completely. Let's wait for a while and watch for people. It might be easier than trying to break in."

With exquisite timing, Jak's wagon came into view around the curve in the road. This was the tricky part.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as he waited for the unfolding of their script. Finally the wagon passed them on the road. Jak pulled the wagon over at a carefully calculated distance. Lara and Jak strode toward the almost-concealed door. A few minutes later, the door to the hillside redoubt opened. He repressed a sigh of relief that his ID still passed the security check.

Gavin fought the urge to close his eyes and flinch in anticipation -- and then the wagon exploded, and pieces of wood and bloody flesh flew everywhere. He breathed out. Everything had gone according to plan. The Organization was going to be really confused about exactly what had happened here. Hopefully they would never figure it out. And there was plenty of ammunition in that open shelter to damn the Organization -- and the Federation -- in the eyes of the Council of Lords.

* * * * *

Shayla was waiting in the garden when Lara, Jak, and Gavin returned from the expedition. Lara and Jak were still in full disguise. She wouldn't have recognized them if she hadn't seen them before they left. They all had big grins on their faces.

"It worked! It worked!" she cried in delight.

"It worked like a charm. They even accepted Jak's story. I was a bit worried about that part." He sat down on the grass beside her and reached for her hand.

Lara said, "And just in time, too. The refugees are landing tomorrow."

Shayla said, "Speaking of the refugees, I have some bad news. There were messages from Jheknan -- from your parents -- on the commsat. All of the Sirens on Jheknan are under house arrest."

Gavin sat up. "Damn. I was afraid something like that would happen." His face was tight. "I'm going back after the refugees are dropped off. We have to get them out."

"I'm going with you," Shayla said. Gavin opened his mouth to object, and she held up her hand. "No, this time you can't leave me behind. Remember Lord Shaldor? You might need me."

Gavin didn't look happy. "You're right. The two of us are much more powerful together."

Jak said, "Lara and I could go."

Gavin shook his head. “You have a daughter. And I have contacts and resources that wouldn’t be available to you. Also, you’re more familiar with Kimur and are better qualified to handle the settlement of the refugees.”

Shayla touched Jak’s hand. “I think you and Lara have the harder job. You have to make a thousand people fleeing from their homes happy. All we have to do is break out a couple of hundred people from the clutches of the Jheknan Security Organization.”

Chapter Thirteen

After arriving on a private landing field owned by Siren kindred, Shayla and Gavin were quickly bundled into an aircar and driven to Drobery. Shayla watched Jheknan pass by through the windows as Gavin sat and chatted with the driver. Somehow it seemed important to fix its appearance in her mind. If all went well, she would be leaving Jheknan soon and might never come back.

She had been born and raised on Jheknan and lived in Drobery for seven years, and it had been all she had known until two short weeks ago. As she watched the houses and streets and trees and shops and all the details of the city pass by, it all seemed strangely unreal. She was a different person now than she had been when she left. She couldn't even go back to her former life. It wasn't safe to visit her apartment, or openly contact Janis. She was officially dead. Talk about starting a new life -- she was doing it the permanent way.

The aircar turned toward the parking lot for the Pink Palace. At the last minute it turned to the left and slid into a dark bay with no markings. The door closed behind them.

Gavin paused in his conversation and listened. "Looks like we made it here without being noticed."

"Was there much risk of that?"

He hesitated. "Not much. Normally they just track people using IDs because it's fast and cheap. Anything that would detect us would be expensive. And they'd have to be looking for us in particular." Smiling faintly, he said, "Let's hope they don't get the idea."

After getting out of the aircar, Gavin pressed his palm against a security panel and a section of wall moved aside, revealing the door to an elevator. They all crowded in, and the door closed. The driver got out on the main floor and flicked them a goodbye.

Gavin smiled wryly. "So, are you ready to meet my parents?"

"I'm a little nervous. Can they read my mind and emotions?"

Gavin shrugged. "They could, but they won't. Much. It wouldn't be polite. Just like Lara and Jak didn't read you -- when they could avoid it."

"Hey, give me a break. I've gotten much better at shielding." She pretended to glare at him. "Can you shield against your parents?"

"Yes and no. For casual contact my shields would protect me. They are stronger than me, so if it came down to a contest, they would win. But normally I don't shield against them, and normally they don't pry. It's the Siren version of manners."

The elevator door opened onto a nondescript room of gray fabstruct with no visible doors. Gavin pressed his hand against the surface of a side wall, and the whole wall shimmered and disappeared, revealing the hallway beyond.

Shayla was impressed. "That must be really expensive. I thought only the government was allowed to use variable state materials."

"We've gone through several cycles of persecution here on Jheknan. We class it as a necessary expense."

Halfway down the hallway, Gavin opened a large wooden door and waved Shayla inside. A surge of anxiety flooded over her, but she stepped forward.

Gavin looked at her and shook his head. "You are not to worry."

It was a luxuriously panelled library, with long walls of antique books and the usual variety of readers and storage devices. Dynamic pictures moved slowly in their frames, displaying several landscapes of the early Regressive period. The overall impression was one of well-established prosperity -- and paranoia, of course, considering that there were no windows and the only access was through secret, forbidden technology.

The man behind the desk looked up. He looked so much like Gavin that it was obvious they were related. They had the same dark hair, the same shape face. He smiled faintly at Gavin. "So pleased you could make it." His gaze moved to Shayla. "And I'm very pleased to finally meet you, Shayla, after all that I've heard about you."

"I'm glad to meet you, too," Shayla said.

Gavin reached out and touched his father's hand. "Jonathor, father, I'm glad we were able to come back and help."

Shayla shifted restlessly from foot to foot. There was something about being here that made her uneasy. Maybe the fact that if she weren't classified as dead, she would be shot on sight. She couldn't visit her friends or retrieve her belongings, and she was stuck three stories beneath the ground in a pre-Reconstruction bunker. "Now that we've taken care of the greetings, could we get on to breaking you out of here and get off this planet?"

Jonathor laughed. "You're very impatient, aren't you? You and Lillorian should get along well."

"How is mother doing?" Gavin asked. "Is everybody in the lounge?"

Jonathor stood up. "Lillorian is fine. She's in the lounge with the others discussing our options," he said. "Let's join them." He herded them out a back door and down a short corridor to a large room furnished with comfortable chairs, cushions, and bright indirect lighting. It was easy to forget that they were several hundred feet underground.

A small, chestnut-haired woman looked up. "Gavin!" She threw her arms around him. "What a relief to see you." She leaned back. "And Shayla?"

Gavin grabbed Shayla's hand. "Here she is. Now, be nice."

Lillorian gave him a playful swat. "I'm always nice, you disrespectful son."

Unaccustomed shyness flooded Shayla. Gavin gave her a sharp look and shook his head. "You're not allowed to indulge in wasteful emotions today." He grinned. "We're going to be too damned busy."

Lillorian frowned at Gavin. "My, aren't you the bossy one today. Give the girl a break." She smiled widely at Shayla. "We'll get together without this reprobate later, after we're all safe."

Shayla nodded. "I'd like that." She looked around. A group of young men had surrounded her, all focused on her. They were an extraordinarily good looking group.

They introduced themselves to her in a chorus of greetings and names, and then one of them, vaguely familiar, stepped forward. His shoulders were broad, his waist trim, his movements confident and graceful. "Greetings, Shayla. We finally meet again." His voice was warm, sweet honey.

Gavin was a large, firm presence behind her. "I'm afraid that I've forgotten your name."

"This, sweetheart, is Jordash." Gavin was amused. "Be careful of him, he's quite disreputable."

Jordash laughed. "You should know. As I recall, we're a close match."

Shayla looked from one to the other. There were undercurrents here she didn't understand. Why was she thinking of two dogs growling over a bone? And she didn't feel like playing the part of the bone. "So, is there a plan for what's happening today?"

Jonathor smiled. "Yes, there's a plan. We're discussing it now."

The Organization had all of the Sirens under house arrest. In addition to tracking ID's, they were using recognition technology on all people detected within two hundred yards of a Siren home, including the Pink Palace. The only Sirens who could get in and out were Gavin and Shayla.

Jonathor looked at them and frowned. "You should probably have stayed away, too. What if they cross-check the records of the dead?"

Gavin laughed. "That's not going to happen. Do you know why?" He raised his eyebrows.

Jonathor shook his head.

“Because they’re a bunch of idiots. The way their system is designed they can’t automatically check people that are flagged dead. Death certification on Jheknan requires genetic identification, so there’s only a tiny number of deaths a year without positive ID. Like sailors lost at sea, space accidents, and -- us. In order to check us, they would have to manually bring up each record and put in an override. I requested it once, and it took them two weeks to process.”

“Good. Then tomorrow when the power grid breaks down and they’re faced with numerous emergencies all at once,” Jonathor smiled grimly, “you will be able to watch over Harl Cogger. A little extra confusion, some fuzziness of thought -- he might not handle the emergency well.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. I believe that I can predict a breakdown in efficiency tomorrow.”

“Does everybody know the plan?”

“Yes, we set it up last year. The countdown started automatically when we were put under house arrest.”

“How is communication?”

“Spotty. Some families and individuals didn’t have backup access. All personal accounts of Sirens are locked.”

Gavin looked grim. “This is not how I would like to do this. If something goes wrong ...”

There was a stir on the other side of the room. A young man with blond hair rushed up. “I’ve been monitoring communication. Our source in the Organization just informed me that they are going to pick us all up tonight.”

“Tonight! Damn and double damn.” Jonathor swore softly.

“Is there any way to warn everybody?”

Jonathor shook his head. “We could contact only about half of our people. That’s not enough.”

Shayla stepped forward. “Could we change Harl Cogger’s mind?”

“How close can we get to Harl?” Gavin asked. “If we can get close enough, we could do it.”

“He’s in his office in the main Organization office. You know that layout, Gavin.”

Gavin looked grim. “Yes, intimately. The closest we could get is the building next door.” He shook his head slowly. “It’s too far.”

“Not if you were fully charged.” Jonathor’s voice was cool and controlled.

There was a short silence, and then everyone turned to look at Shayla.

A herd of butterflies took off in Shayla’s stomach. Sirens, charging, sex ... She knew where this was going.

Gavin turned to her. "We need to talk. Come with me."

He pulled her into a small alcove off the main room. He put his hands on her waist and looked intently into her eyes. "Can you do this, Shayla?"

Shayla cleared her throat. "What exactly are we talking about here?"

"We need to absorb some sexual energy to increase our working range. It would work best as a threesome: me, you, and someone else that you choose."

The bottom of Shayla's stomach dropped, in an uneasy combination of arousal, fear, and embarrassment. "We couldn't just do it separately? You pick somebody, I pick somebody?"

"Shayla, you've never done a full energy drain by yourself, only a kind of accidental absorption. And we need to keep our connection tight. If we use separate partners, the bond might loosen. We've only got one chance to get this right."

How ironic. She was being forced by circumstance and honor into a threesome with two Siren males, one of them the most intense partner she'd ever experienced. Shayla moaned as she shook her head. "I think that I'm in some alternate dimension. I've got to have sex in order to save the universe? These things only happen to me."

Gavin grinned. "Let's not exaggerate. You're not going to save the universe. Only about two hundred relatives."

Shayla breathed in deep. "So Gavin, do you pick the third? We don't have a lot of time to go through a courtship process here."

"We're Sirens. Traditionally the woman picks."

Shayla raised an eyebrow. "Now there's a tradition I can get behind. But I don't know anybody."

"I was there when you met everybody, remember." Gavin looked amused. "I know who you were attracted to."

"If you're so smart, tell me who I'd pick."

"Jordash."

Shayla scowled. "Oh, all right. Have it your way. But what if he doesn't want to?"

Gavin looked at her with incredulity. "Are you crazy? A chance to have sex with the only woman who's a possible mate, save his people, and be a big hero? I don't think we have to worry about Jordash. Besides, we're Sirens. We *like* sex. A lot."

Shayla took a deep breath. "Okay, it's settled. Let's do it."

Chapter Fourteen

Shayla looked thoughtfully at Jordash, standing with Gavin just inside the door of the bedroom. “I know we’re under some time pressure here, but I think we should take just a little bit of time to get acquainted before going at it like rabbits in heat.”

Jordash grinned. “Hey, you’re the boss.”

Shayla widened her eyes ironically. “Really? I am?”

“Jordash, she didn’t know, and now you’ve given the whole thing away.” Gavin shook his head.

“What? What are you talking about?”

Gavin made a kissing movement with his lips. “I’m teasing you, mainly. What Jordash meant is that among Sirens usually the woman leads in these affairs. They have the empathy; they have the close connection to what the others are feeling. It’s your job to make sure that everybody is satisfied.”

Shayla wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or not. It sounded like a lot of responsibility. “So let’s start by taking off our clothes.” She sighed. “Normally I would prefer to take our time, but since we’re in a hurry, we’ll skip that part.”

Swiftly and efficiently they all stripped. Shayla didn’t know where to look. She couldn’t quite meet their eyes, and she didn’t want to stare at the most interesting parts, which left her with a sort of in-between area. Shoulders were good.

She was going to be having sex with these two in a short time. A very short time. She needed to get over this. Taking a deep breath, she raised her eyes to Gavin’s and Jordash’s faces. They had expectant looks, and -- was that amusement?

Shayla scowled. “This isn’t fair, you know. I’m not the experienced one here.”

Gavin smiled. "Feeling a bit shy? Let's start out with something easy. We'll give you a massage. Up on the bed."

With a sense of relief, Shayla climbed on the large, firm bed. She scooted back and watched the two men approach. They were beautifully muscled, graceful -- and hugely erect. Their sizes were similar, Gavin a touch wider, Jordash's cockhead slightly narrower. Jordash angled to the left, Gavin pointed more to the ceiling. Shayla's sex grew wet and swollen at the sight. Her body tingled and her nipples pebbled.

Gavin settled down on her right, Jordash on her left. The heat and velvet of their cocks was like a branding iron where they touched her skin.

"Roll over," Gavin murmured. "We'll start on your back."

With a touch of regret for the loss of the visuals, Shayla rolled to her stomach. She closed her eyes. A warm body and a hot cock pressed against her on each side. On the other hand, there was something to be said for focusing on the sense of touch.

Warm hands -- four of them -- massaged her shoulders, neck, and back. Shayla took a deep breath of relaxation. Their scents flooded her. Gavin's scent was most familiar to her -- a musky sweetness like smelling honey. Jordash had a more bitter undertone, but was just as arousing in its own way. Shayla turned her head toward him and deliberately breathed in more of that heady smell. Anticipation swirled through her; her body throbbed and moistened, and the texture of the blankets underneath her sharpened. She squirmed and rolled her hips, instinctively searching for more stimulation.

Her connection to Gavin automatically snapped into place. She could feel what he felt pressed against her side. The connection to Jordash was fuzzier, less distinct, consisting mostly of his emotions. Both men were aroused. Images and touches and scents and sounds flowed and swelled. Her own excitement was stimulated by theirs.

She had noticed that Gavin's arousal was more physically concentrated, her own arousal more diffuse. With two of them to observe, she could confirm that observation. Not only were their cocks hot against her body, they were hot spots for all sensation, too. She giggled, thinking that it was like one of those maps that were distorted to match people's perception, except that this would be an image of a male figure with a grossly exaggerated penis.

Gavin chuckled. *Hey, I resemble that!*

An unfamiliar mental presence joined them. *Speak for yourself. I personally bear no resemblance to that image.* Jordash gave a mental harumph and she felt his warm lips on the soft skin of her neck.

Shayla asked, *Jordash?*

A thread of Jordash-colored amusement drifted by. *You were expecting someone else?*

No, I'm just not used to anybody but Gavin.

Gavin slapped her bottom lightly. *You're altogether too self-possessed for a woman with us in her bed. You think we can fix that, friend?*

Yeah, I think we can do something about that.

With a smoothly coordinated move, they flipped her over. Without losing a second to hesitation, Jordash angled his chest over hers, exploring her face with his lips and finally his tongue. His taste and texture exploded in her mouth, while Gavin expertly licked lightly around and near her clit.

Her left arm was around Jordash's firmly muscled back, while her right hand gripped Gavin's curls. Shimmering pleasure built and built. *Hey guys, I'm gonna come if you keep that up.*

Dark intent colored Gavin's thoughts. *I'm pretty sure that's the idea. We want to soften you up for the main event.*

Yeah, but ... Images drifted through her head, images of cocks and soft wetness and penetration and ...

Jordash added, *Don't worry. We'll get to all that. This is just the appetizer.*

Somebody's fingers moved to her nipples -- both nipples. She could have drawn on her connection to both men to tell who was doing what, but she really didn't care. Gavin's fingers pushed inside her, curling back to a spot that felt sooo good, and his tongue flicked softly over the center of her spiraling arousal. So many erogenous zones were stimulated at once, an electric charge went up her spine.

Let go and come, the men told her in synchrony.

She hadn't realized she was holding back, but with the command something inside her released and heat and pleasure steamed through her body. Gavin's hand rested on her mound, riding out the storm, and Jordash curled his face into her neck.

The energy flowed back and forth in her body, settling down. She took a deep breath and cleared her throat. "So, if that's the appetizer, I hope I survive the main course."

Gavin scooted up, so that he was on the opposite side of her from Jordash. "Don't worry. *You* will survive." He raised his eyebrows and looked at the other man. "I don't know about Jordash."

Jordash snorted. "Survive? Hey, you guys will be lucky if I don't overload you."

"Overload?" Gavin sneered. "I don't think so."

Shayla scowled at both of them. "Boys! This is not a pissing contest."

Gavin grinned at her. "Nope. It's a ..." He paused, looked at Jordash, and together they chanted, "... fucking contest."

Shayla closed her eyes and groaned. "Did I ask for that? Did I?"

"Yes," Gavin said.

“Well, okay. But let’s move on.” She reached down on both sides and grasped a hot, velvety cock in each hand.

Jordash cleared his throat. “That’ll do it.”

Shayla closed her eyes and concentrated on the feeling of those satiny shafts, stroking up hard, and circling the heads with her fingers. She ran a finger around underneath the ridge of the moist, silky heads, soaking up the hungry clenching of both of their bodies. Then she went through the whole process again, and again.

Gavin finally thought, *Stop. We can’t come yet, need to arrange ourselves for the end.* His breathing was heavy and labored, his eyes closed.

Shayla let her hands rest on them. *How? Uh, how ... need to arrange?*

Jordash snickered. *Talk much? Er, I mean, think much? Hell, I don’t know what I mean.*

Gavin considered the possibilities mentally, while Shayla watched. When he got to one with Jordash in the middle, Gavin behind him, her body clenched.

Okay, that one. Did you get that?

Yeah. Good choice, Shayla. Shimmering anticipation blazed through Jordash, blazed through them all.

Gavin reached to the table beside the bed for a tube of lubricant. He slathered a handful of juice all over his massive erection, spreading it with an efficient stroke.

Shayla loved watching his hand on his own cock, feeling what he was doing to himself. The sheer business-like physicality of it caused her sex to clench, as though gripping it with her own inner muscles.

Gavin raised his eyebrows at Jordash. *You sure you can take this?*

What? That? No problem. Now when it’s my turn to do you, that might be different. Jordash put his hands behind his head, and adopted a mockly arrogant air.

Shayla rolled her eyes.

Okay, in position -- honeybun.

Outrage showed on Jordash’s face. *Honeybun? HONEYBUN? You just wait, I’ll get you for that one.* But he rolled over on top of Shayla, giving her a sloppy wet kiss, rubbing as much of his body against hers as he could, including his blazing hot erection.

After their legs were arranged as comfortably as possible, hands rubbing everywhere, touching nipples and cocks and clits and any other accessible erogenous zone, Gavin said, “Brace yourself.” Kneeling, Shayla could tell from her connection to them both, that he was working himself in to Jordash’s tight channel.

Ribbons of dark delight flared in them both. The tight grip on Gavin’s cock was different in quality from the way it felt to him when he plunged into her. Shayla was so

involved in experiencing the act from their point of view, that she almost forgot about her own body -- except that their arousal was setting off her own fireworks.

When Gavin was all the way in to the hilt -- and pressed up against some highly sensitive part of Jordash, too -- it was time to complete the connection. Reaching down, she grasped his throbbing shaft and positioned it against her own moist heat. Lifting, her hips, she impaled herself on him.

The rivers of sexual energy shifted back and forth, looking for a path.

Gavin withdrew, Jordash drew back with him, then he thrust forward. It was as though Gavin were thrusting into Shayla using Jordash's body. They settled down into a pounding rhythm of thrusts and withdrawals. Power surged through them, intoxicating, wickedly arousing.

Shayla was on the edge of the precipice; the men were there, too.

Gavin drew back once more, slowly, grasped Shayla's hands on the mattress, then said, "Come now," and thrust forward. Dizzy, dazzling, shimmery orgasm swept over them all, connecting from Gavin to Shayla through Jordash. As they drifted down to earth, the energy flowed outwards, away from Jordash, toward the Gavin and Shayla ends of the circuit. With a final sparkle, the energy -- and their bodies -- drifted down to mundane reality.

They collapsed in a pile of bodies, arranging their limbs and other body parts like a pile of puppies.

Jordash, on his side, rested his head on his hand and lazily smiled. "Thanks for letting me join you. Maybe we can do it again sometime."

Shayla felt Gavin's surge of triumph, and Jordash ... was acknowledging defeat? Shayla started reaching for the emotional context, but Gavin interrupted her. *Later. No time now.* How convenient for him. Unfortunately he was right.

Shayla leaned over and gave Jordash an exaggerated kiss. "I'd love to. Sorry to fuck and run." She shrugged in apology, and slid off the bed.

Jordash sprawled back on the pillows, closing his eyes. "You two pretty much sucked me dry. I'm going to nap so I'm ready for the big escape tomorrow."

After a quick trip through the waterless cleaner, she and Gavin pulled on their clothes, and quietly let themselves out the door.

Gradually Shayla's awareness of Jordash's emotions and thoughts had thinned out and disappeared. Her connection to Gavin was tighter than ever before.

It was strange to be so tightly bound. The edges between his thoughts and feelings and hers were hazy and indistinct. Shayla felt like she should be thinking the royal "we" instead of "I."

Gavin was amused. *We probably should. We also see why people can't maintain this level of intimacy for long periods of time. It's tiring and disorienting.*

Shayla and Gavin walked down the hallway, their steps synchronized, their vision double. It seemed easier to do it that way than to deliberately step out of rhythm. *Let's get this over with.*

* * * * *

The same kindred employee who had driven them to the Pink Palace drove them to a street close to the Organization offices. The street was empty and dark, since it was a business area and several hours after everything closed. Gavin used his pocket comp to get them into a neighboring building, which was quiet and empty. Once inside, they made their way to the second floor, and then the room on the side of the building bordering the Organization. They sat down against the wall.

Would it work? Were they close enough? They put their inside arms around each other's waists, and clasped their hands in front. *Close eyes.* They reached out telepathically and empathically, and successfully latched onto Harl's emotions, heard his thoughts. He planned to destroy the Sirens once and for all. After they were all in "protective" custody, a crisis would occur. Maybe a riot. Maybe a technological failure that could be blamed on the Sirens. But they would all end up dead one way or another.

Shayla and Gavin withdrew from the miasma that was his mind. Shayla shuddered. She felt as though she had touched something unclean and evil. These were not the thoughts of a sane and balanced person.

Shayla sighed. "His hatred and fear of Sirens is too deeply embedded to change. We'll have to go for delay."

"What do you think about attacking his sense of urgency? Make him decide that there's no reason to rush."

Shayla nodded. "He likes the idea that he is causing us fear and anxiety. It would seem natural to want to prolong that, to wallow in the misery and fear of his victims."

"I think that's the right tack. I think that he would enjoy thinking that a last minute reprieve of a day would weaken our resistance and unsettle it. It's a technique that is used in psychological warfare."

Shayla turned over mentally what she knew of Harl and his emotions toward the Sirens. "I think that will do it. We can also throw in a touch of arrogance and certainty that the Sirens won't be able to do anything anyway because he's planned everything so well."

Gavin took a deep breath and settled his arm more firmly around Shayla's waist. "Are you ready?"

"To touch that stinking cesspool of a mind? Not likely. But we're as ready as we're going to be. Let's go."

With elegant synchronization they reached out and gently attached themselves to Harl's mind.

Harl contemplated the terror of the Sirens and enjoyed it. He felt arrogance and certainty of the success of his plan, and his sense of urgency dissipated. He had plenty of time. The security measures were the best, there was nothing to fear from the Siren menace. Harl smiled and delayed the sweep by a day. He could play this game for quite a while. They would be putty in his hands by the time he was done.

Carefully, Shayla and Gavin withdrew from Harl and collapsed in each other's arms, drained of energy. Gradually the warmth and comfort of holding each other enabled them to stop shuddering from distaste and feel normal again.

Slowly they disentangled their thoughts and emotions until only the background thread was left.

Gavin stood up carefully, and held out a hand to Shayla. With an effort of will Shayla grabbed his hand and pulled herself up. They quietly left the building.

Once outside, she sighed deeply, and breathed in a lungful of fresh air. "Let's not do that again for a really long time," she whispered.

"I'd be okay with never." Gavin ran a hand through his hair.

Shayla would have liked to take a couple of days -- or maybe a couple of weeks or months -- to sit back and recover, but now they had to escape from Jheknan. When this was all over, she was going to take that vacation.

* * * * *

The next night at the same instant all over Jheknan, Sirens took control of the minds of their captors, walked out, and made their way to a private spaceport through a variety of long-established methods. As the ships took off simultaneously, the alarm rang through the Organization. The reports poured in of inexplicably missing Siren detainees.

In his office, Harl Cogger slammed a fist into the comp display showing the reports, crumpling the usually indestructible display seed. "Damn them! I was so close to removing this scourge from our sector." He tightened his lips into a vicious slash, narrowing his eyes as though peering into the future. "I swear that I'll find them and get even for this insolence, if it takes me the rest of the millennium."

Chapter Fifteen

Gavin could feel the hum of the engines through his bunk. The air blowing through the vents had that stale smell you always seemed to get on spaceships, but at least it was peaceful here in one of the unmated-male dormitories.

The spaceship was hours away from Jheknan and close enough to the jump point that it looked like they were going to get away free and clear. The high level of background anxiety was dropping, though they wouldn't be able to relax completely until they were on Kimur. It was almost impossible to follow a ship through a jump unless you knew exactly where it was going, and the Jheknan Intelligence Organization didn't know their destination. After having been up close and familiar with the morasses of Harl Cogger's mind, Gavin was sure of that.

He was resting, allowing his energy level to recover from that last expedition. He wanted to avoid even the low expenditure necessary to deal with a ship full of Sirens. There were very few people onboard who were even eligible for an energy drain, and he found himself reluctant to consider the possibility anyway. So he would probably be spending most of the next couple of days sleeping.

He shook his head in wry amusement. The Siren kindred were more highly sexed than average humans; he hoped those onboard were on the high end of that scale. They were going to be in demand for the next few days -- if they didn't get entirely drained.

He could tell that Shayla was in the lounge area and feeling restless. Was her restlessness due to the same cause as his? He wanted to see her, he wanted to be with her, he *really* wanted to sink himself in ... He took a deep breath. Oops. Wrong direction. He shouldn't think about sex and Shayla. Maybe if he said it a hundred times it would work. Not.

They had started binding in that last little exercise. That's why he always knew where she was -- and she knew where he was. It made the whole attempt to avoid her really easy --

and obvious. He was almost glad that it wasn't safe to open up to her completely. If her feelings were hurt, he really didn't want to know. Though, frankly, if he was willing to pass on the hurt feelings thing, she ought to be able to. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. It was Shayla that wasn't quite ready, even if she was close. She did love him, he knew that.

But would she want to bind with him forever?

Then there was the energy issue. Could either of them stand to have sex with somebody else just for the energy? The very idea made him uncomfortable, and he was pretty sure that Shayla would feel the same way. Hell, she hadn't wanted to use one of the body servants even before they started binding. People had told him he would feel this way one day, and he had found it hard to believe. Sex was just ... sex. Now it was more. Sex meant Shayla. But if she didn't come to some decision soon ...

Meanwhile, he was restless and irritable because of the forced inactivity. It was only three days until they were back on Kimur where he would once again be in the middle of all the activity involved in creating new settlements. This wasn't exactly a vacation, but it might be the closest he would come for a while, so he should try to enjoy it. Right. Like that was going to happen.

He sighed, and flicked on the in-bunk computer. At least he could pass the time constructively by brushing up on Kimurian history and geography.

* * * * *

Shayla braced herself against the side of the cart that was carrying six Siren girls to Lexfield as it jounced over yet another bump in the road. She shouldn't have complained so much about the carriages on her other travels on Kimur. They were vastly better than this ... this farm cart, or whatever it was. The carriages at least had softened the bumps of the road with springs and cushions. This cart had nothing but a hard wooden bench. She looked gloomily at the long road ahead of her. It was slower, too, since the cart was heavier and was carrying more people.

And of course Gavin had been with her on all of those other trips. She sighed and switched positions, trying to find some part of her bottom and thighs to sit on that didn't feel bruised. Gavin. It was hard to believe that she could miss someone so much, after knowing him for less than a couple of weeks. She didn't like not knowing where he was.

Even though she had hardly seen him at all on the spaceship, she had always known where he was and usually what he was doing. It had made her feel less alone. She knew, from their connection, that they couldn't be together right now for some reason, but he kept disappearing -- mentally and physically -- before she could pin him down and make him tell her exactly why. It hadn't helped that they had both spent most of the trip sleeping in different parts of the ship and had almost never been awake at the same time.

He had left the landing place -- a remote valley hidden by a mountain from Centralia -- early that morning, and after a few minutes her awareness of him had gradually thinned until it disappeared entirely. She didn't like it.

She wanted that awareness back. Goddess, she wanted *him* back. She had all of these newfound friends and relatives, but it wasn't the same without Gavin. Did he not want her? Was he afraid of binding? Yearning wrapped itself around her heart. She wanted to feel at home. It was something she had been looking for all her life. But she didn't know if she would ever feel that way without him.

Maren, the girl sitting next to her, turned toward her, and she hurriedly checked her shields. No, she hadn't been leaking anything.

Maren smiled. "We all spent the trip trying to learn Kimurian, but you've actually been living here and speak it already, don't you?"

Shayla nodded. "Yes, but I wasn't here very long, so you'll probably catch up with me very quickly."

She had ended up in this cart because she had been bunking in the dorm assigned to unmarried women. Of course, there were no unmarried Siren women her age. Maren was the oldest at fifteen, and the other girls were even younger. They were perfectly nice -- just very young.

She looked around at the group of girls. Too bad she had spent a lot of the last few days sleeping. She probably should have made more of an effort to get to know them, but she had been emotionally exhausted, and hadn't felt up to it. But there was no time like the present. "You know, I don't know much about what it's like to grow up as a Siren. Tell me about it."

They looked at each other, puzzled. A girl named Suling finally spoke up. "It's just ... normal." She shrugged. "I guess we have empathic training that other people don't get." Her eyes opened wide. "But we haven't gotten to the good part yet. You know -- sexual training with Siren males. Tell us about Gavin. Was he good?"

She felt her cheeks get hot as she tried to think of what she could say -- of what she *wanted* to say. She had been through some amazing experiences without a single blush, but these young women could make her blush with a simple question. Maybe it was because they seemed so sweet and innocent. Maybe it was because her relationship with Gavin felt too private and she didn't want to share.

She took a deep breath. "I've never done the ... training, so I'm not sure how to compare. Can you tell me what this training usually consists of?" She smiled encouragingly. "I don't know much about it at all. Who are the trainers?"

Maren replied eagerly, "Oh, it's quite an honor for the men who are asked. The older women select them, and they would know who's best, of course. It's usually unmarried men, but married men can be nominated by their wives."

"So do you have the same trainer more than once?" Shayla asked.

Suling frowned. “No, and I think that’s really unfair. What if you get somebody you really like? You’re not allowed to get together with them again for *years*.”

“You know the reason for that rule,” Maren said. “You might bind without it being a really free choice.” She shrugged. “Besides, we need to learn to get energy from donors. If you bind too soon, it’s supposed to be harder to do that.”

So that’s what she had been doing for the last eight years on Jheknan. Learning to use energy donors. Okay, she could live with that. It had all been practice. Leading to the question, of course: practice for what?

Suling brightened. “There is that, of course. There’s lots of really sexy males out there. Some of the kindred are really good-looking.”

Shayla was entertained for the next half hour by an exhaustive discussion of the all of the hottest young Siren and kindred males. It wasn’t a large society; these girls apparently spent a lot of time looking forward to their initiations and they knew almost all of the possible trainers personally. They were all related in some way, even if it was a fairly distant relationship. She even found out that Gavin was her third cousin.

As the girls chatted, her thoughts drifted to the other lost females on Jheknan. What had their lives been like? Some of the kindred had stayed behind to help locate them, and she knew they planned to offer refuge to all the women they located. She suspected that she had been luckier than she realized when she was growing up. Life could be hard on empaths, particularly untrained empaths.

The sun was high in the sky, making the open cart even more hot and uncomfortable, when they rounded the top of a hill and she saw the Lexfield manor nestled in the valley below. An unexpected swell of emotion rolled through her, the feeling that she was coming home. She could feel Gavin again. He was already there, in the Lexfield study that they had spent so much time in just last week.

She breathed out, letting go of tension she hadn’t even realized was there.

* * * * *

Shayla felt guilty for enjoying the luxurious privacy of having a bedroom to herself. There were a lot of people bunking on floors and in the stables, and camping out in the fields. But when she mentioned it to Jonathor and Lillorian, they assured her that this was just temporary and there was no point in moving for only a few days.

Her birth family had landed in a rural area of Jheknan about half a day’s journey away. Shayla had spoken to them briefly on the communicator, and they planned to visit once things were more settled. The idea filled her with a peculiar combination of anticipation and fear.

It was strange to be surrounded by people who were related to her, who considered her part of their extended family. Shayla had been isolated most of her life. Even before her

adoptive parents had kicked her out, she had never felt accepted by them, so she had given up trying to please them at a young age. To have parents again, her real parents who might love her ... It was something she could get used to, she was sure, but her life had contained much more rejection than acceptance, so she couldn't help worrying that they wouldn't like her, or would be ashamed of her.

Meanwhile, it might have been easier to be assigned somewhere else. It was hard to be in the same suite as Gavin and not see him. She knew that he was just a few feet away, through the other door off the sitting room. It was a good thing she had learned how to shield.

The Council of Lords voted to limit off-planet access, and she didn't even get a chance to discuss it with him, after all the work that they had done together. She wanted to share the success with him. Frankly, she would have liked to share just about everything with him. It just wasn't the same without him.

After being back at Lexfield for two nights without seeing him at all, she couldn't stand it. She had to talk to him. She got up at dawn and laid in wait in the dressing room, keeping her shields as tight as possible.

She felt Gavin moving around in his room a short while later. Then the door opened. At the sight of his tousled black curls, warm green eyes, and beautiful body, her heart leaped in her chest. She could hardly breathe.

His eyes were hot and intent on her. "Shayla, sweetheart ..." He hesitated, then stepped toward her, cradled her face in his hands, and touched her lips with his.

His taste flooded through her and her body melted. Then he stepped back, reluctantly. "You know that I want nothing more. If you call, I will come."

She frowned at him, puzzled.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Talk to Lillorian. I have to go." With that he blew her a kiss, and fled out the door.

It looked like this was more of that complicated Siren stuff that she needed to learn. She would have to find Lillorian, who'd been so busy making sure that everybody had someplace to stay and the necessities of life.

She curled up in the window seat in her room, and watched the early morning mist fade away from the hills and gardens. It was going to be a beautiful day, clear and bright.

The Sirens and kindred were camped on the back meadows in temporary shelters, filled every room in the house, and overflowed the village, but many of them would be moving on tomorrow, so Lillorian and Jonathor had decreed that today they would all celebrate their new home. They could hardly have asked for better weather. Of course, the weather in this part of Kimur was almost always sunny, unlike Jheknan.

In addition to the question of her relationship with Gavin, she had to decide what to do with her life. She had no job, no income. Every time she tried to talk about it with Lillorian

or Lara or one of the older Siren women, they told her not to worry. Things would work out. They all seemed to find her mildly amusing, which was really irritating.

The Sirens were also interested in exploring her ability to draw energy from other people without actually having sex. Nobody was sure yet whether it was an ability that all Sirens could develop with the right training, or whether it was some genetic difference in Shayla alone. Right now Shayla was only glad that it meant she didn't have to deal with feeding right now, because with Gavin avoiding her, she wasn't sure what she would do otherwise.

Shayla heard clanging and clattering from the kitchens. It was time to help with preparations. She headed down the stairs toward the kitchen. They were bound to need someone to cut vegetables or mix bread.

But before she reached the kitchen, she saw Lillorian out in the garden. This was a good time for that talk.

She stood at the door to the garden, and Lillorian looked up and smiled. "Come pick flowers with me."

Shayla returned her smile and joined her. She liked Lillorian. It would have been impossible not to. She was warm, self-confident, and kind.

The garden was sunny and bright; light sparkled on the dew-sprinkled leaves. Lillorian picked up the clippers, and starting cutting flowers and laying them in a large basket. She looked up with a welcoming smile and handed Shayla a pair of clippers. "Let's start with the purple and white ones and see how far we get."

"That should be pretty."

Lillorian snipped a fuzzy purple flower. "You haven't seen much of Gavin lately, have you?"

Shayla flushed. "No, we've all been really busy. The settlement is going really well, though. And the vote to limit off-planet access yesterday was successful."

Lillorian put a handful of flowers in the basket. "I need to talk to him about commsat use. Do you know where he is?"

"He's in the study at the computer."

Lillorian turned her head to look at Shayla, her eyes curious. "Did you see him there?"

"No." Shayla shrugged. "I just know."

Lillorian turned back to clipping. "So how long has it been that you always seem to just know where he is?"

"Since we changed Harl Cogger's mind." Shayla ran a finger over the velvety petals of a purple flower. "Do you know how long it will be before it goes away?"

Lillorian looked at her from the corner of her eye and pursed her lips. "So what do you think of Gavin?"

Shayla's mind went blank. This was Gavin's mother. And a highly empathic Siren. She couldn't lie; she wasn't sure she wanted to tell the truth. She couldn't tell about her erotic dreams, her daydreams of spending her life with him. "Uh, Gavin is great. I loved ... I enjoyed working with him."

Lillorian smiled at the flower she was clipping. "That's nice. A mother always likes to hear good things about her son." She laid the flower in the basket. "Shayla, Siren customs are different in some ways from Jheknan -- and from Kimur, too, of course. If you had been brought up in our ways you would have learned these things from birth and they would seem normal to you. They *are* normal to Gavin, and he probably doesn't always remember that you don't understand."

"I realize I have a lot to learn."

"What was the last thing that Gavin said to you?"

"It was something about calling him. I wasn't sure what he was talking about."

"Did he say: If you call, I will come?"

"Yes, that's it." Shayla *knew* those words had meant something special.

"Hmmm. Do you know how marriage works among Sirens?"

Marriage? Why was Lillorian talking about marriage? Were those simple words some kind of ... proposal? "I thought you didn't necessarily marry. Exactly. Sirens bind instead." Shayla carefully didn't look at Lillorian. "Gavin warned me that we ran the risk of binding accidentally if we made love."

Lillorian snorted. "Men. They take a perfectly simple concept and screw it up beyond belief." She shook her head. "It's not possible to *accidentally* bind. Binding is what happens when Sirens fall in love."

Shayla frowned. "You mean Gavin was trying to avoid falling in love?"

"Well ... yes and no. You have to remember that Gavin thought he would never have the chance to fall in love with a Siren woman. He's used to avoiding situations that might lead to it, because it could only lead to tragedy. It's very difficult to work out a relationship with a long established couple. It's just so difficult to balance ..." A wave of sadness from Lillorian swept over Shayla. "Anyway, all of that is old news. The real problem is that it's not considered a good idea to allow a binding to take place without having made a conscious decision to do so."

"So what did those words mean?"

"Among Sirens, the women make the decision. In practice, of course, it's like all groups -- both people have to be willing." Lillorian smiled. "In theory, the woman looks around among all the men who are offering, and chooses the one she wants."

"So it was a proposal?" Shayla could feel frothy, light-filled bubbles of happiness start to form.

Lillorian pursed her lips. "Not technically. He was just telling you that he was available and that he would like you to choose him."

The bubbles became iridescent, sending flashes of purple and pink and shimmery green through Shayla. So this was what joy felt like. She took a deep breath. "That isn't a proposal? Aren't you splitting hairs?"

"No, I don't think so. You'll have a lot of other men to choose among."

Shayla's eyes widened. "I will?"

"Oh, yes. Quite a few."

"Exactly how many men are we talking here?"

Lillorian tapped her chin. "Let's see, probably not too many of the eighteen- to twenty-year-olds ... Oh, about twelve, I'd say. Maybe as many as fifteen?" She smiled brightly. "You can count them tonight, in any case. Most of them will be at the party."

Was she dreaming? Fifteen men wanted to *marry* her? What would Gavin think about that? If she could ask him. "So why is Gavin avoiding me?"

Lillorian handed her the basket of flowers. "It's the only polite thing he could do. If you bind too tightly, you wouldn't have any real choice."

"Too tightly?"

"More than you already are."

"We're already bound?" Shayla was starting to feel like a parrot, blankly repeating Lillorian's words.

Lillorian looked at her gently. "Well, of course. That connection that you can feel to him all of the time, that's an effect of binding."

Shayla sat down suddenly on the ground. "Oh." She didn't know what to think; she didn't know what to feel. A rush of joy at the thought of being tied permanently to Gavin rushed through her; bubbles floated though the air. She felt his attention being drawn by her emotion and quickly shielded.

Lillorian smiled. "Whatever choice you make, we're your family now. You'll always have a place with any of us." She turned to go into the house. "After you take those flowers to the ballroom, you might want to rest before getting ready for the party. It's going to be a big evening." She looked at Shayla and smiled roguishly. "And a big night, too."

Chapter Sixteen

Shayla stood at the side of the ballroom next to Lillorian and Jonathor. An impromptu receiving line had formed in front of her. Or maybe it wasn't so impromptu. Apparently everybody but her had known this was going to happen.

The first person in line was Jordash. She looked up at him and blushed.

He smiled wickedly, and raised her hand to his kiss. "It was a pleasure to participate in such a momentous event with you." He continued to hold her hand in a loose clasp, gazing at her intently. "I don't suppose you've taken a sudden aversion to our Gavin?"

Shayla just shrugged.

Jordash sighed. "I didn't think so. But if a miracle occurs, be assured that I would jump at the chance to accept your call. Or join you both for further enjoyment."

"I'll keep your offer firmly in mind," Shayla murmured, images of the three of them flashing through her mind.

Jordash waved a hand to the crowd of men behind him. "Enjoy your suitors." He grinned. "Toy with them; let them think they have a chance. Frustration is undoubtedly good for the soul."

Shayla started to scowl, then thought better of it and raised her eyebrows. "I do intend to enjoy myself."

"And I intend to make sure that I am the one to rescue the next stolen female."

"Have you located more of ... us?"

"We have leads on some of the missing women. We're setting up a plan to offer rescue, escape, or assistance to those we find." Jordash touched her chin with his finger. "Don't be a stranger."

Half an hour later, Shayla shifted restlessly. All of the men had been pleasant and charming and flatteringly eager, but none of them had made a big impression. Where was Gavin? Wasn't he supposed to be here, too? She looked at the last men waiting to meet her, and managed to smile. All of these people were apparently distant or not-so-distant relatives. Even if she didn't want to marry them, she did want to be friendly.

A large blond man and a more slightly built brown-haired man stepped forward at the same time. "Greetings. We're Kennan and Martin." They bowed in synchrony. "We'd love to have you choose us. We're a package deal, so you get both of us."

Shayla laughed. "You get right to the point, don't you?"

Kennan -- the blond -- smiled sheepishly. "We figure you've already talked to everybody else, so there's no point in wasting time."

"Well, Kennan and Martin, I'm pleased to meet you. Perhaps I'll have a chance to dance with you later."

Kennan sighed and shook his head. "The brush-off. I knew it."

Martin jabbed Kennan with his elbow. "Remember your manners, you oaf." He bowed again, with a flourish of his hand. "We'd love to dance with you, Shayla. Just find us later." He grabbed Kennan by the arm and dragged him away.

Shayla turned to Lillorian, still standing nearby chatting to one of the other women. Lillorian raised her eyebrows. "Well?"

Shayla flushed. "Well what?"

"Are you going to put Gavin out of his misery?"

"Gavin? Out of *his* misery?"

Lillorian rolled her eyes. "I did tell you this already, you know. But let me refresh your memory. You. Have. To. Call. Him."

Shayla scowled. There were aspects to Siren customs that she would just as soon dispense with. It looks like there was no way out of this one, though -- at least not in any direction that appealed to her. She dropped the shield between her and Gavin. *Get yourself down here before I go nuts!*

She could feel amusement and a dash of relief in Gavin's response. *Took you long enough, sweetheart.*

Shayla started to smile and turned back to Lillorian.

Lillorian winced. "Oh, yeah. I think that will do it."

Shayla glanced around the room. It looked like everybody was looking at her and smiling. Damn. She had dropped all of her shields, not just the one between her and Gavin. "Oops. I didn't mean to broadcast that."

Lillorian smiled. "Don't worry about it. It's not like it's a secret."

Shayla could feel Gavin approaching. She turned toward the doors on the other side of the room and saw him standing in the opening. He was looking intensely male and incredibly handsome. The formal Kimurian costume displayed his broad chest and muscular legs perfectly, but it was the familiarity and *rightness* of his face, the sweetness and amusement that pulled to her like a magnet.

She walked toward him across the room, and it was as though everybody else had faded to a pale imitation. Only he was vibrant and real and alive.

They met in the middle of the floor, and grasped hands. The music started playing, and they swept through the movements of the dance as the entire party clapped around them.

So, sweetheart ... Do you want to bind with me and spend the rest of our lives together? Gavin asked as he swept them through a particularly complicated turn.

Shayla rolled her eyes. *You already know the answer to the question. Why bother asking?*

Ten years down the road I don't want you to claim that I never asked. It's always wise to be clear on these little details.

Yes, Gavin, I do want to bind with you and spend the rest of our lives together. Is that good enough?

Absolutely. He pulled her toward the door leading out of the ballroom. *Let's go to bed and have some incredible sex.*

Shayla smiled. *Now there's a plan I approve of. Let's go.*

* * * * *

Up in his bedroom, his arms locked around her waist, Gavin scowled down at Shayla in mock indignation. *You've been picking around in my memories!*

She sniffed. *Nothing of the sort. It was just sitting there right on top.*

This is some kind of test, isn't it?

She sighed. *Yes, I suppose it is. Intellectually I know that you love me. I can read your emotions, read your thoughts. But my body doesn't seem to quite believe it.*

So you think this will help?

She stuck her nose in the air. *I know that it will. This is my area of expertise, you know. Didn't you tell me that female Sirens make these decisions?*

He shook his head, laughing. *Yes, I did tell you that. So it's my own damn fault.* He sighed. *Okay, up on the bed. I'll get the cuffs.*

She huffed. *Well, if you really don't want to.*

He smiled darkly. *You're not going to get out of this now. I think it's a great idea.* With that, he picked Shayla up and tossed her on the bed, and then opened the drawer in the dresser next to the bed and pulled out a set of padded handcuffs.

He snapped the cuffs on her wrists with polished movements. He definitely had some expertise in this scenario. When she ran across that wisp of an old memory, she had known immediately that this was what she wanted. For one thing, making love with Gavin could be so overwhelming -- with all of his senses added to her own, plus all the input from touching him, and his feedback to her touches -- that for once she wanted to be selfish enough to concentrate on her own body, her own arousal.

She wanted to see how different it was for him to make love to her, compared to the energy donors of the past. And ... something about it just seemed right. It was hard for her to let go and truly believe that someone loved her, and it was important that they do this right.

She looked down at the dress that she was still wearing. "Don't you want me to take off my dress first?"

"No. I think we'll leave you right like this. It's not like your important body parts are covered." After cuffing her right ankle, he paused and ran his finger around the areolas of the nipples that had popped out of her bodice from being bounced on the bed, then slowly flicked the length of her soft, moist flesh. "Yes, I think I have adequate access."

She breathed deeply and let knees fall to the side.

He scowled. "Besides, I'm having my wicked way with you, and you have no choice."

"We could skip the bossy part, and just ..." Her voice trailed off when she saw him shake his head slowly but emphatically back and forth.

"I don't think so. It's a package deal right now."

She closed her eyes and relaxed. "You're probably right."

His tongue flicked her nipple, and he whispered, "I know I'm right."

The silk of his curls brushed against the sensitive skin of her breasts. Her nipples tightened to swollen buds of eager flesh. His hot, moist tongue soothed one with wet strokes while his fingers gently tugged on the other. A bolt of electricity flashed from the aching tips directly to her throbbing core.

A coil of heat and pleasure steamed through her veins, and she twisted her hips, trying to find some stimulation. She bit back a moan.

"Uh-uh, not yet." He pulled back a few inches and blew a cool breath on the sensitive wet nubs. Moisture pooled in her sex.

Licking down the sides of her breasts and the curve of her waist, he shifted his position so that he was kneeling between her thighs. His hot, stone-hard cock rubbed on her thigh, and she strained against the restraints, trying to rub the center of her arousal against him, but succeeded only in frustrating herself. Her skin felt too tight for her body. She wanted that thick shaft buried deep inside, but she knew he had no intention of allowing her that yet. He was going to tease her and stimulate her and wind her up to such a peak that she was crazy with wanting him. And, Goddess, was she looking forward to it.

His tongue circled around her clit and her body spasmed in hunger. He reached up to tug and twist her nipples at the same time. The soft, wet explorations of her swollen folds was too slow, too little. She needed, she wanted, she had to be touched right there or she would ... she would ... Damn. There wasn't much she could do. Beg, maybe? She writhed in her bond. *Gavin, touch me, touch me ... there.*

His mind was humming with pleasure, deep in enjoyment of the sweet Shayla-scent and Shayla-taste.

Gavin!

Hmm? Oh, don't worry. I'll get to it. Soon. He gave her a leisurely, full-tongue swipe.

You're going to kill me.

Amusement colored his thoughts. *I don't think anybody's died yet from too much sexual arousal. Now, let me get back to what I was doing ...*

And he did go back, to flicking and laving and twisting and tugging. Shayla was breathing deeply now, and rolling and twisting her hips under his attentions. Her body was trembling with the need for completion. He thrust his tongue into her creamy sheath and she almost came, but it wasn't quite enough.

So, Shayla, are you feeling loved enough yet? he whispered in her thoughts, his tongue spearing her.

All she could do was moan.

I guess that's a no. I'll have to try a little harder.

He was teasing her, the rat! He was taking advantage of her inability to respond to tease her.

He moved up her body, rubbing himself between her thighs until he was straddling her loins. Taking the edge of her bodice, he rubbed the slightly scratchy cloth back and forth across her nipples, then leaned down and sucked one into his hot, wet mouth. Her hand automatically reached to hold his head against her chest, but could only move a couple of inches. The suction felt like it pulled directly on her melting core. Her back arched, pressing her deeper into his mouth.

She could feel the full, aching hardness pressed against her abdomen. She rolled her hips, touching it with the rotation of her body.

Ah, you want that, do you?

Gavin straightened up on his knees. Shayla's eyes snapped open and she watched him pull down the stretchy top of his pants below his heavy balls. Her gaze was glued to the thick, rosy shaft, a drop of liquid leaking from the meaty head. She licked her lips.

He grasped the base with one hand and leaned over to barely touch her lips to the velvety head. She reached forward, trying to reach it with her tongue, and he pulled back a little, just out of reach. She glared at him.

I'm the one who's driving, remember?

She hissed in frustration.

Well, since you asked so nicely ... He pressed forward, slowly pressing the warm satin of his cock into her mouth.

Her mouth opened eagerly, her tongue circling the head and flange as best she could. His taste exploded in her mouth, so spicy, so sweet, the essence of Gavin. Her connection to him made her feel as though in sucking his cock, she was sucking her own clit.

A wave of blazing ecstasy started to surge through her, but he pulled out of her mouth, and the wave fizzled out before cresting. She moaned.

Soon, sweetheart, soon. He was moving down her body again, rubbing against her all the way down. He sat between her legs, lifted her bottom higher in the air and spread her legs over his shoulders, positioning her creaming sex for his careful inspection. He blew on her clit, the warmth of his breath frustratingly light, then leaned forward and started exploring her once more with tongue. He circled the focus of sensation, ran his tongue down and speared her, then continued lower, circling her anus. She gasped, almost choking with the intensity of the sensations. She wanted to brace herself against something, but could only flail about.

She could hear the sound of his tongue flickering, and jerked with every little stroke. Pleasure built and built. She was almost there, when he stopped. She wailed in frustrated anguish, and trembled with unfulfilled need.

He set her hips back down on the mattress, and moved back up to plunge his tongue into her mouth. She could taste herself on him, a heady mix of his taste and hers. The hard ridge of his erection pressed her mound.

So, sweetheart, do you believe that I love you yet?

Yes, yes! I believe!

Hmm. You might just be saying that because you want me to fuck you.

Yes, I mean, no! I do want you to fuck me, but I do believe you love me, too.

Well ... If you're sure ...

He was sooo going to be in trouble when this was over. She was going to lock him up and tease him until he was mindless.

The head of his cock positioned at her juicy entrance, he slowly thrust forward, working his massive width into her inch by inch, until he stuffed her completely. She had never felt so full, maybe because she was sharing his feelings, her tightness clamping down on his throbbing shaft.

He pulled back with excruciating slowness. They looked into each other's eyes and he drove forward in one hard thrust. The flows of sexual energy snapped together, connecting them, and spiraled up and around their heads and down again in a sparkling fountain.

His withdrawals and thrusts formed a pounding rhythm and the energy flowed faster and brighter. Shayla forgot to breathe, as incipient climax surged along with the energy. She paused right on the verge, feeling as though she was about to go over a cliff.

Come. Come now! His mental command was irresistible and inevitable.

She shattered, her perceptions fracturing, and the scintillating energy poured through every cell of their bodies. For a few long minutes there was no boundary between their thoughts and emotions; it was impossible to tell where one of them ended and the other one began.

But it was impossible to maintain that pinnacle of binding. Gradually Shayla's perceptions retreated into her own body. Gavin was collapsed on top of her, breathing hard, gasping breaths that matched her own. The air was thick and heavy with the scent of sex.

She made a supreme effort, reached up to wrap her arms around Gavin, and was reminded that she was still in the damn cuffs.

She poked him with her chin, and jangled the cuffs at him.

He took a deep breath and pushed up on his arms, then collapsed back on her chest and undid each cuff one-handed before reaching down and unlatching her feet. He buried his face in her neck, and they entwined their legs and wrapped their arms around each other.

Sure that her voice would sound rusty and unused, she cleared her throat. "So, does this mean we're married now?"

"You were there, too." He smiled into her sticky skin. "What do you think?"

"Well, judging from my *limited* experience, I'd say -- yes."

"And you'd be right, too." He nudged farther underneath her so that she was lying on top of him. "I hope the rest of the household enjoyed it, too."

She drew in a shocked breath and held it. "Are you telling me --"

"You don't think we kept up our shields through that whole thing, do you? You were probably broadcasting like crazy."

"Oh, Goddess." She covered her eyes with her arm. "How will I face them tomorrow?"

"Not to worry. They'll probably all thank you for the special treat. Why do you think they were all smiling so much at the party? They knew that if we got together they were all going to get lucky. Really lucky. I bet they all paired off and rushed off as soon as we left."

She whimpered. "It's going to take me a lifetime to get used to your people."

"Hey, they're your people now, too."

"Right." She took a deep breath. "And so they are."

She wrapped her body around Gavin, and let the idea of belonging steal into her body and wrap little tendrils around her heart. She opened up and became aware of people scattered through the house, people looking forward to starting a new life on a new planet,

surrounded by friends and family. Gavin's rich, unique scent wound itself around her, marking her for life.

He idly ran his finger down her cheek and stroked the tender skin of her neck. "So do you want to go on a honeymoon?"

She sat up, eyes wide. "Go somewhere in a Kimurian carriage? Are you nuts?"

He laughed, the sound free and joyful. "No, I know better than to ask you to do that. But we could take a pleasure boat down the river from Centralia to the ocean."

She settled back down, tucking herself into the curve of his body. "Well, that might be fun. I could use a vacation -- if there are no carriages involved."

"I'll make sure of it, sweetheart."

Shayla closed her eyes and relaxed into the protection of Gavin's body. It would be good to see some more of Kimur.

As long as she could look forward to coming home.

 THE END 

Sara Rustan

Sara has always read voraciously, vastly preferring the world in books to reality. There have been times she and reality have barely been on speaking terms. After working as a programmer for several large corporations, she decided to follow her dream instead, and started to write. She is particularly interested in speculating about how human nature will be tweaked in the far future, but finds any kind of fantasy absorbing. Clean up after her three sons and husband, or create fascinating worlds of fantasy...? It's a tough decision, but those dust bunnies deserve a life, too.