

Praise for the writing of Kassie Burns

Disaster Earth

WOW! This book is HOT and Kassie Burns has a way to grasp readers and hold their attention, I could not put this book down!

-- Linda B., The Romance Studio

The plot was well thought out and flowed smoothly. All the characters were well written and believable. This is the first book I have read by Ms. Burns, but it will not be the last.

-- Teresa, Fallen Angel Reviews

Disaster Earth is the type of story that will make you think. Mercy is your average woman living in a strange and frightful time... In addition to effortlessly drawing you into Noah and Mercy's story, Kassie Burns will make you scratch your head and wonder "What if?"

-- Trang Black, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

The type of sexual bond that was described is what romance is all about, in my opinion, and why I read it. Ms. Burns has created a most creative story and not only well worth the read, but one I don't think you will be letting go of.

-- Jo, Joyfully Reviewed

Disaster Earth is now available from Loose Id.

SEXUAL RX

Kassie Burns



Warning

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Kassie Burns

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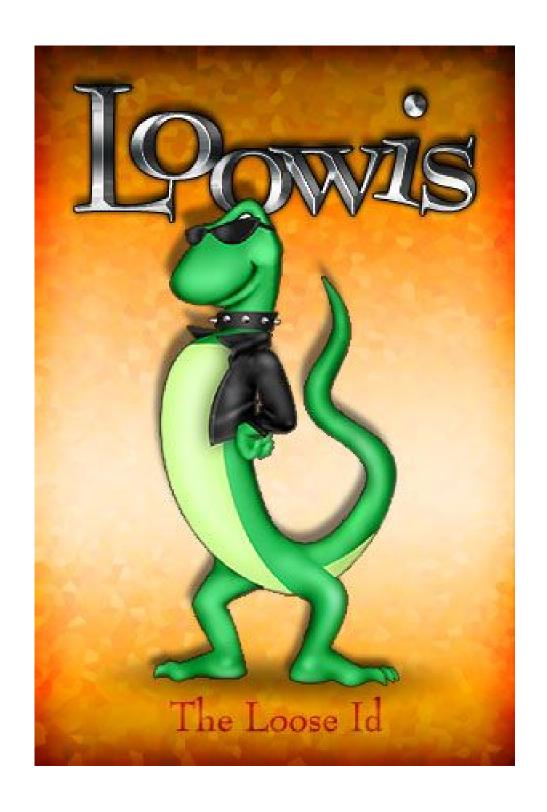
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Chapter One

"Lady, you can't --"

The woman getting out of the limo at the entrance to the United Earth building turned toward the security guard. Recognition dawned in the guard's eyes. His mouth snapped shut on the rebuke he'd been about to make.

Ignoring him, Rachel Herrington-Whyte pasted a serene smile on her face. Her celebrity smile. That's how she thought of it, anyway. She used that smile like a mask to hide the deep loneliness that never went away, the loneliness she'd felt her whole life, even when she was surrounded by people. The child of two famous parents, she could never remember a time when she'd appeared in public without attracting a crowd.

All around the plaza, tourists who were passing by began to point. Damn, they'd noticed her arrival. Rachel fought down a surge of panic when they started to press closer. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe, but she knew it wasn't because of her tight collar, or the encroaching crowd.

She'd just come from her doctor's office where she'd received the grimmest possible news: she was going to die.

Shaking, she drew in a breath. God, she hated this, hated the constant violation of her privacy, especially now when she needed privacy more than ever. Even with all her wealth, she couldn't buy the things she needed most.

Cameras appeared and lights flashed in her eyes as tourists snapped her picture. Turning her back on them, she kept her gaze focused straight ahead and marched across the plaza. She could hear each sharp click of her high heels on the concrete as she walked. Her friend Jen called them her "fuck me" heels: six-inch Starcosas in the wicked shade of smoldering crimson that was all the rage this season. They were sexy as hell and cost two thousand dollars a pair, provided you were one of the privileged few allowed into the

designer's private store in uptown Manhattan. She'd bought them to take her mind off her divorce.

The rest of her attire came straight off a designer's runway. Her chiffon Jeanne Louise skirt swished a fashionable three inches above her knees. Her pale cream blouse featured a tight-fitting collar of scalloped lace.

A wolf whistle came from the crowd. How vulgar! Ignoring the tourists who yelled her name, Rachel started up the broad steps toward the entrance. The guard scrambled to follow. "S-Sorry," he stuttered, jabbing at the button to open the heavy safety-glass doors.

As she stepped into the quiet sanctuary of the lobby, she glanced at him over her shoulder. "Don't worry. You were just doing your job."

Inside, silence enveloped her like a comforting cloak. Rachel had always loved the United Earth building. Out of a childhood barren of love, she retained one golden memory: The day her mother had brought her to hear her father speak in the main chamber. Only years later when she studied history at the private school where she grew up, did she realize she'd heard his inaugural speech as World President.

Today, as always, delegates from all over the globe filled the lobby space. Dressed in the colorful costumes of their native countries, they plotted diplomatic maneuvers in hushed whispers. On the far wall, above their heads, hung a map of the world surrounded by twin olive branches. The antique wall-hanging was the sole reminder of the days when this building had housed the United Nations headquarters. Nations were an obsolete concept in the twenty-third century.

As she crossed the lobby, various diplomats nudged each other and gave her sly glances. Irritated, she bit down on her lip. Why wouldn't people ever leave her alone? Why was that man pointing? Were her eyes puffy and red? She hoped not. A shudder ran through her as she imagined some holo-reporter gleefully telling the world that rich and famous heiress Rachel Herrington-Whyte had shown up in tears for the meeting to finalize her divorce from World Senator Jeremy Whyte.

If only she'd been crying because of that. Her divorce had paled to a minor inconvenience compared to her death sentence.

Squaring her shoulders, she marched up to the elevator. Some people looked away. Others stared with unabashed curiosity, even envy. Rachel hated the envy most of all. They imagined she lived some magical life of wealth and fame. Especially wealth. They never dreamed how ordinary she felt inside, or how empty her life had felt growing up with no parents.

She'd lost her famous father, the first World President, to terrorist assassins. Her mother, an actress of stunning beauty, had plunged into depression and then alcoholism after her husband's death. At the age of six, Rachel had stood beside both her parents' graves.

Death. She'd lived her whole life in its shadow, and today it had swooped down to grab her in its terrible jaws.

As the elevator doors closed behind her, Rachel punched the button for the thirtyninth floor. Thank heavens she was alone in the car. She slumped against the wall and listened to the pounding of her heart. A distorted reflection of her frightened face stared back at her in the polished metal of the wall, all huge blue eyes and wind-blown copper curls.

Only one hope remained. She must convince her soon-to-be ex-husband to help her, but that wouldn't be easy. What she intended to do to save her life would embarrass him politically. She imagined his face as she spoke the words: I'm going to have sex with one of the Evolved. A sexual healer.

No, he'd never support that.

All the way over to the United Earth building her mind had raced, rehearsing the plea she would make for her life. They'd been scheduled to meet today anyway, a cold formal meeting in his office with both their lawyers to sign the final divorce agreement. In her bitterness over his infidelities, she'd driven a hard bargain. She was glad of that now because it meant that today she could offer him a better settlement in return for his cooperation. Jeremy was nothing if not greedy. Surely if she named a figure high enough he'd come around. Money and power were all that mattered to him, and she was about to cut off the money. In response, he'd launched a bid for more power, beginning the groundwork for a campaign for World President.

Now, she feared he'd refuse to help her -- he might even try to stop her. As a diehard traditionalist, Jeremy resented the Evolved. He wasn't alone, either. Many people on Earth had begun to hate that advanced race. They were a constant reminder that the humans of Earth were second-rate.

Ever the consummate politician, Jeremy had sensed a shift in public opinion against the Evolved. His opposition to their presence on Earth had become more vocal, culminating in this new Evict the Evolved campaign, which he'd spearheaded.

Meanwhile, Mastror si Lor Canto, the foremost sexual healer of Cor'almere, would land on Earth tomorrow. Somehow, she had to get in his bed.

If only half the rumors are true ... Rachel shivered and pushed the troubling images of bizarre erotic practices out of her mind. The city hummed with gossip about the mysterious Evolved sexual priest, and as usual, minor government officials in the know had leaked all sorts of information. She'd heard he was only in his thirties in Earth years, yet already renowned on his home world, a darkly handsome man of immense sexual power. He was coming to Earth with an entourage of adepts from the healing temple on Cor'almere. The Evolved healing priests with him were his pupils, all men, strapping, handsome men at the peak of their sexual prowess. Her friends whispered and giggled about the visit over martinis at lunch, their minds abuzz with wild speculation. Some had started betting on who would get into bed with one of the visitors first. Others had protested that they wanted nothing to do with alien sexual practices.

Rachel fought down a tiny frisson of fear. She had to submit to those practices if she wanted a sexual healing. Besides, the Evolved were humans. Or had been human eons ago. How different could their sexual preferences be?

The elevator door opened with a soft whoosh. Straightening her back, she schooled her features into a look of regal indifference and marched across the thick carpet, past the heavy polished desk of Jeremy's office manager. As a senator from the North American continent, he had a large staff, of course, although most of them had their offices down the hall.

"Mrs. Herrington-Whyte!" Kay Richards looked up in surprise. "You're early."

"No need to announce me." As Rachel's hand touched the door handle, she paused to gather her composure. Confronting Jeremy always shook her up emotionally. Already she ached with the pain of rejection. Overwhelming loneliness pressed down on her as she stared at the door with unseeing eyes. She had a sudden, urgent need to tell Jeremy what had happened. Maybe this terrible news would rekindle the feelings they'd once had for each other. She ached for someone to stand by her, someone to hold her. Her stomach churned as if she might burst with the awful weight of the news.

Biting her lip, she reminded herself that Jeremy didn't love her. Once she told him her plan, he'd see her as a liability to his career. His ex-wife was planning to crawl into bed with an Evolved man to save her own skin. Had she really sunk so low? She pictured the outrage on Jeremy's face.

Tossing her head in defiance, she pushed the door open and strode into his office.

"What the --!" Jeremy twisted around in his chair to stare at her, evidently alerted by the click of the handle as the door opened. "Rachel? What are you doing here?"

Rachel stopped in front of his desk, struck by the mixture of surprise and guilt painted on his face. His short blond hair, usually slicked back, looked rumpled, and he'd pulled open the collar of his black silk suit. His brown eyes were a shade darker than usual, the pupils dilated. A vein pulsed in his temple.

Rachel heard a scrabbling sound on the other side of the desk.

"Got it!" Caroline Withers rose to her feet in front of Jeremy's chair, a pen grasped in her hand. Turning to face Rachel, she tugged on the skirt of her hip-hugging dress. "Hello! I just dropped this pen. So clumsy of me." An amused smile twitched at the corners of her lush, red-painted mouth. She brushed back the luxurious mass of her shining black hair and her hazel eyes narrowed. "Is something wrong? You look upset."

"I-I've had bad news," Rachel stuttered, thrown by the unexpected tableau in front of her. Caroline looked flushed, too, and her lipstick was smeared. What the hell was going on here?

Hell, she knew what was going on. Another affair. At least this one would be the last one. Their divorce would be final as soon as the lawyers arrived and they signed the papers. She would be glad to be free of him and his constant womanizing. Her only consolation was

5

the fact that his inability to keep it in his pants had made him the guilty party in the eyes of the media and damaged his political career. Perhaps there was some justice in the universe after all.

His damaged career was the reason he'd latched on to this Evict the Evolved campaign and made it his own. Not that she'd ever cared about the Evolved one way or another. Until today.

Jeremy sat up straighter in his chair. "Bad news?" He glanced up at Caroline. "Perhaps we could continue our discussion another day?" He arched an eyebrow at Rachel. "Not that it's really any of your business anymore, darling, but I've hired Caroline to handle the PR for my Evict the Evolved campaign. We were just discussing our strategy."

Directing a taunting smile at Rachel, Caroline leaned over the desk top. Fully displayed by her low-cut dress, the skin of her ample breasts glowed with the rosy flush of sexual arousal. She reached for a folder, picked it up, and brushed her fingers across Jeremy's shoulder. "I'll run these preliminary ideas past our creative staff. We should have a presentation ready by next week."

"Great." Jeremy waved a hand in dismissal.

As the raven-haired beauty strode past the desk, Rachel caught a whiff of her perfume. She recognized the scent. Enchanted Seduction.

The instant the door closed behind Caroline, Rachel rounded on her husband. "God, Jeremy, do you have a rule that you have to fuck every member of your staff?"

He held up a hand and offered her a smug smile. "You're early. If you walked in on something you didn't expect, you only have yourself to blame. Besides, we're about to end this farce of a marriage, so why waste energy arguing about it."

Why indeed? Scowling, Rachel tried to remember why she'd fallen in love with such pond scum. Once this handsome young man with the flashing brown eyes had swept her off her feet with promises of eternal love. She'd thought she'd said goodbye to loneliness forever. Then his promises had turned sour. Thank god, she'd found the courage to divorce him and start her life again.

Jeremy pursed his lips and shot her a curious glance. "You said you had bad news and you look like you've seen a ghost. What is it?"

The memory of her doctor's words returned, hitting her like a blow to the stomach. She sank into a chair in front of Jeremy's desk, the incident with Caroline momentarily forgotten. "I haven't been feeling well," she blurted, "so I went to see the doctor. Well, several doctors, actually. They ordered a ton of tests, and today my doctor told me the results. I have a brain tumor. A fatal brain tumor. He says I'm going to die."

Jeremy gaped at her in astonishment. "Die? You must be crazy. You look healthy to me."

"No, no." She shook her head. "The symptoms are still subtle, but there's no doubt. I've got a brain tumor."

He made a dismissive gesture. "So they'll operate."

"They can't. It's located in a part of the brain where they don't dare perform surgery. There's nothing the doctors can do."

"Nothing?" She could see the wheels spinning behind his cool gaze. "You're kidding me, right? I thought modern medical science could do anything."

She chewed on her lip, fighting back a dizzying mixture of frustration and cold fear. "I thought the same thing. Dr. Peters said that normally brain surgery was a routine procedure, but this tumor is in the wrong place! Any attempt to remove it would leave me a drooling vegetable." She wanted to burst into tears, climb into Jeremy's lap, and cuddle in his arms. However, their cuddling days had ended months ago.

Jeremy folded his arms across his chest. His expression had turned to revulsion as she described her prognosis. "A vegetable? You'd require round-the-clock nurses."

She shuddered. "I don't want to live like that!" Tears threatened, but she fought them back. This was not the time to succumb to her emotional turmoil. She had to stay calm and convince Jeremy that her plan would work.

"How awful!" Jeremy frowned as his hands vanished under the desk, adjusting something. A jolt of cold anger ran through Rachel. The bastard was zipping his zipper. He and Carolyn had been --

She swallowed. He'd never change.

After a moment, he stood up and walked around to where she sat. With an effort, she lifted her face and forced a smile. Bastard or not, she needed his help. His agreement would make it all so much easier. As a powerful government figure, Jeremy could call in favors that would open doors, even bedroom doors. Nevertheless, she winced inwardly at the thought of groveling before her estranged husband.

He bent and kissed her cheek. "What can I do? I'll do anything."

Rachel drew in a shaky breath. He'd given her the perfect opening. "There is one person who might be able to save me, Jeremy. I'm sure you've heard that Mastror si Lor Canto is coming to Earth."

"The sexual healer!" Jeremy's eyes flashed. "The Evolved sexual healer," he added, his mouth twisting with disgust. "You can't possibly be thinking --"

She furrowed her brow. She'd expected this reaction, but it still dismayed her. Had she always meant so little to Jeremy? Her life was at stake, but she could see the political calculations going on behind his angry gaze.

"Why not? What am I supposed to do? Lie down and wait to die? I've heard remarkable stories about these Evolved sexual healers and the cures they achieve." Hope and fear made her voice tremble. "Maybe he can save me."

"Do you understand what a sexual healer does?" Jeremy's face hardened. He straightened and took a step away from her, making it plain that her suggestion had repulsed him. "The media would have a field day with this one. It would be a disaster. I can hear the commentators gloating: The ex-wife of Jeremy Whyte, the leader of the Evict the Evolved campaign, in bed with the enemy. I'd be a laughingstock."

Rachel dug her nails into the palms of her hands and strove for calm. "That's just it. If you help me make contact with this man through diplomatic channels, we can keep it a secret. No one need ever know."

A muscle in Jeremy's jaw twitched. "You'd have to have sex with him. With one of *them*. It wouldn't be normal sex. I've heard their practices are disgusting and obscene."

"What have you heard?" She held her breath as she waited for his answer, intrigued and frightened at the same time.

He shot her an angry glance. "The Evolved like to keep their secrets, but some of them enjoy boasting about their sexual abilities." His lips curled. "They imagine they're more advanced than us in every way, so of course they believe they're better in bed than humans, too. Anyway, this sexual healing ritual came up in a conversation I had with one of them. He gave me a detailed and revolting description of what goes on. You can't possibly consider submitting yourself to such degradation."

Rachel tugged on her tight collar, suddenly hot. "That's my choice. It's my life that's at stake."

Jeremy's face turned crimson with rage. "Don't you realize I'm the head of this Evict the Evolved campaign? It's the keystone of my plan to build support for my run for World President in two years."

Rachel nodded. She knew he needed the boost, and the Evolved had become an easy target. In the past year, the Evolved had twice turned their haughty backs on a helpless humanity. First, they'd refused to provide a cure for a mutated virus that had swept through the cat population, killing thousands of beloved pets, although their scientists could certainly have stopped it. Then, they'd watched impassively while a hurricane battered the northeast American coastline despite the fact that they knew how to control the weather on their home world.

"As for keeping your sexual encounter secret, don't make me laugh," Jeremy continued. "The media tracks every movement either one of us makes. I wouldn't be surprised if rumors aren't swirling around the city already."

Rachel's hands clenched into fists. She glared up at him, barely able to believe his reaction. "That's it? I'm dying, and I've got one shot at survival, and you're worried about how it will affect your chances in the election? I've never heard anything so selfish and self-centered in my entire life."

"Self-centered?" Jeremy gave a bark of amused laughter. "Who are we kidding? You give new meaning to the term. You've never had to work a day in your life. The media has

fawned over you since the day you were born. Hell, the toughest decision you've ever made is what to wear. Meanwhile, I've had to work and claw my way up to where I am today."

"Yeah." Her lip curled in derision. "Really hard work, Jeremy. Find a wealthy, inexperienced heiress and seduce her into believing you're in love with her. I was eighteen when we met, young enough and naïve enough to believe you when you said you loved me. Then you used my connections and money to fuel your political career."

Why hadn't she seen Jeremy's true motives long ago? She'd been willfully blind for too many years, unwilling to admit her marriage was a huge mistake. She choked back the sob that rose in her throat. She had too much pride to let him see her distress. If only she'd done something worthwhile with her life, something she could hurl at him. However, she hadn't. She'd let him tell her what to do.

Those days were over. She was going to survive this and live to find out who Rachel Herrington really was. If she had to submit to some bizarre sexual procedure to survive -- well, she'd suffered years of emotional degradation from Jeremy's constant criticisms and snide remarks. How much worse could one night of physical debasement be?

Jeremy's mouth had twisted into a familiar sneer. "I could have made it without you. I should have made it without you."

"What does that mean?"

He folded his arms across his chest. "It means I share your assessment that this marriage was a huge mistake. Your father was a great man, and the world gave its love to his orphaned daughter, but if you take this step, people will turn against you. The Evolved were welcomed to this planet initially, but the backlash against them grows stronger every day."

"With the help of your campaign and its lies."

"Don't pretend you understand anything about world problems, you spoiled brat. All you care about is saving that pampered skin of yours. You're a liability to me. I'm glad we're signing the final papers today."

His heartless words slashed through her, sharp as a Samurai blade. Rachel forced a haughty smile to her face to cover her anguish. "Is it spoiled to want to live? Is it spoiled to want a husband who's more interested in me than in his ambitions?"

Jeremy's nostrils flared as he puffed out an angry breath. "I don't believe the doctors of Earth can't help you. You just don't want to face the inconvenience of entering a hospital for some protracted, painful treatment. You'd rather find an easy answer and spreading your legs in some other man's bed sounds like a damned easy answer. If you were still my wife. I'd forbid it."

"Then thank god the divorce is almost done. This isn't the middle ages. I won't be ordered around by you." Rachel stood to her feet and looked him in the eye. "I didn't want to do this, but I must. I hoped that somehow you could find it in your heart to support me and

9

use your connections to arrange a quiet meeting with this Mastror si Lor Canto for me. I will do it, though, even without your help."

"You're determined to have perverted sex with one of the Evolved?"

"If he'll have me."

A look of pure rage appeared on Jeremy's face. Rachel stiffened and backed off a step. If anything had remained of their marriage, it had just burned to ashes. Fine. So be it. For the past year, it'd been little more than a sham. She was choosing life.

"I'm leaving now," she said, her voice cold. "I'll be back in an hour with my lawyer to sign the papers. I expect you to behave in a civilized manner. After that, it will be over between us."

A muscle jumped in Jeremy's jaw. "Not if you sleep with that sexual healer, it won't. I warn you, Rachel, I'm serious about this Evict the Evolved campaign. I won't have my exwife whoring around with one of them."

Rachel lifted an eyebrow and summoned an indifferent look. "But darling, I don't see how you can stop me."

Chapter Two

Mastror si Lor Canto stood beside the arched floor-to-ceiling view port and surveyed the blue planet that hung in space below the ship, cloaked in a thick white veil of clouds. Like a mysterious and seductive woman, Earth kept her beauty hidden. What long-lost secrets did this world hold?

Lor shivered as the ship's ventilation system blew cool air on his damp skin. He'd just emerged from the bathing pool behind him. Drops of water slid over his muscled calves and made puddles at his feet.

"There it is." He pressed a hand against the reinforced glass, as if he would reach out and grasp the planet for his own. A soft aura of light flickered around his outstretched fingertips, the remnants of the energy he'd poured into healing the woman in the pool.

"Get back in here with me, you gorgeous man," Marea ri Dor Sesta called from where she lounged on a molded seat half-submerged in the steaming water. "I'm getting chill bumps looking at you."

He glanced over his shoulder at the tempting curves of her full breasts. The water lapped around her dark nipples, splashing against the hard little peaks whenever she moved her arms. Droplets glimmered on her dewy skin. The heated air rising from the pool carried the sweet scent of fragrant oils and something more, the dark, dusky tang of the sex they'd shared.

"Don't tell me you're cold, poor darling." He turned to face her and half smiled when her pupils immediately dilated at the sight of his full frontal nudity. He wondered if Earth women displayed the same excitement at the sight of an erect cock. He looked forward to finding out.

Dor's small pink tongue slipped between her lips and licked up a drop of water at the side of her mouth. "By the twelve suns, you're an impressive stud. Tell me again, why are you planning to waste your sexual brilliance on these barbaric Earth females?"

His bare feet padded on the tile floor of the bathing chamber as he walked back to the edge of the pool and gazed down at her. Her damp hair clung to her skull, revealing her lovely bone structure. The sweet curves of her sleek body proclaimed that she was yet another masterpiece, mute testimony to the genetic genius of the breeders who shaped their race. He remembered the taste of her skin, the moist heat of her silken sheath encasing him. A pity, really, that her depression had lifted so quickly. The ethical traditions of a sexual healer required him to break off physical intimacies once the healing was complete.

"The Earthlings have a civilization," he reminded Dor with a hint of impatience. Why were the Evolved so quick to give up on this world? He'd argued with the council for weeks before they'd consented to this experiment.

Dor splashed droplets of water at him with a teasing smile. "If you can call it that. They're not ready for galactic society. Really, I wonder why we bother with them."

Frowning, Lor considered his answer. He'd come to Earth on a serious mission. Yet he faced opposition not only from the increasingly hostile Earthlings, but also from many of his own kind, who considered Earth a colossal waste of time. The people of Earth had turned against the Evolved, angered by their relentless elitism. The Evolved were reconsidering their involvement with Earth as well, ready to leave this world to its own savage fate. The Twelve Planet Council might call him back home before he'd had a chance to complete his research.

Lor's jaw tightened. Mixiah's life depended on his success here. His revered alien friend would not survive much longer without an effective healing. He couldn't fail.

Shaking off his black thoughts, he managed a smile. "There is always something to learn about sexual intimacy, Dor, even from primitives. I have a theory I want to test out, and as a sexual healer, it's my duty to experience the ultimate union in all its possible forms."

Dor swam over to the edge of the pool and stood in the waist-high water. Rivulets gleamed under the soft overhead lights as they ran off her satiny skin. She reached up to touch the tip of his cock with a dripping finger. "Maybe. On the other hand, maybe you're secretly tired of making love with civilized women. Maybe you want to find out what it would be like to have a savage in your bed."

Lor held himself motionless as her fingers closed around the head of his cock and began a rhythmic squeezing. Fighting his instant arousal, he regarded her through narrowed eyes. She was beautiful -- and desirable -- there was no denying that. Like all the Evolved, she was a perfect physical specimen. Thick, dark hair framed a heart-shaped face with amber eyes. Golden-brown skin glowed with health. High, perky breasts with large, dark nipples jutted at him in wanton invitation. Her mons and her sleek, long thighs lay hidden beneath the

water, but he knew them, too. Earlier, he had stroked and kissed and caressed her from the tips of her toes to the top of her head.

He was a sexual healer, and Dor had needed healing to cure her deep depression. Now she was quite well, with a raging sexual libido to prove it.

He reached down, grasped her hand, and gently pulled it away from his swollen hardon. His penis twitched as if protesting what his mind had decided, but he ignored it. "Your healing is complete."

She balled her hands into fists and beat at the water, sending drops flying over the edge of the pool. "Damn you, Lor! How can you end it like this? You're cold. Cruel. I thought you had feelings for me."

Lor held up his hands, although her healthy anger pleased him -- it meant he'd done his work well. "I explained all of this to you before we started. A sexual healer cannot fall in love. The traditions of our order forbid it. We are required to end the relationship once the healing is concluded. How could I survive, emotionally or mentally, if I fell in love with every woman I slept with?" Inwardly, he sighed. They all believed they would be different. Each one imagined they would be the one who would claim his heart.

Always his duty had commanded that he hold himself aloof, apart from any permanent emotional involvement with the women he made love to. Until now. If he found the right woman on Earth, his encounter with her might be very different indeed. To achieve his goal with her, he might have to break the rules, for many reasons.

Dor cupped her breasts in both hands as if trying to tempt him with their fullness. "Do you think an Earth woman can satisfy you? Oh, I'm sure they'll be falling into line to get into your bed, but they're little more than barely civilized brutes."

He arched an eyebrow at her, secretly amused. "That's exactly the reason I want to bed one. I want to learn something new, something I believe only a true primitive can teach me."

She pouted at him. "What if I don't want to share you? You're far too sophisticated a lover to squander your talents on this backwater world, darling Lor. Besides, Evolved males differ from Earth males. You possess superior equipment. They may become frightened when they see that." She pointed between his legs.

He glanced down and smiled. "Are you suggesting it's so big it will scare them off?" His face sobered. "On the contrary, I find women like a challenge. Even so, I'm not so sure they'll be lining up to get into my bed as you put it. Earthlings are not as enamored of the Evolved as they once were. Haven't you kept up with the news? One of their most prominent leaders has started a campaign to evict us from their world."

"Evict us?" Dor's shocked laughter echoed through the chamber. "As if we'd care. Their barbaric world holds little of interest to anyone except a few cultural anthropologists." She sank down in the water until her chin rested on the surface. "I still don't understand why you insisted on coming here, darling Lor."

He half turned back toward the view port. "I hope to find something here."

Her mouth twisted in distaste. "Please do it quickly. If you're done treating me, I want to go home."

Lor shrugged off her petulant tone. He'd expected this reaction. "We shall go home, soon, I promise you."

A subdued clang, muted by the water, interrupted their conversation. They both turned their heads as the door to an underwater tunnel connecting the pool to another chamber opened.

"Mixiah!" Dor clapped her hands in delight when a long, lean shape emerged from the tunnel and swam into the pool. She threw a teasing glance at Lor. "At least there's still one reason to enjoy this trip."

Lor agreed. As always, his heart lifted at the sight of the massive Yenxian sage. Mixiah had shown a great deal of trust when he'd agreed to come on this journey and let Lor test his theory on him. Lor felt the weight of that responsibility, but he welcomed the opportunity to drink in the alien's renowned wisdom.

Mixiah was one of the most famous philosopher-sages of his race. With a rare combination of sagacity, insight, and diplomacy, he had brokered the Sa-jun Accord that had brought peace to the spiral arm of the galaxy. Now the revered alien was dying.

Dor smiled, watching Mixiah swim toward the surface. He broke the water with a jerk of his head, droplets spraying off his slick fur. He opened his snout, showing razor-sharp teeth, and gave a shrill cry of joy. His strong back legs and forearms propelled him with ease toward the steps out of the pool, and he lumbered up them on all fours, dripping water over the floor.

Lor swept his arm across his chest and made a bow of greeting. "Peace to you, Mixiah."

The alien reared up on his back legs, his bowl-shaped head swiveling to survey the chamber. Standing, he was half a head taller than Lor. Sleek silver fur, tipped in black, covered his body. The fur on his head, though, was pure white except for two patches of solid black fur that surrounded dark eyes glowing with profound wisdom. "Peace to you, Lor. I see we have arrived at Earth." His voice emerged from his furred throat as a growling ripple of sound before the translator that hung around his neck turned it into understandable speech.

Lor folded his arms across his bare chest, glad such a minor thing as human nudity did not offend the alien's sensibilities. He glanced toward the view port. "Yes."

"It appears a beautiful world from this distance."

Dor laughed. "That's because you can't see the squalor and savagery that passes for a civilization on that world. These humans are a dangerous race, violent and self-absorbed, ruled by instincts and not the rational mind."

Mixiah scratched at the soft fur on his cheek with a long talon. "They can learn other ways," he said with the calm serenity of his philosophical race. The Yenxians devoted their great intellects to probing the vast spiritual questions that haunted every sentient species. Beings from many star systems journeyed to Yenxia to sit at the feet of these gentle philosophers and contemplate the deepest mysteries of life.

Baring his white teeth in something like a human grin, Mixiah nodded at Lor. "I believe you think so, too. We both come here with great hope."

A lump rose in Lor's throat. Great hope, indeed. The fate of Mixiah's whole race might depend on what they found on Earth. Twenty galactic cycles ago, Yenxians had begun to suffer from a new disease. Scientists theorized the affliction was due to a mutated virus. No matter how the disease had started, it had swiftly spread through the population. The afflicted suffered progressive nerve degeneration, with eventual loss of bodily function and finally death.

. Normally, the disorder would have presented no problem to the physicians of the galaxy. Similar diseases had been successfully treated in other races. However, the Yenxians refused to take the necessary drugs or to submit to genetic therapy. Their complex world-view stressed the sacred inviolability of the physical body, and they would not bend, even to save their lives.

Luckily, they welcomed healers such as Lor who performed their work with pure energy. They perceived such healing as a joining with the universal flow of the creator's will. For the past three galactic cycles, Lor had fought to heal Mixiah. He'd succeeded in keeping the beloved philosopher in relatively good health, but only so long as he kept up the treatments each day. And little by little, he saw Mixiah regress. Even an Evolved healer could not generate enough energy to completely cure a Yenxian.

Still, Lor refused to give up. He was determined to find a way to expand his healing abilities. If he could tap into a deeper power, he could heal Mixiah and others like him. That quest had brought him to Earth. Over the past few years, he'd developed a mind-blowing theory about the savages of this world, and he intended to prove it on this trip.

If he were right, he would save a noble race. His victory would go beyond that, though. If he could show that Earthlings had some value, he could shock his own people out of their contented lethargy about their supposed genetic perfection. The universe belonged to those willing to grow and change. He had to prove to his people that they could learn, even from the most primitive race.

Turning his back to the pool, he stared at the blue and white world in the view port. From this distance, its cities were invisible although he knew teeming billions lived there. Millions and millions of women, many of them sick. His cock ached at the thought. He felt an almost physical need to jump back into the pool, grab Dor, and plunge into her. The thought of so much sickness, so much hurt crying out for healing, made his blood hot with the compulsion to stroke, to caress, to heal.

"Relax, my friend." A growl rumbled near his ear. The Yenxian laid a heavy, furred hand on his shoulder. "I have faith that the one you seek is below. The universe desires balance in all things. We have a need, so an answer will come."

Lor admired Mixiah's resolute calm in the face of possible death. Lor couldn't accept defeat. The strong emotions surging through him made his voice hoarse. "We need so much. Healing for your people. A renewed vision for mine. Can I really hope to find it all in the arms of one woman?"

Mixiah opened his mouth to answer, but a whoosh from the chamber's door interrupted him. Mastror si Horet Romea strode into the room, his young, handsome face alight with excitement. "The women of Earth want to greet us with open arms, Lor! The moment we dropped out of null space and opened a communications channel, we were bombarded with invitations to receptions and dinners and parties." He rubbed his hands together. "We should have our choice of women to bed."

Dor swam to the edge of the pool and pulled herself out of the water. Horet's eyes widened in appreciation as he drank in her nude form. She slid a hand slowly over one damp hip. "It's a pity you weren't involved in healing me, Horet."

He made a stiff bow. "You had the attentions of a master, Lady Dor."

Dor padded over to Lor, her hips swaying as she walked, her breasts gently bouncing. "And I appreciated them. Was my case difficult, then?"

Lor exchanged an amused look with Horet. "No. Healing our own people is not difficult. With our pure genetic makeup, sickness is a rare occurrence, and our bodies heal quickly. The rituals I perform only speed the process. But our Yenxian friends -- "He pointed at Mixiah. "-- are a different story. I'll need to nearly double my healing energies to stop this degenerative affliction. To do that, I must activate parts of my brain that are dormant -- the primitive regions we stopped using as we evolved genetically."

He could see the face Dor made reflected in the thick plastiglass. "How disgusting. Now I understand why you've come to Earth. These people still use those parts of their brains, don't they? They've done nothing at all to improve their genetics."

Horet laughed. "They've barely mastered the necessary science. In addition, many of their religions forbid genetic engineering. They believe it's tampering with God's creation."

Dor shot a glance at Mixiah. "Your people would understand that. You feel much the same way. Do you think the Evolved went against God's will when we altered our genetic makeup in the pursuit of perfection?"

The alien's wise gaze glowed with gentle light. "The Great Creator made a universe full of infinite variety for a reason. There is more than one path to enlightenment. I would not have sought the help of the noble Mastror si Lor Canto if I thought the Evolved had chosen a wrong path."

Horet folded his arms across his chest and frowned at his master. "All my life I've been told our scientists purified our genetics. Yet we've come to Earth because they possess the original human genome."

Lor looked from his disciple's troubled face to the calm expression of the Yenxian. "Our people wanted to become perfect. We sought that perfection through genetics but what did we really achieve?"

"If you're not perfect, you're close enough for me." Dor's voice lowered to a silky purr as she circled Lor like a naked predator. Her long fingers brushed across the sharply defined muscles of his bare chest. "I, for one, see no need for improvement. But I understand your desire to help the Yenxians." She smiled at Mixiah. "What about all those poor benighted people down there, though. What will they get out of this?"

Lor shrugged. "Precious little. I hope to learn how to trigger the dormant part of my brain by studying their primitive emotions, but I'm not about to teach our healing techniques to any of them." He gave a curt laugh at the thought. "No doubt, I'll have to engage in the healing ritual with one or two of their women, though. That will give me more insight into how their energy systems function."

"Poor Lor. So hard-working." Dor ran her fingers through his hair and smiled over at Horet. "You should share those arduous duties with your staff."

"Perhaps."

She tapped a thoughtful finger against her pump lips. "And that's it? You're going to heal one or two women to gain the knowledge we need and then we'll leave. We're not going to teach these people any of our scientific wisdom? It sounds as if they need it."

Lor lifted his eyebrows. Dor could have waited for his return from this trip for her healing. Instead, she'd insisted on coming on this journey, but apparently, she hadn't bothered to learn anything about Earth. Typical Evolved superiority, he supposed. "The council has issued an edict forbidding our people to offer them any of our advanced science."

Dor let a slight frown mar the perfection of her brow. "That seems cruel."

Damnation, hadn't the woman studied any galactic history? Lor shook his head at her. "Contact between unequal cultures is a dangerous thing. A superior culture always destroys an inferior one. Many say it was a mistake to even land here, but the explorers who found this world were shocked to discover the Earthlings were descended from Evolved who crashed eons ago. They felt as if they were on a rescue mission."

"Really?" Dor looked amused. "A rescue mission that was several million years late."

Lor sighed. "True. Moreover, our contact with them has done tremendous harm, I'm afraid. Already many of their planet's cultures teeter on the verge of extinction. The knowledge of our existence has destroyed their most sacred beliefs, leaving them adrift. That's why many of them hate us. They've started this Evict the Evolved movement to force us to leave their world forever."

17

"Then we should leave," Dor declared with a careless wave of her hand. "I suppose you will insist on going to some of these parties and fucking a few of the women, even though you'll be in clear violation of the edict against sharing superior technology." Her eyes sparkling, she gestured at his penis.

His mouth curved up at her jest. "I'm only looking for one," he murmured. "One case to test my theory that these people, as primitive as they are, have their own latent sexual healers. After all, we were originally one race."

Dor tossed her head. "Eons ago. That hardly counts."

Her unconscious elitism irritated him. "We can't deny that we're related to these Earthlings."

"I've no interest in them one way or the other, darling. I'm here because this was the only time you had available to treat me. And that has certainly made it all worthwhile." She blew him a kiss.

He inclined his head to acknowledge the compliment.

"Still I can't help but think this is ironic," she continued. "You're the greatest sexual healer the Evolved have ever produced, and from what you're telling me, you've actually come to Earth seeking a more powerful healer."

"Lor does this for my people," Mixiah spread his furry arms wide, and his dark eyes shone with gratitude. "You have a true healer's heart. Healing comes from unity not from separation."

Embarrassed, Lor glanced again at the view port. He'd always believed that. Hadn't he spent his life using the powerful energies released by a passionate sexual union to heal? Still, Dor was right. On Earth, he would become the needy one. To keep the balance Mixiah had mentioned earlier, he needed to offer something back. Perhaps he should concentrate on finding a woman suitable for his experiment who was also ill. If he healed her, that would restore the balance.

The idea pleased him, and he scanned the planet below with renewed interest. While they'd been talking, the ship had begun its descent. He could see the checkered pattern of fields, the tall towers of a city. "Wise words, my friend." He tilted his head at the swiftly passing scenery. "Please pray I find the woman I'm searching for."

Mixiah bared his gleaming white teeth in imitation of a human grin. "All will be well. Fate moves to bring the universe to ultimate harmony, and fate had led us here. Somewhere on this world, a woman waits, ignorant of passion. You will awaken her, ravish her, and release the glorious healing energy these people do not even suspect they possess."

A tall order. Lor straightened his shoulders. First, he had to find the right woman, and then he'd have to make love to her, work with her, perhaps spend years with her learning how to use this newfound power, provided it really did exist. Who would she be?

18 Kassie Burns

Not for the first time, he wished he shared Mixiah's absolute faith in some power behind the universe. Fate was leading him toward a commitment to a woman -- something he'd never expected in his life. Did he dare to hope she'd be someone he could love?

Chapter Three

Rachel stood at the balcony railing and gazed out at the heart of Manhattan. Behind her, Jen Madison, the ruling society lioness of New York, sank into a padded lounge chair and beckoned a waiter to bring her a drink. The caterers were in the final stages of preparing for Jen's dinner party that evening, and the wait staff had already poured the wine.

The city's towers gleamed in the golden glow of the setting sun. From her high vantage point, Rachel spotted landmarks she loved, places that beckoned with the promise of joy and adventure. Here, fifteen stories above the clogged city streets, the air was fresher and the breezes carried a hint of the sea. Far below, the city smelled of human sweat, dirty concrete, and cold steel.

She drew in a deep breath. The city throbbed with life, even stank of life, taunting her with the realization that she had only a few weeks left to explore its wonders.

Perhaps because of her early encounters with death, Rachel had loved to study philosophy at school. Humanity's unanswered questions about the meaning of life fascinated her. Studying the teachings of great thinkers such as Socrates and Plato, she'd pondered the age-old question of death in an abstract, intellectual way. What would she do if she learned she were about to die? She'd imagined a final fling with some outrageously handsome man or going on a devil-may-care trip around the world to sample its forbidden pleasures.

These days her trite, youthful thoughts tormented her. Had she really been that shallow? The shock of her brutal death sentence was forcing her to re-evaluate her life, and she found it painfully lacking. She'd lived a sheltered existence, safe in a cocoon spun by the fortune her parents had left behind, unaware of the harsh realities others faced. Advisers and guardians had always scrambled to find the answer to her every problem. They'd sought her approval by spending her money to assure her constant happiness.

How empty that supposed happiness had proven. She dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands. She had to live, if only to prove that she could find some useful purpose in life. Surely, fate would give her a second chance. She'd take her cursed fortune and give it to the poor, or do something else worthwhile with it.

Money couldn't save her from this problem, though. In the past few days, her thoughts had attained a sharp new focus. She'd wasted precious years sitting back and letting life drift by. No more. The reality of her imminent demise made her stomach clench in fear and her temples pound.

Her hammering pulse carried one unchanging message back to her brain: She was still alive. As long as she drew breath, she'd keep searching for a cure. Whatever it took. Damn Jeremy and his hypocritical pretense at holding the high moral ground. How dare he look down his long, narrow nose at her for her decision to seek sex with an Evolved? In the three years of their marriage, he'd betrayed her with more affairs than she could count. Why, she'd even caught him in a dalliance with Carolyn a mere hour before the scheduled signing of their final divorce papers. Of course, he couldn't have known she'd arrive so early, but it showed his total lack of respect for her.

For a fleeting moment she felt sorry they were divorced. Hell, she'd love to pay him back for the pain he'd caused her by officially cuckolding him with this Evolved healer.

Nursing that spark of anger, she rested her elbows on the edge of the balcony railing and gazed into the man-made canyons below. Anger fueled her courage, and she'd need it tonight. Jen's party would give her a chance to seduce Mastror si Lor Canto.

Only this Evolved healer could save her. God help her, she'd never seduced anyone. Her life depended on her ability to attract this mysterious healer. How was she going to do that? Beyond a doubt, he was a man of vast sexual experience. A man who was more than human. Since he'd landed, women had swarmed after him. Why would he want her?

"I can't do it. He won't want me." Tugging for the one-hundredth time at the hem of her short black dress, she straightened up and turned to face Jen,

"Nonsense!" Jen gave her a long, appraising stare. Her best friend sat curled in a lounge chair with the idle grace of a sleek cat. Holding a drink in one hand, she oozed seductive glamour in a forest-green gown that left one shoulder bare. "You look smashing. Sexy and provocative. What have you done to your hair?"

"Just some highlights." Rachel flicked a stray curl out of her eyes. "Burnished copper and bamboo, that's what the stylist called it."

"I like it." Jen nodded approval, tapping a manicured fingernail against her lower lip. The diamonds that glittered on her fingers proclaimed her status as a rich society hostess. "The red and gold brings out the blue in your eyes."

Rachel repressed a snort. "That and about six applications of mascara." She adjusted one of the thin straps that kept her plunging neckline from disappearing altogether. Her breasts swelled over the silky bodice and threatened to spill free.

"Don't worry," Jen urged. "You're beautiful. What's that word the columnists are always using to describe you? Oh, yes, ethereal. I'd kill for your flawless complexion. You look like a pale angel, all in black. The sight of you will enchant Mastror si Lor Canto. He'll probably beg for the chance to stick that magical dick of his in you."

Rachel winced at the bluntness of Jen's words. Yet here she stood, gussied up like some high-class hooker in a postage stamp of a dress that barely covered the essentials and clung to every curve as if she'd been shrink-wrapped in it. Of course, that was the idea. She had to make this man want her somehow, and a sexy body seemed the logical place to start.

The flesh between her legs pulsed as her mind flashed forward to her ultimate goal: his body covering hers, his cock sliding into her. She drew in a shaky breath. Sexual healing. How bad could it be?

"Here, join me in a drink." Jen plucked a wineglass from the tray the waiter had left on the table and thrust it into Rachel's hand. "Slug it down. You look like you need it."

Rachel gripped the glass to hide a sudden bout of the shakes and took a small sip. *Savor it, it may be your last*, a small voice whispered in the back of her mind. The tremors in her hands struck without warning, coming and going like some fickle wind. They had been the first symptom, the one that had driven her to her doctor's office. He'd warned her it wouldn't be the last. First her hands, then her arms, her legs. Unless she could stop it, she'd lose control of her whole body. She would suffer a painful and humiliating death.

How could she be dying? Most of the time, she barely felt sick except for little tremors that came and went. Mostly she felt fine, for hours at a time. Daily workouts with her personal trainer kept her weight under control and her body in tip-top shape. She loved those workouts, loved the strong, sculpted body they gave her, the sense of confidence and power in her stance and in her walk.

Fake power, she'd realized in the past few days. Real power came from controlling your own destiny. Choosing your own path. Well, she chose to seduce this man. She'd make it an act of courage, not desperation. She'd do it with style, pour her heart and soul into this seduction, open herself up, and offer herself to this man in a way she'd never done with anyone, not even Jeremy. Especially not Jeremy, that loser.

She ran a hand through her hair. Thick, silky curls slipped through her fingers. She was thankful that her skin glowed with the tan she'd gotten while lying under the hot Mexican sun where she'd fled to recover after making the decision to divorce Jeremy. As for her eyes, she'd stared in the mirror, searching deep into their depths for some faint shadow of death, but they looked back at her filled only with questions.

Nothing showed yet, nothing to give her away to this Evolved healer. She had to get him enamored of her before she revealed her illness. So far, her worst symptom was exhaustion. When she got tired, the shakes came. Tired and shaky. That was why she'd gone to the doctor. She hadn't been worried, not really. Now and then, exhaustion overwhelmed

everyone. It was part of modern life, the price of a stress-filled marriage and life in the fast lane.

The fast lane to the grave.

Stop it! Rachel blinked away a sudden vision of a headstone with her name carved on it. Clutching her drink in shaking hands, she gulped down a healthy slug. The wine burned her throat and spread heat through her middle. The vision faded. Besides, no one was buried in a grave anymore. Twenty-third century Earth was too crowded for graves. Cremation, that was the thing. Maybe she should have her ashes rocketed into outer space and scattered among the stars. It sounded almost romantic.

"You've got that morbid look on your face again." Jen shook a manicured finger at her. "Cheer up, he'll be here soon."

A sharp surge of panic twisted Rachel's insides. Jen wouldn't be so cheery if she were the one staring at death. "What if he doesn't come," she mumbled.

"I promise you, he's coming." Jen made a grand gesture at the metropolis beyond the balcony. "New York is still the greatest city on Earth, and my parties are the best in New York. Even the Evolved feel flattered to get an invitation from me. They know only the elite of New York society are invited to my dinners." A triumphant smile curved her lips. "He sent me a very gracious note of acceptance. He said my fame as a hostess had spread even to Cor'almere."

Rachel had to chuckle at that. Jen's eyes shone, as if that constituted a tremendous honor. "Wow!" she murmured, running a finger around the cold rim of her glass. "How your reputation has grown! They've heard of you on the capitol world of the Evolved."

A brief silence fell. Rachel tried to imagine Cor'almere, a world over a thousand light years from Earth, a world at least a millennium advanced beyond their own. Although the Evolved had first landed on Earth more than fifty years ago, no human had ever journeyed to Cor'almere. The Evolved didn't allow Earthlings to visit any of their worlds. Deemed too backward, too primitive to join civilized galactic society, Earthlings stayed on Earth, and the Evolved came to Earth like anthropologists visiting a stone-age tribe. They were compassionate but distant, sharing only tiny bits of their advanced technology and culture and keeping the rest secret.

"I'll bet they can heal anything," Rachel said suddenly. "I'll bet they don't even have disease. Some people think they're immortal."

"So I've heard." Jen's eyes grew even brighter. She licked her lips. "How delicious! Imagine having an immortal lover. He'd remember your shared nights of passion forever. But what does Jeremy think about your plan for a cure?"

Rachel frowned. Jeremy! What did she care what he thought? He had turned into a reactionary with this campaign to evict the Evolved.

Noting her reaction, Jen arched one penciled eyebrow and took a sip of her drink. "Sorry! I shouldn't have mentioned his name. I know the wounds from your divorce are still fresh. You two are at the bitter stage."

Rachel made a face. "I think we'll always be at the bitter stage."

"Darling, it passes." Jen waved a hand. "I have three ex-husbands. I should know. You should try to stay friends with Jeremy despite the divorce. I never liked him personally, but he's a powerful man."

"Because I helped him become one." A familiar resentment washed over Rachel. Jeremy was where he was today because of her connections, her family's reputation, and her fortune. His idiotic campaign might well succeed, and that would be a tremendous loss to Earth. The very thought made her feel guilty. She needed to do something right with her life before she died.

"He didn't deserve you, darling." Jen lifted her glass in a toast.

Rachel raised her own glass and forced a smile. She should celebrate her freedom from Jeremy. At least she didn't have to deal with him at her side during this party. His presence would have destroyed her chances. Even if he had agreed in principle, he would have found some way to sabotage her. No man wanted to watch his wife attempting to seduce another man, especially a man famed for his sexual prowess.

A sexual adept. A thousand questions teemed in her mind. Would such a man have intense sexual desires? Would he take her with raw physical passion and nothing else? On the other hand, did there have to be some small measure of love in the sex for healing to take place?

No, best not to think about love after Jeremy's betrayals. She'd settle for warm arms around her again, and a hard, male body next to her. Inside her.

A flush spread prickly heat over her skin as erotic images rose in her imagination. Her pussy throbbed as if anticipating the first thrust, and her nipples tightened. What if Jeremy was right and this sexual healing ritual involved something unspeakably kinky? Like whips and chains and god knew what else. Her breath caught in her throat, and her head whirled with lurid possibilities. At its best, sex with Jeremy had been — she searched her mind for the right word — thorough. Yes, that was it, thorough. He'd made love as if he'd had a checklist and he was marking it off item by item: kiss her, check; stimulate her nipples, check; insert a finger to see if she's wet, check; thrust penis inside and maintain contact for at least five minutes, check; have orgasm, check.

Then, mission complete, he would collapse on his side of the bed and begin to snore.

This sexual healer would want more, much more. She knew that much, even without the wild rumors that were circulating ahead of his arrival. Sex with him would be hot, unpredictable, and passionate.

She gripped her drink in shaking hands. She had a bad case of nerves. Or else the tremors had returned. This fresh evidence of her tumor sobered her. A night of passion seemed a ridiculously low price to pay for life. What could a few hours of uninhibited sex cost her? Other women tumbled in and out of their lovers' beds all the time. Other women. More experienced women. Her competition.

She sighed. "Who else have you invited? I didn't even ask."

"Just five other power couples, and you and me and Lor."

"That's thirteen," Rachel said in a startled voice.

Jen laughed. "So it is. I never thought of that. Maybe we should call up Jeremy after all."

"No!" Rachel smoothed her skirt over her thighs, intensely conscious of the fact that she wore no underwear. The skirt only came to midthigh. When she sat down, it hitched up dangerously high, exposing soft, forbidden flesh. But then, that was the idea. "I couldn't stand it if he were here. I can imagine him looking down his nose while I display myself like a piece of merchandise."

She swallowed, surprised at the hostility in her voice. Jeremy had failed her. She was lucky to be here, lucky to have a friend like Jen who had connections with the Evolved. As soon as she'd heard of her plight, Jen had offered to throw a party and invite the healer so Rachel could meet him.

She didn't need Jeremy to save her after all. She'd never really needed him. Thank God, he'd agreed to a divorce before she'd found out she was dying or he would have wanted to hang on to her, hoping to inherit her fortune.

Jen lifted her eyebrows and gave a sophisticated little laugh. "Jeremy was never right for you. I told you so before you married him. You only fell for him because you'd had no real experience with men. Those trustees of yours were wrong to keep you so sheltered in those exclusive boarding schools. I daresay a little hot sex with someone like this Mastror si Lor Canto will be an eye-opener for you."

"Jen!" Rachel almost choked in surprise. She forced a smile. "Hot sex, indeed! My biggest worry right now is that I'll make a fool of myself in bed. Jeremy is the only man I've ever slept with."

"Really? I suspected as much. Well, this experience will give you a new lease on life in more ways than one."

"Oh, please." Rachel was about to argue the point when she caught the twinkle in Jen's eye. Maybe her friend was only trying to get her mind off her nerves. "I suspect one man is much like another."

Jen threw back her head and let loose with a full-throated laugh. "Darling, you do have a lot to learn."

Rachel's heart sank. What if the Evolved healer found her too naïve to be sexy? She decided to steer the conversation away from sex. "Jeremy's despicable. The Evolved frighten him and make him feel inferior, so his solution is to kick them off the planet. He doesn't care about what we could learn from them. I'll admit they've only granted us a few crumbs of knowledge so far, but even those few crumbs are helpful. No, it's all about keeping a tight grip on power for him."

As she spoke, she turned her head to stare into Jen's apartment. The French doors stood open and inside the caterers moved about, putting the finishing touches on the bouquets of flowers adorning the dining room table. Four waiters, elegant in velvet black suits and white gloves, held silver trays loaded with appetizers and drinks. Ronald, Jen's longtime butler, paced across the living room, headed for the foyer. The guests should start arriving at any moment.

Jen chuckled and patted at a stray curl of her dark chestnut hair. "The Evolved frighten a lot of people. Just think of it. Once we were the same race, but they advanced for hundreds of thousands of years while we stayed the same. They're more intelligent. With superhuman powers. And yet --" Jen traced the full curve of her lower lip with one finger. "-- still with the most basic human appetites." Her black eyes danced with anticipation.

Rachel raised a curious eyebrow. Had Jen slept with one of the off-world humans? She longed to pump her for more information, but there was no time. Inside the deluxe Manhattan apartment, a doorbell chimed. The staff moved into position. The first guests were at the door. In another moment, Jen would sweep away, elegant in her long sheath, to host yet another successful party.

Jen laid a soft white hand on Rachel's bare arm, her eyes suddenly serious. "The evening's about to start, darling. Just remember, the Evolved may be more advanced, but they're still human. A man is a man, the universe over. And a man really only wants one thing. Good hot sex."

Rachel's heart thumped in her chest. Margery Beckworth and her husband had stepped into the living room. Margery's eyes narrowed as she spotted Rachel in her scanty dress. What would everyone think of her when she began to flaunt her sexuality before the healer? She shook off the worry and focused on Jen. "I'll do my best to radiate sex vibes. But I'm afraid the gap between us is immense."

"Perhaps." Jen's smile turned enigmatic. "They'd like us to think so. The plumbing hasn't changed, though. Part A still fits into part B. And you, my dear, have a very desirable part B."

"Thanks." Rachel patted at her hair. "I hope he's attractive at least."

"Don't worry. I've seen pictures. He's quite attractive. Remember, the Evolved do have certain powers. Their very sophistication makes them crave the, ah, shall we say, earthy pleasures. Don't forget that."

"What --" Rachel cut off her question as her friend put down her drink and glided away, a bright smile already on her face. More people crowed into the living room. Waiters started to circulate among the chatting couples, offering drinks and tidbits of elegantly prepared food.

Already Jen was in the middle of the gathering, kissing cheeks, her mellow voice offering greetings, her dark eyes flashing as she exuded charm. Jen delighted in the social whirl. She could seduce this Evolved healer without batting an eye.

Rachel took a final sip of her wine, praying the alcohol would give her courage. Shoulders back, knockers up, she told herself. She had to move, had to leave the safety of the balcony and join the party. Had to chat and laugh and act vivacious and carefree.

She took a step forward and paused. In the living room, conversation died. Heads turned toward the entrance. As if by magic, a path parted in the center of the room and Jen moved through it, headed for the foyer.

He's here. Rachel pressed a hand to the bare skin of her throat. Her pulse beat against her palm in a wild rhythm. Her heartbeat. Life. She was doing this to survive. She had to remember that.

Jen vanished into the foyer. A moment later, she re-emerged, a smile of pleasure curving her red-painted lips, one hand lightly resting on the arm of a man as she guided him into the living room.

"Everyone," she announced with a small wave of one hand, "please welcome Mastror si Lor Canto."

Breathless, Rachel advanced through the French doors and hesitated at the back of the living room. The Evolved healer faced her at the other end of the room. He started straight at her down the open space that people had made for Jen's passage.

Their eyes met. His were aquamarine, the color of a calm green sea in the pale blue and gold light of morning. Fringed by thick, dark lashes, they glowed with inner light. Rachel felt captivated. Was it healing energy she saw shining in his gaze? Did he truly hold such awesome power within his body? Slowly, she became aware that his stare traveled over her from head to toe with undisguised sexual interest. She began to walk forward, moving in slow motion but drawn by his gaze as if by a magnet. His incredible eyes filled her awareness. He scanned her curves with a blatant stare that wandered from her mouth to her breasts to her thighs, sheathed in the scanty dress.

Heart pounding, she held her head high and returned his bold look. It was hard to ignore those compelling eyes, but the rest of him was worth noticing, too. The man radiated a powerful energy. Even from across the room, it slammed into her, stirring currents of pleasure throughout her body.

Her excitement mounting, Rachel surveyed him with the same thoroughness he was bestowing on her. He might be from a more advanced civilization, but he made her think of an ancient warrior with his strong cheekbones, high forehead, and square chin. A dimple set

squarely in the middle softened the chin, though, as did the flash of white teeth in a wide, sensual mouth. He wore his thick, dark hair pulled back into a sexy ponytail at the base of his neck.

And his body. His body made her blood burn hot with unexpected desire. He might as well be naked. Like all the Evolved males, he wore nothing but a codpiece to cover his privates, soft leather boots, and a lot of jewelry. A jeweled loin belt girdled his hips and held his white codpiece in place. Golden arm bands encircled his muscular biceps and a heavy gold chain hung around his neck.

Licking her lips, she moved toward him. He'd completed his own slow, provocative scan of her body, and their gazes locked again. Intelligence gleamed in those sea-green depths, along with an ironic amusement. With tantalizing deliberation, he lowered his gaze a second time, and her neck grew hot under his scrutiny. He focused on her breasts, and then lower still, on the place where her skirt ended. He was teasing her with this look of flagrant sexual desire in front of her friends.

The part of her that had always avoided the limelight wanted to turn and run. Instead, she held her ground. She lifted her head and took a deep breath so that her breasts strained against the fabric that held them back. She must appear sensual, desirable. Damn Jeremy! It was his fault she had to attempt a seduction in front of so many people. Regardless of the outcome, everyone in her social circle would gossip about this night for years. What if she failed? Yet the terror of failure only added to her excitement. Taking a risk made her feel alive in a way she never had before. How ironic to feel so alive on the verge of death. Why had she spent her life hiding behind Jeremy for so long?

As these thoughts rushed through her mind, Lor's probing gaze returned upward. To her astonishment, her nipples tightened and grew taut under his stare. She licked her lips, knowing the stiff peaks were plainly visible under the thin fabric of her dress. She was sure he could see them. More amazing still, her clit throbbed and her pussy grew damp as those fierce, possessive eyes swept over her.

Could he smell her? They said the Evolved had keener senses, and she must be broadcasting sexual pheromones like crazy.

"Let me introduce you to some people." Jen's voice drifted into her consciousness. The guests started to move, eager to meet Mastror si Lor Canto. As they milled forward and encircled him, he disappeared from Rachel's view. Only the top of his head remained visible through the crowd.

Rachel forced her legs to move again. This was it. She glanced wildly around. Why hadn't she planned this ahead of time? Where did she want to be when Jen introduced them? Standing by the fireplace? Seated in a red velvet chair, her dress up around her waist? She stifled a nervous giggle. No, that would be a bit too obvious. Did she want a drink to hold? Better not, her hands were shaking too badly. She prayed it was only nerves and that the tumor wasn't already growing.

"And this is Rachel Herrington." Without warning, the crowd parted and Mastror si Lor Canto strode up to her, with Jen following hastily behind, making the introduction.

He took her hand and at his touch, a spark like static electricity jumped from his fingertips.

"Ah!" His eyebrows shot up. "I see the attraction is mutual. You captured my attention the moment I entered. You looked enchanting." A rumble of dark power seethed beneath his cultured voice. His stunning green eyes smoldered into hers. Up close, they glittered like jewels, twin emeralds with a hidden fire in their heart. Sexual energy rolled off him like a wave and engulfed her in its heat.

She swallowed with a dry throat and drew a jerky breath. Her breasts heaved upward, and the pink tip of one nipple popped free of the restraining fabric. Rachel stared down at her bare breast in horror. The taut nipple proclaimed her sexual hunger. A rosy flush spread over her exposed chest.

Fighting to stay calm, as if she frequently walked around with one breast naked in public, she snatched her hand away from Lor and tucked her breast back beneath the silky garment.

"All of you looks enchanting," the healer added with a wicked gleam in his eye.

"Thank you," she managed to gasp. Her voice came out breathy, excited. Good, that was good. She wanted him to realize she was ready and willing. Her nipple had looked more than willing. The stiff little peak had practically begged him to suck it. With his mouth. With those firm, smooth lips.

Her knees trembled. Dizziness engulfed her. Was she coming down with something? Despite the open French doors, the apartment sweltered, the air hot and close. Rachel waved a hand in front of her face and held on to the remnants of her composure. "I've wanted so much to meet you."

Dumb! She could kick herself. Could she say anything more cliché?

He inclined his head and stepped closer. She smelled a musky, masculine odor with an edge of spice. His skin looked smooth and firm, his body a hard symphony of sculpted muscle. Without thinking, she dropped her gaze to his upper thighs. His codpiece bulged outward, swelling to contain him.

Her nipples grew even tauter. God, they pointed at him like little arrows. He'd think she was a blatant hussy. He'd think every man aroused her like this. She couldn't understand her body's reaction to his presence. The moment he entered the apartment every part of her blazed with never-before felt desire, as if a circuit had closed in her brain.

His last step had brought him to her side. "On my home world we greet each other with a kiss." His deep, dark baritone whispered close to her ear. Everywhere she looked on him, she saw bare, masculine flesh. What would he feel like pressed against her?

She shivered all over as his warm breath tickled her cheek. His body a mere half-inch from hers, he stopped, cupped her cheekbones in his hands, and tilted her face upward.

Eyes the color of jade glowed into hers. She saw his fine, arched eyebrows lift, and then his mouth lowered. A shiver of desire danced up her spine. She forgot that she stood in a crowded apartment with others watching. Her world narrowed to this man. A sharp pang lanced through her body, a pang of pure need such as she'd never experienced before.

His lips moved over hers, moist and firm and hard, demanding a response. Rachel moaned and opened her mouth, letting his long, hot tongue slide between her lips. Slowly, provocatively, he thrust deep into her mouth, once, twice.

As he broke away, the flush on her chest rushed upward to her face. An Evolved had just tongued her in front of some of the elite of Manhattan society. What would Jeremy say when he found out? Worse, her nipples ached and a flood of moisture dampened her thighs. Surely, this man standing so close could smell her arousal, just as she could smell the sharper spicy edge to his own intriguing musk scent.

Another ripple of dizziness passed over her, and she struggled to stay on her feet until it passed. Her insides were on fire. A coiled rope of burning energy roiled through her, a sensation unlike any she'd ever known. What was it? Nerves? Anxiety? She needed to look calm, seductive. Hard to do when every nerve ending jangled with electric force. Even the roots of her hair stirred as if lightning crackled in the air, about to strike.

Uncanny energy flowed from this man. She felt as if she was sucking it up like a sponge absorbing water. She prayed it was his healing power.

"I'll be glad to share the kiss of greeting with you anytime," he whispered, his hands still resting on her cheeks. His nostrils flared, and his eyes turned two shades darker. A tiny shudder went through her as she remembered the wild rumors she'd heard about his sexual abilities. She didn't doubt that they were all true. If she wanted to live, she had to find a way to get him between her legs.

With him looming over her, obviously intrigued, it suddenly seemed possible. She forced air into her lungs. Already other people were pressing close, demanding their chance, each with their own agenda. She had to act, had to take a risk.

She leaned toward him, moving her hips forward. Her bare thighs pressed against his. Another spark jumped between them, a second flicker of static electricity. Odd, with the night so hot and humid.

Ignoring the tingle of electricity, she ground her pelvis against his in a slow, suggestive motion. Let him think it was part of the Earthling greeting ritual.

He smiled at her in sudden delight, as if he'd found an unexpected treasure. She giggled with relief. Something hard poked at the silky fabric that barely covered her mound. This was working. He wanted her. God help her, she wanted him, too. The depth of her arousal shocked her. Somehow this man had touched a chord, awoken something that until this moment had slept deep within her. She sighed and lifted her lips to his ear, half hidden

under the thick, black curls. She thrust her hips against him, hard. "This is how we welcome sexy men to Earth," she whispered her voice husky with a desire she didn't have to fake. "I'd love to get to know you better after the party. Alone."

Passion flared in his gaze. He chuckled, deep in his throat. "Just tell me where."

Chapter Four

Mastror si Lor Canto's cock hardened in anticipation as he gazed down at Rachel Herrington's upturned face. His full-blown response surprised him. Twice now, sparks of energy had flashed between them as their bodies touched. His nerve endings jangled as though a powerful current swept through his body. His psychic senses stirred awake as the woman's aura pulsed around him, aglow with her mounting excitement.

Were these signs that he'd found the woman he was searching for?

Narrowing his eyes, he honed in on the colors vibrating in her aura. The aura was a window into the soul, and years of training had taught him to read the meaning of every subtle hue.

With a mounting fascination, he studied the rainbow of light that flowed out from her body. Pale pinks and blues predominated. Those colors told him she had a gentle, creative soul, but a strong yellow edge to second layer proclaimed a sometimes indomitable will. That was fine with him. He liked his women strong.

A gleam of silver caught his attention, a soft glow of light emanating from her forehead where the mystical third eye was located. By the twelve suns, the woman *did* possess an untapped paranormal gift. Exactly what he sought. Even better, she exuded an almost virginal sexuality that he found enormously provocative. His stiff flesh ached, and his codpiece grew tighter by the moment. Her face flushed with a matching desire, and her brilliant blue eyes widened.

As he leaned over her, a slight trembling of her lips revealed her agitated emotions. The sight heated his blood. She cupped a hand close to her delicious mouth and whispered so no one else could hear. "Jen has a bedroom we can use after the party."

He nodded with a mounting sense of eagerness. At last, an Earth woman whose psychic potential meshed with his. He needed to get this woman alone so he could open up and

explore that strange stirring of energy. He certainly couldn't find out if she possessed the gifts he sought in a crowd like this. When surrounded by people, he kept his supersensory abilities shut down. The vibrations from so many humans packed in a small space could be overwhelming.

"That's wonderful. I want to get to know you, Rachel." He said her name slowly, with care, and watched the color rise in her cheeks. She looked so young and malleable. Her aura promised a rich flow of power, and the intelligence in her eyes heated his longing to possess her. Most of all, her lush body promised physical delights. His fingers itched to tuck a strand of her coppery hair behind one of her shell-like ears, to nibble a lobe and press kisses down the curve of her neck. Together they would build a blaze of passion to ignite her powers -- and augment his.

She fluttered her long lashes at him. "I hope I can please a sexual healer."

"You have no idea how much you please me already," he growled near her ear.

An impatience to put his theory to the test gripped him. How long would this party last? A dinner party, the invitation had said. However, in his experience on Earth so far, guests frequently lingered for an interminable time after dessert and coffee. Usually, he'd enjoyed the opportunity to chat with these strange, simple humans, to absorb a sampling of their unique vibrations. Their energy pulsed at a lower, darker level, yet it hummed with a fierce current of life. He found it invigorated him, adding credence to his theory.

Tonight, though, he seethed with impatience. The party had barely begun, but he wanted it to end. Rachel gazed up at him as if mesmerized by his words. She might hold the answer to a cure for the Yenxians. He wanted to concentrate on her. He wanted to kiss that lovely face, slip those fragile straps from her milky-white shoulders, and explore the barely hidden breasts beneath that wisp of cloth. He wanted to arouse her to unbridled passion, make the energy within her build to the point of eruption and then open his psychic senses wide. Would her orgasmic explosion awaken long dormant parts of his brain as he believed and hoped?

A stab of guilt shot through him. *You're using her.* He'd sworn upon the altar of the temple to use his sexual powers only for healing, never for selfish reasons or pure hedonistic pleasure.

Healing was his goal, though. He had to remember that what he discovered on this world could save Mixiah and his people.

He suppressed a groan as Rachel pressed her pelvis against his cock, and another thought occurred to him. Did this woman have some ulterior reason for offering her beautiful body in such a blatant manner? A terrible possibility dawned on him, and he let his inner sight open again. It only took a few moments to do a deeper scan of her aura.

Almost at once, he saw the malignant gray-green glow that tinged the radiant light above the base of her brain. Something had gone wrong there. The unhealthy color told him

disease attacked that enticing body. Did she think merely sleeping with a sexual healer would cure her?

Deep in his core, a coil of power stirred. Fine. Now that he'd found her, he had to protect her, and if that meant healing her, then he would do it with pleasure. She had her reasons for wanting a sexual liaison, and he had his. Their desires matched -- in many ways. Pleasure and duty mingled in this enticing woman.

He drew in a long breath, savoring the subtle scent rising from her flushed skin. Some very expensive perfume. Underneath, his sensitive nose caught her musky aroma, heavy with notes of desire and tinged with the bitter smell of approaching death. He ached to drive it back, to probe the warm, moist flesh between her legs.

A low growl of desire formed deep in his throat. The need for savage sex boiled through his blood. This woman possessed a raw, untouched sexuality that throbbed through every line of her soft, welcoming body. It would be his pleasant task to awaken her to passion's wonders. He bent his head close to hers again, watching her eyes go wide. His nostrils flared as he breathed in the sophisticated scent of her rich perfume and the other aroma beneath it: the wet, moist, tangy scent of her sexual excitement. As he pressed closer, her hand came up and rested on his arm. Glancing down, he saw a faint pale line on the flesh of her ring finger.

Interesting. She must have worn a ring on that finger not too long ago. If he wasn't mistaken, that meant she'd been the sexual property of some man. Was that why her lips had trembled beneath his, why her moan when he'd thrust his tongue into her mouth had held both rapture and despair?

"Really, Rachel, you must stop hogging all the best men!" An amused female voice broke into his thoughts. With a start, he realized only seconds had passed since Rachel had issued her invitation for later that evening. In those seconds, she'd become his whole world, absorbing every ounce of his attention.

Turning his head, he saw another beautiful woman, her half-naked body draped in a dark red chiffon dress that exposed her shoulders, but hugged her breasts and hips. The shimmering fabric fell to the floor, but a slit in the skirt revealed a long, shapely leg.

The second woman shouldered her way through the others that stood around him. She was taller than Rachel with a slender, willowy figure. Raven-black hair cascaded over her shoulders and gold flecked her hazel eyes.

This city -- New York -- was apparently a veritable hotbed of lush, sexually insatiable females. Lor fought down another surge of lust. His cod piece could barely contain his straining cock.

"I'm Caroline Withers." She flashed a brazen smile and held out a hand heavy with expensive rings. "I can't say how pleased I am to meet you at last, Mastror si Lor Canto."

"Call me Lor," he murmured, taking her hand and pressing his lips to her flesh. He swiped his tongue over the soft skin in a quick caress, tasting salt and something else, the taste of Earth, so different from the taste of the women he mated with on the twelve worlds.

She gave a little involuntary gasp as he turned her wrist and rested the tip of his tongue on the pulse point of the blue artery there. He felt her heartbeat against his lips, a slow, measured beat. Instinctively he knew this woman calculated her every act.

He straightened and eyed the two females. Rachel had stiffened. She stared at Caroline with eyes that glittered like blue ice. Her lips parted in a frozen smile. "Hello, Caroline."

"Rachel." Caroline lifted both eyebrows. "Congratulations on finalizing your divorce at last. Of course, it's regrettable that you failed at your marriage. We all know that Jeremy is sexually insatiable, but I'm sure you did try your best." She beamed a smile up Lor. "Rachel and her husband have just divorced. Sexual problems. Men ask so much, don't you think?"

Bright red splotches blossomed on Rachel's cheeks. She gasped in an outraged breath as she whirled on Caroline. For a second, Lor thought he'd get a second opportunity to ogle her pert little nipple. "Are you implying I couldn't satisfy my husband?"

Caroline slithered closer to him and pressed one rounded hip against his body. The heat of her flesh burned through the thin garment she wore. "Did I say anything like that, Lor?" she purred.

Rachel opened her mouth to snap some reply, but before she could speak, a man appeared at Caroline's side carrying two drinks. "Ah, here you are." He handed one to Caroline. "I got you your usual."

"Thanks so much." She tossed her head, her black ringlets brushing across her bare shoulders. "Lor, this is my husband, Charles Withers. Charles, Mastror si Lor Canto has said we may call him Lor."

As Lor bowed a greeting, he studied the man. Charles was tall like his wife, with a long, lean face and chiseled cheekbones. Strands of gray streaked his dark brown hair.

"I hope my wife hasn't been too forward." Charles lifted a questioning eyebrow. "I understand among the Evolved the women stay close to home."

"Oh, say it isn't true, Lor." Caroline twisted her lips and pouted up at him. She brushed a hand in a slow caress down the length of his arm. "If it is, you'll set women's lib on Earth back three centuries. Everyone wants to copy the Evolved in everything. Or at least they did before this Evict the Evolved campaign started."

"Caroline!" Jen broke into the conversation with a glare at the raven-haired woman. "You're violating the rules for interaction with the Evolved. We're not supposed to ask too many questions about their culture. And I certainly don't want to discuss that abominable campaign tonight."

Caroline winked up at him with a suggestive sparkle in her eyes. "I enjoy breaking the rules. Do you forgive me?" Before he could react, she stood on tip-toe and kissed his mouth.

Lor returned the kiss with abstract interest, tasting her. A thick layer of some makeup coated her lips. Her vibration engulfed him in a high whine.

Breaking free, he forced a polite smile. "I do."

Rachel looked angry. Her eyes flashed as she glared at Caroline with unconcealed animosity. "I'm surprised you even wanted to meet one of the Evolved, Caroline. After all, you're doing the PR for the campaign."

"You are?" Jen looked surprised. She turned to her guest of honor with an embarrassed smile. "I had no idea, Lor."

"I'm not offended," he hastened to say. "Quite a few of my people agree with that campaign, in fact. They, too, think the Evolved should leave Earth." He directed a warm smile at the crowd around him. "However, I'm here to learn. I'm fascinated by the delightful ways your people differ from ours."

Caroline's hand still rested on his arm. She stroked his biceps with lacquered fingernails. "I'm glad you understand it's nothing personal. Like all Earthlings, I'm concerned about cultural stability. Earth has a rich heritage, one we must fight to preserve or your evolved culture could overrun it, and our ways would vanish. Our children would no longer know who they are."

"That's foolishness." A blue vein throbbed in Rachel's neck. Her eyes flared like twin sapphires, full of fire and shadow as though demons struggled within. "Nothing stays the same, no matter how hard we try to hold on to it. Life demands change. We have to learn what we can from the Evolved and move forward."

Lor cocked his head, surprised by the fierce passion in her voice. The energy field around her swelled with barely leashed power. By the twelve suns, what a find she was. Did this woman suspect her own strength? She looked fierce, almost savage, and at the same time fragile, ethereal. He felt pulled toward her, spellbound by such a strange, exotic combination. Fascinated, he reached out to stroke her bare arm. As his fingers touched the warmth of her flesh, a flash of power erupted between them again.

He stiffened and bit back a cry. Her energy zinged through him, electrifying his blood. His cock hardened. Thank the Creator his codpiece concealed his raging hard-on. He had to get Rachel alone, away from all these people. Yet they pressed around, hanging on his every word. Struggling for control, he adjusted his social face and addressed the group.

"I appreciate your faith in us. I hope you'll believe me when I say the Evolved have no wish to destroy Earth's many delightful cultures. We are only here to observe. That's why so few of us come to your planet."

"Is it also why you don't allow anyone from Earth to visit an Evolved world?" Charles sounded aggrieved.

Lor studied the anxious faces around him. He'd been warned how fragile the psyches of these Earth humans were. The arrival of the Evolved had made it plain that they were an inferior race, a substandard culture. All they'd worked thousands of years to build paled to nothing compared to the achievements of the Evolved.

He attempted a diplomatic smile. "Our worlds will welcome you one day. Meanwhile, we hope to learn from you, too. I've come to Earth to study your sexual habits. I hope what I learn here will expand my abilities as a sexual healer."

"Oh, dear." An older, gray-haired woman in the back of the crowd giggled.

His hostess frowned and took his arm. "I think it's time we sat down to dinner," she said in a firm voice.

Beaming with pride, she led him into the dining room where a long table of dark, polished wood gleamed with china and silver. Candles glowed in the semi-dark, and beyond the windows, the lights of the great city shone bright.

Jen gestured for him to take the seat next to her and then beckoned to Rachel to occupy the chair on his other side. He looked up from arranging his napkin on his lap -- such a quaint custom! -- in time to see Caroline claim a place across the table from him.

Catching his eye, she leaned forward. Candlelight glowed on the wine red of her gown and the soft swell of her breasts. Her eyelids lowered and dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks. "I'd love to get you alone, Lor, so I could learn more about your alien ways. You must tell us, exactly what does a sexual healer do?"

Running a finger around the rim of his glass, he gave her a thoughtful stare. The rules about sharing information with these uncivilized natives were strict. Still, he could reveal a little more than usual to these people since they were among the more educated strata in this society. Besides, his mission required some disclosure. He had come here to tap into the power of their primitive sexuality, and to do that he'd have to divulge a little about his paranormal healing abilities.

Leaning back in his chair, he pressed his fingertips together. It might be amusing to tease this too-inquisitive woman. "I'm not sure if you can even begin to appreciate the intricacies of my craft."

"Oh?" She raised a carefully plucked and shaped eyebrow. The smile froze on her face. "I can assure you; even we savages on Earth have some experience with sex."

"Do you?" Lor made a slight adjustment to the napkin on his lap and surveyed the group. Conversation had ceased. They were all listening. "The tone in which you asked your question indicated you were prepared to be titillated by my explanation. That's a typical primitive response to sex."

Her tongue slid over her lips, moistening them. "Most of my responses to sex are primitive."

Beside him, Rachel drew in a quick hiss of breath. He glanced her way. Anger clouded her features. He frowned. For some reason these two women disliked each other. That much was obvious.

His choice was obvious, too. Rachel. Ignoring Caroline, he inclined his head and whispered into Rachel's shell-pink ear. "I wonder if you'd understand."

She shivered as his breath brushed across her cheek. Chill bumps rose on the nape of her neck. Pleased by her instant response, he lowered his head even closer. The woman was like a magical instrument. With each passing moment, his longing to play his fingers over her flesh, to hear the notes of love sound in her throat as he took her, grew stronger.

Curbing his raging libido with an effort, he murmured reassurance. "For my people, and for a sexual healer most of all, the act of sexual intimacy is sacred. When I make love to a woman to heal her, I pour my body and my soul into the experience."

Rachel half turned to stare at him. Her eyes went wide, their deep blue darkening to violet. Her breasts heaved with sexual tension. A faint flush stole up her cheeks. Her throat muscles worked, but she seemed too nonplused to speak. Did she understand the unspoken promise he was making to her?

The others stayed silent, straining to hear his whispered words. The only sound was the clink of dishes as servants offered platters heaped high with exotic foods.

"You're not like a doctor, then," Jen said, breaking the silence. She gave Caroline a quick warning glance when that woman started to speak. "You don't stay detached. You get involved in your work." As she spoke, she helped herself to a thick slice of cooked animal flesh.

Lor wrinkled his nose. He'd gotten used to the taste of cooked flesh, but he didn't he enjoy it. He kept his gaze on Rachel. Through the years, he'd learned to see the beauty in any woman, but before leaving for Earth, he'd dreaded the possibility that the savage female he so desperately needed to find would turn out to be ugly or misshapen. He needn't have worried. A man could drown in those incredible blue eyes, or spend a lifetime kissing that sexy little mouth. He imagined how her soft lips would feel beneath his, and his own lips twitched with longing. "Yes, you could say I get intimately involved with my work. A doctor heals the body, but a sexual healer is expected to heal both the body and the soul of his patients."

Ignoring Jen's glare, Caroline leaned further forward, her breasts threatening to spill from their chiffon cups. "Are all sexual healers male?"

"No, there are female healers, too. I'm speaking from my perspective."

"But I assume you work only with women."

Lor laughed, the sound full and amused. "You assume wrong. I work with both sexes."

Beside him, Rachel gave a small, startled gasp which she tried to cover up by dropping her fork on her plate with a clatter.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the blood stain her porcelain-pale cheeks. Whenever her breathing quickened, her breasts rose and fell in a most enticing way. He'd have to work at keeping her excited. He shifted in his chair, his thigh brushing hers. His

cock throbbed with the hard-on she gave him. Power sizzled in the air between them. He wondered that none of the others in the room could sense the snap and crackle of the building sexual tension. Tonight promised to be memorable. In his depths, power coiled, as if a spring wound tighter and tighter.

He turned back to Caroline. "Often the woman I'm healing is part of a couple. And the relationship she's in must be healed before she can experience the full benefit of my work."

"How fascinating," Caroline murmured, giving her lips a quick lick with the tip of her pink tongue. "Do you chose your patients, or are you bound by some healing oath to help whoever comes to you?"

Another little murmur of sound from Rachel distracted him. He glanced down and saw her suddenly trembling hands clasped together in her lap. She gazed mutely up at him with a heart-tugging mixture of hope and terror reflected in her eyes.

He looked away. Never on all the twelve worlds had he seen such naked need in a woman's face. Was she so desperately ill? He knew intellectually that these people suffered from afflictions they couldn't cure, but it was different to face the cold reality. Uneasiness rippled through him at the thought that this lovely, vulnerable woman with her soft, sweet mouth might suffer and die without his help. Thank the Creator, the power he sensed in her gave him a reason to interfere. He could send his healing energy into her body without hesitation. Yet he couldn't forget that there were others like her. The need on this world was so vast. The weight of it pressed down on his heart.

Hands off. Official policy. Others had hammered those words into his brain before he left for Earth. On Cor'almere, they'd seemed rational and reasonable. On Earth, they seemed cruel. Still, he knew the painful history behind his people's decision. Even the best intentioned action could destroy the fragile fabric that gave these people purpose and identity. Non-interference was the only practical solution. He had a limited dispensation to look for what he needed, but he wasn't here to heal these people.

He fixed his gaze on Caroline. Her aura shone with animal vitality. Her need was much more basic. He'd seen the glittering hunger in her eyes many times since he'd arrived on Earth. She was a female predator who wanted to bed an Evolved sexual healer, so she could boast about her conquest to her friends.

A slight frown furrowed his brow. He'd encountered so many women like Caroline on Earth and off -- rich and beautiful, but ultimately shallow. Rachel, though, seemed different. Shadows haunted her eyes, shadows that spoke of a woman who faced a terrifying darkness with courage.

He slid his glance from Caroline's eager hunger back to Rachel's heart-shaped face. She managed a bright, courageous smile that tugged at his heart. Suddenly, he was very glad she was the one whose energy field had sparked off his own. Mixiah would speak of fate in his inscrutable way, but Lor couldn't help thinking that simple mutual attraction was enough for a start. Returning the smile, he began speaking to her as if she were the only one at the table.

"At the risk of sounding cryptic, I'll try to explain. I don't choose my patients. They're chosen for me. My people believe in a conscious energy, some call it a divine energy, that permeates the universe. That divinity brings them to me. It is this divine power that wishes to heal them, and I'm merely the instrument."

"God, you mean?" Caroline broke into their conversation, refusing to acknowledge that he deliberately ignored her. She gave a disdainful little laugh. "How sweet."

Lor bit off a rude comment. This woman was so predictable -- predictably crude. Her small mind thought it had grasped and moved beyond the concept of God. So outdated, so post-modern. She thought she was sophisticated and aloof. In reality, she was like an ignorant child wandering in the darkness. How little she knew. How little any of them knew. The alien-philosophers of the Yenxian race could teach them so much, but contact still seemed unwise.

"Are you saying that divine energy works through sexual healing?" A blush stained Rachel's cheeks, but she met his eyes with unflinching curiosity.

"Yes. All healing is a sacred calling."

She nodded slowly, and her chin rose slightly in the air. "I believe that, too. So when you, umm, do your work, you really don't approach it like a doctor. Perhaps you're more like a priest?"

He inclined his head toward her, pleased by the comparison. She stiffened, but didn't draw away. Her hands remained clutched in her lap, her fingers twisting together. When she'd sat down, her black dress had bunched up almost to her hips. He examined the curving beauty of her thighs, imagining them opening to his caress. Somewhere in the shadowed hidden space between her legs lay the entrance to paradise. His fingers itched with the desire to spread those thighs and expose the warm pink slit at her core. His swollen cock throbbed with the slow, measured beat of his desire.

"Exactly." He was close enough to inhale her delicious perfume and the moist scent of her sexual excitement. Copper and gold curls framed her cheeks, and her blue eyes shone with intelligence as she searched his face with obvious fascination. He reached out and curled his fingers over hers, savoring the warmth and smoothness of her skin. The throb of her pulse beat against his fingertips. With his other senses, he tasted the darkness that seeped through her aura. His nostrils flared. He'd sensed a hundred mild illnesses of one kind or another on the twelve worlds, but never anything like this. This disease ran deep. His paranormal abilities picked up a mass riddled with darkness, an evil maw of blackness that threatened to devour her light.

With an involuntary shiver, he drew back, releasing her hand. Rachel Herrington was dying. Would he be able to save her? He couldn't lose her, not now when he'd just found her.

She bit down on her lip, and fear flashed across her face. She'd seen his shiver. However, her gaze never wavered. The rest of the dinner party could have been a million miles away for all either of them knew or cared. They locked onto each other, suspended in some place beyond time and space.

"You're like a priest. Do you honor your calling?" Rachel asked, her voice so low he was sure no one else at the table could hear her.

The question startled him. "I do."

She swallowed and tilted her face upward toward him. "Then I place myself in the hands of your god."

The look of trust she gave him pierced his heart. He wanted to pull her down under the table, spread her legs, and enter her right then and there.

"I would have thought an advanced culture like the Evolved would be beyond the concept of God." On the other side of the table, Caroline raised her voice and leaned forward, trying to regain his attention.

Lor arched his eyebrows at her, but he'd already dismissed her from his mind. He reached for Rachel's hand below the table. "Some concepts are like spirals. You think you've moved on, and instead you find you've only reached another level."

Out of sight under the table, he grasped Rachel's hand and moved it so it rested on his codpiece. His cock strained upward toward her warmth.

Her eyes grew huge. She darted a glance his way, and the dawning hope on her face told him she understood the promise he was making. Her fingers moved tentatively over his hard length.

"So your religion is more like a philosophy?"

He sucked in a breath. Her touch on his cock made it almost impossible to concentrate on this banal social gathering. "I'm afraid I can't go into the details." He waved an apologetic hand and watched as their faces fell. They were all so eager to learn anything they could about the Evolved.

Rachel's fingers tightened over his cock. He bit back a moan of pleasure. The woman had a wonderful touch, firm yet gentle.

Her blue eyes lifted to meet his, alive with hope. "We mustn't pester Lor, Caroline. He's a guest on our world. It's our duty to do whatever we can to please him."

Lor smiled. He knew exactly what Rachel could do to please him.

Chapter Five

"Do you need me to call you a cab, Caroline? I'd be more than happy to." Jen's exasperated voice drifted down the hallway and into the den.

"Your world has such a terrible history," Lor said at the same moment. He stood in front of an oil painting of a beautiful young woman tied to a stake. Wood lay stacked around her feet and her eyes were turned heavenward where two angels hovered with open arms, ready to receive her soul.

"Jen's husband has very strange taste in art. It's not his only unusual taste, either, from what I understand. I think that's why he's about to become her ex-husband." Rachel attempted a chuckle. Maybe she'd made a mistake when she'd pulled the healer into the den in an effort to get him away from the last few lingering guests. People were reluctant to leave while there was still a chance they could spend a few moments with him. Yet all evening Rachel had gotten the clear impression that Lor wanted to be alone with her.

"This is art?" Lor looked baffled as he examined another painting. This one depicted a naked woman hanging in irons, her face contorted in a scream while a man applied a hot poker to her breast. A small metal plate set in the frame read: *The Torture of Saint Anne.*

"Thanks again for inviting us. Good night." A man's voice. Charles, maybe? Rachel hoped so. Please, God, let him take his slut of a wife with him.

"Medieval artists often painted the martyrdom of the saints to show their piety."

"They didn't do it to expose such barbaric cruelty?" Lor's brow furrowed.

"Torture and execution were accepted practices in that time. Although why Jen's husband collects such morbid paintings, I can't say. Jen says he has a sadistic streak."

Lor turned from the paintings with a troubled look on his face. "I've learned quite a bit about your society during this evening, Rachel. Earthlings present a tranquil, civilized surface, while raw passions simmer at the boil underneath."

He spoke in a calm, deliberate tone, yet his perceptive eyes pierced her soul. Rachel struggled with a sinking dismay. Watching Jen's guests posture and preen through dinner, she'd seen them in a new light. Humanity wasted so much potential. *She* had wasted so much potential. She'd squandered her fortune on dresses and jewelry instead of using it to make the world a better place. She, Rachel Herrington, could make a difference, could help lift humankind to a level where galactic society welcomed them. She'd hated Jeremy for using her father's name to further his career, but hadn't she failed her father's memory, too, by making nothing of the life he'd given her? Her father had fought to change the world for the better. He'd been a brave, courageous man. She, on the other hand, had let the constant attention of the media bully her into retreating into an ever-more private world.

If she got her life back, she vowed to use it for something worthwhile.

"Passion gone wrong," Lor was saying, shaking his head at the paintings.

"Earthlings are a passionate bunch." She slipped her arm through his and tugged him away from the morbid oils. Later, if she was lucky, she could do something about her misdirected life. Tonight, she had to remember that she was at this party for one reason. Smiling, she tried to keep her tone playful. "As a sexual healer, you must value passion."

He turned to face her, scanning her face with an intensity that took her by surprise. "I do, but passion's fire should burn pure. Pure fires cleanse. Polluted fires bring only destruction."

She wasn't sure what he meant, and yet his words kindled an unexpected longing in her heart. "I would like to feel a pure passion," she whispered, thinking of the wasted years with Jeremy, who had no passion except for power.

"Would you?" He loomed over her. His whole body radiated waves of vibrant energy that made the fine hairs on her arms stir. It danced over her skin like the heat from a fire. His smoldering gaze scorched her flesh. An involuntary shudder shook her. His intense eyes burned through the filmy fabric of her dress, through the bare skin beneath, down to the bone and blood, down to whatever it was that lay at the heart of her. With a sudden awful certainty, she knew that this man could do more than strip her body and penetrate her pussy in the act of sexual union. This man could strip her soul and penetrate her heart. Opening her body to him, surrendering to him, would begin a process she could not hope to control.

You can't control death, either. The thought came quick and cold, an abrupt river of ice that sent frigid waves through her heated blood. She couldn't back away for fear this man might stake a claim to her body and her heart. Death had already done so, and death had not asked her permission first. It had simply entered and begun its terrible work. Unless she could seduce Lor and convince him to help her, death would claim the ultimate victory over all she was.

She drew in a long, slow breath, savoring the sensation of air filling her lungs, of the way her breasts lifted with the inhalation and pushed against the fabric that held them. She forced her fingers to move, to lightly brush his arm. Another burst of energy from his body

pulsed into her hand, sending a wave of dizziness sweeping over her. For an instant, fear gripped her again, as if she stood on the edge of a cliff and the next step would send her tumbling into the abyss. Biting down on her lip, she summoned her courage and met his ardent stare.

"Yes, I very much want to know passion. You will have to show me the difference between Earth's passions and pure passion."

His eyes darkened, changing like the sea, turning from emerald to jade. "Be careful what you ask for, Rachel. I could teach you more than you can even dream of in this moment."

Her throat went dry. Elsewhere in the apartment, a door slammed and high heels clicked on polished wood floors.

Someone knocked lightly on the den door.

"It's okay!" Rachel called, almost relieved by the interruption.

Jen opened the door and smiled at them. "Everyone's gone, finally! That's the last time I invite Charles and Caroline to a party. Anyway, I'll be out of here in a minute. Have a great night!"

Before either of them could answer, the door swung shut again.

Lor raised an inquiring eyebrow. "I'll admit I don't understand all your Earthling customs, but isn't this her home? Why is she leaving?"

Time to start seducing, girl! Rachel moved closer to Lor and placed her hands on the bare skin of his chest. Her fingers encountered solid muscle. Heat flowed from his body into hers. This close, the sense of powerful coils of energy wrapped around him grew even stronger. How strange. This was something she'd never experienced before with any man. The air surrounding him shimmered, and the soft tendrils of hair around her ears stirred as if roused by a coming storm. Little rivulets of sensation ran over her skin while a shiver of anticipation danced up and down her spine. The man pulsed with some unknown but powerful force. For the first time, she dared to hope he really could save her life!

Gathering her courage, she stroked his chest, feeling the rock-hard curve of muscle beneath the silky skin. To her relief, desire kindled in his eyes.

"Jen's a good friend. I whispered to her earlier that we were, uh, attracted, and she volunteered to let us stay here tonight." She tilted her head and gazed up at him through her lashes. "It's so much more convenient than running around looking for a hotel room with the media on our trail."

"I suppose." Amusement sparkled in the green depths that stared back at her, amusement and a look of tightly-leashed anticipation. "But what about Jen?"

"Don't worry about her. The weekend's starting. She'd be leaving for her country home anyway." God, what did this man expect of her? He was looking at her as if he planned to eat her alive. Rachel let her hands travel lower on his torso, down over his narrow hips and then

across the plane of his flat, hard abdomen. She'd never been so bold with Jeremy, but then Jeremy had never roused the hot, urgent need in her core that this man did. Gathering her courage, she moved lower to press her palm against the bulge of his codpiece. "We're alone here, and the night is still young."

He swelled beneath her touch, stunning her with his instant response. The hardness of him made her throat go dry. God, what would he feel like inside her?

His eyes darkened as his pupils expanded to take her in, and the air grew thick and heavy with hot energy, as if lightning gathered, about to strike. He bent his head closer to hers, his warm breath tickling her ear. "I have a beautiful woman. All I need for a perfect evening is a bed."

Rachel choked on a half-gasp. She snatched her hands away from the evidence of his arousal.

Surprise flashed across his face. "Is something wrong?"

No, nothing. Just that I never knew a cock could be so big. Giving her head a careless toss to cover her momentary panic, she managed a sophisticated chuckle. "One perfect evening coming up, then. Follow me."

Opening the den door, Rachel peeked outside. To her relief, the surrounding rooms looked empty. Jen had left, as she'd promised. Rachel slipped into the hallway with Lor at her heels. The caterers had departed earlier, after the dinner ended. They'd cleaned up the dining room before they'd gone, and she had no doubt the kitchen was immaculate, too. With the exception of a few cocktail glasses in the living room and the scent of various perfumes hanging heavily in the air, no traces of the party remained.

Time to get seductive. A sharp thrill ran through her at the thought. She'd never tried to lure a man into her bed before. Jeremy had disapproved whenever she'd tried to play the sexual temptress with him, although he seemed to like it well enough in a mistress. Well, screw him! She intended to relish her sexuality from this moment on, and she had the erotic fantasies of any young, healthy woman. Hot blood roared in her ears as she contemplated actually performing some of them. With a smile of admiration, she ran her gaze up and down Lor's imposing form. Her tumor had forced her into this walk on the wild side, and she planned to enjoy it.

Moving her hips in an alluring swing, she strolled ahead of Lor down the hallway toward the stairs that led to the second floor. She wasn't used to walking in six-inch heels, but she'd chosen them because they set her long legs off to their best advantage. As she started up the steps, her short dress rode up her thighs until the skirt barely covered her buttocks. Her heart pounded. Lor was right below her on the steps. The fact that she wore no underwear must be obvious. What could he see? Was he staring at the bare curve of her buttocks? Could he smell the scent of her growing sexual excitement?

Imagining his reaction to her body made her grow faint with desire. She could feel his breath on the back of her neck as she reached the second-floor landing. Her breasts grew

swollen and heavy as she pushed open the door to the first bedroom. Jen had promised she would prepare a special boudoir for this evening. "I'll even leave a few toys for you to enjoy," her friend confided in a sexy whisper. "I doubt you've ever used any of them, but I'm sure you'll figure it out."

The heavy oak door swung open to reveal a massive four-poster canopied bed in the center of the spacious room. Luxurious bedding draped the mattress, and soft pillows lay piled against an elegant walnut headboard. On the opposite wall, a fireplace burned, bathing the room in a warm, amber glow. Another door opened into a bathroom, and next to it, an antique dresser held an elegant silver vase filled with a mixture of blood-red and pure white roses.

Smiling, Rachel stepped closer to the bed. The sweet aroma of the flowers, combined with the crackling of the fire and the heavy curtains drawn against the night, turned the room into a haven of comfort and pleasure.

When she cast an inviting glance back at Lor, he lifted his brows and strode over to smell the bouquet. "A most pleasant fragrance, but isn't this an unusual color combination?"

Rachel ran a hand over the satin coverlet on the bed. She was going to do this. She was going to give herself to this man. She let her gaze linger on Lor's tempting body as he bent over the bouquet, admiring his broad shoulders, his muscled arms, his strong thighs. Hell, she wanted to do this.

She came up beside him, letting her hip brush against his. His body was hard, all solid masculinity. Her nerve endings tingled at the glancing contact. Lord, she was worse than a teenager. This man made her bones melt.

"The colors have meaning," she purred in her most seductive voice. "Red for passion and white for purity."

"Purity?" His eyebrows went up. He nodded toward the bedside table. There, a bottle of wine chilled in a bucket of ice between two wine glasses. Next to them lay a huge purple dildo and what looked like -- yes, by god -- handcuffs. That -- that coiled black length -- was that a whip?

Rachel swallowed hard. A raging fire kindled between her legs as she eyed the dildo. What was Jen thinking? She'd never used any of these sex toys in her life. Jeremy didn't have a kinky bone in his body. He liked the missionary position or her on top, and that was it.

Forcing a smile to her lips, she pushed down her embarrassment. She needed to seduce Lor and that meant acting sophisticated about such erotic paraphernalia. "As you said, passion's fire should burn pure. These are tools my people use to feed that fire."

His sensual mouth twitched upward, and for a moment she feared he was about to laugh at her. "Hmm. Well, I've come to Earth to learn about your people's customs. You'll have to show me how these tools are used."

Her heart thudded against her ribs. She wiped suddenly sweaty palms against her thighs. "You don't use such things?"

He lifted a finger to trace the curve of her cheek, a speculative look gleaming in his eyes. A line of fire burned against her skin as his fingertip drifted down her jaw to her throat and then rested on a pulse point. She shivered under the familiar caress, knowing he could feel the hammering of her heart. The intimate way his eyes burned into hers made her want to melt down into a puddle at his feet. Part of her, the innermost part, was a puddle already.

For the first time in weeks, Rachel forgot about the tumor eating at her brain, forgot about life or death. There was only this moment, this man, and her smoldering desire.

Passion. She'd bandied the world about, but she'd had no idea what it meant until this moment.

"We believe the mind is the most exquisite sexual tool of all," Lor murmured.

His hands settled down on her shoulders. His breath warmed the skin on her neck.

Involuntarily, her whole body tensed. It had been years since any man but Jeremy had touched her.

Lor frowned as if sensing her hesitation. His hands began to massage her shoulders, his strong fingers kneading her knotted muscles. "Is everything all right?" he whispered in her ear.

Her knees went weak at the sexual power emanating from his body. She had to get a grip. She had a mission: seducing this man. He truly was a sexual healer.

Sucking in a breath, she straightened her shoulders. She had to pretend that she knew what she was doing. She had to bluff her way through this. Her life depended on it.

"Everything's fine." She kept her voice low, mainly because she feared that if she tried to speak normally it would come out in a squeak. Instead, it emerged pleasantly husky. Good, she sounded excited. Hell, her muscles hummed with pleasure as his fingers kneaded them. Fire thrummed through her blood. A heady excitement made her head spin.

"Perfect, in fact. I love a good massage."

His skilled fingers sent rapturous waves of delight coursing through her shoulders. With a sigh of pleasure, she turned her back to him and leaned against him. Lord, his touch stirred sensations of almost unbearable pleasure. He knew how to dig into her shoulders, how to ease the stiff muscles of her neck. A river of heat flowed from his fingertips down her spine to the small of her back and pooled in her core. His body against hers was rock hard, strong and unyielding. A thrill of anticipation shot through her as something stiff pressed against the swell of her buttock. The energy she'd sensed before enveloped her, stronger now. It felt as if a layer of heat glowed and shimmered over her skin. Her heartbeat thudded in her ears as her excitement mounted. She remembered standing once in a sheltered overhang behind a waterfall and watching the roaring water cascade onto the rocks in front

of her. His presence gave her the same heady rush, as if she were about to be swept into another realm.

Heat radiated from his hands as he caressed her. She prayed it was healing energy.

His breathing quickened. Making a soft growling noise deep in his throat, he lowered his head and placed a gentle kiss on the nape of her neck. A surge of desire brought a moan to her lips. She sucked in a breath, her legs turned to water. One kiss, and she was ready to faint. The man's touch filled her mind with erotic images.

That's why he's a sexual healer, you idiot. She bit her lip, fighting guilt. Lor's gift surrounded him like a halo of light, and she was using him. Worse, she was enjoying it.

Taking a deep breath, she walked away from him, breaking his grip on her shoulders. She strode over to the bed, wrapped one arm around a bed post, and raised an eyebrow at him. "Looks comfortable, don't you think? Maybe we should try it out."

He cocked his head to one side and gave her a challenging look. "Maybe we should explore some of the items on this dresser first."

Rachel shot a panicked glance at the dildo and gripped the bedpost tighter to hide the sudden trembling of her hands. Where had Jen found one that big? And purple, besides! What about the handcuffs? Would Lor want to cuff her to the bed? Could she let him, even to save her life? What about the whip? She didn't even want to think about the whip.

His eyes crinkled with amusement. "I mean the wine, of course. Shall I pour you a glass?"

Rachel fought down a nervous giggle of relief. "Please do."

Lor moved across the room with the sinuous grace of an untamed feline, flowing from one place to the next, his muscles gliding smoothly over bone. He deftly uncorked the wine and poured the dark red liquid into two crystal glasses. His movements were those of someone who had mastered his body, precise and yet fluid, too.

As he turned to hand her a wineglass, the firelight added an auburn glow to his thick, dark hair. Sensual fires lit his green eyes. His fingers curled around hers for a long moment when she accepted the glass.

Without warning, the tremors started again in her hands. Lifting her glass to her lips, she took a sip. This was no time for her symptoms to return, not when she was trying to appear cool and sophisticated. Feeling desperate, she looked up into his smoldering gaze. A spark of the energy that surrounded him leapt from him to her.

It was as if some circuit had closed. For an instant, her whole being lit up with light. A coil of heat unwound in her core in a quick, serpentine movement. Relief surged through her as the tremors subsided. The palms of her hands tingled with energy against the cool surface of the glass.

Lor paused with his glass halfway to his lips. His eyes narrowed. What had just happened? Rachel could tell from his expression that he'd felt it, too. Energy had surged between them like a living thing. She felt as if she were swimming in a sea of molten lava.

She remembered the first time she'd waded out into the ocean and the waves had come in, pounding into her with irresistible force. This felt like that. A current flowed between them, a riptide of incredible force, and instinctively she knew neither one of them had the strength to break free.

She shook her head. Nonsense. He was an Evolved, and she was a mere Earthling. What could possibly link them? Had she somehow tapped into his healing power?

Lor took one of her hands. The palm still tingled as he pressed it to his lips. "You're radiant tonight," he murmured. "So alive."

She felt alive, too, as if his touch had already destroyed the tumor eating at her brain.

Smiling to conceal her nervousness, she took another sip of the wine. The dark liquid burned her throat, but it also seemed to clear her head. Her healing had begun. She needed to take control, to act, to get him down on that bed and inside her. Full contact. The two words sang in her mind.

She set the glass down on a side table by the bed and stepped closer, wrapping her arms around his neck. Her thighs pressed against his, and she lifted her hips, feeling his cock stir against her stomach.

"I want to get to know you better," she murmured, gazing into his eyes. "Much better." A dizzy sensation swept through her, as if she were drowning in those mysterious depths.

She pressed her mouth to his, seeking the heat of his kiss, and heard his breath catch in surprise. She almost giggled again, this time with glee. A backward Earth woman had managed to catch a sexual healer by surprise. She slid her tongue over his firm lips. They tasted of the wine he'd sipped. Feeling bolder, she thrust inside his mouth. His tongue, wet and rough, rose up and entangled with hers.

He broke away and set his glass down with a clink that was loud in the waiting quiet of the room. Turning back to her, he placed his hands on her hips and pushed up the fabric of her dress. It flowed easily over her skin to bunch up around her waist, leaving her naked from her navel down. His palms glided over the bare flesh of her hips and the curve of her buttocks, then forward to caress her abdomen and brush lightly over the curls between her thighs.

Her legs turned to jelly. She tightened her grip around his neck as she leaned into him. His cock jutted against the restraint of his codpiece, poking her. His hands swept up, grabbed her dress and pulled it over her head, forcing her to release her death grip on his neck.

"Lovely," he breathed as she stepped back and the dress fluttered into a silken heap at her feet. "I want to kiss you and brand every inch of you with my lips."

Acutely aware of her nakedness, she tugged on the jeweled belt that held his codpiece in place. "What about you?"

His fingers released a catch, and it fell to the floor. His massive cock sprang free, erect and proud. Rachel grew damp between her legs at the sight. He stepped back, and she admired his broad, tanned shoulders and his sculpted physique, like that of a trained athlete. He kicked off his boots and gave her a wicked grin. "Evolution is a marvelous thing."

Images of his hard length thrusting into her filled her mind. More moisture flooded her pussy. This man made Jeremy look puny. No wonder her marriage had lacked passion. She turned to hide her sudden confusion and bent her head to smell the blood-red roses. The satiny petals blazed against the pure white roses that surrounded them. Her whole body felt like that, like a roaring crimson fire blazing within a porcelain shell.

For a brief moment, she wondered who was seducing whom. Her body trembling with anticipation, she turned to face him again. The firelight cast a golden glow around his head as he bent toward her. His arms encircled her; his lips found hers. She half-stumbled backward and then they were on the bed together, their naked bodies entwined. His skin seemed hotter than hers did. She felt branded by his touch, somehow imprinted by the waves of light that danced around them. The fire glow surrounded his whole body, a shimmering golden light that engulfed her as well. Her body hummed with the impact of his mystical energy. She drowned in it, and she prayed she would emerge reborn.

His lips explored her mouth, her chin, her throat, tracing a flaming path downward. She gasped as his hands cupped her breasts and his thumbs teased her nipples. They tightened into stiff peaks. That serpentine coil at her core stirred again, and as it moved, heat erupted up her spine. His eyes gleamed with green flame as he lowered his head to suck first one nipple and then the other. A current of hot pleasure ran from her breasts back down to her core where it formed a liquid pool. A ball of energy pulsed in her center like a sun about to go nova.

"Let me prepare you for love," he whispered, his breath tickling the hollow between her breasts. She sighed and closed her eyes, savoring the blissful sensations his mouth created as he began kissing her once more. His lips traveled a hot, moist path downward, across her ribs. His tongue traced the circle of her navel, sending shivers pulsing through her body. His hands touched her thighs, pushing them apart. When his lips brushed her labia, her eyes popped open again.

"What are you doing?" Rachel tried to sound casual, but her brain swam with erotic overload. Jeremy had always treated this private place between her legs as if it were faintly unclean, mounting her quickly and thrusting inside, taking his pleasure, and as quickly pulling away to turn on his back and fall asleep.

She was beginning to realize that Lor was nothing like Jeremy. His long, strong fingers glided through the curls at the juncture above her thighs with a sensitive, caring touch. He caressed the outer lips of her pussy as he parted them, exposing the opening of her body to

his fervent gaze. She thought her heart would jump out of her chest as he lowered his head and kissed her in that intimate place, his rough tongue swiping over the wet, aroused flesh between her legs. Then she felt his tongue slip inside her, the tip of it probing at the tender nub of her clitoris.

A shudder shook her from head to foot. Blood engorged her clit as his tongue continued to lap at her most sensitive spot. Waves of heat washed over her. As if from a distance she heard someone moan and gasp and slowly realized that someone was her. Desire burned away her inhibitions. She arched her back and spread her legs wider, inviting his tongue to thrust deeper into her. A primal need unlike anything she'd ever felt before vibrated through her. Her whole pussy tightened, throbbing in rhythm to the caresses of his exploring tongue. On the edges of her vision, golden light flared up all around them. The flame at her core compressed, gathering power, as his mouth closed over her button and sucked.

With a sudden shriek, she exploded, bucking against his ever-more demanding mouth, her body erupting in wild spasms, her muscles shuddering in ecstatic convulsions. She clutched the coverlet and cried out for him to stop as wave after wave pounded over her, drowning her in searing passion. But his tongue only continued its relentless probing until her pussy flooded with moisture and she collapsed boneless and panting, onto the bed.

Lor raised his head. His eyes glittered with passion. "Now you're ready to make love. We can begin."

Chapter Six

From his vantage point between Rachel's legs, Lor examined the feminine feast that lay sprawled on the bed for his delight. The fresh sense of discovery he experienced with Rachel reminded him of that memorable day when, as an eager adolescent, he'd entered the healing temple on Cor'almere. The world had seemed brighter within the temple, colors clearer, sounds sharper, scents sweeter. All the tumultuous energy that roared through his young body had centered into one place, literally swollen with possibility. Before his wondering gaze, a priestess had lain down on an altar heaped with silken pillows and opened her legs wide to him. For the first time the energy coursing through his body had gathered in a rush of purpose, an aching need to join with another in a union of healing bliss.

Never, in all the years since, though, had it burned through his being as it burned now. His head pounded with the pressure building up inside him, and his senses swam with intoxicating anticipation. He'd barely begun the sexual ritual. He was nowhere near his orgasm. Yet already the energy rose from his depths and swelled toward an unimaginable peak. What would happen when he cut loose and soared to the sexual heights?

Narrowing his gaze, he sat back on his haunches and contemplated the marvelous woman who sensual body held the key to lifting his powers to a triumphant new level. Rachel's breasts heaved as she caught her breath after her orgasm. Their full, round shape delighted him. Her body was a symphony of smooth curves and hidden valleys. In the depths of the deep valley between her thighs, a damp rosebud glistened like a flower wet with rain. Under his caresses, it had expanded, its silken folds slick with her dew and ready to open. He was more than ready to enter.

With an effort, he pulled himself from the sensual spell her tempting body wove over him and concentrated on his purpose. This woman had paranormal abilities she knew nothing about. He needed to awaken them, but gently. Focusing his gaze, he examined her aura. What he saw made his breath catch in his throat. The cruel shadow of her disease still darkened her radiant glow, but her orgasm moments ago had freed something within her: Glorious silver light flowed up from her inner depths, washing over her like a blanket of luminous mist. Her skin radiated light as if she'd bathed in an ethereal shimmer.

Healing energy. He'd been right all along. These savage people did possess psychic gifts, although no one in this barbaric culture recognized them or understood how to use them. How tragic. The people of this planet had lost their way, lost touch with the sea of invisible power that swirled around them. Yet because their genetic structure remained closest to that of the original species, they had more access to that power than the Evolved. At least, that was his theory.

Healer, heal thyself, Lor thought with a wry smile. How ironic. Rachel Herrington was dying from the dark shadow lodged in her aura, but she was also a natural healer.

He gave his head a slight shake. What a waste. A valuable gift lost among a savage people. On Cor'almere, Rachel's talent would have been identified in childhood. She would have grown up learning how to nurture and release her healing energy.

What concerned him now, though, was testing the depth of her power. When aroused, did her healing energy possess a primitive vitality that had been lost among his people? Would it be enough to trigger the dormant parts of his mind?

His cock twitched as he contemplated the steps he planned to take to get his answer. He ran the palm of his hand over the silky flesh of her inner thigh. Her body trembled in instant response. She was a willing sexual partner, and a pleasing one. She lay with her legs draped over the edge of the bed, her thighs spread wide, the damp petals of her moist pussy exposed to his gaze. Such sweet, succulent flesh. He could taste her essence on his lips. His mouth still burned with the heat radiating from her inner core. Her wild, low cries during her orgasm had excited an urgent lust in his gut. A lust that had only mounted as she squirmed beneath his ravaging tongue.

It took all of his control not to rise, to cover her body with his and plunge inside her. He should be rushing ahead to the climax that would release both their energies and test his theory. Instead, he found himself slowing down, savoring each moment of precious intimacy with this woman, delighting in her heat, her scent, her satiny skin, as if she were the first woman he'd ever touched.

His reaction puzzled him. Rachel Herrington was a beautiful woman, true, but beauty had never excited him that much in a woman. After all, he'd spent his life surrounded by lovely females. The women of Cor'almere possessed bodies and faces honed to a peak of genetic perfection.

Her dazzling intellect certainly couldn't account for his attraction either. Oh, he didn't doubt that she had a quick mind. The Earthlings and the Evolved shared common ancestors.

These long-lost cousins possessed adequate intelligence. However, she showed no signs of any special mental gifts.

Perhaps the radiant energy that flowed from her core explained his powerful sense of attraction, his unexpected and compelling need to relate to her in a deeper, more intimate way. Yet that explanation made no sense, either. On Cor'almere, he'd lain with several of the healing priestesses. Their gifts were not as raw or potent as Rachel's was, but they, too, possessed paranormal energy. Yet he'd never felt any special attraction to them, only the subtle ease of shared intimacy with someone who understood the power flowing around them.

He didn't have that with Rachel, not yet. She had no idea of the untapped ability that lay at the core of her being.

Frowning, he gazed at her panting body. Despite his musing, he could find no rational explanation for the tremendous attraction that drew him to this woman. It had simply been there, an undeniable reality from the moment he'd walked through the door of this apartment. Maybe he'd tuned in to something in her heart or in her soul, something even beyond the luminous silver light that glowed over her face and the sense of a hidden but indomitable energy that matched his. He only knew he wanted their fledging relationship to continue to grow. More than that, he wanted to clasp her to his heart and keep her there forever. In her presence, he felt as if he'd emerged from a dark shadow into the warmth of sunlight.

Filled with a mixture of wonder and awe, he reached out a tentative finger and stroked the damp curls of hair between her thighs. His fingers slid over the moisture-slick strands down to the rose-petal flesh. He found the swollen bump of her clitoris beneath the protective hood of flesh and squeezed it between thumb and forefinger.

Somewhere in the apartment, a clock began to toll the hour. Midnight. Rachel drew in a shaky breath as Lor's fingers slid into her. Hot waves of energy sizzled up her nerve endings. She bit down on her lip, squirming each time his fingers probed her tender button. Was he going to bring her to climax a second time? She wondered if she could survive coming again so soon. Never had she experienced an orgasm of such bone-jarring power. Her breasts, swollen with passion, ached for his touch, and her womb throbbed with an empty wanting despite the waves of pure desire that had pulsated through her body. Like some insatiable beast, her cunt wanted more, wanted to feel him buried deep inside her.

With a sigh that was almost a moan, Lor rose from between her legs. He repositioned his body so that his hard length covered her. His hot skin burned like a flame against hers, and she saw, to her astonishment, that a pale, silvery light glowed around his cock as he settled between her legs. His hands cupped her breasts in a caress, her nipples poking into his palm.

Her heartbeat quickened with hope. "Is that -- is that healing energy?"

Lor froze and stared down at her, sea-green eyes suddenly alert. "It's normal -- for the Evolved, that is -- to radiate vast amounts of energy during sexual union. After all, it's the most intimate of exchanges, and at the deepest level, all intimacy involves the sharing of energy."

"I -- I suppose." Rachel brushed a wisp of hair from her forehead, not sure what to make of this statement. The light around him dimmed, and a guarded expression shadowed his face. Had she offended him by mentioning his healing abilities? Maybe it was like asking a friend who was a physician for free medical advice. Of course, that was exactly what she was doing. She wanted to seduce him into healing her. If it didn't happen naturally at some point, she'd have to ask him to take the steps necessary to cure her. Was this the moment?

She needed more information about his ability. She brushed her fingers through the thick hair on his chest and dared one more question. "I couldn't help but notice the silver light flickering around your cock. Does your healing energy flow whenever you have sexual intercourse?"

To her dismay, his face changed. The sexual concentration on his features vanished, and something else, a sort of eager curiosity, replaced it. Rachel cringed at his piercing look, feeling as if she turned into an intriguing specimen under a microscope.

Lor rolled away from her and sat up in the bed, crossing his legs. He rested his hands on his knees and gave her a challenging stare. "It's quite uncommon for one of my patients to see the silver light. For an Earthling, you're unusually aware of psychic energy. In fact, you're the only woman I've met on this planet who could see the healing force."

Damn! She should have kept her mouth shut. In another moment, he would have plunged that glowing cock into her. The cure to her disease must lie in its magical touch. Maybe the energy it generated as he thrust into her would be enough to cure her, or maybe that silver light would cling to his seed as he pumped her full. She imagined thousands upon thousands of sperm glowing as they sped into the darkness of her womb, each carrying a gift of healing light into her stricken body.

When she looked up into his face again, her hopes plummeted. Every trace of passion had evaporated from Lor's features. Instead, he studied her with a cool, detached, almost professional interest. He folded his arms across his chest and waited for her answer with an implacable expression. Frowning, she tried to draw hope from the fact that he didn't seem angry. The look in his eyes was entirely different from the joyous passion of moments ago, though.

A part of her cried out in silent loss. Her body ached for the fire that had burned in those emerald depths. His fiery passion had warmed some cold place deep inside her. But that passion was gone. She had to reach out to him as a human in need.

She sat up and groped for the covers, acutely aware that she was naked, that the musky aroma of her arousal filled the room, that her breasts had swollen to match her mounting

desire and her nipples pointed at him like two arrows. His clear eyes watched her, demanding honesty. With a sigh, she dropped the covers and faced him naked.

"I need healing. I have an illness." She swallowed. "A fatal illness."

His gaze swept over her body. Wherever it touched, flames scorched her like a firebrand despite his sudden coolness. "I know. I could see the darkness dimming your aura when we met. I suppose you're in this bed because you hope you'll receive a healing by sleeping with me. I don't understand why, though. You have your own doctors."

"They can't help. That why I need you. It's a brain tumor." She clenched her hands. "The symptoms are subtle and intermittent at the moment, but I'm told it will get rapidly worse."

"A tumor. Surely your doctors can handle something so simple."

"No." She bit down on her lip. "Its location makes it inoperable." She leaned forward so that her breasts swayed gently, hoping the sight of her naked vulnerability would trigger his sympathy. "Conventional medicine can't help me. Then I heard Evolved sexual healers have the ability to heal even incurable diseases using their paranormal powers. Well, I decided I had to get to know you. Can you blame me?"

She let her words trail off and searched his face for some sign of reaction.

He lifted an eyebrow and shrugged his shoulders. An amused gleam had returned to his eyes. "I admit I'm enjoying your attempts at seduction."

Feeling miserable and ashamed, she looked away. "I understand that your people have strict rules about sharing your technology with us. I was afraid that would apply to your sexual healing ability, too. But I thought if the healing occurred as a natural part of the sex act, if I got you to, well, do it with me ..." Her words trailed off. She swallowed the lump of embarrassment that clogged her throat.

His other eyebrow joined the first. "I see. Tell me, was your desire tonight nothing but a performance to get me into this bed?"

Memories of her wild moans of delight only minutes ago made the hot blood blaze up on her cheeks. "Oh, no! I truly do want you. I've never felt, I mean my husband never --"

"Your husband?" Lor sat up straighter. His straight brows drew together in a frown. "Of course. The desire I feel for you must be muddling my mind. Caroline mentioned something about a divorce earlier. It must be recent if you still think of him as your husband."

Rachel's heart sank. God, she'd made a complete mess of this seduction and an even bigger mess of her confession. "Does it matter? Yes, I was married, and yes, the divorce is recent, very recent. I'm a free woman now, though, and I'm attracted to you." Desperate, she gestured between her legs. "Touch me and you'll see I'm hot and sopping wet. I want you."

His lips twitched slightly, and she squirmed under his frank appraisal. She'd never spoken so openly about her desires before. Perhaps that was because she'd never felt desire like this before. The throbbing between her legs had continued unabated through this whole

conversation. Moisture pooled there, dampening her thighs. She breathed in her own scent, rich and musky. Lord, she was like a bitch in heat.

"Sopping wet, are you?" He gestured with one hand. "Lie back. Open your legs."

Her heart in her throat, Rachel obeyed Lor's command. Propped on her elbows, she spread her legs wide, shivering as her thighs parted and cool air brushed against her heated flesh. His hand touched her inner thigh, slid downward, his fingers combing through her hair to find the damp entranceway. She gasped as one finger slid inside her.

"Yes, you're quite wet." He studied her face and spoke with a clinical detachment, while keeping his index finger buried deep inside her body.

Almost involuntarily, her inner muscles tightened around that finger, seeking some sensation to ease the mounting, desperate desire pulsing through her. A pressure began to build within her, a pressure that threatened to explode.

"Are you hot?" His voice changed to a husky, provocative whisper. "You look hot." He leaned over her, his breath tickling her ear. "Flushed cheeks. Pulse pounding in your neck. Panting, irregular breathing. It's either the flu, or --" His eyes sparkled. "-- my touch excites you."

As he spoke, he slowly withdrew the finger, then thrust it inward again.

Unable to control the rush of desire that slammed through her, she arched her body against his hand, driving it deeper. Her breasts quivered, her nipples poking up into the air. "Please," she moaned, trembling on the edge of an inner explosion. God, she so wanted him, a terrible want that had nothing to do with healing or her disease. It was pure need -- need for him. She bit down on her lip, embarrassed to burn with so much desire. Yet she also found it strangely exciting and liberating. Lovemaking with Jeremy had never been like this. What had she missed by marrying the wrong man? The thought of unexplored pleasures in Lor's arms aroused her.

"Please what?"

She licked her lips. "Please penetrate me."

He withdrew his finger and held it in front of him, examining the liquid that coated it. "Why? Because you think that will heal you?"

Her hands gripped the coverlet beneath her and squeezed, twisting the cloth. This was torture. She'd explode if he thrust that finger into her again. She craved the release of the orgasm. "Yes, I want to be healed! You would, too, if you were dying! But I want you inside me more than I want anything else. I'm aching for you."

Lor rose from the bed, his cock jutting toward her. A shimmer of light surrounded his lean, muscled body. To her admiring gaze, he seemed like a magnificent angel descended from heaven as he towered over her -- a glorious, nude angel.

For a terrible moment, she thought that he was going to turn away, that he was going to leave her, spread out and alone, to soak the coverlet with her juices. Then the edges of his

57

sensual mouth softened. "I want to heal you, Rachel, but my people's healing rituals are complex with many rules that must be followed."

Hope exploded through her like a supernova. For in instant she couldn't speak. Her lips parted and she sobbed. "Oh, thank you!"

Lor inclined his head, his smile widening and softening. His gaze turned tender. "Believe me, it will be my pleasure. I can't leave undone what we've begun. After all, I'm only human."

Rachel giggled with relief. Only human. He was teasing her. Who would have suspected the Evolved had a sense of humor after all? Suddenly the world seemed a much happier place. Her mouth curved upward in a matching grin. She dropped her hand to brush her finger suggestively through the tangle of damp curls between her legs. "I'm ready to finish when you are."

His smile vanished, and his face took on a serious expression once more. "I can't complete the act with you. Not yet."

Alarm shot through her. "Why not?"

He folded his arms across his broad chest and planted his legs. A troubled look passed over his features. Rachel squirmed with impatience and fought to control her worry. Obviously, sexual healing involved much more than a good fuck -- and she needed to understand its intricacies. More than that, she wanted to understand this man and the hypnotic power that flowed from him. The unbridled sensuality of this whole experience had overwhelmed her senses, yet she knew changes were occurring at a deep level of her being, too -- profound changes.

Lor brushed glossy black curls away from his face and fixed her with his compelling stare. "Over the centuries, my people have woven a net of elaborate rules around our sexual healing ritual. I don't know what rumors you may have heard, but we regard the ritual as a sacred act. As such, it is designed to involve the entire being. I don't just heal the body. I also heal the emotions and the soul. My calling is to mend every broken part of you."

"Yes, and that's exactly what I want."

"Fine, but you need to understand that such a healing must certainly include an honest attempt to mend any damage that may have been done by failed relationships.

Unfortunately, such toxic relationships are rampant among your people. Your unresolved emotions form a kind of psychic link to your ex-husband, a link that drains your life energy. I must break it. For that to happen, I need to have him present in the room when I heal you."

Rachel gasped. Lor wanted her to have sex with him with Jeremy there! She couldn't imagine such a kinky scenario, or Jeremy wanting any part of it. She shook her head in dismay. "Jeremy would never agree to that."

He regarded her with uncanny calm. "He doesn't have to participate. He only has to watch."

Her mouth went dry, and her tongue had trouble shaping words. Was this some odd manifestation of her tumor? "You want him to watch while you make love to me?"

"Your energy is still joined to his. When I make love to you, I will touch his energy also." Lor's expression softened. "If the pain between you is only a result of misunderstanding, I can heal it; perhaps even heal your relationship."

"No." Her chin came up a little. "It's no misunderstanding. I understand perfectly well. I made a big mistake when I married Jeremy. He doesn't love me. I doubt he ever did. More importantly, I don't love him. Our marriage is over. Finished. Break the link if you like, but don't even think about trying to get me back together with him."

Lor's dark brows lifted again. Bright pinpricks of golden light glowed in the depths of his eyes. "It sounds like you've suffered in this relationship, Rachel."

She bit down on her lip. Suffered! All the humiliation of Jeremy's repeated betrayals rushed through her. She could feel the blush of shame spreading over her face. Gathering her courage, she struggled to meet the healer's appraising stare. "I married too young. I was naïve and shy, and I thought I knew what love was, but I had no idea. I wanted someone to protect me and shield me from the publicity that's followed me all my life. Unfortunately for me, Jeremy wanted the opposite. He needed a rich and famous wife whose fame would give his career a boost. He wanted me to appear at his side, look lovely, and allow him to spend my money and enjoy an affair whenever he pleased. He made me so miserable that I was forced to change. I found enough courage to walk away from a destructive marriage."

Lor reached over and brushed his fingers gently across her cheek. "You have suffered. Betrayal, anger, crushed hope. These things wound the soul and sicken the body." He stroked his chin. "You describe yourself as shy and weak, but you're stronger than you believe. Perhaps Jeremy sensed your strength on some level, too. He fed on your energy and did great harm to you. I will break the link between you and set you free."

"I already did that with our divorce."

Lor chucked low in his throat, a deep, velvety sound. "How little truth your culture perceives about relationships. Divorce is a mere legality. The reality that binds us to those we love, and those we hate, goes much deeper than that. I can see your soul truly was not intended for this marriage. Your bond with this man must have been a constant, inner torture. Setting you free of it will begin the healing process. To do that, though, you must face Jeremy one more time."

"Great!" Rachel tried to sound enthused, but a growing anxiety roiled her gut. How was she going to convince Jeremy to attend this healing session?

"I'm glad you understand." Lor bent over and scooped his codpiece off the floor. "When you have made arrangements, contact me. I'll remain in New York on board our spacecraft until I hear from you."

"Wait!" She grabbed for his arm. "You can't leave me like this."

A look of deep regret flashed across his handsome features. He covered her hand with his and gently pried her fingers loose. "I must. I cannot make love to you until I can complete the healing ritual, and for that I need your ex-husband present." Turning from her, he began pulling on his boots.

"But I'm not sure I can convince him. He's the head of the Evict the Evolved campaign." She blushed as she blurted out the words. What would Lor think of her now? He'd think she had been a fool to marry such a man -- and she had.

"Is he?" Looking thoughtful, Lor returned to the side of the bed. Reaching out, he cupped her left breast. His thumb rubbed her nipple, which immediately stiffened to a taut peak. "Does he value his politics more than your life?"

"Yes." Rachel bit her lip and leaned against his hand as pleasure once more surged through her body. She felt wanton and yet somehow beautiful, desirable, when Lor touched her. Jeremy had always made her feel worthless, inadequate.

"He's an idiot. I've tasted the treasure between your legs." Lor's voice went ragged with desire. His nostrils flared. "I mean to have you."

"Take me, then." She could hardly believe the words she heard coming from her mouth.

To her dismay, he turned away. She stared at his broad back with a sinking heart. Striding toward the door, he tossed his final words over his shoulder. "I will have you, but first we must fulfill the requirements of the ritual. Convince this Jeremy. I know you can do it."

Chapter Seven

Rachel closed the front door of Jeremy's New York apartment behind her and tip-toed into the entrance hall. Beyond the spacious foyer lay a richly-appointed living room with floor-to-ceiling glass windows that offered a view of Central Park. The first rays of dawn streaked the sky outside. This early, she knew she'd find Jeremy still in bed. Too bad. She needed to talk to him, and she wanted to get it over. She fully expected an unpleasant confrontation.

She'd let Jeremy keep this apartment, which was close to the United World building, while she had taken up residence in a new apartment she'd purchased on Fifth Avenue. Luckily, she'd found she still had a key, and he apparently hadn't bothered to change the locks. Of course, given the bitterness of their divorce, he'd probably never dreamed she'd show up at his door again.

During their marriage, they'd owned several luxurious houses around the world. Jeremy enjoyed life on a grand scale. The places he chose featured thousands of square feet, far too much for two people, all of it immaculately furnished and decorated by some interior decorator. She'd often felt he'd wanted so much space so that they could lead separate lives in the same house. As for the various residences, they blended together in her mind. None of them had ever seemed like home.

Standing in the foyer, Rachel peered up the staircase to the second floor and tried to remember if she had to turn right or left at the top to get to the master bedroom. So many residences and so many sweeping staircases leading to so many bedrooms where she'd spent long, lonely, passionless nights.

Staring upward, an image rose unbidden in her mind, an image of Lor waiting for her in that bed at the top of the stairs. She saw his muscled body sprawled naked across the coverlet, his tanned, golden skin glowing against the crisp white of the duvet, his hands

tucked behind his head. In her mind's eye, he half turned to smile at her, and his cock rose up from between his legs, his erection swelling as he gazed at her with unblinking intensity. *I want you,* that gaze said. Her heartbeat quickened.

Rachel shook her head to dispel the seductive illusion. Lor waited for her somewhere else. If she wanted this particular fantasy to come true, she had to convince Jeremy to help her. She prayed her second attempt would go better than the first one had. She had no fallback this time, no Jen to come to the rescue. She steeled herself to play hardball with her ex-husband.

The bottom stair creaked beneath her foot as she started up the steps, but she paid it no mind. Jeremy was about to have a rude awakening. Thank god, her lawyers had insisted on a prenup when she'd married him. He hadn't gotten that much in their divorce, and that left her with a strong bargaining position in the discussion they were about to have. If he balked at the idea of attending the healing session, she'd offer him money. Lots of money. He'd come around.

Cheered by that thought, she turned right, smiled, and pushed open the French doors to the master bedroom.

Early morning light drove back the shadows in the room, streaming through tall, narrow windows. Already the faint sounds of a city waking up filtered through the glass. The huge bed, imported from a French chateau, dominated the space. Jeremy lay in the center beneath the tall canopy, spooned up against Caroline Withers.

"What the hell!" Rachel slammed the door behind her in a sudden fury of temper. Caroline must have come straight from the dinner party to Jeremy's bed. Was Jeremy using his mistress to spy on her?

Jeremy shot up in bed, his face startled. "Rachel! What are you doing here?"

His question set her back for a moment. Tossing her head, she decided to ignore it. She had to stay on the offensive with Jeremy, had to take control, or she'd never get him to agree to her unorthodox request. "I came to see you, of course. I didn't know you'd have company, although I should have expected it."

Caroline sat up with a bewildered look, the coverlet falling away from her body. She was naked, her small, pert breasts tipped by pink nipples. She shook her mane of dark hair around her shoulders and gave Rachel a cold smile. "Hello. What a surprise. You're the last person I ever expected to see in Jeremy's bedroom."

Jeremy's face turned dark with anger. "We're divorced, remember. Finished. Done. I live here and you live in your apartment. You have no right to barge in unannounced."

Rachel balled her hands into fists and planted them on her hips. The defiant posture gave her the courage to forge ahead. "I can see why you don't want unexpected company, Jeremy. You can't keep it in your pants for a minute, can you? You're playing with fire with Caroline, though. She's another man's wife."

A look of contempt flashed in Jeremy's eyes. "I know that. However, I fail to see where it's any of your concern. Besides, I hear you've been busy, too."

Caroline leaned forward, pressing her body against Jeremy's. She ran a hand down his chest, her fingers tangling with his hair. Her lips curled in a smirk. "What in the world are you doing here, Rachel? If I were you, I'd still be in bed with that handsome hunk from Cor'almere. Or did he realize at the last moment that you're about as sexy as a lamppost?"

"You bitch!" Rachel bit down on her lip to stop the explosive torrent of words she wanted to hurl at Caroline. Jeremy watched her with a contemptuous look. Of course, he'd enjoy putting two women at each other's throats and watching them fight. Control freak. Well, she was finally on to him. This time she would stay in control. She forced her voice to become a purr. "As it happens, he found me quite sexy. In fact, he's asked for an encore."

Jeremy's expression turned hard. "You do look frazzled. I suppose you spent the night getting your brains fucked out. So did this Mastror si Lor Canto live up to his reputation?"

"None of your business," Rachel snapped. An image of Lor bending between her legs to thrust his tongue deep inside her flashed through her mind. The heat of an incriminating blush stole up her cheeks.

"Simply curious." Jeremy rose casually from the bed. Rachel couldn't help comparing his soft penis to Lor's impressive erection. "You always struck me as rather frigid, and I suspect your orgasms when we fucked were faked."

It was her turn to look contemptuous. "Maybe that's because of your inadequacies as a lover."

Jeremy traded an amused glance with Caroline as he pulled on a white cotton robe and tied the belt around his waist. "I think not. Although I will confess, I probably didn't make my best effort with you. To be truthful, I found you less than stimulating."

Despite their divorce, despite all the bitter words already exchanged between them, Rachel still flinched at the insult. Blinking hard to keep back tears, she stared unseeing at the city beyond the windows. Lor was right. Jeremy still had power over her. Her stomach muscles clenched tight and bile rose in her throat. God, he left a bad taste in her mouth — literally. She had to break this tie to a man she'd come to despise. Just being in the room with him weakened her life force, sucking vitality out of her. Her head swam with dizziness as if she teetered on the edge of a black hole, about to plunge down into darkness. Why hadn't she realized this before? She must sever this unwanted connection so she could start to heal.

Jeremy slipped his feet into sandals and shot her an irate glance. "I'd love to spend the day trading insults with you, but I do have other commitments. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

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"I need your help."
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[&]quot;My help?"

"Yes. Lor has agreed to heal me. However, he senses that there's still a psychic link between you and me that must be broken first. He wants you to come to my healing ceremony so he can free us from each other."

A peal of laughter interrupted her explanation. Carolyn's bare breasts shook as she suppressed more giggles. A look of delicious delight played over her face. "That's too funny! You want the leader of the Evict the Evolved campaign to stand by and watch while an Evolved sexual healer fucks his ex-wife."

Jeremy glared at her. "Out of the question. Absolutely not. The divorce freed us. That will have to be enough for you."

She took a step toward him. "Jeremy, please. Think about what you're saying for a moment. Think about what this means to me. This man can heal me, but without his help, I'll die."

Her impassioned protest seemed to give him pause. He turned to face her, his head tilted to one side. "Do you have any idea what this ceremony involves?"

That stopped her. "No. Some sort of sex." She raised her chin. "Our marriage is over. If you have to watch another man fuck me, why should that matter to you?"

His lip curled in derision. "It doesn't matter to me if he fucks you. I just can't risk anyone finding out I agreed to take part in such an act. Our campaign is gathering strength. People have begun to realize how much harm the Evolved have done by coming to our world with their superior attitude and making us feel like barbarians. The polls show a tremendous surge in my popularity ratings since I've taken up this issue. It would be political suicide for me go to an Evolved for any kind of help."

"Even if my life is at stake?"

"Now, now, Jeremy." Caroline leaned back against the headboard, her eyes half closed. A dreamy look settled over her lovely features. "You might actually enjoy watching, as long as you can keep your participation secret. From what I could see last night, Lor is hung like a giant bull. It should be rather interesting to see him shove that huge thing into our prim and proper heiress here."

"W-What?" Jeremy sputtered. He whirled on Caroline with a look of outrage. "Does this Evolved have you turned on or something? Would you like to sleep with this sexual healer, too?"

"Of course not, darling. I came to your bed after I left Jen's party, didn't I?" Caroline gave an amused little chuckle. "I could have seduced him if I'd wanted to badly enough. He was obviously curious as hell to sleep with one of the natives. Probably wants to add primitive sex to his repertoire. No, I'm just fascinated by the thought of your uptight and priggish ex-wife impaled on an Evolved cock."

Jeremy turned back to Rachel and puffed out his chest. "I'm sorry you're ill, and I hope you can find a doctor to help you. I can't agree to take part in this bizarre sexual dalliance of yours, though. If anyone found out, my political career would be compromised."

"Oh, really?" Rachel took a deep breath. Time to seize the offensive again. She pointed at the bed. "And what if I let the media find out about your torrid little affair with Caroline?"

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me."

With a low, throaty laugh, Caroline rose to her feet, placing a hand on her hip to flaunt her nudity. "Let her talk to the media, Jeremy. Who would care? Politicians are practically expected to have affairs. All the great ones have done it. Why, an affair while in office almost became a requirement for the American presidents."

"What about Charles?" Rachel demanded.

"Charles is too busy sleeping with his executive secretary to care what I'm up to." Caroline stretched her arms, her breasts jiggling, and suppressed a yawn. "Really, Rachel, you're so naïve sometimes."

"Am I?" Rachel straightened her shoulders and caught Jeremy's eye. "I'll have something else to say to the media, then. They're always begging to interview me. Now more than ever after the divorce."

Jeremy grimaced in disgust. "What do you plan to tell them?"

"I'll tell them how sexually unsatisfied I was with you. The gossip columnists will eat that up. Then I'll tell them how I've found the kind of sexual bliss my husband could never give me in the arms of one of the Evolved." She forced out a brittle laugh. "I can see the headlines. After I've ruined your sexual reputation, I'll tell them how madly jealous you are of my affair with this Evolved. I'll say that's why you've started this campaign to evict the Evolved. I'll destroy your credibility."

"You wouldn't dare." Jeremy's face darkened dangerously.

Alarmed, Rachel took a step back, but the knowledge that she would die without the healing ritual strengthened her resolve. Bracing herself, she met his glare. "I would dare. I'm not asking much. All you have to do is show up and watch. No one else needs to ever know about it."

"Except me, of course." Caroline chuckled. "I'd love to come. It should be quite a show."

"You're not invited." Rachel fixed Jeremy with a determined stare. "I'll throw in a million dollars as a bonus. Surely for that, you can stand to watch me get impaled."

Greed flashed through his eyes before he managed to paste his usual bored expression on his face. "All right. As long you agree to keep my participation secret."

"Don't worry, darling," Caroline purred, coming over to Jeremy and wrapping her arms around him. "It will be worth it to see her shocked expression when he shoves that massive thing inside her for the first time."

Rachel's stomach tightened as she remembered the size of Lor's engorged cock. It would be a tight fit. No wonder Lor had taken the time to get her slick and wet with her juices. Surely, he'd do it again before they made love.

She slid a glance at Jeremy. Her ex-husband would have to watch while Lor's tongue parted her swollen folds. That was something Jeremy had never done.

A sensuous shiver ran down her spine. She was going to enjoy this.

Chapter Eight

"So there is hope, my friend?" Mixiah lay sprawled on his back on the carpet of his living quarters. With his four hairy legs sticking up in the air, he looked the picture of relaxation.

In contrast, Lor paced around the room, too excited by his discovery of Rachel to sit still. He had to fight an almost overwhelming urge to walk up to the alien philosopher and rub his belly. The fluffy silver-black fur invited petting. In fact, Mixiah bore an endearing resemblance to a rather pudgy Earth panda bear, right down to the cute little round ears.

Those ears swiveled toward Lor as Mixiah awaited his answer. Lor forced his mind back to the problem at hand. He had a life to save. Many lives to save. The Yenxians played a vital role in preserving intergalactic peace. Whenever the diverse alien races of the galaxy struggled to understand each other, the Yenxian sages served as a bridge between the conflicting cultures. The star worlds needed their uncanny gift for maintaining the galactic peace.

"There's hope," he assured Mixiah. "This woman possesses a strong paranormal gift."

"Fascinating." Mixiah rolled onto his side and curled up into a comfortable, furry ball. "Does this validate your theory, then?"

"Not yet." Lor quickened his pacing, his eyes glowing with enthusiasm. "I have to determine the extent of her powers and how they function. That will require a consummation of our physical relationship."

Mixiah's razor-sharp teeth flashed in a quick smile. "Your theory started some intense debate on your home world."

Debate! Lor lifted his brows. The Yenxian must be exercising some of his species' famous diplomacy. The council's discussion had swiftly degenerated from a debate to a frenzied shouting match. Most of the adepts of Cor'almere refused to accept the possibility

that a primitive of Earth could possess paranormal powers. His people believed their remarkable healing gifts had developed as part of their advanced genetic evolution.

Shocked silence had greeted his proposal of the opposite theory: That ancient humans had possessed strong paranormal gifts, but that the gifts had almost been lost as humankind came to depend more and more on the rational brain. Finally, weakened and on the verge of flickering out, they were rediscovered by the healing priests of Cor'almere.

If he was right, Lor declared, the highly evolved humans of his worlds could learn more about their gifts by studying the genetically backward humans of Earth and how their paranormal abilities worked.

Such knowledge would enable him to boost his healing ability, so that he could cure Mixiah and his dying race.

"It took some doing to get the council to let me come here," he admitted. "They're about to recall all the Evolved from this world."

Mixiah plucked a ball from a nearby table and began tossing it from the webbed hands of his front feet to his rear paws and back again. He hummed a happy little tune as he whisked the ball from one limb to another. The rhythmic movements were a form of meditation, Lor knew.

"I've heard that." Mixiah spun the ball on the tip of one finger. "Earth will be cut off from galactic society and left to develop on its own."

"It's for the best." Lor tried to sound as if he believed this piece of council propaganda. It was for the best, wasn't it? The anthropologists and sociologists agreed on that. Moreover, the people of Earth shared that opinion. How else to explain the success of the Evict the Evolved campaign in such a short time? The Earthlings were tired of feeling like second-class citizens on their own planet.

Only, he wanted to stay on Earth. He had to stay in order to study their aboriginal paranormal powers. Failing that, he had to bring at least one gifted Earthling to Cor'almere with him. A particular Earthling, in fact. An image of Rachel's lovely face rose up in his mind. He hadn't stopped thinking about her since he'd left her sprawled on the bed in that New York apartment, her copper curls mussed, her face flushed, the air heavy with the scent of her sexual hunger.

His cock pulsed with need. Frowning, he tried to unravel why she intrigued him so much. She was a fascinating mixture of innocence and sexuality, of shy charm and unexpected courage. He recalled the shadows that darkened the delicate porcelain skin beneath her eyes, the provocative throbbing of the pale blue vein in her throat as he'd kissed his way down her neck. Death stalked her. Yet when she laughed, her eyes sparkled with irrepressible life. The provocative sway of her walk had made him hard and stiff as he followed behind her.

Yes, a fascinating package, and that was without even considering the soft shimmer of power that clung to her skin like pale mist. Power that might equal his own. Maybe even power that exceeded his. He smiled at the unsettling thought.

Mixiah batted the ball off a wall, caught it with all four appendages and set it spinning like a top, then tossed it toward the ceiling. "I understand these Earthlings are descended from the survivors of an Evolved ship that crashed on this world millennia ago. Yet you do not welcome them into your league of twelve planets?"

"They've developed their own cultures, cultures that are quite different from ours. The crash plunged the survivors into primitive conditions, and their descendents remain relatively unchanged. Meanwhile, we've used our mastery of DNA to hasten our evolution."

Wise, dark eyes searched his face. "You speak as if you've gone far beyond them. Yet you've come to this world searching for something your people almost lost. There may be other things you can learn from them as well. Your people are justly proud of what you have done to mold your race, but these Earthlings are not necessarily inferior because they're different."

Lor's laugh rang harshly in the chamber. "You'll never convince the council of that. When they look at the Earthlings, they see what we once were, what we've struggled to leave behind us."

Mixiah shook his head. "You think they're far inferior to you because they lack the genetic engineering of your people. Don't you know that nothing in nature ever stands still? During the eons that your two peoples were separated, their genes changed, too, although their changes happened by the hand of the creator, not human will. These Earthlings may yet surprise you."

"True." Lor gazed thoughtfully at the alien. He'd learned to listen to the Yenxians. They had a way of seeing to the heart of reality. Besides, Rachel Herrington had already surprised him. He'd never expected that a woman from Earth could crawl under his skin and capture his imagination as she had. She was a mere primitive, an experiment, at the most a patient for him to heal. As well as the owner of a wealth of copper hair and sky-blue eyes and lips so soft that his mouth still ached for their touch.

"Will you make love to her soon?"

"Tomorrow." Tomorrow he'd see her again. She'd managed to convince her ex-husband to come, and he'd arranged for a room in the Hotel Eros where the three of them could meet. Tomorrow he'd plumb the depths of her powers -- and her body.

"And what if you succeed. What if her energy frees your untapped powers?"

Lor met Mixiah's calm gaze. "I'll use the more powerful energy to heal you. That's my first priority. I'd like to stay on Earth if I can and learn how widespread this gift is here. I'd also like to work with Rachel to develop her powers."

Mixiah smiled. "You'd owe her that much. Would it be difficult for you to work with a primitive?"

"Not at all." The lack of hesitation in his response surprised him. "She fascinates me."

"It's not usual for a sexual healer to stay with one person."

Lor stopped pacing and folded his arms across his chest. "True, but if we can awaken new powers together, it will change everything. We will have to work together."

Mixiah gave him a shrewd look. "The prospect seems to please you."

"The life of a sexual healer can be a lonely one." Lor gazed thoughtfully at his friend. "I hadn't realized how lonely, until I met her."

* * * * *

Floating deep in the bliss of meditation, Lor barely heard the steady murmur of the waterfall cascading into the pool in the next room. Images of Rachel naked, her big blue eyes soft and vulnerable with need, spun through his mind. He pictured her assuming one of the postures of submission he planned to guide her into, and a surge of anticipation pulled him up from the depths. Soon he would unlock her untapped, priceless gifts and awaken her to all the possibilities that lay ahead for them.

He hoped she would find pleasure in the suite he'd rented for this ritual. He'd feared the Evolved landing craft would be too intimidating for her, so he'd searched out this hotel, which catered to honeymooners or bored married couples in search of a renewed sexual thrill. Whichever. The important point was it was equipped with what he needed to consummate their union in the Evolved way.

Still sitting quietly with eyes closed, spine erect and legs crossed, Lor let the powerful sense of rejuvenated energy from his meditation surge through his body. He remained motionless while energy burned in his blood and fire gathered in his fingertips. When at last sufficient power throbbed through his being, he opened his eyes to the glow of candlelight. He was ready.

His gaze swept the room while an amused smile played over his features. The Earthlings certainly enjoyed some provocative sexual fantasies. Called Hotel Eros after an ancient Earth god of love, this intimate space was one of ten suites especially designed for romantic encounters. The hotel manager had described it as the Deluxe Swimming Pool Suite. It featured a luxurious bedroom with a glass wall, and another room on the other side with a private sixteen-foot-long swimming pool, complete with cascading waterfall. In the bedroom, a massive king-sized bed dominated the room, its white duvet piled with colorful pillows. Above the bed, a mirrored ceiling reflected the soft lighting set into the sideboards. A thick crimson carpet covered the floor, its lush surface flowing up to a tile fireplace, where gas logs blazed.

Shifting position slightly on his meditation cushion, Lor pondered his plans for tonight. Healing was a sacred calling, yet on Cor'almere he seldom had to heal physical problems. Their advanced medicine and the perfection of their Evolved bodies made medical problems rare.

Instead, he'd concentrated his abilities on healing the soul. That work had naturally taken him out into the wider universe where he'd encountered the Yenxians. Tonight he hoped to achieve the breakthrough that would enable him to help them at last. What he would attempt with Rachel would take all of his considerable powers. Since his arrival on Earth, hundreds of women had tried to seduce him, eager to experience the rumored delights of sexual healing. Out of them all, he'd encountered perhaps a handful with a touch of the psychic gift.

Out of that handful, he'd chosen Rachel. She possessed an untapped reservoir of primitive energy. He couldn't wait to awaken that energy and trigger his powers to new heights. More than that attracted him to her, though. The first time he'd looked into her eyes, eyes the color of a sunlit ocean, he'd drowned. In those depths, he'd seen a soul crying out for life, for the touch of passion to awaken her to love's power.

Something in his soul responded to that call. His purpose in coming to Earth, his dreams of healing the Yenxians, had all paled and become secondary in the moment they met. For the first time since his initiation in the temple, he'd wanted more than a healing encounter. He'd wanted to claim this woman's soul with sensuality beyond anything she'd ever believed possible.

Tonight he would taste the passion of this Earth woman and see how fierce the flame of her desire burned. Was her spirit bright enough, brave enough to join with him in a daring union? Her haunted eyes told him she'd lived a life she hated with her ex-husband. Since looking the darkness of death in the eye, though, she had decided to seize life, and she'd been willing to risk the unknown to achieve her goal.

A pleased smile tugged at his lips. Rachel. He'd made his choice. She was ready to transform.

Lor glanced around the room, pleased by its ambience. The fireplace gave off a mellow glow, and candles flickered romantically on the mantle. His gaze shifted to the massive bed that dominated the center of the room. This bed would serve as the sacred altar of the sexual healing ritual he intended to conduct tonight.

Desire heated his blood and quickened his breathing as he brushed a hand over the silken coverlet. Already he could picture Rachel splayed out here, her legs stretched wide, her moist, eager sex exposed. Reaching over to the side table, he fingered one of the padded straps he planned to use to bind her. Next to the straps, an incense burner sent a thin stream of richly scented smoke wafting into the air. Lor inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the exotic fragrance.

Satisfied, he let out his breath in a long exhale. Everything was ready. It was time to try his techniques, time to find out if a primitive female of Earth could respond to the advanced energies he summoned through his sexual arousal -- and if her orgasm, in turn, could funnel that energy back to him saturated with her own primal force. If he could establish such a circuit, he could heal her effortlessly and begin the change the Yenxians desperately needed.

A soft knock on the door interrupted his musings. Rachel had arrived. Even through the wall between them, he could feel the subtle pulsing of her sexual energy.

"One moment." Pausing only to dim the lights, he went to the door and threw it open.

"Hello." Rachel blinked up at him, her huge eyes the color of a summer sky. A faint flush of excitement stained her cheeks.

A tight lump formed in Lor's throat as he drank in her fragile beauty. She wore a simple sheath of pale blue silk that brought out the deep sapphire radiance of her eyes. Her coppery curls hung in a wild, free cascade that brushed against her bare shoulders. The sheath hugged her curves and ended at midthigh, revealing long, shapely legs. Slip-on heels that exposed scarlet-painted toe nails encased her tiny feet.

An unexpected rush of passion engulfed Lor. Their relationship had only begun, but already he'd tasted her depths in the intimacy of their first embrace. He'd held her while she convulsed in orgasm and felt the currents of her soul sweep through him. When his healing energy touched a woman, it opened her soul, producing a psychic nakedness, a revelation that went far beyond words.

His heart swelled with desire as he surveyed her face, a face already precious to him. Tonight her smile held a hint of shyness, yet he remembered the unbridled desire on her face while he'd explored her body and caressed her pussy. Apparently, her husband had taught her little of the depths of love. The fool. This incredible woman was his to awaken. She was like a clear pool, fresh and inviting and full of wonders.

"Come in." He gestured to the room. "Please, be welcome."

With a nervous smile, Rachel stepped inside, her heels sinking into the lush carpet. Her eyes widened even more as she surveyed the vast bed with the mirror above it, the fireplace, and the swimming pool beyond. "I see why this is called Hotel Eros," she murmured.

Lor glanced up and down the hall before shutting the door behind her. "Your exhusband isn't coming?"

Her lips thinned. "Oh, he'll be here. I kept adding zeroes until he agreed."

"Pardon?" Lor frowned at her, unsure what she meant.

She shrugged. "It's nothing you need to worry about. I expect him at any minute."

"That's wonderful." Lor paused to take her in again. He couldn't get enough of looking at her. The hungry stirring of his cock reminded him that he wore nothing except the codpiece. "We should begin our preparations, then."

"Oh." She licked her lips and averted her gaze from the bed.

"For the healing ritual," he added.

Her wandering glance fell on the restraints he'd left lying on the bedside table. She gave a sharp hiss of surprise.

Sensing her panic, Lor realized what this scene must look like to her, bizarre and unexpected, like something out of an outrageous erotic film. He waved a casual hand toward the cuffs and spoke in a soothing voice. "Don't be alarmed. These things are only tools I use in the ritual."

Rachel stood stiff as stone, hands clenched at her sides "Are they restraints?" She pointed at the straps.

"Yes." He half shrugged and held his hands out, palms up, to indicate their harmlessness. "They're padded and quite comfortable."

"You plan to tie me down to the bed?" Her voice rose a notch. She eyed the headboard with its carved posts in alarm.

By the twelve suns, he wanted to gather her in his arms and rock her against his chest. He sensed, though, that she was on the verge of panic. It wouldn't do to move toward her. He kept his voice soothing. "Only with your permission. It's part of the ceremony. Your willingness to allow me to bind you signifies your surrender to the will of the Creator. I promise you, you will suffer no pain in this bed tonight, only pleasure."

A long, slow shudder quivered through her body as she gazed around the room. Then her stare dropped to the place below his waist where his swelling erection tented out his codpiece. He saw the doubt and fear fade from her eyes, replaced by simple hunger.

Lor understood that hunger all too well. He watched the candlelight flicker over the porcelain perfection of her satiny skin and inhaled the sweet scent that rose from her body. He ached to hold her, to penetrate her, to possess her and make her his own. Forget the ritual and the healing. He wanted to throw her down on the bed in wild abandon the way these primitive men no doubt did, spread her legs, and thrust inside.

With an effort, he fought down his surging lust. Such passionate emotion was almost alien to him. Where had it come from? Were his psychic gift and hers already mingling somehow, the two together becoming much more than the sum of each? Was the energy that flowed from her, drawn by the subtle force of their mutual attraction, stirring up the deep, primitive parts of his brain? Something had triggered these primal urges to claim a mate. If that was indeed the case, his theory was proving correct. He stood on the verge of a great breakthrough.

Her gaze had remained fastened on his lower body. With a smile, he grabbed the codpiece and pulled it off.

Rachel gasped as his cock sprang free. He pressed his hands on his hips and stood motionless while she gaped at his erection.

"I want you to take off your dress," he told her after a moment.

Her face wore a dazed look. To his pleased surprise, a soft silver shimmer appeared over her skin. The rising tide of passion between them was releasing both their gifts. An edge of darkness ate at her light, though. A growl of defiance rumbled deep in Lor's throat. He'd fix that tonight, cure her tumor, and begin the long process of opening her mind to the powerful force she harbored deep within her soul. Theirs would be a shared journey toward enlightenment.

First, though, she must surrender to his will and learn to trust him. "Take off your clothes," he repeated.

For an instant, fear flashed again in her eyes. He stretched out his hands for her, afraid she was going to turn and bolt from the room. Instead, her head came up. She took half a step toward him, her body moving into a provocative pose, hips thrust forward, as she reached behind and unzipped her dress. The strapless sheath slipped off her breasts the moment the zipper released, exposing the soft white flesh to his eager stare.

Her nipples puckered into tight little nubs under his frank appraisal. Blushing a little, she pushed at the fabric encasing her and wiggled her hips. The dress slid down her long legs to puddle in a blue heap at her feet. She'd been naked beneath the single garment.

Lor let out a low, appreciative whistle as he eyed the coppery brush of hair at the juncture of her thighs. Beneath the gleaming curls, the pink flesh of her pussy peeked at him with the promise of hidden pleasures.

"I'm glad to see you followed my instructions not to wear a bra or panties."

She crossed her arms over her breasts in a moment of embarrassment, then took a deep breath and positioned them at her sides. Flashing him a brave smile, she straightened her shoulders and propped a hand on one hip. "What next?"

"Lie down on the bed and I'll bind you to the posts."

"You mean, tie me up?"

"Yes."

Her lips parted. Sensing her indecision, he stepped closer and brushed the palm of his hand over one breast. His thumb teased the hard, pink tip. Her lips parted on a tiny gasp.

"Only pleasure, I promise," he whispered, giving the tempting mound beneath his palm a gentle squeeze. Her soft flesh was all pliant curves and adorable vulnerability. He ached to hold her close.

For a breathless moment, they stared into each other's eyes. A look of pure sensual longing passed over her face. Her mouth trembled, and she tilted her head up toward him for a kiss.

A loud knock on the door interrupted the awakening passion between them. Rachel jerked back, startled, and Lor suppressed an oath.

"Come in," he snapped.

74 Kassie Burns

The door swung open to reveal Jeremy standing there with a tall, thin brunette on his arm. Looking grim, he stepped into the room, bringing the strange woman with him, and slammed the door behind him.

He turned his angry stare on Rachel. His eyes went wide at the sight of her nakedness. "Already playing the slut, I see."

Chapter Nine

Matching anger flared on Rachel's face. "Jeremy. What a pleasure. Lor, this is my ex, as you may have guessed."

"Welcome," Lor murmured. The fine hairs on his arms stood up as the energy in the room turned suddenly hostile. He kept his face neutral, hiding the instant dislike he felt. It sickened him to think this man had ever touched Rachel.

"I'm here at your insistence," Jeremy snapped. "I decided to see for myself if the lurid rumors I've heard about Evolved sexual healers are true." Narrowing his eyes, he shook his head at Rachel's naked body. "I guess they are. I see you couldn't wait for my arrival to take your clothes off."

Lor wanted to step in front of Rachel and shield her from this man's angry energy, but he needed to see their dynamic for himself. Rachel lifted her chin in defiance and made no attempt to cover her breasts or private flesh. Good. She wasn't letting the man intimidate her. He admired that.

"I'm preparing myself for the ceremony, if that's what you mean." She slid a glance at Lor, and he read regret in her eyes. Instantly, he understood. Like him, she wanted this moment of their first intimacy to be theirs alone.

He drew in an amazed breath. It was as if their thoughts were merging into one desire. The incredible energy building between them demanded his full attention. He wanted to make love to her alone in a sacred mutual joining. Yet he needed to free her from her psychic and emotional bondage to Jeremy. For that, the ritual demanded her ex-husband's presence.

"Ah, yes, the so-called ceremony. That would be the mockery where this Evolved healer --" Jeremy pointed at Lor. "-- will tie you to that bed and ravage your body."

Rachel glared at him. "That's the one." She tilted her head at the woman. "And who's this? No one said anything about you bringing someone else."

Jeremy looked smug. Lor stiffened, sensing that his expression boded ill. He was up to something, but what? "This is Eva. Like you, Eva is ill. She needs healing." He lifted his eyebrows, his gaze focusing on Lor's lower body. "Since Lor is so obviously well prepared with that impressive hard-on, he should have no difficulty saving both of you."

Oh, no! Lor shook his head. His heart sank as he caught the look of instant compassion on Rachel's face. Eva's huge, doe-brown eyes held a desperate pleading.

"My immune system has gone crazy, attacking my body." Eva spoke for the first time, her voice soft and pleading. "It's affected my chest muscles, and there's nothing they can do to reverse it. I'm afraid I'll end up unable to breathe and trapped in an iron lung. Eventually, the muscle destruction will reach my heart, and then I'll die."

"How terrible!" Impulsively, Rachel reached out and gave the woman a hug. She turned to Lor. "Can't you help her?"

Lor gnawed on his lip, his heart torn. Rachel's plea echoed his deepest wish. He was a healer. Everything in him wanted to help. Yet his powers were limited and his hands tied by the rules the council had imposed.

Rachel's breathing quickened and her aura expanded, the silver glow deepening. Her healing energy must be rising in response to this woman's need. She, too, was a born healer, although he doubted she even suspected her talent. One day soon he hoped to tap into her energy to help others, but not tonight. If he attempted too much, too fast, he could end up harming her or Eva.

No, Rachel would need intense instruction before she could fulfill her destiny.

He gritted his teeth, hating the words he had to speak. "Earth has doctors."

The silver glow around Rachel darkened, edged with a dark blue shadow of sorrow. "Have you seen specialists?" she asked the woman. "I could get you the best doctors."

Eva shook her head. "Don't bother. I've seen them all. My body is attacking itself. There are medications, but in my case, they've only slowed down the progress of the disease. There's no cure. I-I wouldn't mind so much if it were just me, but I have two children." Her trembling fingers fumbled into her pocket and drew out a picture. "Would you like to see them? They're eight and eleven."

"No." Lor held up a hand and forced brusqueness into his voice. This planet teemed with the sick and the dying, millions of them. There was no way he could help them all. He had to remember his mission. If he succeeded, he could save many lives.

He stared into the woman's eyes, willing himself to face her even as he denied her heartbreaking plea. "I cannot help you, not tonight. My healing energy isn't infinite. I can only deal with one person at a time."

"I see." She pressed the photograph against her heart. Unshed tears glistened in her eyes. "What about another night? I'll do anything. Whatever it takes."

His throat tightened, almost choking him. He hated the edict of the council. None of this was right. There had to be a way to help these people without destroying their dignity or their culture. By the twelve suns, he'd search until he found it. For the moment, though, he had to concentrate on Rachel.

"I'm sorry. Healing an illness as deeply engrained as yours would take many sessions. I can't promise you anything. I'll be leaving Earth soon."

The woman's face fell. Jeremy's lip curled. "As I expected. This is typical Evolved elitist bullshit. You've picked out a beautiful, rich Earth woman to fuck for your amusement, and the rest of the world be damned. Well, you're not going to get away with it this time."

"I'm not?"

"No. Either you help this woman, or I expose your dalliance to the world."

Lor scowled. What a contemptible jerk Jeremy was. For the first time in his life, he regretted his vow of nonviolence. "You know the answer to that. You knew before you even came here. This is nothing but a vicious attempt to make me look heartless in front of Rachel."

"My ex-wife has no business being here. I begged her not to come, but she refused to listen to my pleas. Our divorce was a bitter one, and she's looking for a way to hurt my career."

"If you don't want me to touch your wife, why would you want me to touch Eva?"

Jeremy chuckled. "I don't. I knew you would refuse. Your heartless reaction should make your true colors plain, even to Rachel."

Eva gasped at the brutal bluntness of his words. A confused, humiliated look passed over her face. "You knew he would refuse? I thought you were offering me hope."

Jeremy gave her an icy smile. "I am. Don't worry. I'll see you get the best medical care possible from Earth's doctors."

"But I'll die, even with the best care." Eva cast another imploring glance at Lor, a glance that pierced his heart. His gaze locked with Rachel's, and they exchanged a look of horror and pain. Compassion shone in her eyes. The healing radiance around her flared. His energy stirred in response, power seething upward through his spine. He felt his cock stir and wondered what the two women thought at the sight of his semi-erection. If he could only consummate his union with Rachel, he knew he'd find the answers he sought.

Jeremy heaved an exasperated sigh. "Please, Eva, calm down, already. I said I'd see to your care. You're far better off putting your faith in Earth's physicians. This alien sexual healing mumbo-jumbo isn't going to help you at all. It's a ploy to justify ravishing our women."

"You knew what he'd say." Hope drained from Eva's face. Her voice sounded numb. "Why did you do this to me?"

"I want to show the world how cold-hearted the Evolved really are." Jeremy jerked his head toward the door. "You'll be rewarded with the best care possible. Now wait outside. I've got some business to finish with these two."

The woman's shoulders slumped. With a last, desperate glance at Lor, she turned and left. The door closed behind her with a soft click.

Jeremy moved over to the fireplace and leaned against the mantle, then turned to face the two of them. "I'm not going to stay and watch you fuck my ex-wife."

Lor clenched his hands into fists. He'd like nothing more than to pound Jeremy's arrogant face into a bloody pulp. Perhaps the council was right. These primitives were beyond civilized help. They were selfish, manipulative, and ruled by their emotions. All the more reason why he must free Rachel from her link to this man. "She needs you here."

Jeremy laughed. "Too bad. I don't give a fuck what your little ceremony requires."

"Please, Lor, can't we do this without him?" Rachel placed a hand on his arm. She was staring at Jeremy with horror. His heart ached at the pain on her face. What kind of man could hurt someone like her, someone whose heart wanted only to love?

What if he sent Jeremy away with the link to Rachel still intact? Would Rachel's paranormal gift be powerful enough to break free? He had to take the chance. He didn't want Jeremy in the room when the two of them joined in ecstatic union for the first time. The man radiated a deadly, hate-filled energy.

"Fine," he snapped at Jeremy. "Please leave."

With a disdainful shrug, Jeremy half turned to scan the room. "Oh, I'll leave, all right. The thought of what you plan to do tonight makes my skin crawl. What kind of perverted place is this?"

"What I do is sacred." Lor fought to keep his voice calm. "For tonight, this is my healing chamber."

"It looks more like a fucking chamber."

Lor winced. The brutality and vulgarity of Jeremy's language revealed the man's brutish soul. How had such a man won Rachel and climbed so high in the world government? He must be a consummate actor and a dangerous manipulator. The thought of Rachel chained to him by the psychic link made his gut twist with disgust. "I'm a healer. This is all part of my work."

Jeremy jutted out his chin and fixed Rachel with a piercing stare. "Wouldn't your famous daddy be proud of you now? Are you really going to play the slut with an alien that despises your own people?"

His accusation seemed to make Rachel uneasy. She twisted her hands together and threw a nervous glance at the bed. "What will happen here?"

"Your healing." Lor spread his hands in a simple, pleading gesture. He needed her trust or the process would be doomed from the start. He kept his gaze locked with hers, sending waves of calming energy her way. Her eyes held a wild, unstrung look, and her skin had turned pale, as if she were made of some fragile china about to shatter. He wasn't surprised. She was under a death sentence, in itself enough to unnerve anyone. Tonight she'd had to give her body to a man who was almost a stranger. Her heart lay open and vulnerable while a hostile ex-husband ridiculed her decision.

He decided to make one last attempt to reason with Jeremy. "I can save Rachel. If you ever loved her, you'd be willing to help me."

Derision flashed across Jeremy's face. "You're a fine one to talk. You flit from woman to woman like some perverted stud. What do you know about love?"

Lor winced. Damn it! Jeremy was a fool, but he had a point. What did he know about love, the kind of love that demanded commitment? Nothing. Yet for the first time in his life, he wanted to learn. Rachel's nearness made his heart swell with need. Soon he would take her and bond with her in the throes of passion. She would be his and his alone.

His lips twisted in a cocky smile, Jeremy turned to Rachel. "I see your boyfriend doesn't have an answer to that one. I can't believe you're falling for this alien mumbojumbo." He cast a scornful glance around the room. "The Evolved don't care about the welfare of humanity. If they did, they'd share their advanced technology with us. Their medical doctors could cure you in a heartbeat. There's absolutely no need to sexually humiliate and debase you first."

Rachel's eyes grew wide as Jeremy's cruel words lashed her. Lor clenched his fists. He wanted to punch Jeremy. The pompous, self-centered bastard. His eyes bored into Rachel's. She had to trust him.

"Jeremy is only trying to frighten you." He dropped his voice into a low, confidential tone and ignored her ex-husband. Doubt flickered across Rachel's face. He had to soothe her fears. He spoke to her as if only the two of them were alone in the room, alone in the universe. "The restraints are a part of the process of learning sexual surrender. That surrender will open your soul to the healing energy of the cosmos, an energy only contacted through faith and trust. I promise you that nothing will happen to you without your consent. Do you believe me?"

She nodded, her rich auburn curls tumbling around her shoulders. Lor's fingers quivered with the need to touch the silken mass that gleamed in copper and gold disarray. He imagined those curls brushing his heated skin as they made love, and his breath caught in his throat. The healing passion had begun to grip him. He needed to quiet her fears and start the ritual.

She slid her gaze away from him to her former husband. "Is Jeremy right? Do the Evolved have medical techniques that would cure me?"

His stomach knotted. He couldn't lie to her, not when he planned to unite their bodies and souls this night. Trust went two ways. He prayed she could accept the brutal truth. "We do, but we are not allowed to share them with your people."

"You see?" Jeremy propped a hand on his hip, a confrontational gleam in his eye. "If he really cared about what's best for you, he would arrange for you to visit an Evolved doctor. Instead, he wants to tie you up and rape you. This so-called sexual healing is nothing but a way to use you for his perverted amusement."

Lor took a step toward Jeremy and wasn't surprised when the other man retreated. A blowhard and a coward. "Normally, we would not share any of our sexual healing techniques with your race. Contrary to what you suggest, these techniques are ancient, powerful, and highly respected throughout the galaxy. I had to get special permission from the Evolved council to conduct these rituals with an Earthling female."

"Why?" Jeremy demanded. "What's in it for you?"

Lor grimaced. That was the problem. There was something in it for him — for him and for all of the Evolved. The council would never have allowed it otherwise. How could he explain that to Rachel? Tonight was a critical juncture, and he needed her supreme trust. Now Jeremy planted dark and potentially deadly seeds of doubt in her heart.

"What's in it for you?" Jeremy repeated. "There's got to be something in it for you, or you wouldn't bother. She'd be just another savage who deserves to die."

A muscle in Lor's jaw twitched. A jumble of powerful, murderous emotions rose up in his heart: anger, outrage, and even darker than them all, hatred. The hot bile of his first taste of hate choked his throat. With an effort, he beat back the inner darkness. He was a healer, called to serve and save, not harm. He had to concentrate on Rachel.

The lost, bewildered look on Rachel's face brought his heart into his throat. If she were his, he'd give his life to save her from pain and heartbreak. She needed a man who would protect her and cherish her, not this self-indulgent wimp. He prayed she knew Jeremy well enough to question his motives. He had to offer the man an answer, one that would convince Rachel he wasn't trying to take advantage of her desperate need to save her life.

"Our planned evolution has brought us many gains," he said slowly, "and some losses. I have argued to the council that there are things we could learn from your people before ..." He hesitated.

"Before?" Rachel prompted.

He faced Jeremy with an ironic little bow. "Your Evict the Evolved campaign has succeeded. My people agree with you that our presence hurts your world. We have made your people lose faith in themselves and their future."

"You're killing our way of life," Jeremy snarled.

Lor nodded. "I agree. Your people look at the thousands of years of effort it would take them to achieve what we've accomplished, and they lose heart. They want us to simply give

them that hard-won knowledge. We cannot. It would be the final blow that would destroy your civilization. It seems an unsolvable dilemma."

Jeremy snorted and gave them both a look of smug superiority. "So you see the obvious at last. The Evolved must leave Earth."

Lor shook his head. "You speak of it so easily. Some of us are grieved to leave your people. The youth and vigor of your world offered us a glimpse of what we've lost with our perfection. Still, you're right. It is the only answer we can see. The council has decided we will leave Earth, never to return."

"Oh, no!" Rachel clapped a hand to her mouth. She stared at him in dismay.

Her alarm washed over him like a wave. The psychic bond between them was growing stronger. Her desperate need for reassurance drew him to her with a powerful magnetic force. His whole body hummed with the urge to enfold her in his arms, but that would only provoke another outburst from Jeremy. Yet he had to do so much more with her before the night was over. He had to possess her body in every way.

"Don't worry." He straightened his shoulders and summoned up a reassuring smile.

"Our people will withdraw in stages, careful to create no further destruction of your society.

And I promise I will complete your healing before we leave."

A crimson flush stained her cheeks. "I believe you." Her eyes shone. "I believe you will heal me." The look she gave him pleaded with him to save her from Jeremy. Great Creator, he wanted to. She deserved so much more from the man who shared her bed. She deserved love.

My love. The simple thought thrilled his heart.

"Every step of the ritual is designed help you," he assured her. "The sexual passions we will share will generate a powerful energy. It will revitalize your immune system and enable your body to eradicate the tumor that threatens your life. I've spent my life seeking that powerful energy in others, and I've sensed it in you."

"Healing energy? In me? But I'm dying."

He laid a hand on her arm. "Yes, you're dying, because your race doesn't understand how to tell who possesses such energy or how to use it. Nevertheless, you do have a paranormal gift. I believe my people could learn from studying that gift in its primordial form."

She rubbed her hands down her thighs. Lor's heartbeat quickened as he watched her palms slide over her smooth skin. He remembered its satiny texture beneath his exploring fingertips. Soon he would caress her all over, stroke the backs of her thighs, cup her buttocks, and plunge into her.

"I'll do whatever it takes," she breathed. "If you want to explore this energy I have, fine."

"Good." Lor licked dry lips. She looked so beautiful, so vulnerable, in all her nude splendor. His blood thickened with a raging desire. The time had come to lash her to the bed and spread those long legs apart. "We need to begin the ritual."

"Oh." Fear and excitement mingled together in the small word that slipped from her lips.

Jeremy snorted and folded his arms across his chest. "You're actually getting turned on by this, aren't you? You can't wait to be strapped down so he can do whatever he desires with you."

His lips compressing into a hard line, Lor faced the other man. "Leave her alone! She's a marvelous woman, and your blindness to what you're losing is appalling."

Jeremy sneered. "Rachel? She's a rich, spoiled brat who's far too used to always having people cater to her every whim. She's gone her way even with this disease." He glared at his ex-wife, breathing hard. Psychic pain battered at Lor's senses. A surge of dark energy filled the chamber. Hatred poured out of Jeremy, polluting the room.

"He wants you to lose this opportunity, Rachel." Lor shook his head, feeling a sudden sorrow for the man's blindness. He pointed a finger at Jeremy. "I should pity you. You're lost in your own selfish world. Your personal agenda is all that matters to you."

Jeremy's lips curled back in a snarl. "My agenda! What about Rachel's? She's getting a secret kick out of finding her salvation in the one place I detest. As far as I'm concerned, there is nothing more important than getting your people off this planet before you destroy humanity's will to live."

"Stop it!" Rachel grabbed at Jeremy's sleeve. "This is no time for a political speech."

"This is the perfect time for a political speech," Jeremy snapped.

"Is it?" A sudden suspicion gripped Lor. He studied the suit the senator wore. A small pin gleamed on the label. Warning bells went off in his mind as he reached for it.

The senator held up a hand, blocking him. "Slow down there. Don't you dare touch me." His mouth twitched upward in a superior grin. "I'm filming this charade. I've captured this whole charming scene with a holo camera."

"Jeremy!" Rachel's face blanched white. She folded her arms protectively across her breasts.

"You!" A terrible rage gripped Lor. He advanced on the other man, his hands coming up into tight fists.

Jeremy scrambled backward, holding up his arms in front of his face. "Don't hit me! Unless you want Evolved brutality recorded for the world to see."

"That's the camera, isn't it?" Lor pointed at the pin. "Why are you doing this?"

"I came here tonight to document your perverted activities. I'm going to broadcast them to the world and expose you for what you are."

"I want that camera."

"Give it to him, Jeremy," Rachel cried. "Give it to him, or I'll spend every last penny I have to make sure your name is dragged through the mud."

The conceited light in Jeremy's eyes only grew stronger. "Ah, the final threat of the rich. Using your money to suppress the poor and the honest. Here, take it." With fumbling fingers, he unfastened the tiny pin.

Lor snatched it from his hand.

"You dare to criticize me when you planned to expose me in this way." Rachel's lips had thinned to a white line. Pain shone in her brilliant blue gaze. "I can't believe it! You were going to do a holocast showing me naked and strapped to that bed?" Her chin came up. "I was going to pay you for coming here, Jeremy, but forget it."

Jeremy threw her a glance of contempt. "You bitch! Without this healer, you'll die. I can only hope he fails tonight." With that, he turned on his heel and marched from the room.

Lor stood watching him, the miniaturized camera clutched in his hand.

"Oh, Lor." Rachel turned to him with a stricken look. "I didn't know anything about this. You do believe that, don't you?"

Chapter Ten

Fear gripped Rachel's gut with stone-cold fingers when she stared into Lor's troubled eyes. Was it possible the sexual healer would believe she'd intended to dupe him all along? Jeremy had made it clear he would do anything to discredit Lor, and she had been married to the man. Lor had only her word to vouch for their alienation.

No, Lor was a psychic. He must sense that she felt nothing for Jeremy anymore except revulsion. The memory of their marriage made her stomach churn. Her mind crowded with image after painful image. As they burned through her brain, she sensed a gentle mental touch.

Surprised, she sucked in a breath. She'd never experienced telepathic contact before, but she recognized it instantly. Lor's mind reached out to hers. His strong, reassuring presence filled her consciousness.

A part of her wanted to retreat from this unexpected new level of intimacy, yet another part wanted Lor to understand her life. Reassured by his steady gaze, she let his thoughts touch hers. This was a completely new, profound level of sharing. Yet Lor had explained that they would join not only their bodies but also their thoughts and emotions as part of the sexual healing.

Taking another breath, she decided she had to trust the healer. She let the memory surface again: The New Year's Eve party where she'd first met Jeremy.

The shadowy memory of her former self danced through her mind, a young girl, barely eighteen, thrilled to be at her first worldly party. Sheltered from the harsh realities of life by the bulwark her fortune had built around her, she'd had no idea that an unscrupulous male might consider her a prize to use.

Lor's psychic presence soothed the sharp edges of her pain, giving her strength. She didn't need to face her memories alone. Jeremy appeared, walking toward her across a dance

floor as he had that night. He'd seemed the perfect choice: intelligent, handsome, ambitious, and totally focused on her. The images blurred and suddenly she was in his arms. He held her close and whispered in her ear that her long-dead father was his personal hero.

Like a naïve fool, she'd believed him. His lies had won her heart. Sorrow swept through her, and Lor's mental arms wrapped around her in unspoken comfort.

The memory blurred once more as she jumped ahead to a speech she'd often replayed bitterly in her mind, the speech Jeremy made that night. Pretending to agree with her father's politics, he'd proclaimed that he, too, was out to save the world by fighting government corruption.

She'd had no reason to doubt him. He came from a respectable family, although it had fallen on hard times, and he possessed the good looks, charm, and intelligence needed for success. Wrapped in an ignorant cocoon of wealth, she had not understood how desperate people could become for money. Yet as soon as her wealth put him into a position of power, he'd wasted no time in buying into the corruption that polluted the world's political system. Soon after that, his failures as a husband had destroyed the passionate infatuation that she had mistaken for love.

Lor's voice broke into her memory. He placed a finger under her chin and lifted her head so she gazed into his eyes. "This man took advantage of your innocence."

"I had no idea he was planning this." She tasted bitterness on her tongue. "I should have known he was up to something when he gave in to my request so easily. Jeremy is a determined foe."

She looked up at Lor. Through the newborn mental link between them, she could feel his outrage on her behalf. Here was a man she could trust at last.

A muscle jumped in his jaw. He slid an arm around her shoulders and drew her to him. His naked skin burned against hers. "He's a parasite. His negative energy surrounds you like a cold, gray death shroud. Your people have no idea how potent personal energy can be. When you lived with him, you swallowed psychic poison every day. His subversive antagonism toward you ate away at your inner vitality and health."

Rachel bowed her head. Why hadn't she ditched Jeremy long ago? She'd known he'd used her for her money and had suspected he was cheating on her for years. Caroline was only the latest of many mistresses. Yet she'd clung to the sham of a marriage. Was she that afraid to face the world alone and find out who she really was?

Her hands fisted at her sides, she swallowed hard, tasting the bitterness of so many wasted years. She prayed it wasn't too late. She would never repeat her mistake.

Lifting her head again, she squared her shoulders, determined to face the future with a willingness to make changes -- drastic changes -- in her life. She fixed Lor with an intent look. "My marriage to Jeremy is absolutely over. I've divorced him, and I'm never going back."

"I want to believe you." Lor's stern expression faded as he examined her.

A shiver of fear rippled down her spine. Did he still doubt her? Was he going to refuse to heal her? "Let me prove it to you. I'll do anything."

"Will you?" He reached out and traced the outline of her bottom lip with one finger. The heat of his fingertip melted her bones. Her knees grew weak. "You must put yourself utterly and totally in my hands."

Staring over his shoulder, Rachel contemplated the king-sized bed that awaited them. Could she really lie down and let a man she barely knew bind her wrists and ankles and then do as he pleased to her body? Her throat tightened, and her heart beat like a frantic bird against the cage of her ribs. She could still turn and walk out of this room, but then she would die. That much was certain.

She tilted her chin upward and met Lor's worried gaze. Some strong emotion flashed in his eyes. Was he afraid she was about to turn and flee? That was it. The knowledge that Lor cared whether she stayed or left gave her strength.

"I'll do whatever you ask," she whispered.

Green flame flared to life in his eyes. His smoldering gaze moved slowly over her body. Wherever it paused, heat scorched her skin, but it was a gentle, healing heat. The tension and fear that Jeremy had aroused drained from her. Slowly, she began to relax, wrapped in a radiant cocoon of soothing warmth. Wonder enfolded her. A steady flow of healing energy poured from Lor, and she drank it like a thirsty traveler who'd stumbled on a well in the desert. Her soul unfolded like a flower beneath the healing light. A great burden lifted. For the first time in years, she felt free. Had Jeremy's negative energy hurt her that much?

This new heady sense of freedom and lightness made her almost dizzy. Her long-denied libido stirred in response to Lor's provocative look. She struck a sexy pose and waited, savoring the intensity of the moment as he devoured her with his eyes. Without warning, a slight tremor began in her hands. Not tonight! Too much was at stake! She had to fight down the terrifying symptoms and concentrate on being wickedly seductive.

Forcing her hands to move without shaking, she slid her palms back and forth over the curve of her waist and hip and down to the soft mound of her belly. His eyes tracked every movement.

"You're a beautiful woman." His voice went ragged with primordial hunger.

"Thanks." She struggled to keep her breathing steady while his glance probed each naked inch of her flesh. Her vulnerability, her exposure excited her. Lor would take her with raw power, yet he would never harm her. A fierce fire kindled in her feminine core. Every particle of her being responded to his masculine presence, to the light that streamed from him. Her sex softened and grew damp while her nipples hardened. The stiff peaks jutted outward toward him as if inviting his touch.

His eyes smoldering with sexual heat, Lor stepped closer. He licked his lips and reached out to touch the tender pink tip of one of her breasts.

Heat exploded through Rachel as his fingers squeezed the sensitive nub. Her womb clenched with a strange combination of fear and desire. Her pussy grew slick, wet, hot, and ready. She threw a quick glance at the waiting bed. She pictured Lor's strong hands tying her to the carved posts and trembled. How would it feel to lie there bound and helpless while he ravaged her body? She ached to know.

He followed her glance, then cupped her chin with one hand. His fingers stroked her cheek. "I intended to begin your healing tonight with the help of your husband, but we don't need him. We must follow another path, you and I, a deeper path that will require your complete submission to my will."

A secret thrill raced through Rachel. A deeper path. It sounded marvelously sexy. "Whatever it takes."

He released her chin. His hand moved lower, and with one fingertip he traced the outline of her areola and then flicked a thumb over her nipple. Rachel sucked in a breath. A sharp pang of desire hit her belly. She wanted to feel his mouth sucking on that aching nipple.

"I'm not asking for your submission merely to appease my sexual desire." Lor bent close. His voice rumbled near her ear, his words slow and heavy. Rachel's lips parted as she gasped for breath. The air grew hot and heavy around her. A passionate energy crackled through the room, an energy that seemed to boil between them.

"Although it will please me, immensely, your submission has a deeper purpose. It will build a bond between us, a bond stronger than the one that ties you to your husband. Only then will I be able to flow healing energy into you. Are you willing to do this?"

"Yes. I want nothing more to do with Jeremy."

Lor's hand cupped her breast. Heat radiated from his palm and energy flowed from each finger. His touch branded her, marking her as his. "My powerful energy will forge a strong bond between us. You will desire me more than you have ever desired any man, and you will give yourself to me without reservation. Are you willing?"

"Yes." She half-gasped the word. Her throat tightened. He stood so close. She breathed in his masculine scent. He smelled like a clean wind carrying the tang of the sea, salty, earthy. A soft sheen of light played over his skin as the energy field around him grew stronger. She leaned toward his touch, wanting more.

"Good. The first step is the consummation of our union." His eyes glittering, he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. Rachel sighed and let her body flow into his embrace. Her desire blazed up under his sea-green gaze. As he caught her to his chest, the evidence of his readiness pressed into her stomach, hard and heavy. Her knees melted under her, causing her to half stumble.

"Easy." His whisper tickled her ear. Supporting her with his arms, he lowered his mouth and claimed a kiss. The damp tip of his tongue gently traced the curve of her lower lip before it slipped inside her mouth. She moaned with pleasure as it probed deeper, exploring the roof of her mouth and tangling with her tongue.

Her tension drained away in his arms. Powerful masculine energy surrounded her, leaving her limp. He held her tight while she tasted the slightly salty flavor of his lips and the spice of his tongue stroking her mouth. His hands roamed freely over her hips and buttocks, exploring the hills and valleys of her flesh. A soft whimper escaped her. He was like the sea, deep and unfathomable. She buried her fingers deep into the thick mass of his hair and hung on for dear life. So this was what it felt like to be kissed with true desire. It left her hungry for more.

His mouth moved lower, gliding over the vulnerable skin of her neck. She let her head fall backward, exposing the long, slender length to him. His tongue licked at her, tasting her, resting on the pulse point at the hollow of her throat. The intimate connection made her womb constrict with desire. Her breasts grew heavy and swollen. She fisted her hands in his hair and rotated her hips, rubbing her belly against the hard length of his penis. She wanted him, ached for him with a yearning that had nothing to do with healing.

"Easy, my sweet one, easy." His eyes held a dark glimmer of amusement as he lifted his head from her throat. "I'll be deep inside you soon enough."

"I want you in me now." Never had she thought she would say such brazen, needy words to a man, and most of all to this man. He was so different from any male she'd ever met before, a man from another world and another culture. Her skin grew warm, each inch tingling with the flow of his energy over her. Her intimate flesh throbbed with need, with a great hollow aching to be filled that made her want to cry out for relief.

With a wicked grin, Lor scooped her up in his arms. She gave a little cry of pleasure as he lifted her from the ground with effortless ease. His strength amazed her. But then he was an Evolved male with muscles that were far superior to a human's. His stamina would be better, too -- including his sexual stamina.

The thought both thrilled and frightened her. What had she gotten into, giving herself to this man? Yet she couldn't retreat, not now. Nor did she want to. Lor made her feel alive, vital, in a way she'd never believed possible. Even if the healing failed, she'd tasted life in his arms, and it was glorious.

Still grinning, Lor swung her toward the bed. Throwing her arms around his neck, she clung to him. A white nimbus of light flickered over their naked skin wherever they touched. She breathed in his masculine scent, rubbed her cheek against his, feeling the faint stubble on his strong chin. The light beckoned her like an ocean, calling her to submerge her soul in the bliss of sexual union. Her spirit craved more of his supernatural energy as the drowning craved air.

His cradling arms eased her down on to the bed. Her heart pounding, she sank back against the pile of silken pillows.

Lor scanned her, his eyes burning a trail of fire up and down her body. "Lie back and spread your legs wide for me."

"Okay." Hot excitement pooled in her core. Keeping her gaze locked with his, she slowly opened her thighs. Excitement pulsed through her as she exposed her throbbing sex to his gaze. She let her head drop back on the pillows and lifted her arms above her head, feeling moisture dampen her thighs. From beneath slightly lowered lashes, she could see Lor drinking in the sight of her damp slit.

"You're doing well." Lor knelt on the bed beside her and laid a hand on her abdomen, then moved it downward to stroke the fleece between her legs. "Very well."

His touch sent jolts of electricity shooting up Rachel's spine. Biting down on her lip to cut off a cry, she arched toward him and opened her thighs wider. This was why she was here, to submit to his every desire.

His fingers continued their journey downward, slipping between her thighs to probe her slit. The pressure of his finger entering her brought a moan to her lips. She ground her hips deeper into the soft mattress and thrust her pelvis upward. Slick juices flowed over the lips of her pussy.

He raised a damp finger and gazed at her, his face hard with desire. "You're soaked. Our first joining will be intense."

Intense. The word barely described the power of the explosion already gathering force between her legs. She nodded, unable to speak. Her heart squeezed tight in her chest, heavy with an inexpressible need for him.

His hand stroked her thigh, swept lower, following the curve of her calf, and paused at her ankle. Then he rose, turned to the side table, and picked up the leather cuffs.

Alarmed, she lifted her head to watch as he bent over her and wrapped the soft, furlined cuffs around her ankles. Working quickly, he fastened each foot to a post at the end of the bed with a tether.

"There's no reason to be afraid." He moved toward the head of the bed, fluttered his fingertips over her stiff nipple, then grabbed one outstretched arm and drew another cuff around her wrist.

"I'm not frightened," Rachel lied. She tensed her leg muscles, testing the bonds that held her. Thick, soft fur slid over her skin, protecting her flesh, but the tethers that tied her to the bedposts were strong and pulled taut. She could not budge them. Her legs were splayed open, her pussy exposed. She fought back the panic that flickered at the edge of her consciousness, willed her body to stillness. She trusted this man.

Lor moved to her other arm. It took all her strength of will not to jerk her hand away as he wound the cuff around that wrist and fastened the tether to the head of the bed.

Stepping back, he surveyed her. She lay spread-eagled beneath his gaze, her legs spread wide, her breasts heaving. "Looking at you makes me rock hard."

Rachel glanced upward to the mirrored ceiling above her. The sight of her naked body bound to the bed made her gasp. Her muscles strained as she pulled against the straps. The light glinted off the moist, pink slit between her legs. Her intimate flesh felt swollen and incredibly sensitive. She had an overwhelming desire to cover herself, but it was impossible with her hands bound. Instinctively she jerked her wrists, trying to get her arms free. She wiggled her butt and twisted her feet against her bonds. Her thighs quivered with strain, but she couldn't close her legs and end her exposure.

"It's useless to struggle." Lor climbed back onto the bed and knelt in the space between her legs, his gaze focused on the juncture of her thighs. His face wore an intense, almost hungry look, and his hard erection thrust out toward her, the swollen head damp with a drop of semen. With slow deliberation, he ran a finger over the sensitive skin of her abdomen and down to the thick patch of coppery hair. He plucked at the curls, each tug sending explosive jolts of fire racing into the slit below.

Rachel's heart swelled against her ribs. Her whole being seemed to expand, to press against her skin, as his energy flowed into her. She shivered, every quivering inch of her awake, helpless, waiting for his touch. She lay back, gasping, aware of the pressure of the bed against her thighs, the soft sensual movement of air over her belly. He lowered his hand to cup her mons, and she groaned under the erotic weight of his touch.

"What are you going to do?" Her raspy breathing echoed through the small chamber.

His stare grew heavy-lidded, and his skin shone with a pale, golden light. The gathering weight of some tremendous energy filled the room, like the heavy pressure of a summer storm building on a hot night. Each touch of his hands on her flesh sizzled with the power of his energy. The walls and the mirror above her head glowed with the light that spilled from him. On the nearby bed stand, a candle flickered and flared, sending out thick incense that perfumed the air with an exotic, sensual aroma.

Her eyelids grew heavy, too. Sensual lassitude spread through her body like a potent drug. She stopped struggling and sank back into the mattress, joining him in his sexual trance. Her pussy throbbed with anticipation as she waited for his finger to slip into her.

Lor laid the palms of his hands against the skin of her inner thighs and spread her legs even further apart. Twisting to reach behind him, he tightened the tethers that held her ankles.

Rachel whimpered softly as her thigh muscles strained with the stretching. If she'd done the splits, she could not have been more fully opened and exposed to his desire.

"Shhhh." Poised between her legs, Lor bent over her, his warm breath whispering in her ear. "Relax. It doesn't hurt, does it?"

She shook her head, not trusting her voice to speak.

"I didn't think so."

Rachel's eyes widened as he straightened again. A thick layer of glowing energy clung to him, wrapping him in a misty cloak of light, as a fog might cling to the hills and valleys. It was ethereal, almost invisible, a radiant shimmer that covered his whole form. The light concentrated in the palms of his hands. There she could see it swirling in golden coils.

Those magical hands dropped to her inner thighs and stroked her skin. An uncontrollable shivering shook her, despite the heat that flowed through her body at his touch. With his hands resting on the tops of her thighs, he moved his thumbs into the hollow between her legs and massaged the slick flesh of her lower lips.

"Please," she begged, not even knowing what she was begging for. Her vision filled with the golden fire that played over his skin. Flames of radiant energy licked out toward her and scorched her exposed flesh with waves of hot desire. Her whole body pulsed with the knowledge that she was pinned, helpless, unable to move to avoid his touch, completely at his mercy. Mysteriously, her very vulnerability made her crave that touch. Her legs trembled as she bucked against the straps for a moment and then relaxed.

"That's it. Don't fight. Let my energy flow through you." Lor's voice took on a deep, hypnotic cadence. "Feel it flow into you and out of you."

As he spoke, he slipped his finger deep inside her already pulsing slit.

Energy erupted from his fingertip and filled her pussy. Rachel uttered a small, bewildered cry of astonishment. Her intimate flesh burned with heat as if it were aflame. Her nipples tightened with the sudden rush of desire that slammed through her like a blow.

"I'm going to touch you, Rachel, touch you in your deepest depths." He matched the motion to his words, his finger sliding in and out of her. His whisper filled her world. She closed her eyes, aware only of his voice and the pulsing flame between her widespread legs, the flame that blossomed stronger with each teasing thrust. She rocked her hips, wanting him deeper inside her. Her leg muscles tightened, and she jerked against the bonds at her ankles as she tried helplessly to press her thighs together to increase the sense of pressure deep within her sheath.

"That's it."

Rachel opened her eyes. He smiled at her. When he withdrew his finger from her body, she whimpered her loss and struggled once more against her bonds.

"It's all right. We've only begun." He brushed his thumbs over her taut nipples. The feathery touch jolted the engorged, sensitive flesh, sending a bolt of heat into her gut.

"Lor!" She cried his name as his mouth covered hers. Moisture dripped from her pussy, dampening the silken coverlet. A fierce desire such as she'd never felt before consumed her. She wanted him inside her. She wanted to wrap her arms and legs around him, to possess him as he possessed her, but she could only lie lashed to the bed, moaning and squirming

with agonized longing, as he drank from her lips and then pressed hot kisses down her neck and over the curve of her breasts.

The golden glow around him deepened to dusky amber light. It shone outward from his body and melted into the candlelight that filled the room. Light dazzled her, almost blinding her. The heat that he radiated warmed her skin, burned the flesh between her legs. Ablaze with desire, her pulse pounding, her skin covered with a sheen of moisture, she twisted and squirmed, moaning her need.

"You're ready at last." His sea-dark eyes glowed. He straightened and took his cock in his hand, guiding it toward her pulsing entrance.

Rachel suppressed another gasp as she gazed on his magnificent nude form. A nimbus of light, like a halo, surrounded his body and out from that light jutted a huge erection. She licked suddenly dry lips. In a moment, that hard, long length would plunge into her.

He pushed his hips forward, and the head of his cock slid over the slick juices that moistened her slit. She moaned as he brushed the head against her slippery flesh a second time, probing for the entrance to her body. He pushed against her with agonizing slowness. A soft moan escaped her as her sex opened up under the assault, unfolding like a flower, moist and damp with the dew of her longing for him.

She arched against the bonds, welcoming him. With tormenting slowness, he pushed deeper, penetrating her, opening her body as he'd opened her heart.

Then he gave a sudden thrust with his hips, and the long length of him rammed into her engorged pussy, unleashing an explosion of heat and desire.

A wild sob of pleasure escaped her. He filled her, filled up all the empty places inside her.

"Rachel!" His face suffused with ecstatic joy. He gripped her hips and plunged in and out of her slick cunt, his hips moving in a relentless rhythm. His mouth claimed hers with demanding ferocity as he ravaged her, each stroke thrusting deep to break new ground, to probe deeper into her, while her heart and soul cried out for more, cried out to be utterly pierced and possessed.

Trembling, she opened her mouth and surrendered to the demands of his searching tongue while his cock pounded into her in a relentless rhythm. The air around him blazed with an almost ruby light, like a fire at the point of kindling. A matching heat mounted inside her, a newborn blaze that scorched her inner flesh and set her womb afire. Her whole body felt molten, like some fragile piece of glasswork held by a strong hand over the edge of a flame. The edges of her consciousness were blurring as a mighty energy rose up from her depths. Her entire being became luminous, like glass heated by unbearable flame and at the point of melting.

A nimbus of power flared up from her core. Heat rushed through her body. What was this? The inexorable pressure felt like an orgasm about to burst through her. Oh, god, it was all of that and something more.

93

Lor's sea-green eyes blazed into hers. A rainbow rush of light poured off his skin. His touch branded her, and she knew she was his forever. Bending his head, he swirled his tongue over her stiff nipple as he thrust hard into her.

Sensation burst from every pore of her body like a thousand explosions of light. Without warning, the energy inside her erupted outward like a geyser.

Chapter Eleven

With little incoherent cries of unbearable pleasure, Rachel twisted on the silken sheets. Her convulsive movements thrust her nipple deeper into Lor's mouth. Passion exploded up from her depths like an erupting volcano. The concussion rocked through her, sending her mind reeling out into the firestorm.

Moaning her name, Lor gripped her tight and buried his face against her breasts. Light rose like an ocean wave and swept through her. It flooded the room with an unbearable brilliance that dazzled her with its glory. Drowning in its radiance, she sank into the depths of a realm beyond space and time, a place of blinding illumination and pure healing power. Her heart and soul at peace at last, she dissolved into that light and became one with Lor.

With a slow, almost infinite pleasure, the ripples of delight faded into the incandescent pool. As the shattering force of her orgasm died down, Rachel drifted free of her body. Dissolved into pure consciousness, she floated upon the scented air. The room blazed as if on fire, and in the center of the conflagration, Lor glowed like an angel descended from heaven.

The splendor of his unleashed power was almost more than she could bear. As light as ashes falling on a sea of flame, she glided on the currents of dimming glory that carried her back into the incinerated remnants of her body. Slowly, she became aware again of the weight of her arms and legs, of the pounding of her heart and the beating of her blood in her ears. Everywhere she looked, glorious light shone silver and gold, dancing over her skin, reflecting off the mirrored ceiling.

Stunned, she struggled to understand what had happened. Somehow, their union had released a titanic blast of energy. It roared through her head, shards of glimmering silver flame flashing through her brain.

With a hopeful cry, she jerked on her bonds. This was what sexual healing meant, that ultimate passionate joining that released inner fire. What about her tumor? Had that pure burst of light burnt it to ashes?

Lor's eyes blazed with a triumphant, emerald glow as he withdrew from her body. The look of proud accomplishment on his face confirmed her wildest hopes. "It happened!" he shouted, planting his hands on his hips and throwing his head back. His muscled body gleamed with sweat. "Didn't you feel it? You're healed. I know it."

Joy bubbled up inside her. She could feel the shift. The power had raged through her in those ultimate moments of orgasm and burned away the darkness that had tried to consume her and drag her down to death.

Laughing and crying at the same time, Rachel sank into the bed, as limp as a rag doll. Tomorrow she'd go to a doctor to confirm the miracle.

"I've succeeded." A wide smile split Lor's face. "We've succeeded." He bent over her, laughing with excitement. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful." She felt more than wonderful. She felt ecstatic.

Without warning, a face rose up in her mind's eye. A woman with hopeless, tear-filled eyes. Eva. She deserved to know this same joy.

Lor sat back on his haunches and turned toward Rachel's feet. His nimble fingers began to undo her bonds. "I'll have you free in a moment. I want you to walk around. Enjoy your new strength."

He shifted position, leaning forward and reaching above her head to release the cuffs at her wrists. She gazed up at his hard, firm body above her. A radiant glow still surrounded him, although it was slowly dying away.

"I can't stop thinking about Eva." With her hands free at last, she pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

He glanced down at her, a tender smile on his face. "You have a gentle, caring heart. The natural heart of a healer." As the cuff fell away from her wrist, he clasped her hand and squeezed. "You're far more special than you can possibly realize, Rachel. You have a powerful gift, a gift that I want to learn more about. I know this will come as a shock to you, but I want you to consider leaving Earth and traveling to Cor'almere with me."

"What?" She stared up at him in disbelief. "Me? Travel to the Evolved home world." She shook her head. "You're joking. No one from Earth has ever gone there. We're not good enough."

"Nonsense." Anger flashed in his eyes, bright as lightning flickering over a stormy sea. His hand stroked her belly, her thigh. She twitched and moaned and bit her lip as he tangled his fingers through the fleece on her mons. He dipped his head and kissed the soft, hot flesh near her slit. Chill bumps of pleasure rose up on her flesh. His slightest touch turned her

bones to water. "Never say you aren't good enough for me, Rachel. You have a gift that can help the people of another world, a people in grave need of healing, just as you were."

Her brows knit together in a puzzled frown. "What are you talking about?" "The energy that our joining released. Surely you felt it."

"Yes." The blazing light had rocked her to her core, burned through her mind, and destroyed the tumor. She was certain of that. Oh, she would visit her doctor and submit to the cold, unemotional measurements of medical science, but her heart was already convinced. She was well.

Stretching out beside her on the bed, Lor took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. Gently he kissed the inside of her palm and then spoke in a soft voice. "We need complete honesty between us, Rachel. You planned all along to seduce me, didn't you?"

Her breath caught at the bluntness of his question. He was looking at her with so much warmth shining in his eyes. Did she dare to trust in the tender emotion she saw there? It was almost as if ... she swallowed hard, forcing that thought from her mind. That couldn't be. Her gaze faltered and fell away from his as she remembered the cold desperation with which she'd planned to lure him into her bed.

His warm fingers cupped her chin and lifted her head, forcing her to look into his eyes again. "I know you were dying and wanted to be healed. What you don't know is that I wanted something from you, too."

Her lips parted in a silent gasp. One of the Evolved needed something from a human? Her mind struggled to imagine what he could possibly have wanted.

He caressed her cheek with a feathery light touch. "I've been searching for a way to increase my healing powers for a long time. There's a race of aliens called the Yenxians. They're dying, but they will only accept energetic forms of healing as a treatment."

He paused, and she searched his face, wondering at the anguish she saw there. These alien beings must matter to him very much. Her heart began to beat in rhythm with his. She ached for him. His pain flowed into her from every point where their bodies touched, joining the pain already in her heart for Eva. Intuitively, she understood: This was what it meant to be a healer -- your mind and heart opened up until you could feel the awful needs of those who suffered all around you.

Lor had called her a healer. The idea excited her, even as the newfound pain assaulted her. Was she up to the demands of such a life? It would be a far cry from the pampered existence of a spoiled heiress. The memory of Eva's distress strengthened her resolve. Reaching out, she grasped Lor's hand with hers and squeezed.

He smiled down at her. "I explored many ways of trying to boost my powers, but they all failed. And then one day it occurred to me that perhaps I was looking in the wrong place."

She curled the fingers of her other hand into the mat of soft hair on his chest. "I don't understand."

"My fellow priests in the healing temple thought we needed to evolve to an even higher level, but I wondered, what if the opposite were true? What if we needed to go back instead, to reclaim a primitive power we've almost lost? What if our healing ability is not from our advanced genes, but from our ancient heritage? That's when I decided to come to Earth."

Understanding dawned. "To see if any of us had this same healing ability?" She tilted her face up at him. He had such drive, such determination. Could she exercise the same dedication and discipline? The challenge excited her. She snuggled closer to him and rested her head on his chest. His heart beat in her ear.

"Exactly." He beamed at her, pleased at her perceptiveness. "And I found it in you." "Me? But I was dying."

"Yes. You didn't realize you had this gift, and you had no idea how to use it. But I could see it shining around you like a silver cloak." He brushed a stray lock of burnished copper off her face, and his heart swelled with desire to take her again. Great Creator, he wanted nothing more than to sink deep into her welcoming heat, to make love to her repeatedly, to feel her tremble beneath him as her energy built to the point of explosion, to add his own to hers and ride that wild surge into the unearthly realm where glorious healing light flowed freely from their bodies.

A shadow darkened the bright blue of her eyes, calling him back from his intoxicating vision of the future. "So, you made love to me because I have a power that can help you."

"Oh, Rachel!" He clasped her face between his hands, but she looked away, obviously hurt by his words. He touched her quivering bottom lip with one finger. Tenderly he stroked it until the quivering stilled. She took a deep breath and met his gaze again with eyes that swam with unshed tears.

He brushed his fingers over her eyelids, and they fluttered shut. He kissed them gently, his lips catching the warm drops of moisture that seeped from her closed eyes. "There's no need to weep," he murmured in a voice made husky by his passion. "Yes, I came to Earth with a purpose in mind, but that changed the moment I saw you. I made love to you because you're beautiful and desirable and I've never wanted a woman so much in my life. And because I wanted to heal you. And because I think you're clever and witty and delightful." He paused, taking a breath. "And yes, because you have this power and so do I, and together we might be able to do something wonderful to help a dying race."

Her eyes opened and searched his face, weighing his sincerity. The raw need in those blue depths pierced his heart. A matching need pulsed through him. How could he ever leave her? Thank the Creator, he didn't have to. If she'd only been a patient, he would have had to say goodbye to her, but she held the promise of becoming more than that, so much more.

"Is that all?" she whispered. "You want me for a healing partner?"

"No, that's not all." Passion roared through his heart and echoed in his words. "I want you for a partner in every way. In my work and in my bed." He hesitated, then spoke the words already ringing through his soul. "And in my heart."

She gave a little cry of wonder at his declaration, and her eyes shone with an agonizing hope. He could see how hard she had to fight to believe him despite her insecurities and doubts. It didn't help that she'd been so hurt by her scoundrel of an ex-husband and that he hadn't yet been able to break that psychic link. He waited, patiently, meeting her stare, willing her to trust him, although all he wanted to do was clasp her to his chest and kiss those soft lips until she moaned her surrender beneath him.

Finally, a ghost of a smile flitted over her mouth. The fragile hope in her eyes grew stronger. She had the natural ability of any healer to bounce back from the edge of disaster with renewed strength. The thought of what they might be able to do together sent a sharp surge of excitement twisting through him. His cock hardened.

"So somehow my power feeds yours?" she asked.

"Yes. It gave me an incredible boost. The energy you released flowed through me. It awakened a deeper part of my brain, one that has been dormant until this moment."

Seeing the sparkle in her eyes gave him immense pleasure. She tilted her head to one side and managed an impish grin. "No doubt a primitive part of your brain."

He matched her smile with one of his own. "I prefer to think of it as unexplored. And obviously, underappreciated." He rubbed his pounding temples with a wry grin. Even now, he could feel remnants of the power they'd released together swirling through his head. He couldn't wait to see Mixiah and attempt a healing of the furry alien. If he succeeded ... the future that waited made him dizzy with anticipation. A whole race to save, a completely new way of healing to explore ...

The vision of the future dissolved, replaced by the face of a woman with soft, kissable lips, eyes the color of a summer sky, and wild copper curls. The attainment of his healing dream faded to nothing beside her beauty. He'd achieved his goal, and to his surprise, it was not enough. Only spending his life with Rachel would be enough.

"I'm glad I could help," Rachel murmured. "But now you've found out what part of your brain to access to increase your powers. Do you need me any more?"

"More than ever!" He pulled her close, hot naked skin against hot naked skin, his leg draped possessively over her hip. She moaned as he grabbed her buttocks and pressed her groin against his. His swelling erection dug into her belly. He pressed closer, letting her feel the hard evidence of his desire. "I think I'm falling in love with you."

Her eyelids fluttered closed as she sucked in a long breath. Her long lashes swept down to veil her eyes. A delicate blue vein in her temple throbbed with tension. "How can an Evolved man love a primitive like me?"

He grabbed her chin, forcing her head up until their gazes once more locked together. Each shared look sent rivers of heat coursing through his blood. Surely, she sensed his passion. "My people have guided our physical evolution with their genetic meddling, but no amount of playing with genes can touch the soul. And it's the soul that matters. Yours enchants me. I'm awed by its beauty."

Her lashes dropped. Then she nibbled on her lower lip and raised her chin. Troubled shadows haunted her gaze. "How can you say that? I've been selfish, thinking only of my own healing. I know Jeremy brought that woman with him tonight to hurt and embarrass me, but she was a real woman, in terrible need. How can I lie here in this bed with you, indulging in a night of lust and feeling so happy and relieved to be healed, while I know she's still out there, afraid and dying?"

He touched the corner of her eye where moisture pooled, about to spill over into another tear. "Your compassion does you credit."

Her mouth twisted, full lips softly trembling. It was all he could do to keep from cupping her face between his hands and kissing her until she cried out. "My compassion won't heal her. Even though I may have this energy you're talking about, I don't have a clue how to use it. Only you can help her, Lor."

Gripped by shame, he studied her pleading face. How could he deny her wish? Yet the dictates of the council were clear. He was to interfere with Earth's culture as little as possible. If he found a woman with the healing gift, he could work with her, but only her. He was not here to heal these people. He could never heal the millions on this planet who needed his help.

"I can't. There are rules my people must follow when visiting your world."

"You've said that before." Her voice sounded bitter. "Rules to keep us from learning your technology."

"We don't want to harm you by destroying your faith in yourselves. Perhaps you can't see it, but in their way, my people are trying to respect your people."

"What about Eva? What about her life? Do you respect her right to live?"

He made a despairing gesture. How could he answer that? In so many ways, he agreed. Surely, a life was more important than some abstract principle of cultural purity.

On the other hand, he knew what could happen when a superior culture let an inferior one have unrestricted access to its technology and knowledge. He'd visited the dead worlds where that had happened and tragedy followed. Races unaccustomed to such power fell apart and destroyed themselves.

Saving one life could cost billions of lives.

He opened his mouth to try to explain, but she forestalled him with a finger to his lips. Her chin came up another notch. "I know what you're going to say. I've heard all the arguments. Anyway, the Evolved are leaving soon, aren't they?"

"Yes. Now that I've completed my mission on your planet, my brethren will start to leave."

"And since Earth has yet to develop an interstellar drive of our own, we'll be marooned here, cut off from other galactic civilizations."

He touched her cheek with a rising sense of desperation. This conversation wasn't going well. He could feel cold anger building in her aura. "Try to think of it in a positive light. Your people will be left free to find their own way, a way that they're in danger of losing through our interference. And hopefully, they will be motivated by a renewed sense of what can be achieved, and the knowledge that a great galactic civilization waits to welcome them when they reach the stars on their own."

She brushed his hand away, her expression going hard. "That's why you want me to come with you. You won't be coming back, and you need me for your research. If I go with you to Cor'almere, it'll be a one-way trip, won't it?"

Lor frowned. He'd been hoping to break this news to her gradually as their love deepened and their bond grew stronger. He should have known she'd guess. He'd created the bond he'd wanted, and now the energy flowing between them made keeping any secrets almost impossible.

"Yes. I've been granted one exception."

She sat up in the bed, tossing her mop of wild curls. "Because I can help so many? Because I can help this dying race you spoke about?"

"Yes. They're vitally important to the future of the galaxy. Many diverse races depend on their unifying wisdom for guidance."

Rachel folded her arms across her breasts, hiding her still-aroused nipples from his gaze. A determined look settled over her face. "I think a trade is fair, then. I realize I can't save everyone, but I'll never get the memory of that woman out of my mind unless I do something for her." Her mouth quivered for a moment. Then she set it in a firm line. Her eyes flashed at him. "I'll go to Cor'almere with you if you'll heal her."

"Rachel --" Emotion clogged his throat. Did she think he was that cruel? "I don't want you to come to my world as some sort of act of sacrifice. I want you to come with me willingly, because you believe as I do, that we can build a future together."

"Do you?" Slowly, she lowered her arms, exposing herself to him again. Moisture glistened on the tips of her long lashes. "I have to trust you first, Lor. I have to believe you care enough about me to take a risk. You want me to leave my people and everything I've ever known. Show me you're willing to go against the wishes of your own people for my sake." She attempted a small smile. "It's not as if I'm asking you to do anything terrible. You'll save a life."

The sight of her unshed tears made his heart ache with longing to comfort her. The thought of losing her, of leaving Earth without her at his side, was more than he could bear. "All right. I'll help her."

Joy flashed across Rachel's face and then, unaccountably, she looked stricken again.

He reached out for her hand. "What's wrong? Tell me."

She gave him a rueful look. "I just realized, if you're going to heal her, you'll have to sleep with her, too. I feel jealous, but I've only got myself to blame."

Grabbing her by the shoulders, Lor pulled her closer. She shivered as she snuggled into his embrace. She laid her head on his chest with a small sigh. He tucked his chin into the soft, silken mass of her hair and stroked her back. "I'm a sexual healer, Rachel. I've slept with many women."

Her fingers toyed with the thick mat of hair on his chest. "I know. I guess I'm going to have to get used to sharing you."

He dropped a tender kiss on her forehead. "I'm not so sure about that. There will have to be a strong bond between us so that I can explore your energy. It will require commitment, even exclusivity."

"You can do that."

"Not usually. As a sexual healer, part of my task is to cure and then move on. It would be wrong to make those I heal dependent on me in any way. However, with you it's different. We will be working together to develop our powers for a long time." He grinned down at her upturned face. "Perhaps a lifetime."

Her small tongue came out and swirled over her upper lip as she pondered his words. He watched the pink tip follow the sensuous curve of her mouth, and a sharp pang of desire shot through his belly.

"You and me, mated to each other. That would be wonderful. But what about this woman? You promised."

"I will help her. I've brought several students with me. Any one of them is capable of healing her."

"Will they do it?"

"If I tell them to. They trust me."

"What about the council? Will you get in trouble with them when you return to Cor'almere?"

Lor laughed. "I'll have to convince them of the wisdom of my choice. When I tell them what I've discovered here, they should be in a forgiving mood. So do we have a deal?"

She nodded. "We do. You arrange for one of your disciples to heal Eva, and I come to your world with you."

"We'll have to find her first," Lor said. "I suppose that means talking to your exhusband."

Rachel shuddered. "I'm sorry to do that to you. You'll have to be careful what you say to Jeremy. He'll do anything to discredit the Evolved."

"I can handle him," Lor assured her. Besides, he wanted to see the bastard again. He couldn't take Rachel back to Cor'almere with him while the psychic bond remained between her and Jeremy Whyte. He had to break it.

Chapter Twelve

As the elevator doors closed behind him with a soft hiss, Lor surveyed the reception area for the offices of Sen. Jeremy Whyte. A young man with ginger hair and a bristly mustache stood beside a desk talking to a woman. Both of them were examining a folder in his hands. They glanced up, and their conversation died. Open-mouthed, they stared at Lor as if they'd never seen an Evolved before.

"Pleasant greetings," Lor ventured, wondering if he should have worn something besides his codpiece. Members of Earth's government could be quite prudish despite their general corruption. It was yet another fascinating contradiction on a planet full of them.

The young man broke from the frozen tableau first. Dropping the folder on the desk, he stepped toward Lor and held out his hand. "I'm Scott Richardson, Senator Whyte's personal secretary. Welcome to the United Earth building."

How appropriate that Jeremy had a male personal secretary. Lor's mouth twisted in a sneer. It was probably the only way the leech could get any work done.

"You know me?" he asked.

"I know the senator's expecting you, sir. And I've seen holo images of you."

Unaccountably, a blush appeared on Richardson's cheeks, clashing with his ginger hair.

Noticing where the young man's eyes had focused, Lor glanced downward, but everything seemed in order. His codpiece remained securely in place.

"Follow me." Still blushing, Richardson led Lor into the Jeremy's spacious office.

"Ah, Lor." Jeremy looked up from behind his desk with a calculating smirk on his face. Not bothering to rise, he gestured toward a chair. "I'm glad you agreed to this personal gettogether. Please have a seat."

"Thanks." Lor settled into a high-backed wing chair and eyed the man across the broad expanse of desk. Jeremy was up to something. That much he knew. He'd only agreed to this meeting to find out what.

The senator had called him the day before. Surprised, Lor had listened quietly while Jeremy asked him to come to his office for a private meeting. He'd wondered if Jeremy had somehow heard that he'd tracked down Eva through a private detective agency. The very morning of Jeremy's call, he'd procured her home address and sent Horet, his most skilled adept, to begin her healing treatment.

Now Lor leaned back in his chair and crossed his ankles with grim determination. He intended that this meeting would produce one result Jeremy would never suspect. Before he left this room, he would break the bond between Jeremy and Rachel. First, though, he would let Jeremy speak. The man looked eager to reveal his no doubt self-serving reason for wanting this meeting.

Jeremy shot a sharp look at his personal secretary. "Do you have everything set up? You know I'm hopeless with electronics."

"It's all ready to go, sir." The man slipped a remote from his pocket and handed it to Jeremy. "You only need to press play." Darting another nervous look at Lor, he hurried from the room and shut the door behind him.

"So, Lor." Jeremy placed the remote on the desk in front of him. He leaned forward with a glint of anticipation in his eyes. "I trust you've enjoyed slumming on our unenlightened world?"

"I have." Lor ignored Jeremy's provocative tone. The less he said the better, until he figured out what the senator was up to.

"Enjoyable scenery? Good food?" Jeremy's brow wrinkled in thought. "How about the sex? How's that?"

"Ah, the sex." Lor pressed his hands together as if deep in thought and glanced around with relaxed ease. If he understood Earth's culture, this question was rude. Probably it was Jeremy's attempt at an insult. Primitive cultures often treated sex as if it were something dirty or nasty, rather than the natural, beautiful experience it should be. However, he was no more offended by a question about his sex life than he would have been if asked about what he had for lunch. Returning his attention to Jeremy, he smiled. "The sex has been superb."

"I believe you." Jeremy sounded smug. "I have photographic evidence of your satisfaction. I caught your whole perverted little encounter with Rachel on camera."

Lor shot up straight in his chair. The gleam of triumph in Jeremy's eye warned him that some trap loomed ahead. "What do you mean? I took that camera away from you."

Jeremy's grin turned into a superior smirk. "I guess the Evolved don't know *everything* after all. You took away the one I wanted you to find. I came to that meeting with no less than three miniature cameras. I walked out with one still hidden on my person, and I

planted another one in the room before I left. I snuck back in later to retrieve it and was delighted to find it caught some red-hot shots of what went on after I was gone."

Lor gaped at him in dismay, blindsided by this news. Adrenaline blazed like wildfire through his veins, and his muscles knotted in rage. Had this scoundrel actually filmed the healing ceremony between him and Rachel? Even an ignorant Earthling must know better than to invade the privacy of a sacred ritual.

On the other hand, maybe not. Jeremy looked unbearably smug. Lor narrowed his eyes. "You're bluffing, hoping to frighten Rachel."

"No, I'm not." Jeremy picked up the remote and pointed it at a cabinet on the wall to the right of his desk. Wooden doors slid apart to reveal a compact holographic projector. Jeremy pressed a button and holographs appeared. Two nude people filled the space between him and Jeremy.

"Ohhh, ohhhh." The soft moans came from Rachel as she strained at her bonds and arched her back. Her breasts jiggled and her stiff nipples pointed up at the mirrored ceiling. Lor watched his holographic form kneel between her legs, his engorged penis probing into her moist slit.

"It sure looks like you had a good time," Jeremy observed, leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands together. He watched with barely a flicker of his eyelids as the holographic Lor plunged into Rachel.

A vein throbbed in Lor's temple. He turned away from the images and swallowed the anger that choked his throat. He'd think about vengeance later. This man was his enemy and Rachel's enemy. He had to stay alert and deal with him.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

Jeremy's laughter exploded in a sharp bark. "There's no mystery to that. You spilled the beans to me the other night that the Evolved are planning to leave Earth. That's a problem for me because as the head of the Evict the Evolved campaign, I want the public to believe I'm the one who forced your people to leave our planet. It's all a matter of spin. I'll broadcast this holocast to the whole world and expose you as a perverted bastard."

Lor struggled to maintain a nonchalant expression. "Really? Is this the best you can do? I am a sexual healer, after all."

Jeremy laughed. "And that's a good thing for me. Earthlings have no sophistication when it comes to sex. Seeing this will shock all those spineless millions who still see the Evolved as a superior race. They'll be stunned and dismayed to learn you're humans with feet of clay and despicable desires. This film is going to go a long way toward destroying the myth of your superiority."

Lor flicked what he hoped was a bored glance toward the two screwing figures. "I don't quite see why. I thought I did a superior job of fucking your ex-wife."

Jeremy's features turned livid with anger. His eyes bulged. "You prick! Everyone will see you're just another man with a hard dick. Nothing more."

"Perhaps." Lor noted that the holocast ended with Rachel's orgasm. If Jeremy had caught the tender exchange between them in the afterglow of their lovemaking, he'd decided not to show it. Of course, he'd edited the footage to make Lor look like a leering sexual predator.

Turning his attention back to Jeremy, he forced a confident smile. He was no politician, but he could play the alpha male as well as this pathetic excuse for a man. Their gazes locked. Jeremy no doubt thought this was a duel of wills, a battle of alpha males. Lor decided to take advantage of this protracted stare to scan the senator's aura.

There! The almost invisible layer of life energy shimmering around Jeremy swam into focus. Lor's lip curled in distaste as he surveyed the muddied colors. The usually vibrant halo of light emitted the dim glow of dull browns and lifeless grays. Jeremy possessed the aura of a man who had compromised the inner light of his soul in a ruthless quest for success.

"Aren't you going to try and stop me from showing this to the world?" Jeremy jutted out his chin in a belligerent challenge.

"I suspect it would be pointless to argue."

"I'm also going to include some footage of you refusing to help Eva. The world will hate you for that."

Lor relaxed slightly. Jeremy didn't yet know that he'd sent Horet to heal Eva. "Will they?" he drawled. "Yet I'm confident Eva will be fine."

Jeremy seemed disappointed by Lor's calm response. A flicker of red along the edge of his aura proclaimed his eagerness for battle.

Narrowing his focus, Lor followed the twisting strands of light with his inner sight. Since Rachel's healing, he'd made love with her twice more. Each time the explosive of energy of their orgasms had stimulated long dormant parts of his brain. He could feel his powers growing. Gathering his concentration, he reached out to sense the link between Jeremy and Rachel. Like a dog sniffing the trail of prey, he searched the other man's aura. Then he spotted the prize. A thin, grayish thread of light that spun out of Jeremy's body and vanished through the wall of the office.

"I'm going to reveal your true nature to the world, literally." Jeremy's tirade broke into his concentration. "I've arranged for this tape to be broadcast tonight on worldwide holovision as part of an exposé on the Evolved. The whole planet will get to watch Rachel spreading her legs for you."

"Won't that be a personal embarrassment for you as well?" Lor kept his voice calm while he reached out to touch the thread ever so delicately with his psychic senses.

"No." Jeremy smirked again. "I'm an expert in controlling what we savages call the spin. I'll be speaking to the audience after the holograph broadcast finishes. I'll explain that

Rachel is a slut and I divorced her because she can't control her sexual impulses." His obscene grin broadened. "She dragged my name through the mud when we divorced, and I intend to return the favor. Destroying the Evolved while I'm at it is so much gravy."

"Gravy?" Lor frowned. What did gravy have to do with this?

Jeremy waved an impatient hand. "Another Earth expression. Forget it. It means I'm getting a double bonus from this broadcast tonight. By the time the program ends, the people of Earth will rise up and demand that the Evolved leave our world. After that, you can say you were going to leave anyway all you want, but in the eyes of the world I'll get the credit for driving you off this planet."

Somewhere in this city, Lor knew, Rachel waited for him. That thread of light went straight to her, binding her to Jeremy in ways she couldn't even imagine.

Until today. Gathering his newborn power, Lor made a sudden cutting motion in the air with his hand. At the same instant, he focused his intent. The thread of light snapped in two.

Relaxing back in his chair, he turned to Jeremy with a bland expression. The other man had no idea what had happened, although his face wore a momentarily bewildered look, as if he'd lost his train of thought. Rachel was free.

"Really, Jeremy, your race seems way too fond of melodrama. If you wanted us to leave so badly, you only had to ask. We're glad to go. It's not as if there's anything we need on your world."

Not as long as Rachel comes back with me. Let this primitive lout have his hollow victory with the holocast. He rose to his feet and cast a disdainful glance at the bewildered man. Rachel was now free to leave Earth with him. This stupid human had no idea what sort of treasure he'd let slip through his fingers.

* * * * *

Her mind abuzz with excitement, Rachel prowled the hallway of the new penthouse apartment she'd purchased after the divorce. A right turn brought her into the kitchen. The gleaming countertops showed no evidence that anyone had ever cooked a meal in this room. Probably the previous owners had had all their parties catered and had gone out to eat every evening at some elegant restaurant.

Feeling restless, Rachel pulled open the refrigerator door and surveyed the three neatly stacked cartons of take-out food. Would Lor expect her to cook? Her life had consisted of gourmet restaurants, private chefs, and take-out. She'd be lucky if she could figure out how to reheat this food without burning it.

When she'd signed the papers for the place two weeks ago, the price hadn't mattered. Now she was glad she'd opted for such an exclusive building. She'd needed somewhere to meet Lor in private, someplace where there was less danger of the world's media tracking her

down. The apartments in this upscale building belonged to the wealthy and elite of New York, and the entrances were well guarded to keep out all unwanted reporters.

Sighing, Rachel shut the refrigerator door and moved over to the liquor cabinet. The thought of Lor's imminent arrival stirred a host of unexpected emotions. Maybe a stiff drink would help. She needed a stiff something, she thought with a little giggle.

Clutching a glass of brandy in her hand, she made her way back into the living room. Low couches of soft leather the color of butterscotch gleamed against the polished wood floor. The chocolate velvet draperies had been pulled aside to reveal a stunning view of New York City, its towers bright against the evening sky. She drifted out onto the terrace and leaned on the wide stone parapet, looking down at the traffic far below. Would he come in an ordinary car or in some exotic Evolved vehicle?

The thought of seeing him again made her shiver despite the balmy evening. They'd only been apart for the day, but already a hunger for more of their lovemaking throbbed inside her like a feverish dream. Fire kindled in her belly at the recollection of his touch, awakening a desire that pooled between her legs. God, she wanted him! Until her relationship with Lor, she hadn't known it was possible to want a man in this way, to crave him inside her with the same fierce need that drove a starving vagrant to snatch food off a table. Her whole body had become a hollow vessel longing to have him fill her. She wanted to feel his lips caressing hers, she wanted to feel the heat of his bare skin pressed against her body, she wanted to feel his tongue on her aroused nipple, she wanted ... she wanted ...

With a sudden sigh, she shook her head. Had the Evolved sexual healer cast some kind of erotic spell over her? Or was this that ancient magic called love? She didn't know. She only knew that he'd saved her life and then given it a meaning she'd never dreamed possible.

Lifting her head, she gazed upward at the night sky. The blazing lights of the city hid all but the brightest stars. Besides, she had no idea where in the sky to look for the star that was the sun for Cor'almere. The thought of journeying through that vast blackness, of traveling to an unknown world, should terrify her. It didn't, though. Lor would be at her side.

Their sexual union had joined them on so many levels, a fact she was barely starting to realize. When her energy had risen up to join with his, something truly elemental had knit them together. Although she barely knew him, she felt as if she'd become one with him in a way she'd never experienced with her ex-husband. She only prayed he shared the same wonderful sense of ultimate union.

A bell chimed softly through the apartment. Hurrying to the door, Rachel threw it open. Lor stood there, a worried frown on his face.

At once her heart sank. The shadows in his eyes told her something was wrong. "What is it?"

Stepping inside, he pushed the door shut with his foot and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. "I went to see Jeremy this afternoon," he said without preamble.

"I see." Rachel swallowed. Of course. Jeremy. It was always bad news when Jeremy was concerned. "Why? I thought you got Eva's name and address from your detectives."

"I did. He wanted to see me."

"Jeremy wanted to see you? That's odd."

"He had something to show me." Lor paused and tightened his grip around her shoulder. "He had more than one camera hidden on his person that night at your healing ritual. He planted one in the room before he left. He filmed the entire thing, and he plans to broadcast it tonight."

"Broadcast it?" For a terrible moment, his words didn't make any sense to her. Broadcast it to whom? Then the terrible truth rushed over her. "What? On holovision?"

"To the whole world."

Stunned, Rachel pulled free of Lor's embrace and staggered over to the couch. She collapsed on the butterscotch leather, breathing hard. "But -- but -- that will show --"

"You and me together, naked." Lor came to her side and touched her hair in a tender caress. "Me tying you to the bed and then making love to you."

"My god." Rachel pressed her hands to her cheeks. Her fingers went icy cold as the blood drained from her limbs. She realized she must be in a mild state of shock. "People are going to think I'm a slut."

Lor shrugged. "Does it matter what they think? We'll be leaving this world soon anyway."

Rage uncoiled from the pit of Rachel's stomach and tightened her muscles. She wanted to hit someone, and she knew exactly who. "Jeremy thinks he can ruin my reputation by doing this. I'm more famous than he is, and he's always hated that. He used to make fun of me because he said I'd done nothing to deserve it. My inherited fame, he called it."

"He's a cruel man." Lor sat beside her and pushed a stray curl off her temple. "People will see this for what it is, the vicious act of a petty prig. Surely the people of Earth are no longer so puritanical that they care what goes on between two adults."

"Some are. People are strange about sex. It's still a very private thing."

"This was private until he decided to catch it all on camera and broadcast it."

Digging her nails into the palms of her hands, Rachel glanced at the clock. Her heart was racing. She wanted to scream. People didn't die of embarrassment, did they? It wasn't like having a fatal disease. It might as well be. She'd never be able to hold her head up in public again. "Did he say when it would be on holovision?"

Lor's gaze slid away from hers, and she knew the answer. It was almost nine o'clock, prime time on the East Coast, where so many of the wealthy and influential movers and shakers of the world made their homes. Meanwhile in the central United States, the heartland of America, families were sitting down to supper. Exactly the audience Jeremy craved. He was serving her up as the first course.

Would they hate her? Condemn her? What exactly would Jeremy show?

With trembling fingers, she reached for the remote on the coffee table in front of the couch and pressed a button. Instantly, three-dimensional images appeared in the room.

Rachel gasped. Her naked body hovered before her eyes, every goose bump visible on her flesh. Another wave of shock engulfed her, but a small portion of her mind detached and considered the view. Jeremy must have somehow placed a tiny camera on the mantle of the fireplace, perhaps hidden between the candles that burned there. As a result, the holographic broadcast showed the entire bed. Flickering firelight, reflected over the writhing bodies on the sheets, provided more than enough illumination to see exactly what was going on.

Her hand pressed to her mouth, her cheeks aflame, Rachel watched in growing mortification as she groaned and arched beneath Lor for the world to see.

"It's going to be all right. You look beautiful, desirable. Every man in the world is going to want you." Lor's soothing voice whispered in her ear, his hand stroked her hair. Rachel barely heard him. She didn't want every man in the world to want her. She wanted her privacy, she always had, but instead Jeremy was ripping it away from her forever.

"I want you." His warm breath tickled her cheek. "I'll take you to Cor'almere where none of this will matter. We can leave tonight if you wish."

On the screen, a sexual flush stained her breasts. Her nipples had hardened into tight little nubs. Her recorded moans and cries of pleasure filled the apartment. She arched her back again, and her whole body jerked in the throes of orgasm.

"You can't see it." Her voiced hushed in wonder, she stared at the erotic images that filled her living room.

"Can't see what?"

"The silver light. The healing light that shone around you and me."

Lor smiled. "Such energy vibrates on a higher level and that makes it invisible to most humans. Psychics and adepts can see it."

"But not normal people."

He shrugged. "With training, at least on Cor'almere. We've found all people have some latent psychic abilities. Almost everyone can learn to at least sense energies, even if they don't have the talent to handle them. Indeed, it was the very fact that these abilities are so universal which started me wondering if perhaps they weren't a new development as we thought, but instead an ancient, almost atrophied, trait."

She rubbed her forehead in frustration. "If people can't see the energy, how are they going to understand why we did this?"

As if in answer, the picture zoomed in to a close-up of her face twisted in the throes of orgasm and then faded away. Two commentators, a man and a woman, appeared on the screen with Jeremy Whyte seated between them. Rachel knew at once that she was in trouble. They were both old by holovision standards. The woman's heavily made-up face was

set in disapproving lines. The man had the stern look of a judge about to pass sentence. He cleared his throat.

"Senator Whyte, would you like to explain to our audience why you've allowed us to broadcast this scene of your ex-wife having sex with one of the Evolved?"

Jeremy nodded. He wore a conservative black suit and dark blue tie. A flag of the United Earth hung draped behind him on the set. He looked straight into the camera, his eyes blazing with conviction. "The Evolved only come to Earth to use and exploit us. Everyone knows how much I loved my former wife. The divorce was her idea, not mine. I would never want to embarrass her in public. But if even she, a supposedly sophisticated woman of the world, can be deceived by them, who is safe from their wiles?"

The female commentator leaned forward. "How did they deceive her, senator?"

"This Evolved man claims to be a sexual healer. Sadly, my former wife is ill. He used his supposed powers to lure her into bed and subject her to the sexual abuse and humiliation you saw on your holoset moments ago."

"But couldn't he be telling the truth?"

Jeremy snorted. "Please. His claims of healing ability are an obvious lie. The Evolved think we Earthlings are so ignorant we'll believe anything. Healing people through the pure energy generated by sexual intercourse? Only a desperately ill person would fall for such a line. My wife believed she was dying." Jeremy smirked. "Although I'm happy to say the doctors were wrong. They misdiagnosed her, and she is, in fact, perfectly healthy."

"That bastard!" Rachel almost choked on her rage. "He knows you healed me. He's trying to make it sound like I'm a fool and it was all a big mistake."

The male commentator pressed a hand to his ear and listened. "It appears the people agree with you, senator. Phone calls are pouring into our broadcast center here in New York condemning this so-called sexual healer as a sexual pervert. It looks like your Evict the Evolved campaign will get a big boost from this."

Jeremy gave the camera a sad smile. "Of course, I'm happy to hear that. I only wish people could have learned the truth in another way. My heart grieves for my former wife and the mortification she must feel realizing how she's been tricked by this man."

"By you, you mean!" Unable to stand watching for another moment, Rachel clicked off the holoset. She jumped to her feet.

"Rachel." Lor was at her side at once, his arms enfolding her. She pressed her cheek against his chest and listened to the steady, reassuring beat of his heart. "Don't let him upset you. We're planning to leave Earth anyway. This so-called victory of his changes nothing. You're healed, and that's all that matters."

"No." Her hands clenched at her sides. "The truth matters. Even if you do leave, someday the people of Earth will make their own way to the stars. Someday our two races

will meet again. Would you have them believing a lie about your people for all the centuries between?"

When he didn't answer at once, she looked up. A troubled look had appeared on his face. "I see your point. What can we do?"

She took a deep breath. "Fight back."

Chapter Thirteen

"We're almost there, madam." The driver glanced up into his rear-view mirror. As his dark eyes met hers, Rachel saw a brief flicker of disapproval flash across his reflected gaze.

Biting her lip, she turned to stare out the privacy windows at the scenery slipping by. She feared he had watched the holocast last night. God only knew what he thought of her or of her destination today. Squirming on the soft leather seat, she thought of her coming reunion with Lor. The driver must suspect she was on her way to an erotic tryst. She doubted he could imagine the true nature of the sexual encounter that awaited her at the end of this trip, though.

Belatedly, she wished she'd taken an autodrive car. Employing a human driver was so old-fashioned. Computers ran the roads and cars, eliminating the hazards of human error. Keeping a limo and chauffer at her disposal had been Jeremy's idea. Another one of his pretensions. This driver was probably Jeremy's spy.

Rachel smoothed the skirt of her dress over her thighs as the limo purred through the traffic. She fully intended to have her revenge on Jeremy before she shook the dust of Earth off her feet forever. This morning, though, she had other things on her mind. At the end of their passionate lovemaking session the night before, Lor had asked her to join him on his ship today. With unaccustomed urgency glowing in his eyes, he'd promised a special encounter.

The limo turned into the airport where Lor's ship had landed when he arrived on Earth. Rachel sighed with relief. A persistent ache between her legs kept her on sexual highalert, always aware of the passionate fire that smoldered unquenched since their first sexual encounter. Renewed energy sang in her blood and lightened the beat of her heart. For the first time in long months, strength flowed into her body, instead of draining away. She leaned back in the seat and savored the prospect of life and all its delights.

One delight in particular. With a sensuous shiver, she recalled the hot imprint of Lor's mouth on hers, the stabbing pleasure that lanced through her body as he plunged into her.

Memories from the night before swept over her, bringing a rush of hot blood to her core. Her nipples hardened. Humming softly, she slipped her compact from her purse to check her makeup for the fourth time. The eyes that looked back at her shone with fierce desire. A slight flush colored her cheeks. She licked her lips, admiring the bright red of her lipstick, and shook her coppery curls around her shoulders. She'd never felt so alive before. Her whole body tingled in delighted anticipation of the meeting to come. Lor had healed her in more ways than she'd ever imagined possible.

With a quick motion, she tucked the compact back in her purse and adjusted the thin straps of the sexy black dress she wore. The low-cut bodice revealed the creamy curve of her breasts, and the clingy fabric made it obvious she wore nothing underneath. She'd chosen the provocative outfit to please and arouse Lor.

"Looks like something's going on over there." The driver pointed as he swung around a corner and the Evolved spacecraft came into view.

Frowning, Rachel surveyed the scene. A small crowd had gathered in front of the main entrance to the huge, saucer-shaped craft. She could hear their chanting even through the thick glass of the limo.

"Evolved go home!"

"Evict the Evolved!"

"Leave Earth alone!"

"Stop sexually exploiting our women!"

The signs they waved in the air bore similar messages. Off to one side, two cops sat in a patrol car, watching with bored expressions. Rachel hoped they were there to stop any attempts at damaging the ship. So far, though, the protest seemed nonviolent. The protestors stayed about twenty feet away from the vessel.

What would happen when she exited the car? Would her attempt to enter the ship trigger some sort of reaction? Worried, she nibbled on her lip, suddenly regretting her choice of such a slinky dress. Everyone in New York knew Lor was aboard this ship, and her attire made the purpose of her visit all too apparent.

The holovision program last night must have triggered this demonstration. She hadn't expected such a swift reaction from the public. Jeremy must be behind it all, orchestrating it. The rat.

"I'd be careful, madam," the driver warned, echoing her thoughts. He pulled the limo next to the police cruiser and put the transmission in park. "These people hate the Evolved. They might feel the same way about Evolved sympathizers."

Rachel tossed her head. She wasn't about to discuss her personal decisions with a driver. "I have business on the ship. That's all they need to know."

The man half turned in his seat, a leer twitching his lips. "Business? I doubt anyone in this crowd will believe that. They all saw the holocast."

Rachel's heart lurched into her throat. She tossed her head, unwilling to let the driver see her discomfort. "I assume you mean that filthy invasion of my privacy."

"Filthy is right. What you were doing with him was hot." A snide chuckle issued from the driver's throat. "I've got to say, you're one beautiful dame when you get naked. And I appreciate a woman who's willing to spread her legs so wide for a man."

Rachel sank back into the seat, trying to escape the driver's penetrating stare. She felt pinned down, naked, under his mocking look. Would this be her fate everywhere she went on Earth from now on? She had to get to Lor.

The driver lifted one finger in a blatant, obscene gesture. "I especially liked the part where Lor tied you to the bed and played with your pussy. You're nothing but a whore selling yourself to aliens to save your own skin."

Blood roared in Rachel's head. A rush of righteous anger made her dizzy. Jeremy had never understood her, and now he'd betrayed her. He'd humiliated her before a worldwide audience. Because of him, she was fair game for insults and rude gestures from people she'd barely deigned to notice before.

With an effort, she summoned a haughty tone. "My private life is no one else's business. My ex-husband showed what a low-life he really is by broadcasting that healing session to the world."

The leer became a smirk. "You might think so, *madam*." His tone made the word into a mockery. "But some of us think he showed the world what a low-life you are despite your haughty society ways. Jeremy's smarter than these bastards are. He certainly managed to trick you and capture the whole disgusting ritual."

Rachel's cheeks burned. She couldn't believe the driver dared to speak to her this way. Jeremy must have bribed him to humiliate her. She narrowed her eyes. "That's enough from you. You're fired, you idiot. Not that I'd expect a moron like you to understand, but it's a sacred ritual"

The driver's grin taunted her. "If you say so. I may be a moron, but I know a slut when I see one. Last night, I saw for myself how eager you were to spread your legs for that Evolved bastard. From the way you were twitching and moaning at the end, I guess that Lor guy fucked you good."

Rachel jerked her chin up, anger driving away her momentary fear. "Shut up!" She glanced desperately around the limo. She didn't want to stay here, not with the driver openly mocking her. The man's sleazy questions made her skin crawl. However, she didn't want to get out and face the protestors either. The cops in the vehicle beside the limo had pointedly ignored her arrival. Where they under Jeremy's command? It was entirely possible. He was an important official in the world government. It wouldn't do to underestimate his power.

He cared nothing about her. In fact, he'd probably be happy if these protesters injured or killed her. If she were dead, he would be free to slander her memory in any way he pleased.

Taking a deep breath, she eyed the human wall that stood between her and the ship. Were any of the Evolved watching from inside? If she made a run for it, would they come to her rescue? Did the Evolved even care what happened to one Earth woman?

The shining white surface of the ship appeared unbroken, without any view ports. It was impossible to tell if anyone inside watched. There was only a ramp, put there by the Earth authorities to mark where the doors would open should someone aboard the ship desire to leave.

"Want to give up?" The driver sounded amused. He turned the key in the ignition. "I can take you home and give you a good fucking myself." As if to emphasize his words, he reached down between his legs.

"No!" Nightmarish scenarios raced through Rachel's mind. The man was acting crazier by the moment. Did he think she was fair sexual game because she'd given herself to one of the Evolved? Did he mean to drive her somewhere and rape her? Horrified, she threw open the car and leapt from the limo.

"Stop, you bitch!" The man jumped out of the car behind her and grabbed for her arm. As Rachel twisted away, she had a clear view of the huge erection bulging out his pants. God, she was better off being torn limb from limb by the mob ahead.

Whirling away from him, she bolted toward the ship, her high-heeled sandals clattering on the concrete runway. Her breasts bounced under the thin fabric and the dress rode up her hips as she ran.

"Whore!"

"Slut!"

The mob had spotted her. As one, they turned her way, blocking her path to the ship. Placards waved in front of her. Men and women screamed insults as she ran straight for them.

"Bitch. I'll teach you to fuck an alien!"

"Hey, you rich whore, I got some real genuine Earth meat for you."

From the corner of her eye, she saw the cops had not stirred from their car. They weren't going to protect her. She had to try to reach the ship. Only death lay on this side of that mob.

Summoning the last of her courage, she charged straight for the unruly crowd, praying that her speed would carry her through and the doors of the ship would open.

"Got ya, ya whore!"

Hands reached for her, grabbing her arms, yanking at the thin straps of her dress, tugging the fabric of her skirt. She screamed in pain as someone pulled on her hair. The straps holding up her dress ripped away. The front split apart and her breasts spilled out.

For a moment the crowd fell back, their feverish eyes focused on her heaving breasts. A small, dark-haired man in front of her licked his lips, and his face contorted with a mixture of revulsion and lust. "Look at those high-class titties. Wouldn't you all like to take a suck on those?"

"Go right ahead. She deserves to suffer public humiliation."

A cold rage seized Rachel at the familiar tone. She whirled around to face Jeremy as he emerged from the crowd. His eyes glowed with self-righteous fervor as he pointed an accusing finger at her. "I've got you, you slut."

"Not today, I think." The calm voice came from the ship.

Rachel clapped her hands over her bare breasts and looked up. Lor stood in an opening that had appeared at the top of the ramp. Fear lanced through her -- he held a gun in his hand.

"Back away from my lady." He scanned the crowd with quiet menace.

My lady. Those two simple words sent a thrill of delight through her. Rachel momentarily forgot the danger she faced. All she could see was Lor.

With a sudden lunge, Jeremy grabbed her arm and squeezed hard. Rachel gave a sharp cry of alarm.

"I've got her, but she's no lady," he shouted. "If you want your whore, you'll have to bargain for her."

He pulled a gun out from under his jacket and pointed it at Lor. Rachel went stiff with fear. "You aren't the only one with a weapon. We're all armed here." He swept the gun around the crowd and others, taking his action as a cue, pulled out their own weapons. Sunlight glinted off long barrels. Within moments, a variety of weapons appeared, all aimed at Lor.

"It's all right!" Rachel shouted the words, her voice high and breathless. She had to defuse this situation before Lor got hurt. The Evolved healer had no concept of the danger he faced. The men in this crowd wore the look of hardened killers. They might even be professional mercenaries, hired by Jeremy. "Jeremy won't dare hurt me. I'm too rich and famous. Please go back into the ship."

"Oh, I won't hurt you, at least not with a gun." Jeremy twisted her hair in his hand, making her cry out in pain. He pulled her head close to his. "I'll take you into the back of that fancy limo there and fuck you first. Then I'll let the others have you, one by one. I'll teach the world what happens to a woman who prostitutes herself to freaks."

Rachel's stomach heaved with fright. She half staggered on her high heels. Jeremy's face wore a crazed look. Was it possible he meant it? Would she even survive a gang banging? She threw a desperate glance at Lor, and her eyes filled with tears. He looked so alone, standing there with a single gun in his hand, his broad shoulders squared, his jaw set.

Distress showed on his handsome face. Stormy sea-green eyes locked with hers as he raised his weapon higher.

"No!" she cried again. They'd shoot him down where he stood and then vanish before the authorities arrived. The cops weren't going to do anything, not against Jeremy.

In answer, Lor gave her a dazzling smile. Her heart leapt in love and terror. His finger curled around the trigger. Jeremy tightened his grip on her arm. Guns waved all around her as the men in the crowd took aim at Lor.

Chapter Fourteen

A brilliant blue light erupted from the gun in Lor's hand. The rays flared through the crowd before any of them could fire. On both sides of her, men screamed as metal glowed red-hot. They dropped their weapons and clutched their burned hands.

"Back away from her." Lor's voice rang with command.

"You motherfucker!" Jeremy dropped his superheated weapon and bent over in agony, his hand pressed to his belly.

Eyes wild with pain, he straightened and grabbed the front of Rachel's dress. With a howl of outrage, he ripped the last tatters of fabric from her body.

Rachel screamed as the delicate material tore away, leaving her standing naked except for her high-heels. A low, feral male growl rose from the crowd as the men stared at her exposed flesh.

"That's enough." Lor pressed a second stud on his weapon, and a deep emerald light swept through the air to wash over the mob. As it touched the people surging around her, they began to sway. Their eyes turned upward in their heads.

Rachel swayed too. Against her will, her muscles relaxed. Her body melted into a soft cloud. She wanted only to fall to the earth, to lie down and sleep.

For the third time, a light flashed out, aimed at her alone. The vivid scarlet rays washed over her, and her dizziness vanished. Next to her, Jeremy slumped to the ground, his eyes glazed. Other men and women swayed and collapsed into limp heaps. A car door slammed behind her. She turned to see the two cops jumping out of their vehicle at last, guns drawn.

Lor swept the blue light over them and the green. They dropped their guns with sharp cries of alarm, grabbed at each other, and fell in a tangled pile of arms and legs.

Rachel blinked and turned in a slow circle. All around her, people lay sprawled, looking as if they slept. From the ship, Lor beckoned her with an urgent gesture. "Hurry, Rachel. Get inside. Your husband might have more men on the way."

Suddenly aware that she was completely naked, Rachel hurried up the ramp. She kept one arm pressed across her breasts. One hand covered the private area between her thighs.

"Come inside." Lor pulled her into the ship, and the door sighed shut behind them. Inside, brilliant white light filled the interior, almost blinding her. The light seemed to come from everywhere. She blinked hard and saw smooth white walls, padded with some soft material.

Rachel collapsed against the nearest wall, trying to catch her breath. Lor grabbed her hands and pulled them away from her body, exposing her to his burning gaze.

"You're not hurt?" He surveyed her with a relieved smile.

"No, I'm fine." Her breasts heaved and her nipples hardened under his stare. A hot rush of moisture dampened her pussy as his glance swept downward.

A waiting silence filled the alien ship. Looking past his shoulder, she saw a deserted corridor.

"Where is everyone? Aren't your people worried about the mob outside?"

Lor shrugged. "There's no way they can get into the ship. I promise you, no weapon on Earth can possibly break through our security. We are perfectly safe in here."

It was over. Rachel slumped against the wall and shook. The calm look on Lor's face assured her that his words were true. Her fear faded and she became aware again of her nakedness, but now it was an erotic awareness, triggered by the strong masculine body crowding close to hers. The cool surface of the wall pressed against her bare back, while the muscular male in front of her radiated an erotic heat.

Lor lifted her hands and held them pinned above her head as his thighs pressed against hers. His warm breath brushed her cheek. "Are you sure you're all right, Rachel?"

"Yes. Now that I'm with you." She knew it was true. Despite her nakedness and exposure, despite that fact that she was on an alien ship, pinned against the wall by a man who was more than human, a man she barely knew, she felt no fear. In some ways, she knew Lor better than she'd ever known anyone. She'd lain bound and at his mercy, and he'd given her only pleasure and healing. The pure energy of her heart had united with his. She trusted him with her life.

Hadn't he proven it yet again by saving her from that ruthless mob moments ago? Her insides melted with desire as she gazed into his brilliant green eyes. His thighs pressed against hers, naked skin to naked skin. As he leaned even closer, his erection poked into her stomach. A small smile of delight sprang to her lips. He wanted her. The hard flesh thrusting against her abdomen told her how ready he was for her.

God, she was hot for him, too. Moisture from her pussy dampened her thighs as she squirmed between him and the wall. She wanted him, right now, right here in this corridor. With a soft moan, she widened her stance, spreading her legs and bracing her body against the wall.

His mouth curved upward. "I'm glad to see you're so willing because there's a very special reason I asked you to come to the ship today."

"I remember." She wiggled against him enjoying the sensation of her bare skin sliding over his smooth muscles. Lord, how she craved his touch! "You were fairly mysterious about it."

"That's because I want you to meet someone, someone the people of your planet can't know about."

"Oh?" She was intrigued. "Why not?"

"Because he's an alien."

"Really." Rachel glanced down the deserted corridor again, her curiosity aroused. "I thought we uncivilized Earthlings weren't ready to meet any alien races."

"You're not. You people can barely handle a different skin color. How would you react to scales or tentacles? Most aliens would terrify you, although not the one I want you to meet today," he hastened to add. "But the terror you might feel when you see one is the least of the problems. The main difficulty is that your people are still learning to live in peace among yourselves. You're not ready to deal with a completely alien culture. Look at your reaction to our Evolved civilization. We've almost destroyed your culture, even though we're human like you. The impact of an alien race on your people would be devastating. However, you'll be meeting aliens once you come with me to Cor'almere. I thought it wise to prepare you."

Rachel frowned up at him, sensing something more. The energy they'd shared had opened her heart to him. She could feel the tension rolling off his body. "I appreciate the thought, but you brought this alien all the way to Earth for a reason, didn't you?"

"You're right." The obvious pride in his eyes told her he was pleased by her perceptiveness. "He's a member of the alien race I told you about, the one with the degenerative, fatal disease."

She nodded. "And you came to Earth looking for someone like me to boost your powers so you could heal him."

"Yes. It's time to make an attempt." Taking her hand, he tugged her away from the wall. They made their way down the corridor, turned, and stopped before a closed door.

"Mixiah is inside this room," Facing her, Lor brushed a stray curl off her forehead in a tender gesture. "He's eager to meet you."

Rachel crossed her arms over her breasts, painfully aware she was naked. "Shouldn't I put on some clothes first? I'd prefer not to be nude when I'm introduced to my first alien."

"Mixiah's race has fur; they don't really care about clothes. I think they find our human need to cover ourselves amusing. Besides, we'd have to get naked in front of him anyway as part of the healing ritual."

"Oh." She hadn't thought about that. Her gaze locked with his, and a flutter of embarrassment rippled through her. "You want us to make love in front of him?"

His face grew solemn, communicating to her without words how much this experiment meant to him. "We must, Rachel. It's how the sexual healing works -- we join together and release the energy in his presence. At least, at the moment. Perhaps as we work together on Cor'almere, we can find a way to channel it to other people without having sex with them in the room. But for now ..." His voice trailed off.

"And Mixiah's need is urgent. I understand." She forced out a laugh. "Well, my exhusband portrayed me as a porn star on worldwide holovision, so I guess not much can really embarrass me anymore."

"I knew I could count on you." Smiling, he touched the door panel and it slid open.

A pile of black and white fur lay sprawled on the carpeted floor, four paws up in the air. Small, rounded ears swiveled toward her, and bright black eyes blinked.

"Oh!" Rachel couldn't hold back her exclamation of pleased delight. Expecting some horrible monster, she was surprised to find this alien was ... well, adorable! He reminded her of a giant stuffed toy she'd had as a child.

"Rachel, this is Mixiah."

The huge ball of fur rolled over onto four feet and then reared up into the air. Balanced on his back legs, he was at least two heads taller than she was. The teeth that filled his snout looked razor sharp, but she felt no fear. He was too much like a giant cuddly bear to inspire fear.

The alien made a series of rapid barks and yips, and the translator around his neck glowed to life. "Charmed to meet a resident of Earth." Mixiah swung one paw to cover the area where she supposed his heart lay.

"Mixiah is from Yenxia," Lor explained, although the name of the alien's home world meant nothing to her.

The creature inclined his head closer to hers. His small, dark eyes sparkled with wisdom and compassion. "Lor tells me you may hold the key to healing my people."

"I hope so." Filled with wonder, Rachel plucked up the courage to touch the soft fur that covered the alien's massive body. The silky strands slipped between her fingertips. "Are you ill? You don't look ill."

The alien bared his teeth and let his tongue loll out of his mouth before making another quick series of barking noises. "My nervous system is indeed deteriorating," the translator supplied. "While it may not be visible to you, it's quite painful. Thankfully, Lor's healing talents have kept the worse of the symptoms at bay."

"Forgive me if I seem to be rushing things." Lor smiled from one to the other. "But this moment is the culmination of years of effort and research on my part. I can hardly wait to see if it works."

"Then let us begin, if it is all right with the lady." Mixiah courteously inclined his head toward her, a question in his dark eyes.

Rachel took a deep breath. "Yes. I want to help."

"Good!" Mixiah fell forward onto four limbs again and then rolled over on his back, sprawling out on the carpet. He looked quite comfortable as he stared up at them. "Don't let me distract you. While you do your, ahem, work, I plan to enter a meditative state and contemplate Eternal Bliss."

Then to Rachel's amazement, the alien winked. She fought a giggle at the sight. Grinning back at her, Mixiah folded his front limbs across his chest and closed his eyes.

Lor turned purposefully toward her. "Good. Let's begin."

Suddenly, Rachel remembered that she was naked. A little startled, she backed up against the wall and surveyed the chamber. Except for the alien sprawled on the carpet in the center, the room was almost empty. The only furnishings were a low table and what looked like some sort of computer terminal set in one wall.

"Spartan quarters," she murmured as Lor approached her.

"Mixiah likes it this way. He spends most of his time in meditation anyway." Lor stopped a few inches in front of her and placed his hands on the wall on both sides of her shoulders. His compelling eyes gleamed with excitement. He reminded her of a young boy about to embark on a great adventure. Leaning forward, he kissed her.

Rachel's knees went weak as his tongue swirled over her lips. "No bed?" she managed to ask when the kiss ended.

Amusement glinted in Lor's eyes. "We were doing fine in the corridor without one, as I recall. We were like this, weren't we?" He grabbed her wrists with her hands and lifted her arms above her head. Immediately, the round globes of her breasts rose up to brush against his chest. "I like how you look in this position."

A teasing smile played over his lips as he pressed his hard, lean body against hers. Heat blazed off him and burned into her, branding her with the rising flame of his desire. Still holding her hands pinioned above her head, he lowered his lips to hers and claimed a long, passionate kiss. His tongue plunged into her mouth, bringing a whimper of need to her lips. He glided his tongue around the inside of her mouth and slid it in and out in a blatant promise of what was to come. Lower, his cock twitched as it pressed against the barrier of the codpiece that separated it from her naked flesh.

"Rachel, Rachel!" He gripped her wrists with one hand, holding her pinned to the wall, while the other roamed over her body, exploring the curves and valleys of her flesh. His thumb traced her chin and drew a line down her throat before swooping into the hollow

between her breasts. She writhed against the wall as he circled the areola of her right breast and brushed the taut nipple. Her lips parted on a sharp gasp when his hand dipped lower, stroking her belly.

She gazed into eyes filled with green light. Golden flecks floated in the irises, sparkling with his awakening energy. She felt as if she were falling, drowning, in those eyes. The gold deepened, turning to bright flames of fire, while her skin grew hot wherever his fingers touched.

His roving hand circled her navel, and her womb clenched in desire. Then those wonderful fingers tangled in the brush of her hair, slipped between her legs, and glided over the slick surface of her lower lips.

"Tell me that you want me," he whispered urgently, lowering his head His mouth fastened on her nipple and began to suck.

"Oh, god, I want you," she cried, forgetting the alien sprawled on the carpet. The mound of black and white fur in the center of the room didn't even twitch, but her skin shivered with the realization that Mixiah might emerge from his meditation at any moment and find them locked in this passionate embrace. The knowledge added a fiery urgency to her need. Lor's mouth locked on her breast, his tongue encircling the tender peak, driving her wild with its teasing caresses. She arched hard against his erection.

"I'm so wet," she moaned. "I'm hot and soaked and ready. I want you inside me."

A golden shimmer appeared over his skin and swiftly grew brighter, filling the dim chamber with amber light. With one last fierce suck, he lifted his lips from her aching nipple and stared into her eyes. His face blazed with power. Energy flowed from his body and washed over her like a great, crashing wave, sweeping her out into an ocean of desire.

"You're mine," he whispered as he released her hands. In one quick motion, he stripped off his codpiece. Grabbing her hips, he thrust his engorged cock toward her. The muscles of his arms bulged as he lifted her and brought her down again, impaling her. Clutching her close to him, he thrust hard into her. His first fierce stroke slammed her against the wall.

She cried aloud as his cock sank inside her and buried her hands deep in the thick dark curls of his hair. Wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips, she clung to him as he pounded into her. Each stroke drove deeper into her body, awakening the pulse of red-hot desire at her core. Through half-closed eyes, she could see a golden nimbus of energy expanding around them both.

She tightened her inner muscles to intensify the pleasure. With each ecstatic stroke, the pressure inside her loins mounted until her body vibrated with pure lust, threatening to explode into thousands of pieces. It filled her with intense pleasure to be held in his embrace, supported by his straining muscles. The fierce stroking of his thrusts inside her ignited a flame that sizzled up her nerve endings and sent sparks flaring from her feet to her fingertips. Light broke free of her inner core and radiated outward. She wrapped her legs tighter around his hips, certain she was about to melt around his cock. His rigid manhood inside her was the

only thing holding her together. Her body shuddered as he drove into her, and she collapsed against him.

"Rachel!" Passion and triumph mixed in Lor's cry. He threw his head back. Rachel bit down on her lip and swiveled her hips to deepen his plunge into her. Her sex opened, expanded, as energy spiraled upward out of her core.

"Come for me, Rachel." His eyes afire with urgency, Lor pumped his hips, slamming her back against the wall. A rush of energy filled her, like water lapping at the top of a dam, ready to spill over. With a final shudder, her mind and being melted into his, her consciousness spun free on a bridge of fire that leapt upward toward the distant stars.

An explosion of golden light flooded the room as they shuddered in the throes of their mutual desire.

Melting into the golden radiance washing over them both, she caught a last glimpse of Lor. He raised a finger and pointed. Rainbows flashed outward from the tip toward Mixiah.

"Rachel, my love." The soft whisper of Lor's voice called her back to consciousness. She became aware again of the wall at her back and his hard body supporting her. She was still impaled on his cock, her arms draped loosely around his neck. Her head had fallen onto his shoulder and her legs rested on his thighs as he held her close.

"Lor." Her eyes fluttered open to stare into warm green pools. The fire in those depths had died to an amber shimmer, like coals in a hearth. He gazed at her with a keen, probing look.

"I've never felt passion the way I do with you." His wondering smile tugged at her heart. Did she really amaze a sexual healer? "After seeing those men pawing at you out there, I had to reclaim you for myself."

"You've certainly managed to do that." She gazed up at him, feeling relaxed and sleepy, yet sensually aware of the rigid length of hard man that stretched her aching pussy. The relentless pressure sent a pleasant tingling along her nerve endings as long as she didn't move, but she knew the slightest motion would bring her fully awake, her desire rekindled into flame once more. "My body almost exploded with the energy we generated between us. Did it work?"

He lowered his head and kissed her. His lips, warm and clinging, tenderly moved over hers, as if he could not get enough of her taste. When he broke away again, he smiled. "Let's ask Mixiah what he thinks."

Moving his hands to her hips, he lifted her as if she were light as a feather. She sighed as he slipped from her body, already craving the heat and pressure of him deep inside her.

Hand in hand, they approached the pile of fur on the floor. As they neared him, Mixiah opened his eyes and sat up. His tongue lolled out over his teeth in a pleased pant of pleasure.

"What a beautiful experience. I did indeed feel the energy you two released in your lovemaking. It filled my being with a profound peace."

"But did it heal you?" Lor gestured toward the computer terminal. "Allow me to check your condition."

With a nod, the alien lumbered over to the terminal and sat in front of it while Lor picked up a scanner. Rachel held her breath, sensing how important this moment was. Moving with precise care, Lor ran the sensor over Mixiah's body above his thick fur.

After several minutes, he swiveled his head her way, his face alight with pleasure. "There's definitely been some improvement. No cure, but then healing is often a process." His eyes glowed as he smiled at Rachel. "And I think we can manage several more sessions if that is what's needed."

Excitement swirled through Rachel's stomach. Then another thought caused her to start with alarm. "Didn't you say this disease is affecting his whole race? Surely, the two of us can't heal them all."

"No." Lor chewed on his lower lip, his frustration evident. "We can't. However, now that I've found you, I'm sure my theory is correct. There must be others like you on Earth, with the healing gift and the ability to tap into more primitive parts of the brain."

Shaking his head, he began to pace the room. "This presents a problem though. I wasn't worried about Jeremy and his campaign earlier because I knew my people were leaving Earth anyway. However, this proof of my theory changes the situation. We need to stay here and learn more. I need to convince the Evolved council not to abandon our relationship with Earth."

For a brief moment, Rachel's heart sank. She'd been looking forward to leaving Earth and forgetting the humiliation and embarrassment she'd suffered at the hands of her scoundrel of an ex-husband.

Her glance fell on Mixiah who was watching them both. A new light of hope glistened in his huge, dark eyes. The memory of her vow to make something of her life came back to her. This was her chance. She could run away to the safety of another world, or she could stay and try to help this alien race.

If she let her public humiliation stop her, Jeremy would win, blocking her once more. She couldn't let Jeremy keep her from doing that she'd been born to do.

A new determination filled her heart, washing away the momentary fear. She planted her hands on her hips. "Jeremy must be exposed for the jerk he is, before his Evict the Evolved campaign succeeds."

"Yes." Lor faced her with a rueful smile. "Unfortunately, we gave him some great ammunition to use against us."

Rachel's chin came up. "Well, I'm not going to let him succeed in that! You will have to handle convincing Evolved to stay. But I think there's a way I can fix this situation with Jeremy."

"How do you plan to do that?"

She chuckled and rubbed her hands together as a planned formed in her mind. For once, she relished the thought of an impending public fight. "I'm going to confront Jeremy on his own ground. He wanted to use my celebrity status to ruin me. I'll use it to get a worldwide audience for my viewpoint. I'm taking this battle to the people!"

Chapter Fifteen

Opal Ratherman turned her piercing blue stare straight into the camera. "Tonight," she announced in solemn tones, "the *World Scoop* takes you straight to the heart of the Evict the Evolved debate, with a one-on-one confrontation between World Senator Jeremy Whyte, the leader of the campaign, and his ex-wife, Rachel Herrington, whose sexual adventures with one of the Evolved were recently exposed on worldwide holovision."

Rachel straightened in her chair and sucked in a shaky breath. This was it: She was in the New York studios of *World Scoop*, the most popular news program on holovision. Opal Ratherman commanded a huge audience across the planet. The people in the studio tonight had purchased their tickets years in advance.

It was hot under the bright studio lights. She tried to ignore the hundreds of eyes trained on her. She needed to focus on her task, but her thoughts kept darting back to Lor. She knew he was backstage, watching her performance. Would she make him proud? He had saved her life and awakened her slumbering talent. She owed him so much. She had to vanquish Jeremy and turn the tide of public opinion back in support of the Evolved so he could stay on Earth. Only by working together could they create the life they wanted to share.

"Senator, it's rumored that you have political ambitions and that you plan to run for the world presidency." Opal accented her searching question with a toss of her perfectly coiffed blonde head. She sat between Jeremy and Rachel on the plush couch of the World Scoop set, her long legs crossed. Rachel knew from watching the program that the camera would spend a lot of time focused on those legs. "When the Evolved first came to Earth, you welcomed them, and it's only in the past few months that you've spoken out against them. Your change of heart has culminated in this Evict the Evolved campaign. Did something happen to change your opinion of the Evolved, or is this campaign simply a way to get the support of the people?"

Good. Rachel suppressed a smile. Despite her designer dresses and her long legs, Opal Ratherman was a hard-nosed journalist, famous for asking the tough questions. She wasn't sparing Jeremy. She'd managed to go to the heart of the matter with her first question. Jeremy didn't give a rip about the Evolved and the supposed damage they were doing to Earth's many cultures.

Go, Opal! Inwardly cheering the journalist on, Rachel leaned forward, eager to hear his answer.

Jeremy folded his hands in his lap and pursed his lips as he considered his reply. He'd dressed for the occasion in an expensive black silk suit with the high collar coming into fashion. A row of silver buttons ran down one side, giving him almost a military look. However, the sheen of sweat on his brow belied his calm appearance.

"Opal, I appreciate the chance to talk to your audience and answer whatever questions you have. Yes, I did welcome the Evolved at first." He smiled. "We all did. We thought they would solve so many of our problems for us. Instead, they've only created more. I'm an optimist by nature, and I was slow to realize this. Once I did, I knew I had to take action of the most drastic sort. I'm proud to say my Evict the Evolved campaign is having its desired effect. I'm told by very well-informed sources that the Evolved council is planning to call all of the Evolved presently on Earth home and ban this world to Evolved visits."

"That would be quite a victory for your campaign, senator." Opal stared into the camera with a tight, uneasy smile. Her blue eyes looked troubled. "But is it really a victory for the Earth? We've learned that there are other races, other cultures, out there in the galaxy and that we are primitive in comparison to most of them. Hasn't the damage already been done? Wouldn't continued contact with the Evolved help us to adjust and eventually take our place in the galactic community?"

"Good questions, Opal." Jeremy's displayed a set of perfect teeth in his trademark campaign smile. Inwardly, Rachel seethed, wishing she could wipe that self-satisfied grin off his face. She wanted to slug him, not sit quietly and wait for her opportunity. She wiggled slightly on the couch and hoped her face showed only the serene look she'd practiced for hours in front of the mirror. She had to show the world she was a lady with class, not some trashy whore in a porn flick.

"This is indeed a victory for Earth." The false sincerity in Jeremy's voice grated on her ears. "We need to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and take pride in our achievements again. The Evolved were only playing with the barbarians for their amusement. As a case in point, look at the way one of them sexually abused my ex-wife. You and everyone else on this planet saw how he tied her to the bed and had his way with her."

Rachel jerked her shoulders back. Should she speak or would she only seem like a hysterical female for interrupting? Fortunately, Opal held up a hand to stop Jeremy and turned to her. "And that brings us to our second guest tonight, Rachel Herrington. Rachel,

you've been famous since the day you were born. This little episode must seem unimportant to you."

Holding her head high, she faced the audience. "Quite the contrary, Opal. I value my good reputation like anyone else, not to mention the value I place upon the legacy of respect my father left behind. I've always tried to live a life worthy of his memory. As you know, he was a great world leader in his day and a fighter for justice. I believe he would have wanted me to come out fighting on this issue. That's why I'm here."

"You disagree with your ex-husband? You wouldn't call what we all saw a sexual assault? You can't deny that you were bound to that bed."

"I was." She lifted her chin another notch. "Because I wanted to be. Jeremy failed to tell the world the whole truth. That holocast you saw the other night was heavily edited, slanted and distorted. Mastror si Lor Canto is a sexual healer and what you saw was part of the Evolved healing ritual. I had a fatal brain tumor, and I asked Lor to use his healing abilities to cure me."

"Amazing!" Opal Ratherman arched one well-shaped eyebrow at the camera. "And you heard it here first. Tell us, Ms. Herrington, did it work? Are you healed?"

Rachel forced her lips to curve into a smile. "Yes, I am. It's wonderful."

Opal rubbed her hands together, not even bothering to hide her pleasure at this turn of events. "That's great news." She glanced over at Jeremy. "When you showed this holofilm to the world the other night, why didn't you explain this background?"

Jeremy's eyes flashed with anger. "My ex-wife claims her tumor was incurable by our world's medical doctors, but we have only her word for that. I asked her to see other physicians, and she refused. The truth is, she wanted to sleep with one of the Evolved. Many Earth women do. They see it as some sort of sexual feather in their cap."

This time Rachel couldn't hold back her retort. "That's not true. I saw more than one doctor, and they all agreed they couldn't help me. The location of my tumor made it inoperable. Without Lor's help, I would have died. He saved my life, and I owe him everything."

Opal turned to her with a piercing look. "You say that with so much emotion, Ms. Herrington. How well have you gotten to know this Evolved healer? Do you have feelings for him?"

Rachel swallowed. Once again, Opal Ratherman had displayed her unerring instinct for ferreting out the truth, an instinct that had won her so many journalism awards. "Of course I have feelings," she said, maintaining her calm. "He saved my life. More than that, he's shown me my true worth as a person."

Opal's sharp blue eyes examined her as if peering into her soul. "That's an interesting statement. One of the main charges of the Evict the Evolved campaign is that the Evolved make us Earthlings feel inferior. But you seem to be saying the opposite."

Rachel nodded. A sense of empowerment surged through her, warming her blood like an intoxicating wine. She was meeting Jeremy on his ground and holding her own. Moreover, Opal was helping her make her point.

"Indeed, I am." She aimed a level look at Jeremy. "While I was married to Jeremy, he often made me feel as if I were inferior to him. He treated me like a brainless airhead. I was his trophy heiress, only good for appearing at his side wearing designer clothes and a happy smile. Lor, on the other hand, showed me that I have talents I never even dreamed of. Talents that will help a great many people."

Opal Ratherman glanced from one to the other. "What kind of talents?"

Rachel licked her lips. "Lor came here to prove a theory. He believes that the people of Earth have something important to contribute to the galactic civilization."

"Really?" Opal's nostrils flared as she picked up the scent of a scoop.

"He believes that the paranormal abilities of the Evolved are not a result of their advanced genetics, but come from their ancient heritage. That means that Earthlings have the same abilities. In fact, he theorized such paranormal gifts are actually stronger in us because our brains have not been manipulated genetically like theirs have."

Jeremy snorted. "Don't tell me you think you have psychic abilities. That's ridiculous."

Opal Ratherman frowned. "Why do you say that, senator? I don't see anything in your background that makes you an expert on psychic abilities."

Rachel could have leaned over and kissed Opal on the cheek. That was exactly the question she wanted to ask. Despite his ignorance, Jeremy had tried to pass himself off as an expert on the Evolved and had almost gotten away with it. However, tonight his true motives were becoming glaringly obvious to anyone watching. At least, she thought so. She prayed the people of Earth agreed with her.

Jeremy shot a look of disgust at Rachel. "I'm an expert on my ex-wife's abilities. Believe me; they are few and far between. She's spent her whole life being coddled by the trustees of her father's estate. She's always gotten whatever she wanted. The toughest decision she's ever made has been what to wear each day."

Sensing her opportunity, Rachel laughed lightly. "I can hardly believe what I'm hearing, Opal. I guess you see why we're divorced. Jeremy couldn't be more wrong. The truth is, I've looked death in the eye for the past few weeks. It's been a terrifying and yet liberating experience. I've had to make some very tough decisions indeed. The hardest one was learning to trust one of the Evolved in an intimate way."

Opal leaned forward, patting Rachel's knee in her eagerness. "So what we saw on holovision the other night was really a moment of great victory for you?"

"Yes, it was. I've learned that I'm a lot tougher than I ever dreamed. As for my alleged psychic abilities, no less of an authority than Mastror si Lor Canto says I have them. He

believes many Earthlings do. Some of us are natural-born healers. And these same abilities are urgently needed, not only on Earth, but also in the galaxy."

Jeremy opened his mouth to protest, but Opal ignored him. "What do you mean?"

"Lor told me about a race of very wise aliens. They're beloved throughout the universe, but they're dying from an incurable disease."

"That's pure fantasy!" Jeremy interrupted. "You expect us to believe an advanced race can't find a cure to some disease?"

Triumph surged through Rachel. The know-it-all! The more he talked the more ridiculous he looked to the watching world audience. Why, by the time she was done, he'd be lucky to get elected dog catcher.

"They live by their philosophy, which emphasizes staying in harmony with the flow of universal energy. As a result, they don't believe in treating illness with surgery or drugs. So, they've turned to the paranormal healing abilities of the Evolved for help. However, even the Evolved were unable to cure them. They needed to tap into a stronger source of energy. Lor believed Earth might hold the answer, since Earthlings possess the original Evolved brain. He came here on a quest."

Rachel hesitated a second, letting the suspense build. She could see she had the audience in the palm of her hand. The silence in the studio hummed with anticipation. Even Jeremy was silent, watching her with wary eyes. Opal nodding slightly, urging her to go on.

"Lor was right. The people of Earth do have psychic abilities that equal or exceed those of the Evolved. The galaxy is going to owe the people of Earth an immense debt of gratitude."

Rachel could see the delight in Opal's eyes. And why not? She had handed the journalist the scoop of a lifetime. She grinned. "During the sexual ritual my ex-husband spied on, Lor released this healing energy in me and proved that I have these abilities. Soon the Evolved will be coming to the people of Earth for help."

Opal gazed earnestly into a camera. "If this is true, it will indeed mark a turning point in our relationship with the Evolved. We will be on more equal footing."

"That's right," Rachel told her. "And they'll start to treat us as equals. In fact, I'm very pleased to say that Lor has invited me to come to his home world of Cor'almere with him."

Jeremy's jaw dropped in astonishment. Opal chuckled with glee. "That would be a first, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes, it is. No human from Earth has ever been invited to Cor'almere before." Rachel beamed at the studio audience. "This is the start of an incredible new day for the people of Earth and the Evolved. The Evict the Evolved campaign is nothing but a useless relic of the misunderstandings of the past."

"A useless relic!" Jeremy visibly bristled. "Who elected you to speak for the human race?"

She laughed at him. "The same people who elected you. No one. On the other hand, I do know quite a bit more about the Evolved than you do. You were invited to participate in this ritual, Jeremy. You had a chance to help build a bridge to the future. Instead, you tried to twist it to your own selfish ends. You used it as an opportunity to deceive and betray Lor, to try to humiliate me, and to advance your own political career."

Opal arched both brows. "Those are some pretty serious charges, senator, and from what I've heard so far, they seem to be pretty accurate, too. What do you have to say in your defense?"

Jeremy puffed out his chest. "Pure slander. I acted in the best interests of Earth."

"Not so." Rachel leaned back and studied his outraged face, taking pleasure in this moment of victory. "You're not the only one who can broadcast secrets on worldwide holovision, Jeremy. I hired some private investigators, and I've learned you've been taking funds raised in the Evict the Evolved campaign and siphoning them into your account to pay for your run for the world presidency."

"Not true," Jeremy snapped, but the guilty way his eyes shifted away from the cameras betrayed him.

"I have the evidence, and I'm making it available to your staff, Opal. I'm sure you'll inform the people of what you find in a future broadcast."

"I'm sure we will." Opal looked thrilled.

Hunching his shoulders like a threatened fighter, Jeremy glared at her. "Why should we take your word for all of this? I'll bet Lor fed you this whole song and dance about a stricken alien race just to get you into his bed."

Rachel tossed her head. "You're losing it, Jeremy. I wanted to get into Lor's bed. He didn't need to trick me. I'm not surprised you'd think like that, though, because that's the sneaky and devious way your mind works." She gazed out over the studio audience and saw by their nods that she'd made her point.

She took a deep breath. "Besides, I've got more than Lor's word for it. I've actually met one of these aliens. They're a race called the Yenxians."

A sharp buzz of excitement broke out in the studio audience. Rachel could only imagine people around the world leaning closer to their holocast to catch her next words. For so many centuries, Earth's people had speculated on whether alien life existed in the galaxy and what form it might take. Until now, the Evolved had kept them totally in the dark about the extent of galactic civilization.

Opal's eyes blazed with eagerness to nail down this scoop on her program. "You did? No one from Earth has ever met an alien. What can you tell us about this species?"

Rachel licked her lips. Her moment of final triumph over Jeremy had come.

"I can do more than tell you about them, Opal. I can introduce you to one of them."

Chapter Sixteen

"You can?" Opal's jaw dropped. In the audience, people glanced wildly around as if expecting to see an alien materialize in the seat next to them.

Rachel smiled. "I hope you don't mind that I took the liberty of bringing Mixiah here with me tonight. He's been waiting outside in the limo that brought me, but the Evolved should be escorting him into the studio right now."

As she spoke, she turned her head and stared off camera at the spot where she had first stepped onto the stage. People in the audience jumped up from their seats to follow her stare. Opal leaped to her feet, too, and stepped toward the back of the set. The camera operators and sound people stood in a tight knot, their voices raised in an excited babble. A woman Rachel recognized as the director pushed through them, and then Lor's head appeared. Behind him, she saw the tall, furry form of Mixiah.

The audience gasped as the alien strode into view. Jeremy rose from his seat, his face flushing a livid scarlet with rage. "This is more proof of the treachery of the Evolved! They've brought an alien creature to our planet without informing Earth's government." He pointed a shaking finger at Rachel "You just admitted the Evolved are trying to help a sick alien race. What if this creature is one of them and it's carrying a terrible disease? The Evolved are putting the whole planet at risk."

"Oh, calm down, Jeremy." Rachel shook her head and gave him a pitying stare. She felt completely in control of the situation. Her glance locked with Lor's for a moment, and the sweet, heady thrill of victory coursed through her. She'd met Jeremy head to head and bested him. He'd never live down this public humiliation. She'd done to him exactly what he'd planned for her. "The Evolved have thought of all that. They've made certain Earth is safe. Far from being a threat, Mixiah is a member of one of the galaxy's most esteemed races, and his affliction is not contagious. Earth should be honored by his visit."

"Esteemed?" Opal's nose practically twitched. She turned to Rachel. "Does his race rule the galaxy?"

As she asked the question, Lor and Mixiah stepped onto the set. With his greater height, the alien loomed over the journalist, but she stood her ground and stared up at him without flinching.

Mixiah made a series of soft barking sounds that rose and fell like some intricate melody. Rachel suspected his language was based on tone. A light glowed on the translator around his neck and a cultured voice emerged: "I am pleased to meet you, Opal Ratherman. Since landing on your fair world, I have watched your program often."

Amazed delight flashed across Opal's face. Rachel knew she was envisioning how her ratings would soar because of this pronouncement.

The alien bowed gracefully, sweeping one furry hand toward the audience. "And greetings also to the people of Earth. The many races of the galaxy have been eagerly awaiting the time when we could welcome you into our fellowship of star worlds." He straightened again, his silver and black fur gleaming under the bright studio lights. His bright, expressive eyes surveyed the audience, which gazed back at him in silent wonder.

Jeremy's face sagged with defeat. It was obvious Mixiah had already charmed the hearts of those around him. "You've won," he muttered to Rachel.

At his words, her anger faded. She watched her ex-husband's mouth turn downward with despair. Lor stood at Mixiah's side, but his eyes were on her. Understanding shone in his gaze. She nodded her head in silent agreement with the message Lor's eyes conveyed. She'd had her moment of triumph. It was time to begin the healing process. That was going to be the focus of the rest of her life with Lor: healing.

"I'm glad you're here, Jeremy." An unexpected joy rose up inside her as she let go of the bitterness of the past. This was true victory. She leaned toward him determined to force him into a position he couldn't back out of again. "As a representative of Earth's government, you can have the honor of officially welcoming the first true alien to Earth."

Jeremy's head turned as he searched for a way of escape, but there was none, not with a worldwide audience watching. He bit his lip and stared from Opal's awestruck face to the studio audience, which followed their exchange with rapt attention. She could see the wheels spinning behind his eyes as he calculated the best way to salvage some remnant of his political future. His shoulders straightened. "Yes. It's an honor to welcome you to Earth, Mixiah. I hope your arrival signals a new beginning and a better relationship between the advanced races of the galaxy and the people of Earth."

The furred head bowed toward him. "Indeed, it does. My esteemed friend Lor has spent the past day consulting with the Evolved council, reporting the success of his work here. But I'll let him tell that story." "Really?" Opal gestured to Lor and Mixiah to take seats on the couch. With a smile, Lor slid in beside Rachel. Mixiah, on the other hand, dropped to all fours and rolled over on his back, his four limbs waving in the air.

"Oh!" Losing her professional composure for a moment, Opal pressed against the back of the couch in alarm.

"Don't be afraid." Lor took control of the interview with a smile. Claiming one of Rachel's hands with his, he squeezed it with affection as he spoke to Opal. "That's a normal position for a Yenxian. They usually assume it when they plan on holding a relaxed conversation among friends."

"Well, great." Opal resumed her seat and smoothed her skirt, before crossing her world-famous legs. "I'd love to interview all of you." She rubbed her hands together and furrowed her brow. Rachel could appreciate her dilemma. There'd been so many revelations in the past few moments that it was hard to know where to begin.

Making up her mind, Opal turned her penetrating gaze on Lor. "We've heard rumors that the Evolved were planning to leave Earth, due to the success of the Evict the Evolved campaign." She cast an angry look at Jeremy, who shrugged uncomfortably and managed a weak smile.

"The campaign was a mistake," he said. "I'm glad to see I've been wrong about the Evolved."

"And I'm glad to see your change of heart." Lor's lips twitched in an amused smile. He beamed a look of pleased pride at Rachel, a look that told her he was touched by her willingness to forgive her ex-husband.

She suppressed a grin of her own. It didn't hurt that she was forcing Jeremy to publicly take a stance he secretly hated. From now on, he'd be on record in support of the Evolved, and he'd have to work with them to bring the Evolved and the humans of Earth closer together. It was a sweet revenge.

"What has the council decided?" Opal asked, interrupting Rachel's thoughts.

Lor intertwined his fingers with Rachel's and drew her hand up to his chest, claiming her in front of a worldwide audience. "I told the council about my work with Rachel. Together we've proven that the people of Earth possess enviable paranormal talents. We Evolved can learn from you, or perhaps I should say, we can relearn what we once knew and mistakenly left behind us in our pursuit of perfect evolution. Mother Nature was wiser than we were, after all. My work with Rachel has shown that the Earthling human brain possesses abilities we never dreamed of, abilities we need to learn to tap."

"Were they impressed by your findings?"

"Yes." Lor's face glowed with triumph. "They agreed we needed to take another look at helping the people of Earth integrate into galactic society. There is too much we can learn from you to give up on this situation."

"Aha!" Opal looked like a cat about to pounce on an especially delicious canary. "So you admit the people of Earth have value?"

"Great value. The Evolved were wrong to denigrate you. We intend to make up for it." "It's noble of you to admit that so freely." Opal nodded her head in approval.

"The Evolved have learned humility from us." The self-satisfied rumble came from Mixiah. Rachel glanced down to see an amused twinkle in the alien's wise dark eyes.

Opal directed a penetrating look at Lor and Rachel. "After seeing the program that Jeremy holocast the other night, the whole world knows about your passionate sexual relationship. I sense your feelings for each other have begun to extend beyond the bedroom, though. Is that true?"

Rachel looked down at her lap and held her breath as she waited for Lor's answer. Her heart leapt with hope, but she didn't want a worldwide audience to see her disappointment if he disparaged their relationship. He was a famous Evolved sexual healer, after all. She barely knew what she brought to their newborn partnership, although she hoped her would teach her more --so much more.

Lor lifted her hand from his chest to his lips. A warm tide of relief swept through her as he pressed a soft kiss to her fingertips. She lifted her head to meet his eyes.

"I feel blessed," he murmured. His intense gaze told her he was speaking to her alone, although Opal, Jeremy, and the audience all leaned forward, straining to catch his words. Rachel even thought she saw Mixiah's ears twitch. "I came here seeking to help my friend, but I'm the one who's received the greatest reward. I've found a woman I can share my life with."

"Oh, Lor." Rachel swallowed. Her lips parted in pleased surprise.

Without hesitation, he put an arm around her shoulders and drew her to him. His mouth lowered and settled over hers, his lips tasting hers with slow deliberation. She gasped slightly and leaned against his chest, feeling the strong, steady beat of his heart against her palms. His tongue traced the outline of her lips, then slid into her mouth.

When the kiss finally ended, she came up for air to meet the amused gaze of Opal Ratherman.

The journalist turned to the camera. "And there you have it. A World Scoop exclusive. Earth-Evolved relations are indeed off to a new, and very exciting, start."

Chapter Seventeen

"Can I get you a drink?" Rachel asked, suddenly shy. Following their triumphant appearance on Opal Ratherman's show, they'd taken Mixiah back to the Evolved ship, and then Lor had accompanied her to her apartment. It gave her little goose bumps to see him moving among her things with the air of a man about to take possession of all he saw. "I think a toast to our future together might be in order."

"I agree." Lor wandered around the comfortable living room, touching sculptures and eyeing the spines of the antique books she treasured. He pulled one from the shelf and read the title aloud: "Sex and the Single Woman."

"It's a classic," Rachel hastened to explain. She eyed him through lowered lashes, appreciating all over again how delectable he was. Of course, it didn't hurt that he was halfnaked as always, dressed only in jewelry and his codpiece. With his broad shoulders filling the doorway of her living room, he looked like some exotic savage newly arrived from a remote island, not the denizen of an advanced civilization.

His compelling green gaze lifted from the book to meet hers. "Did you buy this book to learn about sex?"

She nodded. "Years ago. No man got me really excited, and I thought I must be missing something."

"And now?"

Her breath clogged her throat. "Sex with you is an out-of-this-world experience."

His glance grew hotter. "I feel the same way when I make love to you."

"Do you?" Even halfway across the room, she could feel the rush of sizzling energy flowing from him. Waves of heat prickled across her skin. His admiring gaze filled her with a new boldness. She beckoned with one finger and turned, intending to lead him into the bedroom. "You haven't seen anything yet."

He planted his hands on his hips and eyed her with blatant desire. "No, and neither has New York."

The gleam in his eyes told her he wanted her in some primal, basic way. Her heartbeat quickened. "What do you mean?"

He jerked his chin toward the French doors that led out to her spacious terrace, twenty-seven floors above the city. "After what Jeremy did to you, you don't ever need to hide from the public eye again. They've seen it all. It's time you learn to enjoy the freedom you've won."

A little frisson of titillation ran through her. He couldn't mean what she thought he meant. She glanced at the doors. "You want to go outside?"

He moved closer to her with the lithe, predatory grace of a cat. Now she knew what a mouse felt like as it was about to be devoured. "The night will hide us in its shadows. I want to make love to you under the stars."

A thousand objections crowded into her mind. "The media followed us here. There might be reporters watching from other buildings or from helicopters."

"So?" He stood in front of her, his breath warm on her neck. He lifted his brows, challenging her. "What will they see that they haven't already seen? Claim your right to your life, Rachel."

For a long moment, he stared into her eyes. Then he turned, threw open the doors with a dramatic gesture, and strode through.

Time froze while Rachel battled her fears. A million headlines swept through her mind, a million pictures, all the countless invasions of her privacy and her life that that had led her to retreat, to turn herself into a vapid doll, a caricature of a real woman who dressed in designer clothes and smiled frozen smiles and did not dare do anything to offend anyone.

A choking sensation rose up in her throat. She'd had enough of that. As if in a dream, she followed Lor out onto the terrace.

The night air wafted over her face, cooler than inside, although a remnant of the long summer day's heat rose from the busy streets far below. Lor stood near the waist-high stone parapet and stared down at the metropolis spread out around them. The sound of traffic drifted skyward, and the ever-present wail of sirens. The garish lights of surrounding buildings lit the sky, adding a glow to the horizon and forcing all but the brightest stars into pale pinpricks of light. She wondered how many people might be watching this balcony at that very moment from behind those countless glass windows.

The thought made her loins go tight with desire.

"Come here." Lor beckoned her with a twitch of one finger. Feigning nonchalance, she joined him and half turned away to lean over the railing,

Strong hands gripped her shoulders from behind. Lor turned her around. His eyes smoldered with desire as they gazed into hers. His hands lowered to cup her breasts. At once, her nipples hardened, poking up the soft fabric of her dress.

God, he made her hot. His lightest touch turned her on. Let the whole world watch. Let them all go green with envy. He was hers, her divine lover.

His thumbs caressed the curve of her breast through the cloth, heating the blood in her veins. "I like the view out here," he whispered in a voice made husky by desire.

She smiled. He'd barely glanced at the breathtaking panorama of New York at night. His eyes bored at the low-cut collar of her dress. "Would you like to see more?"

His tongue ran over his lower lip. "Much more."

Giving him a teasing grin, she pulled away and reached back to slide down the zipper of her dress. She shrugged the garment off her shoulders and let it slither down her body to pool at her feet. Underneath she wore only a sexy black lace bra and panties. She planted a hand on one hip and kicked off her heels. "It's cool out here without my clothes. Isn't there something we can do to keep warm?"

With a low growl of longing, he reached for her, but she stepped beyond his fingertips and moved to the patio table. She picked up a remote lying there and pressed the button that turned on the outdoor fireplace. Gas flames leapt up through the grate. Smiling, she moved back toward him.

"You see, we have fire."

"We do indeed." Firelight and city light warred with the night, masking his expression in shifting shadows, but the fierce emerald glow of his eyes drew her like a magnet. She returned to him and slid her arms around his neck, pressing her body to his, her skin hungry for his touch. His hard-on jutted against her stomach. Moisture pooled between her legs, dampening her panties. She inclined her head toward the lounge chairs. "Those look comfortable. Maybe we should try them out."

He shook his head. "No, we're going to flaunt our sexuality in the face of this city, and let the prudes be damned." He pointed to the parapet. "I want you to bend over that for me."

Her head lifted at his challenging tone. The passion that showed on his face made her heartbeat quicken. "What do you have in mind?"

"Teaching you more about evoking energy." His smile carried a sensual promise. "Hot, potent healing power."

Her breath caught in her throat. The air around them shimmered with their mounting psychic energy. Her body trembled with barely controlled desire. She swept her tongue over dry lips, moistening them. "It's a long way down, Lor."

"Don't worry. I'd never let anything happen to you." He cast a heated glance at her. "I said, bend over the railing."

Her heart pounding, Rachel eyed the stone parapet. Sturdy marble columns supported the top, which was several inches thick. She gripped the stone edge with both hands and bent over it, leaning out into the empty air. Although the endless drop made her dizzy, she knew the stone would not give way. Countless stories below, neon lights flashed on storefronts and headlights swept through the streets like string of pearls. The air, rushing upward between the buildings, blew her hair away from her face. The smell of gasoline and diesel fuel and the mingled odors of a hodge-podge of ethnic restaurants assaulted her nostrils. Leaning out into the vast open space between the man-made mountains of the city, she felt like a bird about to take flight.

Bending over a little further, she spread her legs in a wide V-shape for maximum stability. Currents of air flowed between the stone pillars of the railing and teased her thighs. She moaned, already aroused almost beyond the endurance by the thought of being so exposed while at Lor's mercy. He moved behind her and grabbed her buttocks with both hands.

"Lean out some more," he commanded. "I want this adorable rear of yours up in the air."

Giving her butt a slight, provocative wiggle, she obeyed. She heard a soft thud as his codpiece hit the flagstones and he moved into position behind her.

"What, no foreplay, not even a kiss?" she pouted. Her hair swirled about her face. Something hard and stiff probed the crack of her butt cheeks. She froze, not daring to breathe.

His fingers dipped under the silken waistband of her panties and plucked, teasing her. "Don't try to teach a sexual healer his job, Rachel. I'll wager your pussy is flooded with moisture already."

Breath returned to her lungs. She gave her hips another wiggle, wanting to provoke him. "Maybe. As a scientist, you shouldn't take my word for it. You should check it out for yourself."

One hand moved up her thigh between her legs and stroked the thin barrier of silk that lay over her aching pussy. "This feels damp to me."

Rachel bit down on a cry of desire. She wanted him to strip off her panties and thrust his finger deep inside her. Her hands gripped the stone edge of the railing as she struggled for control. Her face felt flushed and hot, and her swollen nipples strained against her bra. "All right," she admitted. "I guess I don't need any more foreplay. I'm ready for you."

"Yes, you are." The note of naked need in Lor's voice sounded sweet to her ears as he bent closer to her. His hands tugged on her panties, pulling them down to her knees. She shivered as the cool night air moved across her swollen, exposed private flesh.

His hand pushed between her legs again, his fingers brushing through her pubic hair and fondling her aching pearl. When he squeezed the sensitive button, she cried out,

pressing hard against the cold stone of the railing. Panting, she tried to lift her buttocks into his exploring hand.

"Steady," he murmured. His hands slid up her back, undid her bra, and slipped it down, freeing her breasts. He dropped it, and she watched the black lace fall through the night, swirling down to the streets below. Would it land on the head of some pedestrian? Would they look up and see her far above, her breasts swinging free.

He cupped the full globes, his fingers teasing the erect nipples.

"Lor, please." Her mind whirled with a strange intoxication. Her breasts swayed in the air, twenty-seven stories above the city. What would someone looking up at this moment think? Surely, she'd be invisible against the night.

"Please, what?"

"Please, take me." She watched a jet lift into the black sky. Were the passengers looking out their windows and seeing this remarkable sight?

"You're ready? No more need for foreplay?" As he spoke, he stroked a finger over her damp slit, spreading the slick juices down over her inner thigh.

A low moan escaped from her lips. The railing bit into her abdomen. She let her head hang loose, her hair falling like a curtain in front of her eyes. "Just having you with me is all the foreplay I need."

He laughed. "Music to a sexual healer's ears. I promise you, our work together will always bring you pleasure, Rachel."

He grabbed her rear and spread her thighs wider with both hands. She held her breath, her heart hammering with anticipation. One of his hands circled her to cup her mons from the front, supporting her, holding her tight against him, at the same moment that his cock penetrated her swollen folds.

She sobbed her pleasure as he sank deep inside her. His first stroke awoke a fire in her belly. Energy uncoiled like a snake, flowing up her spinal column to her brain. A golden glow enveloped them both. The light surrounding them grew brighter with each thrust he made into her eager body. Again and again, he withdrew and pounded into her, pressing her hard against the railing. Her cries of pleasure echoed off the concrete towers and fell toward the ground below, drowned out by the honking of horns.

Despite her perilous position, Rachel felt safe in Lor's embrace. His agile fingers stroked her throbbing clit in a relentless rhythm that drove her to the edge of exquisite pleasure. Wherever his fingers touched. sparks kindled flames of overwhelming desire that ignited her body, sending her into a realm of pure sensual longing.

Rachel shuddered. The golden light surrounding them began to pulse and spin as the inexorable pressure of her coming climax built inside her. She tightened her inner muscles around him and rode the roaring eruption up into the sky.

Shouting her name, Lor rammed into her one last time. His penis throbbed as he ejaculated into her body. She exploded with a cry, her hands clutching the railing for support while her body quivered with the force of the currents that surged through and around her.

"Rachel." This time he whispered her name, his voice low and full of emotion. "That was so sweet, my love. Never have I felt so close to the divine when I joined with a woman. You complete me like no one else ever has."

Rachel blinked back tears of joy as he reached around her waist and pulled her away from the railing. He wrapped his arms around her as she swayed and leaned against him.

"Our mutual passion summoned the healing energy again," he murmured into her ear. His warm breath tickled her neck. "I sent it through you in case there was any trace of your disease yet remaining."

"Oh, Lor!" She rested her head on his shoulder, thrilled by his concern. She turned to face him and took his face between her hands, kissing him. To her surprise, he reached down, pushed her legs apart, and lifted her up with effortless ease. Laughing, he settled her back onto his cock. Once more he sank into her depths.

"Ah!" She couldn't hold back her sigh of pleasure as he entered her, didn't want to. She wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck, luxuriating in the pure pleasure of having him inside her. She kissed his mouth, hot, eager kisses, as he began to move again. She hadn't thought she could be aroused a second time so soon after the incredible climax she'd experienced, but he proved her wrong, his skillful caresses effortlessly stimulating her to the peak of sexual desire once more.

Her nipples grew hard, tight little nubs of longing that poked against his chest as he thrust in and out of her. Energy boiled through her core, heating her sheath. She dug her nails into his back and wondered that the patio furniture didn't burst into flame around them. It felt as if he had thrust a burning torch between her legs, but this fire did not burn. It scorched and tormented her, sending wild sparks of desire shooting through her body.

All around them, tall buildings stood like sentinels, the blank eyes of hundreds of windows watching their lovemaking. Rachel imagined unseen voyeurs behind those windows, and her skin flushed with heat. Lor's face hardened into taut lines of desire. The sight of his intense passion only stimulated her further. This man gave his all when he made love. She must do the same. She must give her heart completely.

"Lor," she whispered, her voice tremulous with emotion. "I want you to take me again and again, but I'm afraid you'll grow bored with me."

He stopped and frowned at her. "Bored? Why?"

She bit her lip. Why had she chosen this moment to speak her innermost fears? But she couldn't stop. The intense intimacy between them demanded the utmost honesty. "Because you're a sophisticated sexual healer, and I'm just an ordinary Earth woman."

He shook his head. "Rachel, there's nothing ordinary about you. Making love to you has been a constant surprise." He shifted his weight, the slight movement sinking his cock deeper into her hot depths.

Moaning, she writhed in his arms. She squeezed her legs tightly about his hips and arched her pelvis toward him, tempting him to renew his thrusting. She wanted to feel that penetration, to feel the head of his shaft striking her womb. "Then don't stop," she commanded. "I know what I want -- more and more of you. We've only begun to explore each other's bodies."

"I agree." His voice growled, rough with passion. Grabbing her hips again, he pounded into her.

Her second orgasm slammed over her like a tidal wave, sweeping all rational thought from her mind like so much debris. She arched her back and screamed as her womb exploded into a thousand lights. Waves of energy blasted out of their joined bodies and bounced off the distant towers all around them.

"Woman, woman." As she came back from a great, light-filled place, she found Lor smiling at her, his eyes smoldering with desire. "You're amazing. The energy we've released might have healed half of Mixiah's people. Or maybe we've healed half of Manhattan."

She smiled weakly. "I'm sure we can do it again."

He laughed at that. "I am, too." Moving with gentle care, he lifted her off his cock and set her back on her feet.

She reached out to run her hands over his chest, her fingertips exploring his hard muscles. "Will we journey to his world together to try?"

"If you're willing."

"Yes, of course. Take me there. I'm ready."

"Are you?" He reached out and squeezed her nipple. Warm currents of desire pulsed from her breasts to her loins. Her toes curled with pleasure. "We will need to perform the ritual many, many times. I will tie you up again, bind you and penetrate you as I please."

The thought made her grow faint with desire. The familiar dampness gathered between her legs, scenting the night air with the musky aroma of her aroused sex.

Apparently, Lor smelled it, too. He snuggled closer, his erection once again pressing into her hip. "I can't get enough of you. I want to do it again, right this moment."

She had to smile at the chagrin in his voice. She knew he was thinking that they shouldn't waste the marvelous energy they were creating. They should be with someone sick, someone they could heal. "Would it be so awful if we two made love alone now and then."

"No." His face softened. "We need our times of private intimacy. I've enjoyed this night immensely. But then, I suspect I will enjoy devouring your body any time, any place."

She let her lashes flutter downward to touch her cheeks. "And I enjoy devouring yours."

"I've finally found a woman whose passion matches mine." His voice went hoarse. "You awaken ancient, primal pleasure centers in my brain, and that releases power like I've never known. What I feel for you goes far beyond that, though. You displayed determination and courage in standing up to your ex-husband and facing the public. And then you showed compassion toward a man who really didn't deserve it." Lor looked at her with shining eyes. "I'm spellbound by you."

Rachel bit down on her lip. Spellbound. She was thrilled to hear he found her spellbinding, but she'd longed to hear a stronger word. She studied him through her lowered lashes, torn between hope and despair. To spend her life with Lor would be a dream come true. Still, his world and the galaxy beyond were an unknown mystery. Gathering her courage, she voiced her greatest fear. "If I travel with you to other worlds, won't the beings there look down on me? Don't they consider Earthlings to be mere primitives?"

He shook his head. "You've proven that isn't so. I promise you wherever we go, you will be treated with honor and respect. All beings will realize what you're sacrificing to help us."

Sacrificing. Rachel suppressed a smile at that. She'd be sacrificing her wasted life with Jeremy for a chance to start anew with a man who'd opened up a new life's purpose for her and whose slightest touch drove her wild with desire. Her life on Earth had been empty, although she'd never understood that until she'd met Lor. When the doctor had told her she had a fatal disease, she'd thought catastrophe had struck. Instead, it had been the best thing that had ever happened to her. Becoming a healer was like a dream come true.

Her thoughts turned to the stars wheeling over their heads, hidden by the glow of the city. So many stars, so much empty space. She supposed their travels would take them away from Earth for years at a time. "I might miss my homeworld."

"True, but I'll be with you always."

"Will you?"

"Of course." He frowned at her as if puzzled by her sudden doubts. "Haven't you heard what I've been saying? I love you, Rachel."

Love. That was the word she'd longed to hear, the one that set her spirit free to follow him anywhere. Joy flooded through her. Her lips parted.

"Say yes! Say you'll come with me to see the universe." Lor slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. His damp skin slid over hers, sending erotic impulses colliding through her nervous system. She grabbed his shoulders for support and stared up into his face. His eyes shone with love. A woman could drown in those eyes, but drowning would be such a pleasure.

"Yes." She murmured the word against his lips as she leaned into his kiss. Rachel Herrington-Whyte had died after all. In Lor's arms, someone else had been reborn -- a new woman with a new life. She could hardly wait for it to begin.



Kassie Burns

As a Libra, Kassie Burns was born to write romances. Romantic and charming, easygoing and sociable, Libras are in love with love.

Her love of writing, though, comes from her fiery Leo moon, which can be creative -- and explosive. A stormy early life taught Kassie a lot about love's ups and downs -- and provided plenty of material for the steamy romances she loves to write.

Born a small town girl, Kassie moved on to a big Midwestern city where she works as a writer and editor. There she found love and settled down with a husband, her adorable dog and her ever-trusty computer. As an erotica writer, she dates her interest in bondage back to long nights spent chained to that computer.

When Kassie isn't busy writing, she indulges in her favorite hobby: astrology. She's taken classes from several astrologers and keeps busy casting charts for friends and family who want a peek at the future. Her other passionate pastime is golf -- all those handsome men striding up to the tee box! But her true fantasy is to someday hit a hole in one.

Kassie's first book for Loose Id was *Disaster Earth* -- when the world ends, love begins. You can visit her online at www.kassieburns.com.