



# THE COMMANDER'S SLAVE

By  
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## Chapter One

The noise assailed her ears and made her shrink back against the back of the male pushing her through the bazaar. Everything was so strange, so alien. What was she doing in this place? *Who was she?* With a muttered oath, her captor stabbed her in the back with the handle of his rifle, and she stumbled.

At least she was under no misapprehension that the weapon was there to harm her. Even amongst the chaos of the marketplace, she could detect the predatory glitter of other traders, could feel their gazes move up and down her body, assessing, calculating. No, she was sure that her guard, and his weapon, was there primarily to protect his investment--her.

But it was difficult to concentrate. As for the past four days, her head continued throbbing, sending waves of blunt pain hammering through her brain. It was all she could do to place one foot before another.

Left, right. Left, right. A jerk on the chain around her neck brought her to an abrupt stop and she once more started to take notice of her surroundings.

Helson V. She had heard her captors talking about the planet during their nighttime meals. Hell's Market, they joked. A place where you could buy whatever your heart desired. At which point, they would normally cast looks in her direction and laugh raucously.

She didn't know anything about the planet. Wasn't even sure where it was. But she did know the guards were right on one count--it was indeed hell. She was sick from eating what her captors considered food, but they forced it down her throat, knowing that a weak subject would bring a correspondingly weaker price. They had also thought hygiene a luxury, though. Except for sparse toilet breaks, when she was constantly watched by one of the snickering guards, she was given no chance to bathe or clean herself. They had stripped off the tatters of clothes she wore, shrouded her in some stinking sheets that were slippery and cold to the touch, and led her off on the march to the Market on Helson V.

Once, she had tried to reason with them, but they were obstinate bordering on incomprehension. They were poor natives of the planet who had stumbled across the crashed shuttle and discovered their prize. They were so poor they couldn't even afford transport to the famed Market but had to slog it out on foot, their captive a glittering prize that they kept as hidden as possible. In her quiet, dark moments, she couldn't really blame them.

Coming back to the present, she looked ahead of her, at the eight steps leading up to what she presumed to be a stage. She could see figures standing immobile while several handlers walked around them. The noise was more focused here, money bids being shouted into the air, ribald comments, and there were no more doubts--she was going to be sold. Eventually, a bell sounded and the figures were led off, presumably to a holding pen while the ownership documents were prepared.

There was a commotion behind her. "Just her! Just her!" Then sounds of something solid hitting flesh. One of her captors walked in front of her, yanking at her chain and she followed him up the steps.

The reality was even worse than her imaginings. There were hundreds of people in front of her--humanoid, insectoid, drones--and she started to feel afraid. Gods, but she even longed for the relative peace of her captivity against this ... this open ogling.

The auction-master, a thin strappy man stroking a whip, took his time as he circled her, a feral smile curving his lips.

"A golden nymph," he finally announced to the crowd, breaking their tension. The language

of the galaxy was Cirlian Formal, maybe even Cirlian Lower on the less-advanced planets. She mentally described his accent as Cirlian Gutter. It gave her some small satisfaction, and she straightened her spine. She was not going to let this *drain-sahmpren* intimidate her.

"A prize indeed," he continued. "A fine addition to one's spawn-nest. Or even as the star attraction in a discerning entertainment establishment."

There was much jeering at this.

"I start the bidding at a mere ten quattoons."

She kept her gaze forward and steady, not looking down into the mass of life forms bidding for her body. Because that's all they would be getting--her body. No matter what they did to her, she would try to retain her dignity ... even if she couldn't quite remember her mind.

The bidding climbed steadily. Ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-three.

The auction-master looked toward the group of natives who had brought her in, but they swore and shook their heads.

Gamely, the auction-master turned again to the crowd.

"Only twenty-three quattoons?" he taunted. "For this lovely? Look at those features, unblemished by illness or disease. All limbs strong and capable of servicing many forms." He lifted one arm, brushing the makeshift sleeve back with his whip.

"Golden skin," he declared, then rubbed at her arm until she flinched. "And natural too. Surely that's worth a few extra quattoons? She will be the envy of every party you give."

"Twenty-seven."

The bid had time to hang in the air, uncontested. With disgust, one of her native captors strode on stage and, with one brutal movement, ripped her garment downwards.

She stood, naked, exposed to the crowd, hearing the 'aaah' of excitement move through them. She wanted to cover herself, but her wrists were manacled against her thighs, and she only had a few inches of movement, not even enough to cover her groin.

The gaze of the crowd moved up her body, caressing her long, shapely legs and the promise of pleasure covered by a triangle of copper curls. Grazing the slight mound of her abdomen and stroking the shadowed skin between a pair of uptilted, firm breasts, tipped by circles of dusky brown.

The auction-master had a hurried conversation with the native before turning again to the crowd.

"I have it on impeccable authority that this female is untouched," he finally announced. "A virgin. And, I am forced to admit, a rarity to this humble market. Surely that is worth a premium?"

"Fifty quattoons," another voice finally declared into the relative silence.

She looked then for the source of the voice and found a pair of hard obsidian eyes, filled with boredom and contempt. Even from this distance, there was something about him that sent a shock through her. It tightened her groin and hardened her nipples to erect pebbles.

"Ah, that's more like it," the auction-master crooned, although whether he was referring to the bid or her physical response was debatable. "Fifty quattoons. Do I hear a competing bid?"

Other heads had turned at the sound of the bidder's dark voice and mutterings began spiraling through the crowd.

Tangus, she heard from her position at the top of the dais. Mercenary. Ruthless. Will kill for what he wants. Dead trader who tried to double-cross. Not worth the risk.

And it appeared the swirls of conversation won, because there were no competing bids.

"Fifty it is," the auction-master declared, while the natives hugged themselves with joy and the bell tone sounded. One of the auction-master's assistants appeared at his gesture and walked her off the stage and down the other set of steps into an open pen, walled off by strands of sizzling energy.

Still naked, she stood there and watched as a phalanx of hard-faced men approached. They didn't need armor for her to know that these were space-combat veterans. The lack of expression on

their faces said it all.

On cue, they parted, and she saw the man who had bought her and the body that belonged to that pair of dark, cold eyes. And, despite her discomfort, she could see it was a magnificent body. The anonymous gray jacket could not hide the breadth of his shoulders, and the snug, color-matched pants clung to the contours of thighs as hard as his expression. As he took the data pad from the dealer, she noticed large hands and strong, capable fingers, thought of them running over her body, and the breath caught in her throat.

He scanned the pad briefly, thinning his lips in disapproval.

"What's your name?" he barked.

"My--?"

Name.

If she knew that, she would know the answers to at least part of the puzzle.

"Name," he repeated.

She shook her head. "I ... I don't ..."

But he cut her short. "Have you sold me an imbecile, Rakk?"

The administrator smiled. "Her, ah, handlers told me she is capable of intelligent conversation."

The man she presumed was Tanguis grunted. "Too late to do anything about it now, I suppose," he grumbled. "Just as well I didn't buy her for her intellect."

He put his mark on the pad, authorizing the fund transfer, and threw it back on the table. Since the moment he bought her, he hadn't given her more than a passing glance.

"Daurent," he said, and a younger male behind him stiffened and stepped forward. "Take her back to the *Strike*. Put her in the chamber next to my quarters. You know what to do. I have a bit more to do down here, but I'll be back in two hours."

Daurent nodded and took her by the elbow.

"And Daurent?" The company halted. "She stinks. Make sure she's clean before I see her next."

\* \* \* \*

At least she was off the planet. That was the good news. Though whether she was now in the possession of rational beings or some race of combat brothel-keepers (*was there even such a profession?*) was still beyond her reckoning.

Daurent and his company of five others led her, still naked, back through the crowds and across to the launch bays.

They're treating me like an animal.

*I'm not used to being treated like this.*

The thought entered her mind suddenly, a flash of a murky past, gone as quickly as it had come. How *was* she used to being treated? But no other insight emerged.

She was led to one of two shuttles that had obviously seen better days, its outside scarred and pitted, the inside bare with metal sheeting for floors and walls and thinly-upholstered chairs. No, even the most basic of brothel-keepers could afford better transport than this.

That kept her thinking while she was buckled in. Daurent was circumspect and impersonal in his dealings, but one other soldier who helped strap her in deliberately ran the back of his hand up her legs and across her thatch of pubic hair, grinning as she tried to jerk away. Her hands were still manacled, curtailing all protective movement.

"Tomben, get back to your seat." Daurent's voice. Tomben looked for a moment like he would disobey then, with a grimace, straightened and moved away, taking a seat behind her.

The trip was as efficient and bare as she knew it would be. No lazy arcs or fancy maneuvering. Just straight up, a short flight, then a quick dock.

Daurent moved first to unbuckle her and lead her out of the shuttle and into the *Strike*.

Here, things were much improved although still of a military nature. At least the floors were

covered, with something that looked like short cropped carpet. And there was insulation and smooth paneling on the walls, absorbing sound and dulling the background whine of engines to a more pleasant hum.

Daurent paused at a corridor intersection. "Stera, Tomben, you heard the commander. He'll be back in two hours. That gives you enough time to install and test the new energy-converter unit. Viils, I'll leave it to you to oversee the supply pod when it turns up. The rest of you, run through the systems one more time. If we need anything else in a hurry, it would be wise to know now before we leave Hell's Market."

After terse nods, the other men scattered obediently to their posts.

"Come with me," Daurent told her and led her through the ship. The occasional men they passed paused to stare at her, but after the past four days, she was past caring. Tangus had said she was to be cleaned up and that's all she was concentrating on--a chance to bathe and wash the grime and dust of Helson V from her body. Even if somebody stood guard and watched her every move, it wouldn't be enough to take away from the pleasure of such an activity.

He stopped at a doorway and entered a code, ushering her in before him.

The room was large and surprisingly plush. Richly-upholstered platforms of various heights rose from the floor, a large bed dominated one corner of the room, and an open bathroom dominated another. It took a second glance before she saw them--discreet openings in the floor, the glint of cuffs, thin luminous strands hanging from the ceiling that she first took to be lighting of some sort but which, she realized, could be used equally for immobilizing a person.

She stared at Daurent who refused to meet her eyes and surprised a flush under his brown skin.

"The bathroom has its own program." He walked her across and a half-step down into a shower-pan that was dotted with anti-slip protrusions. With deft movements, he withdrew an electronic key from his belt and touched them against her manacles. With a soft click, they disengaged and fell to the floor. "Clean," he announced. "Humanoid. Female."

Then he stepped back out of the pan.

A female voice emerged out of the wall.

"Please hold your hands above your head."

And she was hit by a focused spray of hot water.

All in all, it was certainly the most thorough of cleansings, even if it wasn't the most comfortable.

When Daurent beckoned her out of the bathroom, the hot-air jets having dried every drop of moisture on her body, she knew he was nervous.

What was going on?

She stopped in front of him, her brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Then he tied her up.

\* \* \* \*

Tangus, commander of Second Fleet. How grand that sounded. How little it was actually worth.

As Tangus rummaged around the stalls and shops of Hell's Market, he wondered again what had made him spend good, hard-won currency on a piece of flesh. Admittedly, a very beguiling and attractive piece of flesh but....

For fifty quattoons, he could have purchased two small crates of valuable spare parts, or enough food to feed the entire crew of the *Strike* for a week. So why had he thrown it away on a brainless female?

She hadn't looked brainless on the dais. Despite her nakedness, she looked composed, even superior to the men who traded flesh with the same carelessness as they changed their wardrobe. That's what had caught his eye. He had admired her spirit, but at the same time, it angered him.

How dare she look that way when she was obviously a member of the Fusion. She was one of 'them', one of those people from so-called civilized planets who had watched and done nothing while his own people perished.

Until nothing was left except for eight thousand tired and weary men--the Second Fleet--on the run and hiding from the powerful Lasc Prein.

His libido alone he could have handled. Three years and eight months of running had honed self-discipline in the art of denial. But libido *and* justice? A potent mix, and fifty quatuoruns later, one he was powerless against.

With disgust, he threw the greasy docking-bay hinge back into the barrel. He didn't really need docking-bay hinges. Or any more plasma-alignment injectors. He had spent the last hour and a half trying to get himself back under control, trying to think of battles and supplies, but it was no use. His groin stirred and he growled under his breath.

Three years, eight months of justice. Three years of ruthlessly-repressed sexual desire. He had to get back to his ship.

\* \* \* \*

If anything, she was even more magnificent than when he first saw her, even with most of her delectable body hidden.

He checked in with Daurent via intercom after docking but avoided going to the bridge. He didn't need his subordinate's idealism at a time like this. In his quarters, he washed his hands before taking a deep breath and pressing the button that led to the adjoining chamber.

As requested, she was cleaned up--he spotted the manacles on the floor of the shower pan--but was huddled on the floor, sitting with her hands around her knees. That wasn't unreasonable, after all he *had* kept her waiting more than an hour. No more.

"Greetings," he said.

She jerked around at the sound of his voice, for she had been facing the room's main entrance and his silent entry startled her. As if that word was a command, other machinery sprang into action. The cuffs around her wrists, tied to loose yet intensely-strong filaments, started to contract, pulling her into a standing position. Similar cuffs around her ankles pulled her legs apart, only stopping when she was spread-eagled. It wasn't an uncomfortable position, none of her muscles strained, but she was open to his inspection. His *every* inspection.

And inspect her he did. From running his hand through the unruly mane of copper hair that cascaded between her shoulder blades to flicking a finger between her breasts, from examining her large amber eyes to caressing the line of her cheekbone. He walked behind her, then stepped up close. His hands reached around to pinch her dusky brown nipples, and she gasped.

He continued rubbing one nipple with one hand while skimming her flesh with the other, over her abdomen and down to her groin. She tried to move, but he pinned her against him and she could feel the stiffness of his erection against the small of her back. His fingers started their exploration, sliding between her legs, in and out. At first just skimming her copper curls then, with each returning stroke, exerting slightly more pressure.

She felt the roughness of his unshaven jaw against the back of her neck, then his breath against her ear.

"You're a member of the Fusion," he half-whispered. "You must be. Only life-forms who have mastered interplanetary travel are accepted into the Fusion, and although I don't know where you're from, I'm betting you're a long, long way from home. The only way you could have gotten here was by spaceship. Am I correct?"

She whimpered, trying to concentrate on his words while the fingers stroked her relentlessly. One set now parted her labia, rubbing against her clitoris while the other set continued pinching the hard peak of one breast. She had no memory of her past, but she knew, viscerally, that nobody had ever touched her like this. She jerked again, slamming her body into his hard length.

"My young first officer would have me treat you like a civilized being. But I'm of a

different opinion." A finger dipped into her pussy, and she was ashamed to feel how wet and hot she felt. But then his finger retreated and she groaned, wanting it back.

"All I want right now is justice. And you, my sweet, are going to help me get it."

He withdrew both hands from her, and she was surprised at how bereft it made her feel. Dazed, she focused on him as his figure swam into view. His pale skin was tanned, but his dark eyes still stood out in relief, pools of glittering glass, sharp and cold. Cynicism furrowed his brow and tightened lips that would otherwise be lush. Even held here against her will--or was it really against her will when all she could do was yearn for his touch again?--she wanted to reach out and stroke the roughness of his jaw and run her hand down the strength of his throat.

He caught her gaze and held it while he undressed, slowly, leisurely, as if he was stripping for her, revealing himself in tantalizing slices so she could savor his perfect form. He hesitated only once, and she could tell he was feeling embarrassed. Looking down his body, she could see why. Crisscrossing his torso were long fingers of scar tissue, healed to angry red welts. They were all that marred his perfection and, in a perverse way, seemed to emphasize it, contrasting with the precisely-carved rippling muscles beneath.

He saw her look down, and he stiffened.

"Part of what I need justice for," he explained, and it was as if he was describing a triviality, but she knew it was something much deeper than the words he spoke.

When he was naked, he walked over to the open bathroom and ordered a shower. She found she could not look away. Just watching him, as he rinsed his hair and ran hands down his legs, made her hot again. The scars extended around to his back, but even that couldn't take away from his muscular magnificence.

Knowing she was watching him, he faced her, reached for his prick, and began slowly massaging it, his hand moving along its length like an artisan's over oiled blonde-wood, and she knew what was coming next.

Impatient, Tanguis terminated the drying program and, still damp, strode over to her, looking down into her golden eyes.

"You're supposed to be a virgin," he said quietly.

He was so close that she could feel his bobbing prick against her abdomen. Gods help her, but she wanted him!

"Which suits me just fine." He moved around until he was behind her again. This time, without preamble, his hand skimmed her flesh and a finger entered her, making her cry out.

"Yes," he encouraged next to her ear, "feel free to cry out as much as you want. This room is very well insulated."

She felt herself jerk, her juices spilling out over his fingers.

Roughly, he pushed her pelvis back towards him and, in one smooth movement, entered her.

She screamed. From the pain of sudden insertion, from the pleasure of his flesh inside her, from the shocks of sensation as one hand grabbed and pulled at a responsive nipple, his callused fingers rubbing them until the shudders in her body made her tremble and convulse around him. But that still wasn't enough. The hand at her pubis started moving, the fingers finding and flicking at her clitoris.

"No," she moaned, her head moving from side to side. But her body was betraying her, responding like a well-trained instrument to his practiced hands and cock. With each thrust, he seemed to penetrate her more deeply, his size stretching her until every inch of her body could feel him stroking, hard and furious, pent-up desire powering his hips.

She had just enough time to hear him call out a strangled animal cry into the room before she too convulsed into orgasmic spasms. She heard herself cry out loudly, a mate to his own shout, before she fainted in his arms.



## Chapter Two

The first thing she noticed when she opened her eyes was that her headache was gone. She couldn't pinpoint exactly when, but maybe it had something to do with a fantasy she had had. It had been a strange dream. She remembered standing, all limbs restrained, but now she was lying down, a firm but comfortable surface cushioning her body; although both her head and hips were elevated, resting on two bumps in the bed's surface.

She looked around. The room she was in looked very much like the one from her fantasy, the one Daurent had brought her to. But that meant that she and a man she knew as Tanguis ... She bit her lip. Had that really happened? Had she really behaved like a wanton animal, coupling with a strange man?

But what a man, a voice whispered in her head.

No, she didn't want to hear that. She shifted and felt a dull ache radiate from her groin. Yes, it must have happened. It had not been a dream.

But where was Tanguis? Had he decided to let her go? She tried to get up, and it was then she found her hands were tied above her head. Again she was restrained, but this time in a different position, one that thrust her breasts out like golden invitations.

"You're awake, I see."

She heard his voice before she saw him. He was still unashamedly naked, his cock not rock-hard anymore but still partially engorged with blood. She could see a tracing of thick veins running up and down its length, and it made her lick her lips.

Tanguis saw her movement and smiled. "I see you're a step ahead of me." He sat down next to her, and his expression became serious. "My apologies. I didn't mean to cause you such discomfort. It should have occurred to me that you would still be suffering from the effects of your handlers. Perhaps one more interlude and we can have something to eat."

"Why should you care how I feel?" Was that really her voice, sounding so weak and raw. She cleared her throat and tried again. "I thought all you wanted was justice. Or should that be some twisted kind of vengeance?"

A spark glinted in his dark eyes. "So you aren't brainless after all. What a stroke of good fortune." But he didn't elaborate. Instead he watched her lips, and she could feel the change in him, from amusement to something darker. His face sharpened, taking on a look of hunger. Impatiently he moved, slipping down to her legs, pushing them apart. Once again, she felt exposed to his relentless touch.

She was expecting the coarseness of battle-ready fingers, an already familiar roughness invading her, probing her, preparing her again for him. What she did not expect was the gentle firmness of his tongue, a companion wetness to his own. He licked, like a wild animal would lick at a treat, the length of his tongue lapping her, tasting her, then a short quick stab into her pussy before he found her clitoris.

She couldn't stop the cries escaping her throat at this, increasing when he began mouthing at her, taking her nub into his mouth with his lips and sucking. A small tug, then a release. Then the licking and mouthing began again.

This time, with the comfort of lying down, she could feel every wave of pleasure as it coursed through her body and coiled ever tighter, all sensation centering on her groin, on the apex of her legs where her sticky wetness fed his mouth. Abandoning herself, she felt it spread from his mouth to her legs and then to the rest of her body.

"Yes! Aaaahh, aaaahhhh, please ... oh, please."

She was unaware she was bucking against him, the force of her spasms jerking her body against the platform, her voice echoing in the room, rough with passion. Her wild mane of hair flew in all directions as she shuddered.

Then he was on her, straddling her, holding his cock with one hand as he knelt before her face.

"Take me in your mouth," he ordered.

She did as she was told, and he groaned.

"Now suck me." His voice was husky, his eyes closed. "Lick me."

Her initial movements were tentative, her mouth full of him.

"Harder," he said harshly. "Suck me harder."

He began softly thrusting into her mouth, still keeping one hand around his shaft as she used more force, at the same time moving her tongue against him. "Yes, that's good." Eyes still closed, he rocked gently.

She felt his length graze the roof of her mouth, meeting the softness at the back of her palate just as his thrusts became quicker and stronger until he exploded into her, collapsing onto his free hand as he continued to come into her mouth.

She swallowed his thick cum, tasting its saltiness, but there was still too much for her. A white stream dribbled out of the side of her mouth and ran down her cheek.

Tangus remained oblivious for seconds after, until he finally opened his eyes and stared down at her. "It's been a long time," he said, unrepentant. Reaching down in an oddly gentle gesture, he wiped the creamy trail from her mouth. "Time for food now, I think. Wait here."

Not that she had a choice, she thought to herself, pulling on the wrist restraints and watching as he left her.

Safely back in the refuge of his quarters, Tangus paused to rest his head against the nearest bulwark. He hadn't realized how tenuous a grip he had on his self-control until he had seen his latest purchase restrained and opening in front of him, like an exotic flower. Wordlessly, she cried her need to him and he had obliged. Twice.

"Twice," he muttered. He should have stopped after the first, after she had fainted. He knew the conditions well enough on Helson V, since Hell's Market was an occasional--although not favored--stop. The planet was renowned for its lack of manners and its trade in the living. Until now, he had stayed away from the flesh-auctions and kept a low profile because he knew that in Hell's Market he could find rare objects that his fleet desperately needed: contraband weaponry, sensitive tracking systems, all for sale with no questions asked. He had moved through the metaphorical trade-swamp of the desert planet like a puff of sand, staying just long enough to complete needed purchases, then drifting silently away.

Until today, when the commander of the much-vaunted Second Fleet, the last vestige of a destroyed planet, turned up and openly bid on a golden-skinned virgin for an outrageous sum. Which meant, of course, that neither he nor his men could ever go back to Helson V again. The informers trawled the Market like marine harvesters, and he was sure that, even now, word was flashing to the Lasc Prein about their whereabouts.

That alone should have been enough to send him pounding for the bridge. But it wasn't. *It must be my libido*, he thought. By the Creator, she didn't even need to *look* at him. All it took was the musky scent of her body rising to his nostrils as he unbound her and his mind was filled was lascivious fantasies.

As a commander of the Second Fleet, as fractured as it was, he should have acted with honor. Should have set her down, perhaps in his quarters, and ordered food. Should have waited till she regained her strength. Instead, he had configured one of the many platforms in the chamber to contours matching her body--it took a few attempts, he was still learning the software of his acquired flagship-- and hating himself while he did it, restrained her again while he sat across the room. Watching. Brooding. Unwilling to leave the room in case she woke up. And hating himself

for such weakness.

With an oath, he pushed himself from the wall and punched the intercom button. "Daurent." The answer was swift, as he knew it would be. Daurent would be a worthy successor to his admittedly reduced legacy.

"Yes, sir."

"How's progress?"

"We've unloaded the supply pod, sir, and are underway."

"It occurs to me that one of our, ah, acquisitions could bring unwanted attention ...."

Tangus heard the grin in his subordinate's voice as he interrupted. "Already there, commander. I double-timed the offloading and initiated a delta-evasion pattern. We should be clear of any Lasc Prein tracers within two hours."

Handsome and smart. It hurt Tangus that he could offer his ablest lieutenant only a life of retreat and stealth, instead of the glory such an officer deserved.

"Good work," he commended gruffly. "How long before we're home?"

"A week, by current reckoning. We'll take some of the more obscure hyper-jumps. It'll take longer, but I think a less direct route will be safer in the end."

Tangus nodded at the words. "Fine. Stand down after we've cleared the first jump. Standard detection protocols. And, Daurent, send some food to my quarters. Enough for two. Tangus out."

Now that he had time to think about it, he was famished. And so must be his ... guest? Purchase?

*Slave?*

Something kicked in his groin. So soon? Maybe the woman had some kind of overpowered pheromone system. That would explain a lot. He would get that checked out at the earliest opportunity.

He heard a chime a few minutes later, just as he pulled on a pair of loose hip-hugging trousers, and he opened his door to the *Strike's* backup cook. The young man was barely into adulthood but already had the hard look that all in his crew eventually wore. He entered without a word and set down a large tray, covered with an ornate metal dome. Daurent must have left very specific instructions Tangus thought with an amused twitch of his lips.

When the youth left, the commander took the tray back to the chamber. He walked to the platform and undid the wrist clasps, offering his ... his *slave* a hand to rise. A hand she ignored. Very well, two could play that game.

With a hand at a silky-smooth back, he led her to where he had left the tray and gestured for her to sit.

She sat.

\* \* \* \*

It was strange standing again, walking. After the physical tumult she had been through in the past few hours, she had expected some blinding change. She had taken the seed of a man into herself yet the universe moved on at its own pace, oblivious to the carnal sensations that had been so fiercely aroused.

When Tangus silently indicated a spot of floor next to a large covered tray, she nodded and lowered herself to the springy surface. It hadn't escaped her notice that she was still unclothed while he had at least put on a minimal garment--a pair of trousers made of a soft material that molded to the curves of his buttocks so well that it was clear that was all he was wearing. She averted her gaze, pretending not to notice.

After seating himself opposite, Tangus lifted the tray's lid ... and an eyebrow. Cook had outdone himself in presentation and if he hadn't known the battle-scarred man during several missions, he would have accused the veteran of sentiment.

Carved slices of a red vegetable, still plump with pulp, nestled against expertly carved slices of Zincan fowl, the meat pale yellow from gentle poaching. Both ingredients rested on a nest of

wild black-field rice and were surrounded by baby greens, glistening in a hot buttery dressing. The aroma of the food kicked Tangus' appetite into overdrive. He handed a plate to the woman opposite.

"Please, have something to eat."

She couldn't believe how inviting everything looked, a dramatic change from the unappetizing slop that had been forced down her throat for the past several days. But could she take food from the person who had possessed her so completely? *Could she not?*

After a moment's hesitation, she took the serving implement and dished out a sizable portion of everything, hoping the food tasted as good as it looked.

She was not disappointed. The juice from the vegetable wedges spurted into her mouth, releasing a sensation of sweet-tangy heat, cooled by the tender fowl meat. Emboldened, she began eating more rapidly. It felt like years since she had last eaten like this, satiating her senses while also filling her belly.

"Is this how you normally eat?" she asked between forkfuls, casting him a wary glance.

"So she speaks," he commented. And well, too. He recognized the forms of Cirlian Formal, the Fusion's *lingua franca*, although there was a hint of an accent. Smoky, exotic. She hadn't been brought up in the Fusion then, but could speak its language fluently. Curious.

"No, not usually when we're so far from," he hesitated, "home." It was hard to think of the gas giant's moon as their home now, but that was something he would need to hammer into his head. He had lost his home planet, and the sooner he came to grips with that fact the better.

"We try to transport most of our supplies back to our base camp, but I think Cook arranged this elaborate concoction because of ... you."

"Me?"

"Daurent, my adjutant, is an excellent officer, but he can also be a compulsive gossip." Despite his earlier hunger, Tangus only picked at his food. "I'm sure he had some say in our repast."

"I'll have to thank him when I see him next."

Tangus was sure it wasn't meant to be a provocative statement but was still surprised by a shaft of white-hot anger coursing through him. Surely that wasn't jealousy? To keep his mind off that dangerous track, he changed the subject.

"So what *is* your name? It's far too late to play coy."

She put her fork down and looked him full in the face. "I don't know."

Tangus shifted. "I hardly think ..."

"I don't know!" she interrupted, raising her voice. "All I remember is wandering around before being picked up by that group of natives." She put a hand to her forehead, and her mane of hair fell forward, obscuring part of her face. "There was a wreckage. I remember seeing it burn, smelling it. But I don't know where it was from."

He looked at her golden skin. "Do you know where *you're* from?"

By the Creator, he would consider himself the luckiest man in the galaxy if he could find a planet of women just like her.

She shook her head.

It was improbable, but not unheard of. Tangus had lots of contact with people who had suffered trauma after a life-or-death event. He knew it did strange things to the mind. Pressuring her was probably the worst thing he could do at this stage.

"So you crash-landed on Helson V? Not a very good choice, I'd say."

"No," she agreed.

"Well, if you don't have a name, I suppose I'll have to give you one."

"Give me ...?"

"What else would I call you? 'You there'? 'Woman'? 'Personal slave' has a nice ring to it, but I don't think it would be very useful outside these quarters."

Of course. Lest she forget exactly what her circumstances were, she should bear in mind that

this man had paid money, a lot of money, for her.

"How does Asha sound?"

Asha? She rolled it around her mind a few times. Asha. It wasn't a bad name, soft, soothing. She supposed it would do until her own memory returned. She nodded but said nothing, and Tanguis looked satisfied.

"Good. Asha it is."

She returned to her meal, finishing it before finally voicing the question that had been haunting her. "What do you want with me?"

He, too, laid down his dining utensils, taking his time to fill their glasses with a light wine before answering.

"Considering how we spent the afternoon, I thought that would be obvious."

"You said 'slave' before. Is that what I am to you?"

Again, it wasn't the words but the tone in her voice that set him on edge. As if she was somehow superior to him, and she knew it.

"When a man pays good money for a piece of flesh and then commands it to pleasure him, more people than not would say that's a slave."

She turned her face away but not before he saw a flash of anger cross her features. He was surprised to find himself amused.

"Finish your wine," he instructed softly, a sudden vision overtaking his other senses.

"I don't think ...."

"I said, finish your wine."

Asha already knew that tone of voice. With trembling fingers, she lifted the glass and emptied it, sending the liquid's light bubbles coursing down her throat.

"Shall we attempt a dessert?" he suggested, tugging her to her feet and pushing her back. She retreated, step by step, until she felt the wall at her back. But he still kept advancing, skimming the sides of her body with his hands, cupping her buttocks, pressing himself against her.

"You need to understand one thing, Asha," he whispered harshly. "I bought you, and now I own you. Whatever I tell you to do, you do, willingly and obediently. Do you understand?"

She felt his hardness grind against her, and by the Gods, she wanted him again. "Yes," she breathed.

"Until I'm through with you. Until I've taught you every trick to pleasure me. Understand?"

"Yes."

"We continue your lesson," he ground out. "No hands." And he pulled her back to the bumpy platform. Only instead of pushing her down onto its firm surface, he instructed her to kneel while he secured her hands above her. Then, after stripping off his pants and kneeling on the platform himself, he took her head between his hands and kissed her.

There was nothing gentle about the kiss. It was a sign of conquest, of domination, making sure she completely understood exactly how helpless she was. His hot tongue thrust into her, and his hands held her immobile while he explored every inch of her mouth. When he withdrew, both of them were breathing heavily.

His hands moved down to her breasts in deliberate movements, and he watched her face as he stroked the erect nipples with his palms, tracing a circular pattern.

"Does that feel good?" he asked, his dark eyes glittering in the semi-darkness.

She couldn't help herself as she pushed against him. "Yes."

"Would you like more?" He caught the nubs between his fingers, squeezing them.

"Oh yes," she shuddered. Of her own volition, her legs parted, sending out their own message to him.

He bent his head and took one nipple in his mouth, grazing it lightly with his teeth. She cried out and her body jerked a response. Then he did the same with the other nipple. When he used one hand to stroke the inside of her thighs, he wasn't surprised to find them moist with her own

lubrication. Virgin she might have been just a few short hours ago, but she had also quickly developed into a highly-powered sex-machine. And for the moment at least, she was entirely his. He unfurled himself onto the platform, slipping between her open knees, his cock purple and rigid. Then, slowly, savoring every moment, he brought her down on him.

It was wonderful. The heat from her pussy enveloped him in stages, sheathing him in tight, hot elastic until he was buried inside her to the hilt. He couldn't help the groan that escaped him as he felt her pulse against his length. Truly, he could spend the rest of his life in this position, with this woman, and not regret a moment of it. Already he could feel himself starting to spasm, a masculine counterpoint to her movements.

With another groan, he lifted her slightly away, then brought her down on him again, watching as her breasts bounced with the movement, wishing he had four hands: two to guide the erotic thrusting and another two to fondle those firm golden globes. The mere thought of it was enough to send him over an already precarious edge, his own hips lifting off the platform while he plunged deep within her and cried out in pleasure. With thrust after thrust, he gripped tightly at her waist while he emptied himself, throwing his head back in primeval pleasure.

When the spasms died away, he took a shuddering breath and relaxed his muscles. During his orgasm, his hands had moved down to her hips, gripping them tightly. He relaxed them, too, moving them around so they could stroke the cheeks of her buttocks, then he looked at her, swaying above him. Her breath was still tortured from exertion, and a sheen of perspiration covered her body. With her arms restrained above her, he had time to appreciate the slim, muscular lines of her body with its tonal gold shadows stroking her arms and breasts. Whoever Asha really was, she obviously took great care maintaining her body.

With one hand, he stroked the underside of her left breast. Magnificent. Even moments after his release, he wanted her again.

He was tempted to keep her in this position, to go to sleep while still inside her so the vision of her body stretched out above him, the feel of her legs straddling him, was the last thing he saw and felt before he slept and the first thing he woke up to. He had figured out enough of the workings in the room to know that the *Strike's* past owner, unfortunately now deceased, was more of a connoisseur than a brute in his sexual dealings. The filaments could keep their victims in position for days, allowing them limited movement after a time, but reapplying the configured tension when their programmed master made the appropriate movement and sound. At the most she would be mildly discomfited, more annoyed than physically harmed.

Tempting ....

With a sigh, he lifted her and slid off the platform, stretching to release her wrists from the filament's thick supple cuff.

"You may want to clean up," he suggested, watching as she rubbed her wrists, although he noted that there wasn't a mark on that clear skin of hers. "Then get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

He paused to pick up his discarded pants and the tray and left her without a backward glance.

## Chapter Three

The vision of her was the first thought that entered Tanguis' head when he woke the next morning. Perhaps he had dreamed it all, an extended carnal fantasy created by a mind denied sexual release for--by the Creator--years!

He glanced at the door. No, that was no dream. She was really in the next chamber. His very own sex slave. His revenge on the self-righteous Fusion. Something pulled at him and he rose and took a step toward the door. He had had a good night's sleep, the first in months. What better way to celebrate than to engulf himself in her hot wet core again? He could imagine her still emerging from sleep, soft and pliant, while he ravaged her body ruthlessly, licking and nibbling at her with his tongue, forcing his fingers into her, emptying himself into that luscious mouth while she whimpered and struggled beneath him. He would teach her to look at him with those large amber eyes while he came, to cry out his name and beg him to take her in every way possible, to fondle and pleasure him while the perspiration formed on her body and trickled down between her breasts....

"Enough!" Tanguis slammed a hand against the wall, using the sudden pain to help rein in his thoughts.

There was a panel which displayed what was happening in the chamber next door. Tanguis was determined not to use it. Stiffly, using every ounce of self-control he had, he ignored the blank screen set into the wall and moved to the bathroom cubicle.

"Shower, needle, cold," he directed and withstood the icy needles with gritted teeth.

This was no way for a commander to behave. He had already disregarded his duties with alarming alacrity the day before, and he was determined it wasn't going to happen again. He stopped the shower, dried, then stepped out and began dressing with deliberate care.

The Fleet--*his* Fleet--deserved more than their leader rutting like an animal in heat. And just because they were on their way home didn't mean they were completely safe.

He entered the bridge moments later, his dark hair slicked back, his expression as forbidding as it ever was. Of course Daurent was already there, but he rose quickly from the command chair the moment he spotted his superior.

"Progress," Tanguis barked.

"Status green," Daurent reported, but there was a hint of a smile on his youthful face. "All supplies stored and, ah, purchases tested."

In all truth, Tanguis couldn't begrudge his second-in-command a small joke, but he wasn't going to let it get any further either.

"What does our seed inventory look like?"

Daurent's lips drooped. "Ninety-three percent germination failure. We're working on it."

"Damn."

Once, an eternity ago, Tanguis was merely a Seti commander, a much-decorated war veteran leading the glorious Second Fleet. All he had to do was outthink his enemy and keep his men alive. But that was an eternity ago. In this new reality of scraping and running, keeping his men alive demanded more than battle acumen. He had to feed and clothe them, provide shelter and morale. He had to give them hope, and that was one battle he knew he was losing. And there did not seem to be one damned thing he could do about it.

He jabbed the intercom. "Cook, send a light breakfast to the room next to my quarters, access panel only." He clicked off the switch. "Daurent, to my ready room." The two officers moved to the small cabin that doubled as the bridge crew's meeting room.

"Is all our seed stock useless then?" Tanguis asked bluntly when the door hissed shut behind them.

"I wouldn't call it a complete failure," Daurent countered. "A seven percent success rate is still better than our average. If the analysis from xenobiology is correct, there's a chance we'll harvest enough grain to feed perhaps the entire population in eight month's time."

That should have heartened Tanguis but the 'population' Daurent referred to numbered in only the thousands, a last pitiful remnant of a once-proud species. And the statement was bounded by so many qualifiers, Tanguis knew his deputy was merely trying to boost his spirits.

He sighed and sat on the edge of the conference table. "What about the detection technologies we bought? Any good?"

"They're not fully compatible with Seti matrixes. I've had a bit of a play with them, and they *seem* to work, but I won't know for sure until they're fully installed and I've had a chance to tune them."

There was a loaded pause.

"How's our passenger?" Daurent asked, a little too casually.

"Passenger? We don't have--oh. You mean Asha."

"She has a Seti name?"

"No, no of course not. She can't remember her real name."

"So you gave her one?"

"Something like that." Tanguis shifted.

"Why?" Daurent seemed clearly puzzled. "Why not just call her 'hey you'? Or 'breeder'? Or," he continued carefully, "have you changed your mind about that?"

Tanguis pushed himself from the table. "I haven't changed my mind about anything. And you're starting to take dangerous liberties, Daurent." His look would have quelled any other, but the two men had been through enough together for Daurent to see beneath the rebuke.

"She looks too innocent, Tanguis, to be used like this."

"You would have us shower our murderers with flower petals," Tanguis retorted, using a line from a classic Seti poem.

Daurent's pale eyes followed the commander as he paced. "I lost family too, you know."

That stopped the taller male in his tracks. "And that's why I *must* do this. While the Lasc Prein destroyed our planet, the Fusion stood by and did nothing. We have no women, no children, no *world* left to us. All we have left to cling to is our vengeance and our thirst for justice."

"Vengeance? On innocents? Is this what the Seti are reduced to?"

"Justice through survival, Daurent. Everything has a plan. We examine her physiology and compatibility to breed. If compatible, we set her up as a breeder, one of many to help increase our race again. If not, maybe we can still use her womb. As a last resort, she can help establish the new Seti world. Nothing goes to waste."

"And you think you can do this? Use her, then discard her when you're done?"

"Do you deny me this?" the older man countered in a cold voice.

Daurent shook his head.

"Tanguis, I know more than anybody else what you sacrificed to save even so few of us. I, and everyone else in the Fleet, owe you our lives. You know that I don't begrudge you a thing, least of all a few days of pleasure. And why not? She is certainly comely, and you've denied yourself for more months than I can count. But you're not as strong as you think. The Lasc Prein destroyed much, but they couldn't destroy your heart, Tanguis. Please. Don't do something you'll regret later."

"This is for *us*, Daurent," he said softly.

But Daurent remained unconvinced. "If you say so."

\* \* \* \*

She ached where she didn't even know she had muscles. After Tanguis left, Asha moved slowly to the shower-pan and hesitantly ordered a warm, soothing shower. She tried to clean



between her legs but the flesh was tender and swollen. Eventually she gave up, dried herself and limped to the bed, collapsing on top of it.

So much had happened that she could barely take it in.

If only she could remember more than five days of her life. Who was she? What had caused the ship she was on to crash on Helson V? Was she running away from something? Or towards it? And what did her subsequent 'purchase' mean?

The thought of being sold at Hell's Market inevitably led to her captor, her owner.

Tangus.

With those broad shoulders, slim hips, and towering height, he was the epitome of masculinity, one that seemed strangely fascinating to her. Asha's brow furrowed. Why should that be? Why this breathless awe whenever she looked at him? Why this irrepressible urge to mate with him? Surely she had seen men before?

Maybe not. Maybe there were no men in her previous life ... no, that wasn't right. She had a feeling she was very comfortable around both females and males, but like a wisp of smoke, further guidance from that insight eluded her mental grasp.

So she knew men but was a virgin. Which meant she wasn't bonded to anyone. But, with what happened between her and Tangus, did that mean she was bonded now?

Just thinking of his naked form made her groan, and despite her discomfort, she could feel her groin start to throb again.

He had shown no mercy to her virginal state when he had her strapped into position the first time. He had roughly brought her to a shuddering climax before rutting her from behind, and she felt herself stretched more than she thought possible, the friction of his hard penis rubbing against her--inside her--despite the juices that drenched her tight pubic curls and eased his access. She should have been shocked and outraged by such carnal behavior, but, she could admit to herself in the darkness, she was not. There was something about the way he touched her, the way he moved, that tugged at her heart. She should be hating him for taking such a precious possession from her, but instead, all she could do was hunger for the next time.

Three times he had taken her, and despite her aches, all she could do was hope for a fourth.

No memory, and now helpless to the man who owned her.

She was doomed indeed.

\* \* \* \*

Tangus stalked back to his quarters, trying hard not to think. He had spent half the day peering over his crew's collective shoulders, desperately searching for some kind of long-term distraction, but it didn't work. He had trained his crew too well.

Now, on their circuitous route back to home base, all that remained were standard shifts and protocols, more long-range scanning than anything else. During times like this, he usually stood the crew down, allowing them to relax, knowing there was more hard work ahead of them when they reached their moon refuge.

Normally, he, too, spent some time reading or playing cards with some of the other officers. Until now. On this trip, he had a distraction he hadn't had before.

Though loath to show it, Daurent's words had hit home, and he was determined to prove his adjutant wrong. He had no heart left. That had been destroyed along with his planet, the void now filled with a cold fist of icy revenge.

Daurent thought him incapable of using then discarding a beautiful woman. He would prove him wrong. And when she was secured in one of the breeder's quarters, swollen with the child of another soldier of the Fleet, Tangus would be able to laugh in Daurent's face. But until that time, he had full run of that delectable golden body, and he intended to make full use of it before they made moonfall.

When he stormed through the door, the first thing he noticed was her golden nakedness.

*I should get her some clothes.*

Then anger at his own compassion. Maybe he could get her something to wear just so he could rip it off her superior, feminine body?

She turned at the sound of his entrance, her eyes wide. "Tangus ...."

She got no further. He cleared the distance between them in two steps, lifting her below her arms and pinning her against the wall.

"Not Tangus," he growled. "Master. I'm your master now. Say it."

She was bewildered by his reaction, he could see that, but he wasn't in the mood to explain anything.

"Say it."

"Master," she whispered.

Just watching that word leave her full lips was enough to send his cock into overdrive. Looking around, he spied a narrower, higher ledge and carried her over to it, laying her so her legs dangled over the side. He moved between those legs and unfastened his trousers.

"I want to fuck you," he told her deliberately. "Tell me you want me to do that." His eyes were black with passion.

"Tan--fuck me ... master."

He reached into his trousers with an unsteady hand and pulled out his turgid shaft, the tip already oozing a drop of clear liquid.

"Again."

"Fuck me, master."

He had a moment to notice the redness at the apex of her open thighs, a twinge of guilt ruthlessly repressed, before he plunged into her. Even with such little notice, she was wet and he slid inside her easily. He didn't care about her own needs or desires, all he wanted to do was stamp his ownership on her so that even when she was finally serviced by other men, she would remember him. But the sudden thought of her with other men drove him even crazier. He gripped her hips frantically, ignoring her cries as he kept pounding, not easing until the waves of orgasm washed over him, making him shudder and moan.

When he was finished, he withdrew quickly, turning his back on her as he refastened his trousers.

"I'll get some clothes for you," he said, turning his head but still not meeting her gaze. "Then we'll continue the lessons."

But lunch came and went before that happened. Together with her meal was a small package that Asha unwrapped to reveal two suits, both made of light material, two tops and two pairs of pants.

Clothes again, she thought with delight. She thought she would never see clothing again, had wondered whether Tangus would keep her naked and bent to his will for ... well, for as long as he wanted.

Quickly she slipped into the indigo outfit. The top was short, semi-transparent and caught at her breasts, swaying with their every movement. And the pants hugged her buttocks and thighs before flaring out as it reached her feet. Perhaps it was a little more revealing than what she usually wore--where did *that* thought come from?--but it was still better than nothing.

Feeling a bit more in command, she walked to the chamber's main door and pressed it, but it refused to open. She searched for a control panel with no luck. Then tried the same with the door adjoining Tangus' quarters. No, she was locked in.

Which left her with time for little other than thinking.

She should have felt outraged by his order to call him master and shocked by the way he so fiercely took her, but something in her yearned to match him thrust for thrust. She wanted to dig her fingernails into his biceps, claw his back and bite his shoulder. Wanted to do such things now. Twice he had taken what he wanted without giving her release, and she was shaken by the strength of her unfilled desire.

Maybe he was right forcing her to call him master. The thought sent shudders through her. Never had she expected to be dominated so completely by another person, much less find herself meeting such domination with equal intensity.

Even if their situation was different, if they had met at a party for example, she was sure her first thought would have been how it felt to mate with him. There was a primeval masculinity to his form, to the way he moved his body, that mesmerized her.

And, as if in answer to her fantasies, he suddenly appeared at the door leading to his quarters.

"I see you found your clothes," he commented.

"Yes," an imp made her finish, "master."

She noticed he started at the term and felt a stab of satisfaction. So she *could* get under his skin.

He walked into the room, stretching out a hand to her. Gracefully, she extended her arm, letting him pull her to him.

"I've checked and re-checked the systems," he whispered into her hair, breathing deeply of her scent. He nuzzled her neck, nipping gently at the skin where it met her shoulders. "There's nothing left to do for the next several days but relax."

The tempestuous conqueror of this morning was gone, replaced by the Tangu she was more familiar with--stern but focused on their mutual pleasure.

"Can you suggest, slave, how we can relax?"

"I'm sure you have many more suggestions, master."

"True." He captured her mouth in a quick, hard kiss. "Perhaps...." He scanned the contents of the room, his eyes lighting when he spotted her old manacles, now neatly placed next to a wall. He walked over and picked up a pair, weighing them in his hands. At least they weren't too heavy. And they would only be on her for an hour at the most.

"Put your hands behind your back." She obeyed, and he secured her in a loose but inescapable hold. Once restrained, he took his time stroking her breasts through the material of her top, the thin layer of cloth accentuating the eroticism of his actions. Before too long, he saw her erect nipples pushing against the gauzy indigo. He skimmed her body with his hands as he knelt before her and heard her breath catch in her throat.

Slowly, he took a nipple into his mouth and suckled on it, the smooth wetness of his tongue joining the roughness of the textile, his hands tightening on her as she sighed and buckled against his lips. He moved to the second breast, leaving the first to rub against a patch of wet texture. She leaned into him, trying to push herself further into his mouth, moaning her encouragement, and he was happy to oblige, grabbing her full breasts in his hands, rubbing them with hard strokes before grabbing the edges of her neckline and ripping the material in two. Now Asha's breasts were only partially covered, a nipple occasionally emerging from indigo folds as she breathed.

He ignored them now, licking her flat abdomen with its slight, sexy mound, then moving further down, pulling her pants to the floor and kissing around her triangle of copper curls. Her scent was musky and intoxicating, and he stiffened the tip of his tongue, forcing it between her legs, hearing her gasp above him as he reached the button of her clitoris. He flicked his tongue back and forth and, with a whimper, felt Asha shifting, moving her legs apart, allowing him access.

Taking one callused finger, he thrust it into her wetness, feeling her grasp against his digit.

He withdrew and moved his hands around to her buttocks, licking at her clitoris again while he spread her cheeks and ran the tip of his moist finger around the tip of her anus, holding her firm as she bucked against him. With deliberation, he applied more pressure with his finger, sinking it into her while she cried out. He knew he could make her come then and release her lubrication over his mouth in seconds, but that wasn't what he wanted.

Deftly, he turned her and pushed her down until her breasts and head brushed the floor, leaving her backside elevated and open to his erect shaft. Gathering her pants in one fist, he ripped

them off her and threw them away from him.

"Do you know what I'd like now, slave? Can you guess?"

Wordlessly, she moved her knees apart.

Bending over her, he licked the spot his finger had just vacated, circling her pale anal rosette with the tip of his tongue, tasting its sourness. At the same time, he inserted one finger into her soaking wet vagina, then withdrew it and inserted two. She gasped. Withdrew and inserted three. She shouted muffled cries into the carpet.

Then he straightened and guided his stiff penis into her wetness. Once in position, he licked his thumb and placed his left hand at the apex of her backside, slowly inserting his wet finger into her other opening, stopping while she cried and shuddered against him, then starting again when her spasms subsided. When his second knuckle was fully embedded, he paused, letting her convulsions ripple against him.

"Do you like that?" he asked softly.

Her answer was half-cry, half-sobbed confession. "Yes master ... oh please, master. Please take me. Please take me." To emphasize her words, she moved against him, impaling herself even further on his cock. "Please," she sobbed faintly. "Please."

With his free hand he encircled her hips, finding her clitoris engorged, slick and slippery. It took very few practiced flicks to bring her to screaming orgasm, contracting against both cock and thumb and sending him over the edge, as well. Where this woman was concerned, he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of semen which he pumped into her, her cries an exultant clarion to his ears. In his wildest dreams, he couldn't have imagined someone more responsive to his every touch.

How could he possibly give her up?

Gently, he withdrew himself and released her manacles, lifting her and carrying her to the room's shower. With minimum words, he initiated a warm, solid stream of water, peeled off the tatters of her ruined top, and seated her on one crouched knee, soaping her arms, torso and gently between her legs before rinsing her off. She still shuddered against him, a reaction of his double penetration and one that convinced him more than anything else that she really was as innocent as Daurent had surmised.

Maybe he could track down others of her race, he mused? There couldn't be too many golden-skinned races in the galaxy. He had a sudden vision of returning her to her people, receiving their adulation in return while she smiled graciously at his elbow ....

*No!*

He stood her upright and helped her into her indigo pants. He could barely keep the last traces of his own people together, much less spare the time adventuring off into unknown sectors because of one female, as intoxicating as she was.

He should remember her primary purpose, as a Fusion breeder for the rebirth of a hybrid Seti race. It would take decades, but he was determined that the tragedy that befell his people, the undeniable traces of their existence, would not disappear into the chaos of galactic history.

"You'll want to rest before your evening meal," he instructed. "Lie down, and I'll get you a blanket."

He returned moments later from his quarters, a quilted grey coverlet over his arm.

Asha accepted it gratefully, wrapping its length around her shoulders.

Tangus sat next to her, strangely reluctant to leave. And the words started leaving his mouth before he realized it.

"My species comes--came--from a planet in the Vodex system," he said. "We didn't have a specific name for it, we just called it the Seti home world. I always thought it one of the most beautiful planets in the galaxy, full of soaring mountain ranges and lakes so wide you couldn't see the far shore. We weren't a large population by galactic standards, just three billion with a wonderful world to share."

“Wonderful, that is, until the Lasc Prein came along.” He angled a look at her. “Have you heard of the Lasc Prein?”

Asha frowned for a moment, indicating perhaps faint recognition, then shook her head.

“Lucky. The Lasc Prein dominate two sectors of the galaxy. They’re an old member of the Fusion: political, smart, and quick. In retrospect, it was stupidity that we would try to stand against them.”

He fell silent.

“What happened?”

Tangus’ mouth worked but it took seconds before he spoke. “They destroyed us of course. The entire planet. Three billion thinking, feeling people. The Seti home world is now a very pretty asteroid belt.”

She gasped.

“Only the Second Fleet survived.”

“This ship?”

“This ship, thirty others, a few thousand men. Only a few thousand.”

It had seemed so important to explain it to her, so she could understand that he was more than the common mercenary others took him for. *Did* she understand? Could she comprehend what it was like to be part of a species that had been wiped off the star charts so completely?

Did it even matter?

“Would you like a tour of the *Strike*?” he asked suddenly.

A smile curved her lips.

“I’d like that.”

“I’ll come for you after the evening meal.”

## Chapter Four

As promised, Tanguis came back after she had finished her meal. He also brought with him more clothes (*where did he get them from?* she wondered) and she obligingly changed into another pair of trousers and a more modest long-sleeved shift that reached her thighs. Her feet, however, remained bare, but Asha said nothing, not wanting to give him the slightest excuse to retract his surprising offer.

He seemed to have reached some stage of equilibrium, dispelling the demon that had repeatedly driven him inside her in frantic sexual need. Need, she was shamed to admit, she fully shared.

Now, the giant warrior paused for a moment by the door and looked embarrassed.

"Outside, call me Tanguis," he said without looking at her, then pressed his thumb against a hidden panel. The door hissed open.

Asha hid her smile and followed him, looking around her as she walked. Occasionally, a soldier walked past her, his eyes rigidly ahead, as if evincing even a trace of curiosity was more than his life was worth.

"It's a..." How did you compliment a space-going vessel? "...nice ship," she finally ventured after they had toured the engine-room and he gave her an overview of the propulsion systems.

"That's why I stole it," Tanguis admitted with a feral grin.

"Stole?"

He shrugged and led her out of the section. "My flagship was badly damaged during the Lasc Prein's offensive. We kept it patched and limping for another three years, but I couldn't avoid the inevitable."

That started her thinking. "So the chamber ...."

"Came with the craft," he admitted, his terse tone indicating that further discussion on *that* subject was closed.

They climbed three levels, moving forward, until they reached a door at the end of a dead-end. Tanguis tapped a code into the keypad, and they entered.

The bridge.

The ship's past owner believed in function as well as pleasure, Asha thought. She recognized the young officer Tanguis called Daurent, now rising from the command chair--for a start, he was the only one brave enough to grin at her, and she found herself returning the greeting. Around him, cramped banks of winking lights were manned by three others.

"The *Strike's* previous owner loved technology," Tanguis commented as he watched her eyes scan the crowded consoles.

"The *Strike's* previous owner also had the largest ego this side of the Straw-Hair Nebula," Daurent retorted, approaching them and smoothly taking Asha's right hand in his. He turned it over and planted a feather light kiss on her wrist.

"Sub-commander Daurent Fens, at your service."

"Oh," was all Asha could say.

"I thought you were working on the new propulsion optimizers," Tanguis cut in harshly.

"Tested and working."

"Long-range sensors?"

"Clear." Asha tried to withdraw her hand, but Daurent kept hold of it for a few seconds longer than necessary before relinquishing it with a flourish.

"Agri-hormones?" Did Asha hear a hint of desperation in Tangu's voice?

"We've tested it on a sample. Awaiting results."

Daurent kept his eyes on Asha's, giving her a quick wink before finally looking at his superior.

"Everything's clear, commander. We're coasting at sub-light five five. Only four more jumps and we're home."

But Daurent's assurances didn't dampen Tangu's irritation. In fact, they seemed to increase it. "What about the duty rosters?"

"Slen and I did them this morning."

Tangu clenched his jaw. Anything that he wanted to say would make him look churlish. Worse still was the realization that he only wanted to say churlish things to Daurent. But his first priority was to defuse the situation before he sat down and contemplated matters.

"Madam," he said, turning to her, "is there any more of the ship you wish to see?"

Asha looked quickly from one man to the other. "Nooo."

"Then I'll escort you back to your quarters."

And he did precisely that, leading her into her chamber in silence, ushering her in, and closing the door behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Once more, Asha was left to her own thoughts, ones that were beginning to get more disturbing the more she examined them.

She had crashed on a planet, lost her memory, and been bought as a sex-slave. Outrage, anger, shock, disgust, these should have been the emotions dominating her, especially when her buyer had the arrogance to take away her virginity without a single word of apology or softness.

And perhaps her first carnal encounter with Tangu had been tinged with equal parts outrage and disbelief. But deep inside, hadn't she also harbored less-than-savory thoughts herself about the man? Hadn't a frisson of awareness danced up her spine, tensing her body and hardening her nipples, when their eyes met at Hell's Market?

Out of all the species of bidders that day, wasn't it true that she had hoped *he* would be the one to finally possess her? And when he had possessed her, over and over again, instead of satiation, hadn't she instead yearned for more and more of his hard intimacy?

Asha groaned to herself.

Maybe she could have deluded herself that this was merely a physical reaction to his overpowering masculinity. That, in time, it would burn out, as all relationships did that were based on only sexual intimacy.

That was a tempting train of thought, unfortunately derailed by his kindness today. She had tried not to notice, but it was obvious he cared very much for his men. The demise of his planet also hurt him deeply. That, too, was obvious.

Perhaps if she could have put him in a convenient little box--expert lover but ultimately just an exploiter of women--she would be much happier. But the Tangu of the boudoir was rounded out by Tangu the leader, Tangu the sensitive, and she was lost.

Here was a man worth centuries of searching. Hard, yes, capable of ruthlessness, but also of deep emotion and firm purpose. Dare she hope that they had some kind of future together?

She nibbled her bottom lip while she followed that theory to its end.

Surely the fact that he had even bought her in the first place indicated that he was attracted to her? And their intimate encounters since that time reinforced the view.

And why would he invite her on a tour of the ship and supply her with clothes if there wasn't a trace of feeling budding within him, as well? Despite her amnesia she was not naïve enough to think that he had felt anything for her when he first bid those fifty quattrons, but surely she couldn't be mistaken about his growing gentleness and consideration towards her? On the bridge he had appeared possessive in the face of Daurent's cheerful gallantry, a reaction that both

puzzled and warmed her. Maybe that proved that he wasn't immune to her.

As for her amnesia, maybe that, too, wasn't such an obstacle after all. Of course there was the possibility that she was nobility of some sort, part of a ruling family, an important player in the politics of her planet, but statistically, she had to admit that was highly unlikely. It was more probable that she was a scientist or someone's assistant or even just a crewmember on the ship that had crashed.

In the daze of the wreck and the grief at not finding anybody else alive amid the hot corkscrewed panels of metal, she had not taken much notice of her clothing ... her uniform? She had still not recovered fully when the group of Helson natives had found her, stripped her, and bundled her into more restrictive clothing, discarding hers by the wreck and forcing her on the four-day march to Hell's Market. So now, there was no trace of her former life, either physical or mental.

Still, she thought with amusement, there weren't many adult women who came without some kind of emotional baggage, usually the result of bad past experiences. And if she had no bad experiences to remember, then she came with little baggage. Simple!

One problem out of the way, she decided with determination. But onto the next, more difficult one. How was she to convince Tanguis that she herself desired something more than the heated magic they shared in the dark chamber together? That she was an intelligent woman who would go crazy constantly locked in the confines of a pleasure chamber and that she valued his conversation and consideration as much as his sexual prowess?

Maybe a good place to start would be to show that she was not immune to his touch. That she was willing to fully participate in their lustful encounters.

Maybe it would show him something if *she* was prepared to initiate their next encounter?  
A wicked smile spread slowly across Asha's face.

\* \* \* \*

Damn Daurent and his come-hither eyes, Tanguis thought in fury as he stalked into his quarters. Who did he think he was, staring at Asha so lasciviously? He was entranced by her body, the grace with which she walked, her regal, sculpted features.

But what did his first officer know of the *real* Asha? The firebrand who cried out her passion with such abandon, the ... the ....

Tanguis abandoned his search for an object to hurl at the wall and collapsed at his desk chair. If truth be known, he didn't know much more about the captive himself. Even her name was manufactured. He didn't know where she was from, where she was going, or how she had ended up on Helson V. In fact, he could only be sure of two things: one, she had been a virgin the first time he mounted her, and two, she was the only woman he had ever known who could drive him to ecstasy with not much more than a look.

*Three things.*

There were hints of course. The quiet while he related a quick history of the Seti's last, calamitous, conflict suggested patience and reserve. And he certainly couldn't deny her passion, he thought with a quirk of his lips.

*The way....*

Under other circumstances, he would be honored to be noticed by a female as magnificent as Asha. There were always difficulties with cross-species courtships, but nothing he was sure he couldn't handle. He had already established they were physically compatible and wasn't that the greatest hurdle?

And what man didn't think of leaving his legacy through future generations? He was sure she would make a strong, loving mother, fiercely defensive of her children but gently wanton with her mate.

*I feel....*

Tanguis shut his eyes tightly against the visions intruding into his brain. No, he couldn't keep thinking that way. Perhaps if the home world still existed, if he could still harbor some hope for the



future, then he could afford to indulge himself. But he had to keep remembering that Asha was merely a means to an end. That was the reason he had purchased her. She was to be the first in a line of Fusion women who kept the Seti name alive, and he couldn't afford to be distracted by useless monopolistic fantasies. In fact ....

He pressed the intercom button. "Daurent?"

"Yes, commander?"

"Let Doctor Zehnda know he has an upcoming appointment. Tell him to bring his xenogenetics sampling kit to my quarters tomorrow morning."

Tangus could hear Daurent's questions in the hesitation that followed. "Yes, commander."

"Tangus out."

He exhaled and leaned back in his chair. Now, if he was thinking as clearly as he'd hoped, he'd grab a bite to eat himself, go over the latest tactical reports and get some sleep.

*...about her....*

And there were still some elements of the classic Rheni Gambit he wanted to research, the weather conditions at the time and how that had played into the master strategy. Those were the good old days, he thought with a grim twist of his lips, before the advent of interplanetary war and massive vacuum-muted killing.

In fact, there were many other things to concern himself with--future developments of their moon base, cheaper female acquisitions, crop grafting. So he was surprised to find control again taken out of his hands, after he opened the door to the adjoining chamber, and asked, "Would you like to see my quarters?"

He stepped aside, breathing in her scent as she brushed past him.

\* \* \* \*

Tangus was suddenly full of unexpected surprises and Asha couldn't refuse his latest offer. Would she like to see his quarters? And get an insight into this enigmatic man? Of course!

What had she been expecting, she asked herself as she entered? Of course he was neat, although the scatter of book-rods on the desk indicated someone who followed several ideas simultaneously. And the space was well-appointed although sparser than she was expecting. No velvet anywhere, a wide but not extravagant bed. One wall was dominated by a large star chart display but there was nothing of any personal value. She saw no little mementos, no pictures of friends or family, just his unmistakable personal scent filling the room.

"Disappointed?" he asked, coming up behind her.

She turned, her lips quirking and she saw him narrow in on them, his dark eyes clouding into opacity. A jolt of power shot through her.

"Certainly it's not as sybaritic as I was expecting," she half-whispered, licking her lips. As if mesmerized, he watched the moist tip of her tongue emerge, then retreat.

Did she dare act on her impetuous plan? Did she have enough courage to finally take *him* to bed? Taking a breath, she lifted her hands, locking them behind his neck. "Thank you."

"For what?" Automatically, he moved to stroke her back, grazing her with his rough hands.

"For the tour. For the clothes. For proving that you're not such a callous brute after all."

"You'll find," he replied, kissing one side of her mouth, "that I am," then the other side, "a *very* callous brute."

But she wasn't listening. Tightening her hold, she pulled his mouth down on hers, opening her lips so he could taste her while coyly toying with his tongue at the same time.

There was a moment when he hesitated, when she was afraid he would reject an advance that he had not initiated, before he tightened his grip. Swiftly, he captured her tongue in his mouth and sucked on it, the gentle pulling action starting a heat in her groin.

"You don't know what you do to me," he grated against her ear when he drew back for breath. He kissed her earlobe, then followed it with another kiss to the side of her neck. "When you're around, I stop thinking."

Asha arched her neck, gasping when he bit at the sensitive skin between neck and shoulder. With eyes closed, she reached for one of his hands, bringing it around from behind her back to grasp a burgeoning breast.

Tangus didn't need any more encouragement. Still kissing her neck, he slipped his hand under her tunic so he could stroke her bare breast and tug at a fast-hardening nipple.

They kissed again, all hands and hot tongues, before Tangus picked her up and carried her to his bed. It creaked beneath their combined weight.

"I would like to pleasure you," Asha whispered. Quickly, before he could grab her, she got off the bed and began disrobing, pausing every little while to watch his reaction. A smile curved her lips when she saw his hardening penis strain against the material of his trousers.

Her top discarded, Asha bent and stepped out of her pants then, still out of reach, she began running her hands up and over her breasts, plucking at her own nipples and moaning with pleasure. Tangus' response was electric. He jackknifed into a sitting position, reaching for her, but she danced out of range.

"Tell me what you want me to do ... master," she teased.

"Come here," he growled.

She shook her head. "Not yet. Perhaps you should take your shirt off while I ... touch myself."

Tangus' eyes, already dark, blacked in an instant, glittering like volcanic glass, but he did as he was told. In front of him, tantalizingly out of reach, Asha sank to her knees and spread her thighs. Watching her lover, she licked her finger then trailed it down her body, between her breasts, leaving a glistening trail that he followed hungrily with his eyes.

With deliberation, Asha continued her finger's journey, through tight copper curls, and gasped as she inserted it into herself.

That was too much for Tangus. No woman had ever behaved so provocatively in front of him before, displayed such wanton pleasure, and it was more than he could stand. He swooped down, grabbed her, and took her to his bed, ripping the rest of his clothes off in a frenzy before possessing her.

"You're a siren," he told her hoarsely, his hands trembling as he stroked her hair. "There are legends about them on every planet. Beautiful women who coax you to your death."

Asha thrust her hips towards him, beginning an insistent rhythm.

"No, not yet," Tangus gasped, but it was too late. With a violent convulsion, he orgasmed, crying out into the air while she continued her merciless gyrations beneath him.

When he was spent, he looked at her, his expression sheepish.

"I don't ...."

She placed a fingertip against his lips. "I'm not expecting anything from you. Sleep. We can talk later."

It was only when his breathing had steadied and the first spasm of sleep tightened his hand against her that Asha said softly, "I love you."

## Chapter Five

Tangus awoke early, the comfort of his bed disturbed by a new sensation. He frowned, wriggling a trapped hand, before recollection crashed down on him. Startled, he opened his eyes to see a golden head nestled into the crook of his arm, long copper tresses fanned over his bare biceps.

In the middle of the night, he had woken her and they had mated again. Despite the wordless communication, he recognized that this time it had been a meeting of equals, not of master and captive, and he cursed himself for a hundred types of fool for thinking he could make it anything else.

His mind returned to the thought of finding her people. He had lost his own family in the Lasc Prein attack on the Seti home-world, but surely Asha must still have some. Was there a parent or relative searching the galaxy for her? And what were the chances of him finding them?

Carefully, he eased himself away from her and rose, quirking his lips at the discarded clothing that lay around his quarters. Picking at them, he pulled on a shirt and trousers and made a brief trip to the bathroom. The smile stayed on his face until he found himself humming as he regarded his unshaven reflection, and he was brought back to reality with a slam.

What was he thinking? He was Tangus Xalor, only remaining commander of the Seti Space Corps. He was the man responsible for the last remnant of the Seti. What was he doing losing himself in the eyes and body of a golden beauty?

"Tangus?" The soft voice was a bit puzzled.

He gave himself a long look before exiting.

Asha was sitting up in bed. No false modesty here. She wasn't holding a sheet against her naked breasts. Instead, she leaned nonchalantly on one arm, the sheets draped over her legs. Even without a single artistic bone in his body, Tangus had the urge to paint her just so he could always remember her like this.

"I was wondering where you were," she teased, her voice still husky with sleep. "Will you come back to bed?"

And Tangus had several flashbacks. He remembered the time, as a young and stupid officer graduate, he had picked a fight with a pair of Toldah mercenaries adventuring far from home. He had come off second-best in that altercation, only the timely intervention of four other friends saving him from a thorough skewering.

He remembered the tense stand-off with a ship from the Flow-Stick Cluster, a notorious smuggler species famous for their weaponry-heavy space runners and how he had bluffed his way into capturing them.

He remembered his last desperate gambits as he extracted as many survivors as possible from the marauding Lasc Prein before he and his decimated fleet beat a hasty retreat.

But, as he stared at her long flowing hair, perfect features, and beguiling eyes, Tangus realized that nothing he had previously done in his life required more self-discipline than just standing his ground and not--once again--losing himself in her perfumed loveliness.

He spun the chair at his desk and seated himself at what he considered to be a safe distance, content to watch her.

"I'm still captain of this ship," he reminded her. "I have duties to perform."

"I have some duties you can perform," she teased, but he brushed her comment away with a wry smile.

Maybe he gave a little more away in that movement than he wanted, because Asha frowned as she, too, began pulling on clothes.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked. "As eye-opening as the past few days have been ..."

Tangus had the decency to flush along his cheekbones although his expression didn't change.

"...I'd like to do more."

"Such as?"

Indeed. She thought she could compartmentalize her forgotten life in a little box and forgotten about it, that she could start building a new beginning with Tangus. But no matter how much she tried to ignore it, the questions around her existence continued to appear at the most inopportune moments. How *could* she possibly help the crew of a quasi-military vessel? Was she combat-trained herself? A superlative navigator or pilot? By the gods, she wished she knew!

"I'm not sure," she said slowly.

"Now if only you were an influential member of the Lower Convergence," he mused, more to himself, mentioning one of the two galaxy-wide political bodies of the Fusion.

"You're thinking of the Lasc Prein destroying your planet."

"I'm thinking of justice."

"As a member of the Fusion yourself, you can petition for an enquiry sub-committee," she suddenly said then sat back, thunderstruck. Where had *that* thought come from?

But she was right. Tangus nodded. "True, but we only joined the Fusion a few years ago. Who would agree to sponsor and chair the sub-committee? The Lasc Prein were very smart. They knew the best time to strike the Seti was before we could build up any alliances. All the worlds we have relationships with are non-Fusion. Short of starting an all-out war, which I doubt I can do, the situation still looks hopeless."

The door to his quarters buzzed, and still preoccupied, Tangus rose to answer it. He froze when he recognized his visitor.

Doctor Zehnda's face was open and enquiring. "Commander, you passed orders that I should report to you this morning. Sub-commander Daurent has already briefed me, and I brought my genetics kit."

*No!* something shouted in Tangus' head. *Don't do this!*

The night had been wonderful, ecstatic, but what about the future of his people? Could he sacrifice the continued existence of the Seti to monopolize one delectable golden body?

"Of course," he greeted after a short pause. "Come in, doctor." Dammit, he had to prove that he was stronger than this, that he was able to formulate and carry through a difficult strategy. He tried very hard not to think.

Asha, grateful she had dressed, rose and offered her hand. "Good morning. I'm Asha."

The older man put his small case down on the nearby desk before walking forward and taking her hand between his. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm the doctor aboard this ship, Zehnda Galin. At your service." He applied slight pressure to his grasp then released her.

Both people turned to face him.

*Give him some excuse. Send him away. You don't have to do this, Xalor.*

"I've ... called the Doctor here to give you a checkup."

"A good idea," Zehnda chimed in with a smile. "We should always establish a baseline before we start on the tricky business of xenotyping."

Asha frowned. "Xenotyping?"

But Zehnda wasn't listening. He moved to Tangus' desk and opened his case.

She turned to Tangus. "Xenotyping?"

*There's still time to salvage this situation. Send Zehnda away!*

"I don't know what species you are," he began. "I asked Doctor Zehnda here so he can run some tests. Genetic compatibility. Physiological bars to fertility."

"What are you saying?" she asked, quelling a small leap in her heart. "You want me to bear

your child?"

It was all a bit sudden and although Asha admitted to herself that the thought itself was attractive, surely he should have discussed it with her first? By the standards of her species had she even reached sexual maturity yet? And what kind of future would a child of hers have, on the run from the Lasc Prein?

Zehnda laughed. "If my instructions are correct, it's not just the commander. Isn't that right sir?"

Both Tangus and Asha stared at each other in frozen tableau while the doctor, still checking his instruments, continued talking.

"With just one person there may not be a problem. But with a potential donor pool in the thousands, the cumulative effects of recessive genes across interspecies embryo development cannot be underestimated."

"In the thousands?" Asha asked through bloodless lips. Her voice was faint.

A tic worked in Tangus' jaw. "I'll leave you to your work, doctor." He left, quelling the howl that rose within as the doors to his quarters slid shut behind him.

\* \* \* \*

Tangus' quarters on the *Strike*, like all rooms on the ship, was temperature-controlled, but that didn't stop Asha's shivering.

The doctor had already left, leaving Asha's body whole but splintering her mind into a million pieces. Not being able to stay in his quarters, to have his scent taunt her, she slipped back to the smooth decadence of the adjoining chamber. She would never have believed for a moment that a room geared to sex would comfort her, but in the entire galaxy, it was now the place where she felt the greatest security. At another time, she would have smiled at the irony.

But now, all she could do was collapse on the edge of the bed and confront an unpalatable reality.

Why had she even entertained the fantasy of a life together for her and Tangus? He had made it plain from the beginning that he had purchased her for a reason. At the time, she had thought that meant possession by only one man--him.

But *thousands*?

Doctor Zehnda had been more forthcoming in that one hour than Tangus in the past several days.

He told her that the Seti remnant was all male, the dregs of a species that would soon die out unless someone came up with a plan. And the commander had. A bold plan of acquiring female stock to interbreed with the Seti so the genetic strain wouldn't completely die out. Preferably female *Fusion* stock so they would always serve as a reminder of the Fusion's perfidy while they allowed the Lasc Prein to massacre them into almost total extinction. She was their first acquisition.

It made her blood run cold to see how much she had underestimated Tangus' ruthlessness, reading sensitivity instead of callousness, and torment instead of all-consuming revenge. It had fooled her into thinking he was, beneath all his actions, an honorable man, and she was going to pay for such a misjudgment by living out the rest of her life as a Seti breeding-receptacle.

But what could she do to escape such a fate?

Where before she didn't see her amnesia as a negative, now she confronted dead-ends. Who was she really? Was she someone powerful? Or just a bystander somehow involved in a spaceship crash? Was her species capable of looking for her? Did they even care?

Asha buried her head in her hands. Only a few hours ago, she was prepared to throw away any thoughts of her species, but now they loomed large in her future. How fickle she had been to think that she could ignore everything that happened in her life up till this point, up to the point when she found herself betrayed by the man she had fallen in love with.

Desperately, she started thinking. What she needed now were options. Was there anybody on the *Strike*, for example, who would help her? Doctor Zehnda was totally committed to his

commander. But what about Daurent? The young sub-commander had treated her kindly. Would he help? She thought about it. No, even she could see the bond between the two men. Daurent would not betray Tangus.

What she needed now was a miracle. A ....

A shuddering jolt whipped through the ship, toppling her from her seat. At the same time, a klaxon sounded, followed by a terse voice she recognized as Tangus'.

"Battlestations. This is not a drill. Enemy sighted and engaged. I repeat, battlestations."

Another rippling concussion struck the ship, sending it into a deep angled swerve. The moment the floor steadied, Asha made a rush for the door in Tangus' quarters, hitting the access panel.

As the doors slid open, acrid smoke filled her nostrils, and she recognized the smell of an electrical fire. Men rushed around her, yelling to each other to make themselves heard above the tortured whine of the engines. The *Strike* was still listing, and Asha was, for once, glad of her bare feet which gave a better hold on the tilted vessel's floor.

She turned the corner and confronted a scene of destruction. One wall panel had blown out, taking a young soldier with it. Asha could see the flames lick at the wiring, melting the insulation and flicking upwards inside the bulkhead.

She grabbed the sleeve of someone else rushing past.

"Where's the fire extinguisher?" she yelled.

"What?" his eyes were wild and she tried to get away but her grip was stronger.

"Fire extinguisher," she repeated.

He pointed to an opposite panel then tore away from her hand and kept running.

Asha hesitated. This was an excellent opportunity for escape. If only she could find the emergency pods .... Then she looked down at the young man unconscious by the panel. What if she had a brother and he was in a similar situation? Would she forgive or condemn the prisoner who had a chance to save him, but didn't?

With an oath, she turned to the opposite panel, grappling with her fingers at the catch. It stuck, then released. Asha flung it to one side and reached in for the extinguisher. If she knew anything about electrical fires in enclosed spaces, the immediate vicinity would be super-heated. Deftly, she released the safety and aimed it at the fire, pulsing the shots. When it was doused, she moved closer, angling the nozzle into the bulkhead and spraying all around, making sure all traces of the blaze were extinguished, careful not to touch the still-hot jagged metal.

With the immediate danger out of the way, she knelt and examined the young man. Part of his face was burnt red and raw. She felt for a pulse and was relieved to find one.

Although she hadn't entered it, she roughly knew from the tour where sickbay was situated. Placing her hands under his arms, she hoisted the man up and began dragging him towards the back of the ship. Thankfully, sickbay was down one level, but she was still panting and sweating when she entered with her rescued soldier.

Zehnda was all-professional now, giving her one quick glance before directing her to a nearby bunk. But Asha wasn't strong enough to lift the unconscious man onto the bunk, so she left him on the floor next to it. Zehnda rushed around, examining four others who had gotten there before she did.

Finally, the doctor had time to give her patient a quick scan.

"Well done," he said. "You caught him just as he was entering shock. I'll give him something that should settle his system."

"Where are the other doctors?" she asked.

He grabbed a second to give her a quick grin. "What other doctors?"

"Assistants?"

"Not many medical personnel survived the attack on our home world," he explained.

Asha made a quick decision. "Then give me a medical kit. I'll see who else is injured and

bring them back here.”

Zehnda didn't demur. He returned with a compact case. “Do you know how to use the equipment.”

“I ... think so.”

“Then I'm not going to turn down an offer of help. Get going.”

She hesitated. “Ah, doctor?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have a spare pair of shoes anywhere?”

\* \* \* \*

The attack on the *Strike* stopped Asha from thinking. Caught in extreme circumstances beyond her control, all she could do was react. And, she found, the less she thought, the more her hands knew what to do.

Almost as though she was standing outside herself, she watched as she reset a dislocated shoulder, bandaged wounds and emergency-bound broken limbs. Around her, the battle continued to rage, but she found a center of quiet and used it, calmly extinguishing fires and estimating doses of painkillers. Thankfully, the kit she had been supplied with had been designed with non-medical personnel in mind: tranquilizers and medication were already divided into individual treatments and all she had to do was load and shoot the hypo-spray.

Right at the end, when she could tell that the pace was less frantic--the fact that the *Strike* was still in one piece augured well--she came across Tomben.

She had not forgotten about him from the time she was sold to the Seti and shivered as she remembered the familiar way he had run his hand down her naked body. But right now, he was in pain just outside one of the engine rooms, cradling an arm that was clearly broken in two places, and suffering third-degree burns.

He tried to summon a leer as he saw her approach, but Asha could see his face twist as he adjusted his position.

“Stay still,” she commanded, kneeling down next to him.

“Just get me some painkillers,” he rasped, “then I can get back to killing more of those Lasc Prein scum.”

Asha's fingers faltered at the clasp of the medical kit. So they had been attacked by the Lasc Prein again? Still, whatever else she thought of Tomben, she couldn't fault his loyalty. Her fingers stilled as she thought of something.

“Listen Tomben,” she said in an urgent tone, “you don't like me, and to be honest, I'm not too keen about you. But you know your commander likes me ... very much.”

Tomben turned away in disgust, but Asha stopped him and forced him to look at her.

“For all you know, the Lasc Prein were able to sneak up on you because the commander was distracted by me. Have you thought of that? Maybe you wouldn't be here in pain if he had been thinking clearly.”

Tomben's eyes narrowed. “So what?”

“So you don't need that kind of distraction, do you? One woman with all those enemies out there waiting to vaporize you into your component atoms.” Tomben's face twisted in pain again so Asha hurried. “I have a deal for you. You tell me where the emergency escape pods are located, and I'll give you a painkiller.”

“How do I know you won't overdose me instead?” he demanded.

Asha hesitated. There was food for thought. After all, would the galaxy really miss someone like Tomben?

“I give you my word,” she said.

He looked at her for a few seconds, then jerked his head. “It's in the engine room behind me. Go to the end and turn left. There are three pods.”

“Thanks.” She added a powerful sedative to the painkiller and gave Tomben a double dose

before he could say anything else. Then, with a quick look around, she slipped through the open door of the engine room.



## Chapter Six

Later, even though he knew it was nothing he could have foreseen, Tangus would blame his distracted mood for the way the scout ship had sneaked up on them.

The first strike sent him half out of the command chair as the blow reverberated through the *Strike's* hull.

Ven, his young helmsman/navigator, frantically checked his instruments before turning to his commander in alarm.

"Sir, the ship. It's Lasc Prein!"

Tangus swore a short sharp epithet. After all the careful planning they had done--

"Daurent, jam that ship's transmissions. I don't want any 'friends' dropping by."

"Yes, commander."

Another blast shook the ship as Tangus opened shipwide communications.

"Battlestations," he barked. "This is not a drill. Enemy sighted and engaged. I repeat, battlestations."

A third hit.

"And, Daurent, when you have time, lock on that ship. What can you tell me about it?"

Second after second ticked away, and Tangus continued swearing. In his old battleship, there was enough room on the bridge for one person per function--one for communications, one for weapons, one to handle helm, the other navigation. He even had the luxury of Security and Sensors officers. But in the renamed *Strike*, the bridge was cramped, and his officers had to carry out multiple roles. With predictable results.

"Scout ship, commander," Daurent reported after an eternity. "Just the one. Standard armaments."

"Target the shields around the propulsion systems. Ven, get us into an evasive maneuver."

"Which one, commander?" The helmsman/navigator's fingers flew over the boards in preparation for a defensive move.

"There's only us, Ven. Find one."

"Ah--"

"Commander, one of the engineering ports has taken damage. Artificial gravity's at eighty percent."

"Get us out of here, Ven." Tangus kept his voice calm, and his young officer responded, sending the *Strike* into a deep dive. "Daurent, ready the rear cannons and fire."

More seconds. "Direct hit on their bridge shields, commander. They're still holding."

What followed was an interstellar game of cat and mouse, the roles alternating with each tactical move, but Tangus wasn't satisfied. For every minute they engaged with the Lasc Prein scout, the risk of their discovery by another unfriendly increased.

"Ven, I need some piloting magic. We need an edge on that ship, fast. What can you give me?"

The helmsman conferred quickly with his star charts. "We're close to a solar system ringed by an asteroid field. I can make an initial run in that direction ...."

A smaller explosion rocked the ship.

"Trouble in Engine Room Two," Daurent said. "Systems offline. We're down to seventy-five percent propulsion."

"Whatever you're thinking of, do it now."

"Yes, commander."

"Daurent, get our weapons ready."

"Yes, commander."

And Ven rose to the challenge with, even Tanguis had to admit, a skilful exercise in piloting. The young pilot led the *Strike* into the asteroid field, at the same time starting a shallow curving trajectory, finally exploiting a larger body--and a tractor beam--to execute one of the tightest turns he had ever experienced. They came up under the unsuspecting scout ship, and Daurent needed no prompting to empty all batteries into the forward cannons.

On the forward view screens, the first strikes hit the scout's shields and scattered into sparks, but Daurent kept up the barrage. A noiseless explosion of white light blinded the bridge crew temporarily, and when they regained their sight, the scout ship was gone.

"Destroyed," Daurent reported with a grin.

Tanguis let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and relaxed in his chair.

"Good work, helm. Damage report?"

"We've lost shields on the left-side and sustained damage in two propulsion units. One escape pod prematurely ejected. Minor hull breach on Level Two. Some internal fires, all under control. Repair crews have been dispatched. Doctor Zehnda reports twelve injured, none critical."

Good. Nobody had died. The Creator knew he had already lost enough people to the Lasc Prein.

"How far to the next jump?"

"Three hours at our current speed."

"Probability of tracking us ... home?"

"Slim," Daurent concluded after some thinking. "There are two jumps near this system. If we shut down our damaged engine, we can make it to one without leaving a trail."

"How much will that add to our travel time?"

"No more than forty minutes."

"And once we're past the first jump?"

"It's a complicated route that takes us close to popular space lanes, then back out again. I think we'll be okay, commander."

"Do a quick scan for salvage, then get us out of here."

With the current danger over, Tanguis wondered how Asha was. If she had any sense, she would have taken refuge in her chamber and stayed there.

"I'm going to see Dr. Zehnda and check in with the wounded," he told his second-in-command. "Let me know if we meet any more surprises."

"Yes, sir."

Tanguis left the cramped bridge and headed for sickbay, his lips tightening as he took stock of the internal damage his flagship had sustained.

Still, it could have been worse. Six months ago, the *Strike* would have broken apart under the stresses it had just been subjected to. But thanks to hard work from his crew, and several judicious purchases at various trading posts, they had fashioned a serviceable, if small, military vessel.

In sickbay, chaos had settled into calm purposefulness. Tanguis entered and saw five soldiers sitting on the floor against the wall. All three bunk beds were occupied. Zehnda was looking at some information on one of his monitors.

"How's my crew, doctor?"

"No fatalities, commander, I'm happy to report, although," he took a look around, "I could have hoped for more expansive medical quarters."

"So could I. How serious are the injuries?"

"Some second- and third-degree burns. A few broken limbs. I sent the concussion and superficial injury patients back to their quarters, but ...." He hesitated.

"Something bothering you, Doctor?"

"Well, Asha was helping me ...."

"Asha?" Tangu's voice was sharp. "What the hell was she doing out of her quarters?"

"That's something you're going to have to ask her," Zehnda replied evenly. "She came to sickbay with a patient and exhibited some competence in medical care. Upon her request, I supplied her with an emergency medical kit, and she began treating and bringing back more patients. Except for Tomben."

"What about Tomben?"

"He had obviously been treated by Asha but was found unconscious near engineering. He's in that bunk over there." Zehnda indicated the far sickbay bed.

"And where's Asha?"

"That's just the point. I haven't seen her yet."

Tangu's blood ran cold. Tomben was a good soldier, fierce, loyal. Because he was dependable and fearless, Tangu had been prepared to overlook Tomben's more lewd behavior on shore leave. But the thought of Tomben alone with Asha ....

And outside engineering. Where two propulsion units were out of commission.

Could he have attacked her? Or maybe Asha had gone into Engineering Room Two just before the strike that had damaged the units?

The thought of losing her was suddenly unbearable. Twisting on his heel, Tangu left sickbay at a run.

\* \* \* \*

Asha followed Tomben's directions. Engine Room Two was a mess, dark from lack of power and smelling of smoke. Gingerly, she stepped along, glad she had asked the doctor for some footwear.

After a long look at what she wore, he had disappeared for a minute, returning with a bundle of clothes.

"The boots are the smallest we have," he said, indicating the footwear on top of the pile.

With a grateful smile, Asha pulled the pants and combat jacket over her clothes, followed by two pairs of socks on each foot. Lastly, the boots which were only a little loose. Finally, she was starting to feel like a real person again, instead of a decorative plaything.

When she finally reached the pods, she didn't at first recognize them, mistaking them for some kind of fuel chambers, but after walking back and forth for half a minute, she realized they were the only group of three *things* in that section of engineering.

Reaching forward, she grabbed the handle of the nearest circular hatch and twisted it. To her surprise, it opened easily, swinging out on heavy hinges and tripping some internal illumination.

"It's now or never," Asha told herself, and levered herself in, closing the hatch behind her. A red light still shone dimly.

Somehow she wasn't expecting something quite so basic. The obviously one-person pod was roughly circular inside. There was just enough space for her to stand, bent over, next to a seat that resembled a cross between a recliner and a chair. She eased into the chair and looked for the attachments. She knew she didn't have much time to come up to speed with the systems. She had the feeling that the battle was coming to an end and wanted to be well away before Tangu began looking for her.

The toilet attachment was unisex, and to her surprise, the combat pants unzipped along the crotch seam to accommodate the plumbing. She ripped the seam of her underpants, and once secure, she strapped herself into the harness and powered up the primitive navigation and propulsion systems.

If she didn't think too hard about things, Asha realized, knowledge just flowed into her, and she wondered again at the kind of person she was to be familiar with both first aid and basic spaceship operations.

Gods only knew exactly where she was, so Asha set the pod's search parameters to target

and head for the nearest humanoid-habitable planet and turned the oxygen mix to just above minimum to maximize her search time. But before she could eject from the *Strike*, it was done for her. A last shudder hit the ship, she heard clamps releasing and found herself tumbling over and over at high velocity.

Asha tried to reach the controls but the spinning made her nauseous. She tried to fire one of the small propulsion jets but her fingers only scraped the switch and she passed out.

\* \* \* \*

Lips were kissing her.

Asha opened her eyes to an intricately arabesque-like ceiling soaring meters above her. She was in bed, cool luxurious sheets beneath her body. To her right, tall narrow windows looked out beyond an ivory balcony to an idyllic lake scene shrouded in morning mist. One window was open, and she breathed in the scent of greenery carried on a light breeze.

She blinked. Something wasn't right.

Lips were getting insistent.

She felt another's wet warmth envelop her breast, hardening the soft peak with nibbles, and instinctively protested by pushing with her hands.

They met a familiar resistance, her fingertips recognizing the corded muscle they touched. "Tangus."

He reared above her, his usually grim expression softened, his dark eyes dancing.

"I thought you'd sleep all day. In fact, I could only think of one way to wake you up."

She tried to catch him, but he was too quick, ducking her grasp and continuing his exploration of her body.

He bit gently at her ribs, tickling and arousing her at the same time, while his hands stroked her legs. First the outside, then the inside, moving further up with each stroke.

"Your aunt sent a tray," he commented, his voice muffled as he buried his mouth against the smooth skin of her belly.

"My ... aunt?" That sounded so familiar in a way and yet so unfamiliar in another.

"Mmmmm. Which means we can stay here all day."

"But--oh!"

"Exactly," he purred and Asha could hear the satisfaction in his voice.

Gently, he parted the lips of her labia, breathing in her musky scent before nuzzling her with his lips.

"Oh, Tangus."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

But she was past hearing, spreading her legs and lifting her hips towards him in a blatant invitation. She felt his hands accept the offer, slipping under her buttocks and holding her in place while he invaded her with his tongue, lapping at her until she gripped the bed sheets tightly, her breath quickening.

She could feel the orgasm coiling within her, taking her as high as the ceiling in her bedroom before she exploded in delight, bucking and shuddering beneath his mouth.

Tangus moved quickly, his erect penis penetrating her while he kissed her passionately. Asha loved the smell of her on him, the mingling of musk and wood, female and male.

One hand still cupped her behind while he thrust into her.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear, then nibbled at her neck.

She wrapped her legs around him, meeting each thrust with one of her own, panting out her need.

"Oh, please, Tangus. Oh, please--!"

\* \* \* \*

Asha woke suddenly, her panting loud in the confined space of the escape pod. With a groan, she remembered her dream.

That was the third sleep period in a row that she had dreamed of Tanguus. But where exactly was that wonderful dream location?

*My bedroom.*

Was it? Had she really lived in such a magnificent setting? Or was it her overactive mind conjuring up delusional fantasies? And surely if she had lived in such a place, if that's where she belonged, why would she leave it for the dubious pleasures of, say, Helson V?

She checked her instruments and turned down the temperature control. It was warm in the capsule and--was she imagining things?--the air was starting to get stale. She still wasn't reading a habitable planet within range although occasionally it would seem that her scope was picking up an anomalous object. A comet perhaps?

She slowed her breathing and took stock. According to her calculations, she had enough air and water for the next eight days, together with as many ration bars as she could force down her throat.

What if she didn't find a planet, or some rescuer didn't find her, before her oxygen ran out? What if she died out here in the dark vastness of space?

She didn't know who she was or why she had been in a crashed spaceship. So far, her entire life could be measured in days, but already she had regrets.

She regretted that she had taken flight from the *Strike* during their firefight, leaving the man she had fallen in love with without even a word or look of farewell. But if she had stayed, what life could she have looked forward to as a breeding machine for the rebirth of the Seti species? Would Tanguus have ordered her to a brothel complex where she had to service other males until she fell pregnant? Or would it have been more impersonal--impregnation by insemination?

She regretted that she had fallen in love with the right man in the wrong circumstances. There were so many things her subconscious thought they could do without: a past for her, punishing vengeance for him. But they were insurmountable obstacles, and she had been fooling herself with brief fantasies of a happy ending.

And now, as she drew a breath, she regretted dying alone. How long would it be before someone happened on her cold drifting coffin? Ten years? Fifteen centuries?

With a heavy arm, Asha leaned forward to turn the oxygen intermix down another notch. It would maximize the time available to her, but it would also put her into a near-coma.

As she drifted off into sleepy unconsciousness again, she hoped the extra time would buy her salvation.

\* \* \* \*

An insistent buzz broke through her thick sleep and forced her eyes open. She couldn't believe it. The pod was picking up a planet with a compatible atmosphere. It had locked on coordinates, it informed her, and was heading in that direction. Asha quickly checked one of the readouts: estimated time of arrival in three hours.

After almost four days, by her internal reckoning, planetfall in a mere three hours. She could hardly contain her excitement. Her first task would be to identify exactly what species she was. With luck she would make contact with more established Fusion members who'd have ready access to such information. Then she'd contact her home world. Surely it wouldn't take too long for someone to recognize her, especially if she supplied details of where her original ship had crashed?

And Tanguus?

She brushed the errant thought to one side. She would think on *that* difficult subject after she regained a speck of self-determination. So far, the life she could remember had treated her like flotsam--from the downed ship to the Helson natives, then on sale to Tanguus and his Seti remnant and finally grabbing a desperate chance to launch herself into a vacuum.

Yes, if there was something she was in desperate need of, it was self-determination.

Slowly at first, the pod's readouts began changing.

Entering the solar system.

Approaching the planet which, to Asha's eyes, seemed to get smaller with each sensor reading.

Entering atmosphere.

Chutes deployed. She checked her harness.

The pod hit the surface and start rolling. Asha quickly lost her sense of orientation. When it finally stopped, she checked its status and, after a long pause with jumbled thoughts chasing each other through her head, began unbuckling her harness. Suddenly, it seemed so much harder than previously. Every movement of her body required enormous effort, and she was panting by the time she unstrapped herself from the straps and plumbing fixture and zipped up her pants.

She couldn't even stand but had to crawl to the hatch, twisting it open with great difficulty, then falling out with it as she swung the panel open.

Of course, the problem was gravity. Her body had been in a weightless environment for several days, and now the effect of a planet's gravity was like a giant pushing her into the earth.

Asha rolled over onto her back, trying to draw deep breaths into her lungs. It might have been a difficult task, but she hadn't smelled anything sweeter in her life. Trees towered above her, sending filtered sunlight onto her face, and she smiled.

She didn't know how long she stayed there, just smiling and breathing, until she gathered enough strength to struggle to her feet and stick her head back into the pod, trying to ignore the miasma of exhausted air it still contained.

There were indications of a population about an hour's walk away, and by pulling every latch she could reach, Asha finally found a small backpack with a container of water and the inevitable ration packs. Shouldering the pack, and using a fallen branch as a staff, she began walking in the direction indicated.

Would it be a village? A mining camp? Surely not a city? Sounds of strange animal life filled the air, flitting from tree to tree above her head. It was all a bit wild, she thought, as she stepped carefully over yet another aboveground root system, but with a welcome lushness that only a planet with enough rainfall could provide.

It was perhaps half an hour later when she began to hear sounds of approach. She supposed she should have been more cautious, but she was eager to make someone's acquaintance. After being sold at a market, losing her virginity, falling in love with her captor and escaping into space in a tiny survival pod, what else could possibly surprise her?

She found out one minute later when she battled through a thick veil of low-hanging branches. She swiped the large, damp leaves out of the way with impatient hands ... and walked straight into a stranger's chest.

Her sense of smell identified a familiar scent at the same time as her eyes moved upward to a pair of unsmiling orbs of blackest glass.

He quirked an eyebrow.

Tangus!

## Chapter Seven

"How ... I ... what?" Words deserted her. What was Tanguis doing here?

He smiled but it was a gesture without humor.

"I see you had a safe landing. Would you follow me?"

It was a request, but there was nothing optional about the hand that gripped her arm and the pace at which he led her through the forest. She was about to protest her exhaustion when they happened across the first sign of habitation, short barracks placed between large tree trunks in a random pattern. Then a clearing, then more barracks, all made from recycled spaceship parts. She looked up at the leafy canopy high above them.

"You're hiding your camp," she said.

"It won't stop a thorough sensor sweep," he agreed, "but it will deceive a casual survey."

"How many of you are there?"

"Four thousand here, the other four on another part of this moon."

"How did I get here?" she asked.

"An interesting question." He gestured to a passing soldier who snapped to attention. "Get Doctor Zehnda."

"Yes, commander." And he sped off into the trees.

"But one I'm afraid will have to wait."

They stood in the shade in an unnatural silence. Asha couldn't think of a single thing to say, and with a quick glance at Tanguis' rock-hard features, she was sure that he wasn't in any mood to listen.

The first glimmer of welcome she got was when the doctor, approaching briskly, saw her and gave her a warm smile.

"My dear, I'm glad to see you again. I still haven't thanked you ...."

"Get her cleaned up, Doctor, and give her something to eat. Then keep her at your facility till I call for her."

"Very good, commander."

With a curt nod in her direction, he left. Asha's bewildered gazes following his progress into the dappled shade of the forest.

"The facilities on this moon are still a bit primitive," the doctor told her, leading her in a different direction, "but I think you'll find them adequate. The commander made sure that the infirmary was the first place up and running in both camps, and I'm grateful that he always assigns us top priority."

And it showed. While the doctor's infirmary was also built of scrap material, the inside was well-ordered and maintained. He led the way to a small bathroom and showed her how the equipment worked, then, after producing another set of fatigues for her to change into, he left.

Asha reflexively probed the walls for some weakness but couldn't find one. And there was only one exit, back into the main treatment area. In any case, what would she possibly achieve by escaping again? Tanguis had already captured her once when she had launched herself into the coldness of space. She was sure he would capture her again if she tried disappearing into the moon's verdant forest.

Gratefully, she peeled off her days-old clothing and soaped herself under the stream of hot water, emerging ten minutes later feeling completely refreshed, her hair tied back from her face with a clean bandage she found in the bathroom.

Zehnda smiled as she entered, indicating that she should put her soiled clothing in a nearby

sack, but she held onto the filmy two-piece suit she had originally fled in. She would wash them herself, later.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she finally asked.

"Well, you *did* show some proficiency in first-aid," the doctor mused, "and I haven't got around to recruiting an assistant yet."

The afternoon progressed steadily, and if it wasn't for the thought of Tanguis hanging over her head, Asha would have felt almost happy. There was a small but steady stream of visitors to the infirmary, all with mostly minor injuries--sprains, bruises, gashes, and a couple of broken limbs--and, as she assisted Zehnda, they regarded her with steady, if curious, gazes. And she couldn't help thinking, is this the one? Was I bought to bear *this* man's child?

But despite her discomfort, the doctor was right. She had a latent talent for a firm but comforting touch and wondered whether it meant she was actually engaged in the life sciences.

"Are you the only doctor the Seti have?" Asha asked when they had stopped for a quick lunch.

"No. We do have another doctor at the other camp, with his intern, but I'm afraid it's just the two of us." He frowned. "When the Lasc Prein first began attacking our planet, our first instinct was to land and administer to the civilian population. We lost most of our doctors that way. Then, as they began decimating the Fleets, we would transfer medical staff to those in most need. With everything else going on, the deployment of doctors wasn't on anyone's mind, and when the Second Fleet finally managed to escape we discovered we only had three doctors and two interns. In the three years since then, we've lost a doctor and intern."

"And no one has been trained?"

"With what?" The doctor shrugged. "We have only basic facilities in a challenging environment. I know the commander has a plan," he cast a quick sideways glance at her, "but I believe we will need to think of something else in the interim. While he has a long-term strategy in mind, we seem to be out of short-term options."

The words hung in Asha's mind while she worked on till evening. Dusk had begun to fall before Daurent came for her, and she followed him on unsteady feet.

"It's a lovely evening," she commented.

Daurent snorted. "You won't say that after a month." He didn't explain further.

They stopped outside what looked to Asha to be a cargo bay door, and he knocked twice. There was a creaking as the door slid open, manually, and Tanguis stood there.

With a nod, Daurent walked off into the night, leaving her at the commander's doorstep.

"Come in."

\* \* \* \*

Tanguis couldn't stay another moment. If he did, he would have either taken her in front of the doctor or wrung her slender neck. He needed distance, and fast.

Stalking off, he tracked down his adjutant. He knew he was overworking the young officer. Nobody deserved the chore of constant duty, not until they were captain of a ship at least, but Daurent was tireless, smart ... and reminded him of his favorite nephew. Now dead. His sister. Dead. His parents. Dead. His world. Dead.

He gritted his teeth and continued walking, chasing down Daurent in the second of their four crop fields.

"Progress?"

Daurent looked up from a chaotic schematic. "We've planted the six species, arranged semi-randomly as agreed. Astronomy points out that it does look vaguely natural, but we won't get the same kind of yield as from monoculture fields."

There wasn't much need for an Astronomy section on the moon, so they had been reclassified as Xeno-Agriculture. They took to the change with acceptance. Mostly.

"It'll do."



"This is really pushing the envelope, commander. With so little light available on this moon, and every 'night' lasting almost two days, it may take a while before we even get our first crop."

"I thought you told me eight months back on the *Strike*."

Daurent grinned. "Creative license."

"Hmm. Well, I may hold you to that. Speaking of which, are all the ships still concealed?"

"Sunk to the bottom of the lagoon."

"The *Strike*?"

"This afternoon."

Silence.

"We retrieved the escape pod," Tanguis commented.

"Ah. And how is Asha?"

"She survived."

"Have you told her why you did it?"

"No."

They fell into silence again, watching the breeze ruffle the wild grass.

"I'll leave you to it," Tanguis finally declared.

He took a walking tour of the camp, evaluating what had already been done, and what was still left to do. Four fields of crops. A half-finished dam to complement the natural lake that supplied them with fresh water. Barracks for four thousand men with basic medical facilities and a serviceable canteen. Low but acceptable energy supply through use of geothermals.

But what about a future? And what about Asha?

It hadn't taken them long to figure out what had happened after the battle with the Lasc Prein scout ship. At first, they had discounted the premature ejection of the pod, until discussions with a conscious--and contrite--Tomben had dictated otherwise. They had tracked the pod and tractored it within two hours.

But Tanguis thought long and hard about his next actions. If he brought Asha back on the ship, she might somehow engineer another escape attempt. He didn't know how, but she had managed fairly well with the first one, and he could tell she was intelligent and resourceful, as well as beautiful. It was a lethal combination.

But perhaps if he left her in the pod and tractored it back to the moon with them...? Where could she go with such rudimentary navigation and steering controls? According to their calculations, they would reach their base in a little over two and a half days. Maybe she'd learn a lesson about impulsive actions. And he'd get some much-needed distance from the pull of her body.

So that's what he did. It was only when he saw her again that he realized she could destroy his fragile self-discipline with little more than an unsuspecting look.

He growled as he stalked through the forest. He needed to do something about that.

\* \* \* \*

"Come in."

It *was* a cargo bay, she realized. At the far end, a window had been cut out of the metal and shuttered with clear-panels and wood. Along one side ran a bench, now loaded with instruments and books in neat piles. On the other side was a wide bunk bed, the equivalent of the one on the *Strike*, and taking up some floor space was something she recognized as a circular escape hatch, reworked into a low table and flanked by two chairs. There was food laid out on it.

Illumination came from a monitor on the bench and a low-light lamp on the floor next to the bed.

"Please sit."

There was so much to discuss, Asha did not know where to begin. Her knees buckled as she sank into the upholstery.

Tanguis helped himself to some food. "I hadn't thought our uniforms would look so good on you," he remarked.

The illumination cast his face in shadow so Asha couldn't see the accompanying expression. The light from the small lamp was a distracting glare in her eyes.

"You're wondering how you landed here," he continued. "Was it a coincidence? No."

"You were monitoring me?"

"For such valuable cargo, we were doing much more than that."

Understanding dawned, firing sparks of indignation in her amber eyes. "You kept me trapped in that ... that prison for four whole days?"

"It was barely more than two days."

"I could have suffocated!"

"You didn't."

His calmness infuriated her. "I could have ...." She searched for words to give meat to her argument. Starved to death? No, she had had more than enough ration bars. Died of thirst? No, she had plenty of water, as well. He had already told her she had enough oxygen to breathe.

But the way he sat there, immovable, while he told her of yet another way he had subdued her threw her into fury. Without thinking, she got out of her chair and lunged at him, taking him by surprise. But only for a moment.

With an oath, he threw her onto the bed and followed, pinning her body beneath his.

"How could you?" She tried to free her hands, but he had them both in one firm grasp.

"I own you," he growled.

He had meant it only to teach her a lesson, to prove that she was incapable of physically overpowering him. But the writhing of her body beneath his, and the defiance in her face, kicked his desire into full gear. Then he remembered the features of the trousers she wore and his cock hardened instantly.

Asha felt him and her eyes widened, but before she could do a thing he was biting her breast through the material of her shirt, the sharp nips catching at her nipple and pebbling it. She cried out and, ashamed of herself even as she did it, wantonly thrust it into his face.

Roughly, he kneed her legs apart and reached down to unzip the crotch seam of her pants. As she panted, he inserted one, then two fingers, their roughness catching against the smoothness of her passage. She covered him with her wetness, and when he held her eyes and deliberately licked her off his fingers, she went into a frenzy.

"Please, Tanguis," she pleaded. "Now. Please."

He shifted, then he was inside her, his hot length thrusting deep and arousing her.

Oh, he felt so good! Asha undulated her hips, goading him to pump into her mercilessly. This was sheer animal sex at its rawest, the physical mating of two beings consumed with lust with no room for reason.

Just as she came, he covered her mouth with his, so she screamed her release into him as his tongue plundered hers. Then he shuddered his orgasm, the shocks rippling through his body before he collapsed sideways on the bed and pulled her into a supine position above him.

"You will always be mine," he told her after his breathing returned to normal.

Asha, too, was recovering from the madness that had consumed her.

"Even when I'm bearing the child of another Seti?" she asked bitterly and flinched as his hands tightened convulsively on her body. But she had to continue. "That's why you bought me, to be a breeding animal for the Seti race. Have you changed your mind now?"

"Is that why you ran? Because you didn't want to be with another man?"

"I ...." Asha couldn't lie.

Tanguis felt his own iron will weaken in the face of her silent admission. "I can't put my own needs ahead of my men, Asha," he told her gently, stroking her hair. She could still smell her muskiness on his fingers. "We cannot disappear. I swore that on the day the Seti world was destroyed."

"Then where do we go from here?"

He hesitated. "The doctor says he hasn't finished his tests yet. Maybe if we find our species are too incompatible ...."

"But what if we *are* compatible?" Asha levered herself off him so she could look him in the face. "What if your species and my species *are* compatible? Will you still sacrifice me to your grand plan then?"

The set expression on his face gave her the answer.

\* \* \* \*

How much longer did she have?

That was Asha's first thought when she woke up. She thought it would be morning, but the lamp was still on and there was no light streaking through the crude wooden shutters of the room's window. But there were larger questions on her mind.

They couldn't go on like this. Once the compatibility issue was settled, then the rest of Asha's life was settled, as well. If she could successfully mate with the Seti then she would be put to work bearing the next generation of Seti hybrids so their race wouldn't die out. If she couldn't, then perhaps there could be a future with Tangus, but only a short-lived one. Because, of course, Tangus would also want a child, a genetic descendant, and if she couldn't give him one, then he would be forced to go to someone who could. Either way, Asha faced disaster, whether in a handful of days or a handful of years. And, truth be told, she found it impossible to imagine life without him.

In their brief time together, and despite his best efforts, she had managed to see into the core of him, and she could weep for the waste of it all. Here was a man who could have easily been the linchpin of a progressive society, and he and eight thousand of his kind were instead being hunted like prey.

She turned her head and watched him sleep.

What if she became pregnant by him? After all, it didn't take a test to somehow certify her fertility. What if she was compatible and pregnant? Wouldn't that buy her some time? Maybe it was a rationalization because she had fallen in love with him, but Asha knew she had to try everything to stay with him.

While asleep, Tangus appeared years younger, his characteristic frown disappearing into the smoothness of his forehead. Without those dark blazing eyes open, he also seemed more approachable, and she could imagine him with a smile on his face, a contrast to his normal waking expression.

How could she give any of this up?

Slowly, she slipped out of bed and untied the bandage that was binding her hair, then she shed her clothing and used the bandage to wrap it around her wrists. Of course she could turn out of the twists easily but the illusion was still served.

On her knees, she approached the narrow end of the bed and pulled down the thin blanket that had covered them, easing onto the mattress and reaching down into his open pants to pull out his sleeping penis.

He awoke when her hot wet mouth enveloped him. Above her, she could hear him groan and reach for her. Obliging, she straightened her arms and heard his intake of breath as he saw her captive wrists.

He opened his legs and stroked her arms while she licked him, quickly growing hard and taut in her mouth. She sucked at him, pulling while she lifted her head, then plunged him into the back of her throat. Suck, pull, plunge. Suck, pull, plunge. When she lifted her head again, she let his penis leave her mouth completely, smiling as she saw a bead of masculine lubrication form at the top of his engorged head.

She bent down once more, this time rubbing her cheek against his length, flicking her tongue against the thick vein on his underside and following it all the way down to where the shaft met the hairy skin of his testicles.

Tangus couldn't stand it any longer. He moved to a sitting position on the bed, back against the wall, kicking off his trousers and holding her wrists to his chest while he encouraged her exploration.

Asha returned to his shaft, licking then sucking his balls into her mouth, massaging them with her tongue before reluctantly pulling away. But Tangus wasn't passive himself. Despite the waves of warmth that thrummed through him, he moved his feet in between her thighs and spread her open. Asha moaned and moved back to his bobbing penis, tensing her tongue to velvet rigidity while continuing to flick at his tender flesh, up and down.

But Tangus, Asha found out, could tolerate such teasing for only a little while. With one hand, he grabbed a handful of her hair and thrust himself into her mouth, and she felt the stiffness of his head rubbing against the softness of her throat. He would come very soon, she knew, but she didn't want him like this.

With a last suck, she pulled away and crawled on top of the bed, lowering herself onto him, her female lubrication slick and aromatic. Tangus moved his hands to her body, clasp ing her chest and rubbing her nipples with his thumbs while he drove into her. In wild abandon, her hair flew in time to his thrusts, and her neck arched backwards, presenting the perfection of her body to him. The thought was enough to send him over the edge, convulsing as he shot his essence into her, slowing only when the last spasm had consumed him and left him satiated.

"That was, unexpected," he finally said, nuzzling her ear. She was still astride him, her bound hands around his neck.

"I ... missed you," she breathed.

An almost-chuckle emerged from his throat, the first she had ever heard from him.

"In that case, I'll have to lock you in an escape pod more often."

They stayed close, not saying a word, for a few more minutes before Tangus set her to one side to walk to what she thought was a cupboard of some sort but was actually a tiny bathroom. When he was done, he gestured for her to do the same, and her heart almost broke when she emerged and found her clothes, neatly folded, next to the door. That such a small gesture could affect her so deeply indicated how hard she had fallen for the man.

He gestured to the meal of the night before, the majority of which was still untouched. "If you don't mind leftovers, we have a policy here of not wasting anything."

"Of course." She sat down and helped herself to some cold meat.

"We'll have to come up with some quarters for you."

"I thought ...." Asha stopped, deliberately slowing her voice. "I thought I could stay here."

"Here? To be labeled the commander's whore?"

He was testing her, she knew. She looked into his face, her expression earnest.

"Whatever words some men may use are just those. Words. I believe I've suffered more up to this point."

He nodded. "Point taken." But he still kept watching her as she nibbled on some food.

"Maybe I can also help," she added.

"Help? How?"

"I spent the afternoon with Doctor Zehnda yesterday, and I liked it. Perhaps I could train as his assistant."

"That's a possibility."

"Can you tell me more about your plans?" she asked suddenly. "You have me, but I'm only one female. What comes next?"

She had to know more about what he was thinking but could tell she hit a sore point by the way his lips--those lips that had suckled and pleased her breasts--tightened.

"We're still in survival mode," he finally said. "Still on the run and hiding. Everything we do, even on this moon, is done in as clandestine a fashion as possible." He chewed a piece of bread. "My next move is to find a more secure place to settle, but that may take years. Maybe if we could

find a planet that would lease us part of their land, or an important Fusion member that would sponsor an enquiry, that would help. But the nearest embassy world--Adduce--is a month's travel away, and I can't think of any planet that would give land to a bunch of stateless mercenaries."

"So you've got to think farther ahead?"

"That's right. I have to be prepared for the fact that it may not even be my generation that finds a supporter. Which is why it's so important that we survive." His eyes were bleak. "It's our fault. We thought that gaining Fusion membership was the answer to our dreams and neglected forming more local alliances. But the Seti home world was at the edge of the sector, and it made us an easy target."

Asha rose and went to him, kneeling and laying her hand on his. "You can't blame yourself, Tanguis. After all, it was your entire planet that made those decisions, not just you."

He looked down at her hand, mesmerized, then, with a frown, shook it off and stood.

"I have work to do," he told her brusquely, unwilling to accept her gentleness, her sympathy. "You can help Doctor Zehnda. But I'll expect you back here at the end of the day."

Reaching for his jacket, he bunched it in his hand and left his quarters.

\* \* \* \*

"Commander--Tanguis, you can't be serious!"

It was three days after Asha had landed on the moon in the escape pod, and Tanguis was ostensibly conferring with Daurent on the progress in getting the detection/cloaking net operational. Like any good leader, Daurent had delegated the task to his engineering team, but he was still conversant with the successes--and failures--they had encountered.

But the discussion had another purpose, and Tanguis waited until the other soldiers left before broaching the subject in the confines of the Operations Room.

"I mean, I like Asha but ..."

"She would make somebody a good mate," Tanguis pointed out.

Daurent spluttered. "With respect, commander, I don't see why it has to be *me*! Why can't it be *you*?"

But Tanguis had thought long and hard over exactly why it couldn't be him.

"Because of who I am, Daurent. How would it look to the other men if I suddenly took a mate while they remained single? They would damn me for an egotistical tyrant. And they'd be right. Whereas you ..."

"Commander, there are a number of flaws in your reasoning. For one, while I like Asha, I don't like her in *that* way. She's a bit too ... robust for my liking." He flushed with embarrassment at being forced to describe his taste in females with his superior. "Plus I don't love her. You may find this hard to believe, but I still harbor fantasies of finding a woman and settling down, and I'm not really the polygamous type. Plus--oh I don't know, it's obvious how you feel about her. I don't relish the part of playing either the cuckold or the wedge."

How could Tanguis tell his friend of the hours he had spent furiously thinking while Asha lay asleep in the crook of his arm? Because he did feel the responsibilities of his position heavily and that meant he could not give in to his dream--yes, he could admit it now in the dark secret corners of his mind--of making Asha his wife, compatibility be damned. Already he knew that there was talk about the commander's woman, and he didn't want it to go any further than that. To have a woman satisfy his sexual desires--his men could understand that as one of the perks of the job. But a wife was another matter altogether.

But if he couldn't claim Asha as his own, then what could he do? The idea of having her bear children other than his was like poison in his blood, as was even the idea of letting her out of his sight. And even if she couldn't bear Seti children, offhand he couldn't think of any of his men who wouldn't appreciate her warming their bed. But how would they treat her? Would they appreciate her quick intelligence or see it as a challenge to be overcome?

By the Creator, who could he trust her with? And, time after time, he kept coming back to

Daurent. Except his faithful adjutant wasn't being as cooperative as he had expected, and to be honest, Tanguis was feeling equal parts irritation and relief from his subordinate's response.

"Daurent ...."

"Commander, you have to tell her how you feel about her."

Did he? Not only step down from the pedestal his men kept him on, the pedestal that was necessary to their future survival, but bare his soul to another being?

"I'll take it under advisement."

\* \* \* \*

Her nipples rubbed against the rough cloth of the blanket, the friction driving her into a frenzy.

Tanguis was behind her, thrusting into her as she knelt against the side of his bed, her knees and her body open wide to his ravaging.

He reached around her to rub a nipple between thumb and forefinger while his other hand slid down to her wet labia, flicking mercilessly against her clitoris.

Asha threw her head back and moaned, felt his mouth at her neck, teeth nipping against her nape's tender flesh.

"What do you want?" he rasped.

"I ... want ... you," she panted, in between thrusts. By the gods, just the thought of him inside her was enough to make her more slippery, more fragrant, more mindless.

His fingers plundered her, their calluses catching against her tender nub. She clenched against him and was seconds away from orgasm when he stopped.

No, he couldn't do this! Frantically, she pushed herself against him, but he remained immovable, unresponsive. Then, with a jerk, he began the primal rhythm again, once more taking her to the brink before halting again.

Asha screamed her frustration.

"No, Tanguis!"

"Not Tanguis," he corrected her.

She shook her head. "No, not Tanguis. Master. Please, master."

"Do you want to please me?"

"Yes, master." Her entire body was throbbing, every sensation feeding into her hypersensitive clitoris and the cock that was buried to its hilt inside her.

"Touch yourself," he ordered. "Pleasure yourself."

She moved her heavy hands, one to her breasts and the other to her groin, to the welcoming moisture and pulsing need. Slowly, she touched herself, pinching a nipple between her fingers and exploring her sex with her other hand. Roaming down her cleft, over his flesh and cupping his balls before retreating to her sex, flicking against it with practiced fingers while she jerked against him.

Tanguis sat back, levering her back against him while she played with herself, splaying his fingers across her ribs so he could feel every breath, every shudder as it rocked her body, content to let her pleasure drive his need.

But when she began to climax, he took over, moving her fingers out of the way so he could take control. Left to her own devices, she would stop at the first orgasm, but he wanted more, so he relentlessly continued the onslaught on her sex, touching, teasing, while she convulsed through two, three, four orgasms, until it was too much even for him and he emptied himself into her.

They collapsed on the floor, the coolness calming their heated skin, but still he held himself inside her, reluctant to release her.

"We should get to bed," he said.

"Hmmmmm." She nestled her back closer against his body.

With a smile, he reached for the blanket and dragged it to the floor, covering both of them, and they fell asleep, but when Asha woke the next morning--although it was still dark outside--she found herself in his bed.

Her sleepy half-open eyes registered Tanguis bustling around his quarters, tidying his various possessions.

"Why don't you come back here?" she asked drowsily, a seductive smile on her lips.

Tanguis didn't meet her eyes, and that sobered her instantly. "What's the matter?" she asked.

He should have known better. Didn't he think she knew him well enough by now to gauge his moods? He was nervous and unhappy, so unlike the Tanguis she had fallen in love with, the Tanguis who had made love to her last night.

"Doctor Zehnda called. He completed analysis of his xenotyping." Tanguis indicated a pad on his bench.

Her skin chilled. "And?"

"You're compatible with the Seti, although it will take external fertilization to complete conception."

Each word was a heavy stone dropped into the well of her spirit.

"What will you do?" she asked through bloodless lips.

He looked away. "We can begin egg harvesting tomorrow."

So, even after everything, he was still going to sacrifice her to his grand Seti strategy? Asha tried to capture his eyes, to imprint on him her horror at what was to come, but he sidestepped the intimacy. If it required medical manipulation for them to create a child, then it was certain that she was not currently pregnant with Tanguis' child. She shivered, wondering who he had in mind as the father of the first hybrid baby. As an example to the rest of his men, she was almost positive it wouldn't be him.

"I think you should rest," he said. "I've told the Doctor not to expect you today."

Even after he had gone, she remained seated in bed, cold and numb. She had failed. She had gambled on a greater degree of compatibility, and she had failed.

She didn't know how long she sat there before a sound impinged on her consciousness. It was a methodical scratching on the shutter of the window. Curious, she got to her feet, wrapping the blanket around her.

With some effort, she slid the clear-panel aside and pushed a shutter open. She gasped.

In front of her were crouched three people--two women and one man. But the strange thing was that they had the same golden skin as she had. One of the women, her dark hair tied back severely into a functional bun, lifted her head, taking a cautious look into the room.

"My Lady, we've come to rescue you."

*My Lady?* Were they talking to her?

"I ... don't ..."

"We have to hurry, my lady. There's not much time."

"Do you know who I am?" Asha asked in a hesitant voice. It caused them to look at each other worriedly.

"We were sent by the Dowager Eminence the moment we heard of your disappearance," the other female answered quickly, "and have been tracking you for a long time. Please, my lady, we have to go now."

"Go where?" Asha asked.

"Home, my lady."

Home. Until an hour ago, she had thought home was wherever Tanguis was, but she could see now that such hopes were futile. Should she stay? And do what? Beg him to keep her? Throw herself on his mercy? Ask that his be the first child she bore? And even if he agreed, what about after that? Tanguis' sense of honor would not allow him to monopolize her while he couldn't offer his men equivalent release.

But she had only known Tanguis. Her entire remembered life revolved around him. He was as precious to her as the air she breathed.

She looked at the three golden and expectant faces, hoping desperately for enlightenment.

## Chapter Eight

*One month later:*

Asha let the edge of the soft, sheer curtain slip through her fingers as she gazed out the window of her bedroom. Below her, in the middle distance, the water of Martiss Lake glistened like gems in the morning sun. Beyond the lake, tall stately trees stood sentinel in the Northern Forest Expanse. She breathed in the air, letting it fill her lungs with its sweetness. Above her, the slanting sun textured the intricate arabesques of the ivory ceiling.

The door to her chamber chimed, a low melodious sound, and Imgran, the Senior Steward, entered.

"My lady, the Dowager Eminence would like to see you."

"Of course. Tell her I'll be right down, Imgran."

"Very good, my lady."

With a sigh, Asha turned from the window and regarded her reflection briefly in the mirror, adjusting the neckline of her morning jacket before exiting the room.

Her slippers feet slapped quietly on the polished stone floor outside her room as she followed the corridor to a wide flight of stairs and descended.

It was still early, with hours to go before the morning petitions, so Asha headed for the Residence's more informal breakfast room.

A guard--one of so few remaining--opened the door for her. Soon there would not be enough, and they would have to forgo the ages-old rituals of Abrengo royalty and automate most of the Residence's functions. But for now, she smiled her acknowledgement to the ceremonial guard and entered.

Her aunt, the Dowager Eminence, ruler of Fa Drunn III, watched with keen eyes as she approached.

Asha dropped a graceful curtsy. "Your Eminence."

The striking older woman was seated at the head of a long table. Flanking her on one side was Onduin, her eldest daughter and heir, on the other, her second daughter, Erinan. They were still eating.

"Won't you join us, Arais?"

Arais. That was her name. Arais sun-Abrengo, blood kin to royalty and niece of the Dowager Eminence. The weight of her connection, only recently recovered, still settled heavily on her.

"I'm sorry, your Eminence, but I'm not hungry."

"Whatever did they do to you, Ari?" Onduin asked, shaking her head. Her golden hair, intricately styled, bobbed in time to her words. "You haven't been yourself since we rescued you."

"Indeed," the dowager agreed. She indicated a chair. "Please, Arais, if you will not eat with us, at least sit and keep us company."

"We made Mama order you down," Erinan the teenager told her with a cheeky grin. "Ever since the treatments finished, you've been moping about refusing to eat. Imgran has been filling us in."

"It occurs to me that we were too precipitate in ordering you on your mission, Arais," the dowager cut in, ignoring her mischievous offspring. "I feel we should have consulted more widely, and for a longer period of time."

"Oh no, Aunt Inna, you couldn't have done that." Ari was still unsure of much of her recovered life, but she was adamant on this point. "Who else could you have sent on a diplomatic



mission to the Krat system?"

"Mama could have sent me," Onduin suggested, biting into a piece of toasted bread.

Ari looked at her sharply. "Don't be ridiculous, Dew, you're the heir to the throne."

"Or me," Erinan interjected.

"We wanted them to take us seriously, Erin, not play simulations with us." Ari looked at her aunt. "You had to send me. There was no other choice."

"And yet look at what happened," the dowager said. "We lost you, our most beloved niece, and despaired of finding you again. And when we did finally recover you ...."

All at the table were silent for a moment.

It was true. After the shock of discovering that the third successor to the Abrenco throne had completely lost her memory, the Fa Drunn retrieval team took her straight to the Alpine Monks' Retreat in the northwest corner of the great northern continent. There she was sequestered for three weeks, although she wasn't under any doubt that, despite her isolation, regular and disturbing reports were being relayed back to the royal house.

She had not behaved well. She had ranted and raved. Thrown objects around and destroyed furniture. Sobbed for days on end. The legendary calmness of the monks made it even worse, angering her to such an extent that she went on longer and more destructive rampages until, eventually, there was no more fine porcelain to break, no more chairs to hurl at walls, and for the moment at least, no more tears left inside her.

And only at that point did the monks begin talking to her.

She might have returned to the Royal Residence a week ago with her memory back, the dowager thought, but she had truly lost her innocence. Where once she saw an impulsive young woman, not uncaring but perhaps a little careless of those around her, now she saw someone more sober, more reflective. On balance, it looked to be a useful improvement, but the dowager wondered how much such newly-acquired self-discipline had cost her niece.

"Before we begin the morning petitions, I will be asked again about the results of your mission, Arais. I have been telling the Council of your indisposition, but they know that you've been back at the Residence for a week now, and I doubt my ability to distract them any longer."

Ari knew that, up to that point, her aunt had protected her well beyond what was required. The entire Residence staff had left her alone to walk the corridors and gardens, always discreetly present but never imposing. They had given her as much time as they could for her to recover from her ordeal, but now it was time for her to face her responsibilities again.

"I know, Aunt Inna. After all, the future of our planet is at stake." She hesitated. "They said no."

Erinan sucked in her breath. "Then we're doomed."

"They didn't find any part of our proposal attractive?" the dowager asked with a frown.

Ari shook her head.

"I related the basic conditions as instructed. Then, I added the secondary conditions--the alliance with the Royal House, free land parcels, and full shared access to our superior medical facilities. They still refused."

"They said no," Onduin repeated in disbelief. She and her mother had spent weeks assembling the concession package. She had not even entertained the notion that the Krat would turn them down.

"But when I was leaving," Ari continued, "you said you would undertake a most rigorous analysis of the remaining genetic material. What did you find?"

The fact that all three women refused to meet her eyes gave her the answer.

"We have two problems," the dowager explained, "the genetic error that afflicted all our men has permeated through fifty percent of our existing chromosome stock. But the constant harvesting and duplication of the other fifty percent to fulfill population demands has introduced errors in the remaining stock. I'm afraid that if Onduin wishes to bear children, we cannot guarantee

they would survive infancy.”

“How could the Krat be so selfish?” Erinan demanded, her face contorted in anger. “We weren’t after *all* their men, just those who were willing to start new lives. After all, it’s the survival of our species we’re talking about.”

Ari turned slowly to stare at her cousin, something suddenly--belatedly!--clicking in her brain.

Survival of a species.

On the one hand, a rich world, vastly under populated and slowly fading away through genetic error in the male line, despite the latest research in biogenetics and reproductive technologies.

And on the other, a lost remnant of the Seti home world, also doomed to extinction through lack of females.

Both looking for salvation. And, if it wasn’t for a chance encounter at Hell’s Market, both oblivious to each other.

“I’ve got to leave,” she said urgently.

“Leave?” Onduin repeated. “You mean this room?”

“I mean this *planet*. I think I have a solution.”

But the dowager was skeptical. “If you’re considering approaching another species, Arais, then I’m afraid it’s too soon. We chose the Krat after years of research, and it will take almost as long to decide on a substitute. We have to consider the economic as well as genetic consequences of any offer we make ....”

“I have a way around that,” Ari interrupted, her eyes shining. “Have you heard of the Seti?” Nobody had.

“I’m not surprised. They are a very new member of the Fusion. Their home world, I found out, was located at the edge of the sector.”

“Was?” Onduin quizzed.

“It was destroyed.” She held up a hand. “Hold on, let me finish. They were set upon by a species called the Lasc Prein ....”

“I’ve heard of them,” the dowager commented, her tone chill. Their reputation had obviously reached the ears of other Fusion members.

“Oh, who are they?” Erinan asked.

“Let Ari finish!”

“--who destroyed their planet after a prolonged series of disputes, wiping out the entire population.”

“What good are they to us if they’ve been destroyed?”

“Will you let me finish, Erin? While the population on the planet was wiped out, their Space Fleet wasn’t. Although extensively damaged, they escaped....” She paused and eyed them before completing her explanation. “...all eight thousand of them. All male.”

“How do you know about these people?”

“How genetically compatible are they?”

“Would they be willing to relocate to Fa Drunn?”

“Where are they now?”

The dowager tapped her spoon on the table, demanding silence, and fixed her niece with an eagle stare.

“How do you know about the Seti, Arais?”

Arais flushed. “We’ve ... ah ... met.”

“Met? Where?”

“At first on Helson V, then later on,” she faltered, “on one of the larger moons of a gas giant.”

The dowager frowned. “Moon? But wasn’t that where you were rescued from? Where you

were being kept prisoner?"

Ari opened her mouth to protest then closed it again. Prisoner, sex captive, love slave, was there really a difference?

Onduin caught her cousin's gaze. "Ari," she asked seriously, "what is the relationship between these Seti people and the ones who kept you prisoner?"

She took a deep breath. "They're one and the same."

"What?!"

"Preposterous."

"You expect us to talk to these people ...!"

"I know their commander," Ari shouted above the din. "He's a decent man."

"Did he know about your imprisonment?" Onduin demanded.

Know? He *instigated* it! Ari could only nod.

"Then how can we even negotiate with such barbarians? Ari, you can't be serious!"

"He had his reasons, Dew."

"She's obviously still brainwashed," Erinan muttered. "I think we should send her back to the monks."

"Enough." The one word from the dowager silenced everyone at the table. "Arais, Onduin makes a good point. How can we even countenance negotiating with a group of people that were responsible for such," she glanced at her daughters, "actions."

The look she sent Ari spoke volumes. She knew about her lost virginity and at least a little of what happened. "Who is their leader?"

"He's called Tangus. He used to be commander of the Seti Second Fleet."

"And do you trust him?"

"Yes," Ari said simply.

"They may not be a compatible species."

"I ... ah ... some preliminary xenotyping has already been done." Ari flushed. "I believe I brought back a data pad with analysis data." At the time she didn't know why she had grabbed the tablet off Tangus' desk. Perhaps, besides the clothes she had hurriedly changed into that night of her rescue, it was because it was the last thing he had touched. "The results are promising."

"Xenotyping? Has already been done?" This from a frowning Onduin in a mirror expression to her mother's. "Exactly how well did you know this Tangus, Ari?"

"He was trying to save his species as well," she countered. "He was just ... exploring options. Look, Aunt Inna, we can go round and round this argument for the next few years and still not reach a completely happy conclusion. But while there's still a chance, at least let me contact them and ask if they're interested in a new life on a new world."

"And do you think that, unlike the Krat, they will agree?"

Ari bit her lip. "I don't know."

\* \* \* \*

In the end Ari took the Fast Rake *Mirror Lake*, with a small but experienced combat team.

Unlike her last diplomatic transport, *Mirror Lake* was well-armed and shielded, and they made good time. Still, it took five days of constant jumping before they emerged as close as they could to the otherwise unknown NX-8903 system.

"Shields online," Captain Wresla barked the moment they entered the system. "Prime all weapons. Sensor data?"

The science officer was quick with her analysis. "We're picking up a detection grid around the second planet, captain."

Ari, strapped in next to the captain, frowned. "That's not right. Their base camp is set up on one of the gas giant's moons."

"All moons showing negative for life. But I *am* picking up habitation signs on the second planet."

Several heads turned in Ari's direction.

"It's your mission, my lady," Captain Wresla said. She was a capable no-nonsense woman, and Ari was beginning to like her. "What are your orders?"

"I think it's a decoy," Ari said. "One of those giant's moons should contain a compatible oxygen atmosphere."

"That would be the moon on the far side."

"Let's head for it," Wresla ordered. "Five percent light speed."

Ari didn't put it past Tangus' resourceful second-in-command to have manufactured the misdirection, apparently leading them to one place while they were concealed in another.

"Captain, I'm picking up some anomalous readings. Very faint, but there's a definite black body leakage trace in the vicinity."

"A deflection cloak," Wresla said with satisfaction. "You were right, my lady."

"Can this Rake land on the surface?"

"Yes, it can."

"Then look for disguised metal fabrications and a set of open fields next to two lakes near the equator."

While they narrowed in on the location, Ari thought hard. The dowager would have her head if she tried approaching the Seti without an adequate guard, but at the same time, she didn't want Tangus to think that she was attempting to dominate their interaction from the moment they met. Again. This was the second time she had escaped him, and the second time they would reunite, and to say she was unsure of her reception was an understatement.

She had an electronic copy of her planet's proposal, a variation of the one she had carried to the Krat which Onduin had ruthlessly re-edited in three frantic days, and she touched the pad's reassuring flatness, and the feel of something else she had brought along on impulse, through the material of her skirt as they descended. Wresla's helm had found a flat site near the major encampment, and it was only a question of minutes before they touched raw earth.

In the end, the question of an adequate guard was also taken out of her hands. The dowager had relayed strict instructions to Wresla, and the Captain remained obdurate on that point. She was either going to follow the Eminence's order or take Ari back to Fa Drunn at the highest available speed.

As she stood near the docking bay, the guard streamed in and formed around her. For this first visit, she had insisted on being the only person of any authority to meet with the Seti. It was enough that she was endangering the lives of eight of her fellow citizens. She refused to put any more in a possible firing line.

The *Mirror Lake* kept descending until Ari was sure they had dug through the ground and were now subterranean. Surely it didn't always take this long? Then she felt a shudder and resistance as splayed landing pads contacted solid ground and began taking the weight of the Rake.

The whine of the engines cut out just as the doors began sliding open.

Ari took a deep breath.

## Chapter Nine

There was always the chance that an enemy wouldn't be fooled by the trick shield Daurent had installed around the second planet, but Tanguis had expected a bit more reconnaissance before the unidentified ship began a more thorough search pattern, time for him to either plan an attack or evacuation. But the strange ship hadn't been fooled for a second. Instead of moving further into the system, it had turned and plotted a direct route to their base.

Neither Daurent nor his surveillance team had been able to shed any further light on the interloper. It was an unknown configuration, not a Lasc Prein nor, to their puzzlement, an apparent Lasc Prein variation either. A survey ship perhaps? Daurent shrugged his confusion.

This was the first bit of excitement they'd had in more than a month, and if he was honest with himself, Tanguis could have done with more monotony. He didn't know when the pain of Asha's loss would lessen, but drawing breath each morning when he woke up was like breathing in serrated blades, the torment searing his soul. Still, maybe a little adventure was exactly what he needed to get his mind off *her*.

If his men had considered him grim before, he was now irretrievably terse and abrupt. And he was tired of running. Even if it meant dying, he decided, he was through with fleeing every time he smelled a whiff of danger, although he would take as many of the Lasc Prein demons with him that he could.

The conjecture that this was another survey or scouting ship was dispelled when the stranger punctured through their deflection cloak and started heading for the field next to the barracks compound.

Tanguis' lips tightened as he marked their progress on the screens in their operations room.

"Daurent, pass out weapons and organize three blades in a crossfire pattern. We know where they're going to land. Let's get there before they do."

"Yes, commander."

Tanguis went back to his quarters for his jacket, shrugging it on while he took a quick look around. Idly, he walked over to a shelf and briefly caressed a piece of cloth. It was indigo and belonged to a two-piece outfit that Asha wore when she was still with him. For the millionth time he wondered what had happened to her, kicked himself mentally for being the biggest fool in the galaxy, and holstered a wave pistol.

Unsmiling, he headed for the field, watching as his troops dispersed into the surrounding vegetation. If the strangers did come with mayhem on their minds, they were in for a nasty surprise.

Tanguis watched the ship land with shielded eyes and naked envy. He had forgotten how beautiful a well-designed ship could look, the perfect combination of function and aesthetics. Their own fleet of craft had been patched and modified so many times they resembled nothing more than lumpy aggregates of riveted metal.

The smooth skin of the landing craft was sleek and burnished, bulging out in the center before gracefully curving underneath. Three slender legs emerged from its underside, ending in landing pads that adjusted itself to the terrain.

Then the clouds of dust it whipped up settled, and the engines cut out. Tanguis waited, Daurent by his side, tense and ready to give the command to fire. He hoped his soldiers could read his mind and only kill the attackers while leaving that glorious piece of machinery in one piece. The new *Strike*, he thought with grim humor.

A seam appeared in the ship's flawless skin, traced a rounded rectangle, and gracefully folded out and down into a shallow ramp.

Eight--no, nine--people headed out of the ship, but eight of them were in a run. Tangus tightened the hold on his pistol, but they merely formed a perimeter when they reached the ground, lifting their weapons in unison and pointing them at where his troops were hiding in the greenery.

These were combat troops, familiar in look and movement, but not the ninth person. She looked so incongruous he frowned and blinked his eyes.

A close-fitting dusky blue jacket hugged her figure, nipping in at the waist before flaring out and ending at her hips. Below that, she wore a long, full ivory skirt--a skirt!--and soft boots. Her hair was pulled back severely from her face and coiled at the back, although its distinctive copper color shone in the sunlight.

Copper! Hungrily, his eyes roamed her features, recognizing the large amber eyes and high cheekbones, the lush lips and slender throat. Asha! He stiffened in shock, then forced himself to relax, and shuttered the expression on his face.

From the ship, a voice blared.

"We come in peace and bring an envoy of the ruling party of the planet known as Fa Drunn."

Tangus heard the murmurs start up behind his back as the Cirlian Formal words sank in.

"We believe you have met her before--Lady Arais Innan Cybar sun-Abrengo, niece to the Dowager Eminence, ruler of Fa Drunn."

Lady? Niece? Ruler? Beside him, Daurent groaned. "I think we're in a lot of trouble, commander."

"They're only one ship, Daurent," Tangus countered in a low voice. "What can they do?" And wished he believed his own words.

The small group moved towards him, then parted, and *she* stepped forward.

"Tangus."

"Your name is obviously not Asha," he replied, "but I don't think I caught all of it."

"Arais will do." Her eyes searched his, looking for a splinter of softness, anything that would tell her he was glad to see her, that he had missed her, but she saw nothing.

"Niece to the ruler of ... a planet? A system?" *An empire?* And he could have cheerfully blown his brains out right there and then in the mild afternoon sunshine.

"A system, but it really only has one habitable planet." She looked around, trying to come up with a conversational opener. "But seeing where you settled your people, perhaps we should start exploring the two gas giants in our own system."

She attempted a smile, but it faltered in the face of his stoniness.

"Is there something we can do for you, your Highness?"

"The proper term on my world is 'my lady'."

He nodded curtly. "My lady, then. If you need supplies, we'll gladly share what little we have and see you on your way."

Hadn't he missed her at all? Who was this grim stranger standing in front of her, wounding her with each impersonal word and glance?

Daurent stepped forward, looking from one to the other. "Perhaps we can move somewhere a bit more comfortable?" There was no response. Daurent cleared his throat and tried again.

"Commander, I think the situation is ... ah ... under control. Perhaps we should stand down our teams?"

A tic worked in Tangus' jaw, and for a moment, Ari thought he was going to manhandle her up the ramp and back into her ship but he just clenched his fists.

"Yes. Do it."

With relief, the sub-commander signaled a stand-down, and at Ari's gesture, so did her team. But her eyes were still locked with Tangus, probing, seeking ... not finding.

"Commander, I really do believe we'll be more comfortable somewhere else."

Tangus thought quickly. The canteen was too open and they had not yet constructed any

smaller common rooms. Usually when groups wanted to get together, they chose a spare patch of outside ground and just sat down there. By the Creator, even having Ash-Arais on the moon was enough to expose, once again, their lack of preparedness.

"My quarters," he ground out, then turned on his heel and led the way, seemingly not caring if anyone followed.

Daurent watched his commander's stiff back, then turned to Ari.

"Your ... um ... rescue affected him," he told her as they slowly walked in his wake. "Don't think it didn't." No reply. "He's been trying to hold us together, but without any hope, it's getting more and more difficult." He didn't need to add that, with Ari's shiny and sleek vessel arriving, his task had just gotten that much harder. She could read between the lines.

Tangus' quarters. She had thought of nothing else for weeks, the angles of the recycled sheet-metal door etched into her memory.

She turned to the head of her three-person security team.

"Sergeant Gamlez, could you and your soldiers wait outside, please?"

She could tell the grizzled veteran, one of very few males who had reached his fifties, was not happy.

"My lady, I have strict orders from the dowager. If anything should happen to you ...."

"Nothing will happen to me." She laid a hand on his arm. "Please."

There was a charged silence.

"We'll stay outside," he finally conceded. "But I *will* enter if I hear anything suspicious."

"Agreed. Daurent?"

"I think I'll stay outside with your escort."

"Very well."

The quarters hadn't changed, although there was an untidiness to everything that hadn't been there before. She glanced briefly at the bed, remembering hot, willing nights of passion, then over at Tangus. He had seated himself in a chair facing the door, and as she approached, she once more felt as she had when she was his captive--unsure yet a little excited.

"I'm sorry I don't have any place more befitting your ... station," he said, watching her with hooded eyes.

"It never bothered me before," she replied.

"No, I suppose there were too many *other* things that bothered you." Did she realize how aloof she looked to him? Unapproachable and somehow above him while he groveled below on the dusty earth. He had never felt so dirty in his life. Why had she come? Revenge? To flaunt her obvious status in front of him and prove to him, in undeniable fashion, that she didn't need him anymore? He didn't need her for that. He had felt the truth in his bones for weeks now and there was nothing she could say that would make him feel any worse than he did already.

"Tangus, stop," she reproached gently. "Do you know why I'm here?"

No, he couldn't remain seated. His body demanded an outlet for his nervous energy. Swiftly he rose and moved to the window in the rear of his quarters, half-turning away from her. "Somehow I don't think it's to continue where we left off."

"No, but I was hoping for something better."

"Better?" He did glare at her then, his eyes searing chips of black stone. "What could be better, Asha ... Arais," he quickly corrected himself. Now even her name had been taken from him and replaced by something magnificent but achingly distant. "How can it be better to come back and remind me of just what I can no longer provide for my men? I hope you're not intending to make this a regular stop so we can work through our mutual frustrations, because quite frankly, as distracting as your presence is, the fallout from every visit would be more than I could possibly handle."

Mutual frustrations? Could he really stand there and called the intimacies they shared 'mutual frustrations'? She was almost tempted to call Gamlez in just so he could shoot some sense

into the head of the man she loved.

Man she loved. Still loved. Would always love. But certainly not if he was going to continue along this path.

"What if I could offer you and your men a way out?"

His laugh was full of cynicism. "Of course. Land in that wonderful ship of yours and do what, Arais? Take us away from all this?" His hand swept the recycled cargo bay that doubled as his quarters. "Help us perpetuate our species? Get justice against the Lasc Prein?"

She raised her voice over his objections. "I mentioned once the possibility of an enquiry sub-committee in the Fusion's Lower Convergence. The beginning of an investigation into what happened to the Seti home world."

"If we could ever find a sponsor."

"We are willing to sponsor you."

That stopped him. He looked for the jest but her expression was serious. "You?"

"I have spoken to the Dowager Eminence, ruler of Fa Drunn. My aunt," she explained.

"She's agreed to sponsor your request, in return for ...."

Ah, the catch. He knew there would be one. His lips twisted.

"Well, to put it simply, we need your men."

"As cattle? As slaves?" Then he winced as the word left his mouth.

"As partners," she countered. "As husbands. As fathers."

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

Arais pulled the pad out from her skirt pocket. "Your planet was destroyed in a single act of unspeakable violence, while ours is dying over generations. Almost six hundred years ago, the males of our species contracted a virus that led to extensive chromosomal damage. Our ancestors did what they could, saving genetic material for the future, but the constant cloning of material and recessive immune traits introduced an increasing degree of genetic error in succeeding generations. Quite simply, we have very few men left on our planet. We need more."

Breeding stock? Could it be true that Arais' people were searching for the same solution for a different problem?

"We are prepared to deal fairly," Arais continued. "All the conditions are outlined on this pad." She left it on his desk. "Re-education programs for those who want it, available land and opportunity for new business ventures. You'll find our medical and technological facilities are of the highest standard. Your men will want for nothing."

But Tangus saw her hesitation. "There's a condition isn't there?"

"Yes." The dowager had refused to compromise on this point. "At least eighty percent of your men must contract a parenting agreement with our citizens and produce at least one child within three years of such an agreement."

"And of course you know we are basically genetically compatible because ...."

He saw her flush, and inexplicably, it cheered him. So she wasn't as impassive as she appeared.

"Of course, I took Doctor Zehnda's initial analyses into account."

For the first time since he eyed that glorious ship descending, Tangus relaxed.

"What do these women of your planet look like? Do they look like you?"

"We have variations, the same as on any planet." She touched her coiffed hair. "My coloring is the most common. My cousin, Onduin, is as fair as sunlight, but there are many who are more exotic."

He leaned against the wall and folded his arms.

"But eighty percent? That's a very high proportion."

She hesitated, unsure. "I'm sorry, but Her Eminence is immovable on that point. Perhaps if some couples produced more than one child in the stipulated three years, we could negotiate something."



"And when would we have to give you an answer?"

Arais was floored by the question. In her musings, she had imagined handing the pad over to Tanguis and him jumping for joy and ordering immediate evacuations. Things weren't working out the way she had planned at all.

"I was hoping for a quick answer."

"I see."

She really didn't know men at all, Tanguis concluded. A whole planet of women who looked even vaguely like her? To have a life again, with new families and old friendships. *To not be forgotten*. Did she really think he could even hold back the stampede once he announced the proposal?

He straightened and walked over to her, circling her slowly, breathing in her scent. How he had missed her! Missed her like the beating of his heart or the pulsing of blood through his veins. But he had to ask one burning question, even though he knew he didn't want to hear the answer.

"And what about us?"

"Us?"

His heart broke in two as he circled.

"I presume that there's some marriage arranged for you. That's how things normally work, isn't it?" An arranged royal marriage that he was now sure he had ruined through the taking of her virginity. Part of him wanted to howl his despair, while another part wondered how he could offer himself as a substitute. Could he imagine waking up next to his woman for the rest of his life? Could he contemplate the alternative, the despair of the last two months compounded by decades? But most importantly, would she even want to have anything to do with him after what he had put her through?

He spun her around, holding her by her arms and looking deep into her soft amber eyes.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

She looked dazed. "Sorry?"

"Dammit, Asha-Arais, if you want me to beg, I'll do it. Put a collar around my neck, I'll do that too. I ... it took a long time but I realize now I can't live without you. I only wish we could have met under better circumstances. I wish I could have shown you the man I once was. I wish ... I wish many things. But as demanding as I was, as selfish as I was, believe me when I tell you that, no matter what happens, I will never stop loving you."

The transformation was astounding. Her eyes lit up and her face opened, releasing tension he hadn't realized was there until it was gone.

"If there's any way you could regard *me* as your prospective mate, I'll be *your* slave," he murmured as he bent and nuzzled her neck. "Anything, as long as I don't lose you again."

"I do have one condition," she whispered.

"Anything."

She moved away and reached into her skirt pocket, this time bringing out a length of silken cord. She lifted an eyebrow.

They didn't emerge from his quarters for more than an hour and the celebrations lasted well into the moon's long night.

The End