



APRIL  
REID

TEST OF  
TRUTH

## TEST OF TRUTH

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He drew her closer. “Pirates take booty. I’ll claim this bauble you’re trying to conceal.”

To her horror, he seized the chain with its precious capsule and tucked it inside his pressure suit.

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face and his sensual lips so close to hers reminded her of their days and nights of loving; reminded her of their formal promise ceremony and plans for a lifetime bond-marriage.

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ALSO BY APRIL REID

*Dark Passion*

*Deadly Desires*

*Desert Passion*

*The Dragon's Choice*

*Sidhe Warrior*

*The Sultan's Revenge*

# TEST OF TRUTH

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BY

APRIL REID

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TEST OF TRUTH  
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*Dedicated to my husband, Paul  
who supports and encourages my writing.*

# CHAPTER 1

The space yacht dropped out of hyperspace near their destination, with the com unit already blaring, “Attention, all hands. Unknown ships approaching.”

Still disoriented from the twisting stress of travel between folds of space, Sylinda Rianna de Corvic-Morgan ordered, “Screens on.”

She sat up straighter in her chair and focused on the split-screen views from outside the ambassadorial yacht.

Five sleek, silver ships surrounded the vessel.

The captain’s voice came over the com unit again. “Madam Ambassador, the lead ship has identified itself as the *Space Prowler*, captained by Wolf Reiver.”



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“*Space Prowler?*” Chills raced down her spine. “Vandelian pirates?”

“Yes, ma’am. Their weapons ports are open, and we’re receiving instructions to prepare for boarders.” He hesitated. “I’m sorry, Ambassador de Corvic-Morgan, but any show of resistance would be suicide.”

When the captain clicked off, Sylinda knew she had only minutes to complete her identity change or risk the future of her home planet, Atarka.

Her cousin, Victoria—the real ambassador—and other ambassadors from the Central Worlds Alliance were meeting on Vandelia to establish mutual protection against organized bands of space pirates, like the fiends who’d raped and killed her beloved grandparents and all the other people in their settlement.

The results of that cooperation would make or break the future of Atarka, as well as other newly opened worlds in the alliance.

Sylinda’s role was to play the part of ambassador as a decoy long enough for the meetings to formulate plans for the destruction of the pirates.

The trick of genetics that made her and her cousin close enough in appearance to be twins had provided the opportunity for them to switch identities so Victoria could slip into Vandelia unannounced for secret talks. They had the same last name—de Corvic-Morgan—the same natural color eyes and hair. Even their voices sounded the same. Facial and fingerprint sculpting had removed the distinctive scar from

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Sylinda's cheek and strengthened her resemblance to her cousin. They'd even fooled their parents and friends.

They both knew the formal routine to establish identity would include testing a sample of skin cells and blood for DNA and match it with incorruptible information recorded at a child's birth.

However, top-secret work by Atarkian scientists had developed a serum of mutated cells from Victoria's blood that would change the DNA in Sylinda's body for ten days before they began to break down.

As one of the pirate ships closed with the external hatch on the yacht, Sylinda quickly retrieved the hypo-spray of serum from hiding, and slipped down her snug pants far enough to press the spray into the tender skin of her inner thigh. A slight sting, then the cabin seemed to roll and dip around her. With trembling fingers, she adjusted her clothes, while flashes of heat and weakness spread through her body as her DNA underwent the change.

The scientists had warned her about the effects, but nothing could've prepared her for the nausea and distorted vision and her skin's aching sensitivity to anything, even the slightest brush of clothes.

Fighting the effects of the cellular changes, she dropped the container into the recycle chute, then propped one hip against the bed and checked her appearance in the full-length mirror. Growing up as *Sylinda* in a pioneer settlement, she'd dressed casually with her pale blonde hair in a single braid or tied back with a self-hold length of ribbon. On the other hand,

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*Victoria*, raised in urban wealth, was known for tailored clothing and hair disciplined into a smooth twist or bun. Her one bow to feminine frills was her lavish collection of jewelry.

The figure in the mirror was Victoria, from cool, blue eyes, and the sleek, pale blonde hair coiled into a twisted bun at the nape of her slender neck, to the precisely tailored, dark blue tunic, pants, and matching ankle boots. Her blue ambassador's cape lay folded on her bed and her pressure suit and helmet hung ready on the stand.

Sylinda touched the hypo-spray, disguised as a jeweled pendant, she wore on a slender, braided-gold and platinum chain around her neck. The platinum filigree and fire-crystal cylinder carried the precious antidote to reverse the effects of the mutated DNA before it did irreparable harm.

I have ten days, no more, she reminded herself and slipped the life-saving pendant under her tunic.

Those thoughts flashed through her mind while she watched the images on the monitor screen.

The pirate ship had come close enough to dock. The *Spirit of Atarka* shook as the pirate ship's grapplers attached themselves to the sides.

Resigned to the inevitable, she watched the boarding tunnel slide smoothly across the short distance to the yacht's exterior hatch. The procedure was familiar.

In fact every child in Waterdown learned the process of safely going onboard and leaving a spacecraft. They even had instruction in small hand weapons for defense. Many lived in outlying areas where predators roamed undisturbed and self-

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protection was necessary. Her own training had been expanded to offense and defense on land, sea, air, and in space.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. This was no drill, and she had to behave like her cousin, who employed others to do her fighting. However, there was one point where they agreed. She and her cousin both carried knives for use as a last resort.

On the split-screen, Sylinda saw five figures, in silver pressure suits and helmets, emerge from the tunnel into the airlock, then close and seal the outer door. Each carried a needle pistol or laser gun with the ready ease of an expert.

The helmeted figure in the lead said to the ship's intercom pickup, "Air pressure has equalized. Open the inner door—and no tricks. My men will shoot to kill." Even filtered by the suit's com unit, his voice rang with cool authority and threat.

As she watched the inner door to the ship slide open, Sylinda knew her freedom was measured in minutes. She'd already concealed a thin, ultra sharp, plasglas blade in a secret pocket inside her tunic sleeve and another one in her pressure suit.

Now she slipped deeper into her role as Madam Ambassador and sat in the sleek, butter-soft cazleather chair facing the door, assuming an assured air of authority.

Out in the corridor, there was an exchange of orders and responses, then her door opened and the leader entered. Something in the easy way he moved—in the set of his broad shoulders and narrow hips—reminded her of her long-lost

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lover, Justin Kade.

“Ambassador de Corvic-Morgan?” he asked in clipped tones.

She raised her chin in defiance. “I am de Corvic-Morgan.”

He removed his helmet. Her heart stuttered, but years of practice hiding her true feelings helped her conceal her shock. *Justin? Is it really him after three years?*

The pirate chief drew a slim holo-tester from an outer pocket. “Say your full name,” he ordered, holding the tester flat on his palm.

Sylinda’s stomach knotted, but she recalled her cousin’s impatience with fools and used that tone to say, “I am Victoria Consuela de Corvic-Morgan, Ambassador from Atarka.” She rose to face him. “And you are in violation of interplanetary laws.”

“Planning to arrest me”—he glanced at her holographic image slowly turning above the projector in his hand—“Ambassador?”

Relieved to know she’d passed the first test of her identity, Sylinda crossed her arms so her fingers had quick access to the concealed knife. “Now that you know this is my yacht and you are on Atarkian territory, I’ll give you two minutes to collect your crew, return to your ship, and leave—all of you.”

“What makes you think I’ll obey your orders?” He prowled closer, reminding her of a sleek, dangerous wolf-panther. “Your ship is surrounded by five fully armed marauder vessels. My men are in command of your helm, engineering, and environmental controls. This vessel and you

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are not going anywhere without my permission.”

He leaned closer. His nostrils flared. “Your voice is abrasive, but your scent is enticing. Want to earn your freedom with a long, slow fuck?”

“Damn you!” She spat in his face. “Fuck that.”

His hand shot out. He gripped her wrist. Spittle dripped from his now-expressionless face. “A very undiplomatic action—Ambassador. Most pirates would torture and kill for that insult.”

“Not you.” She hoped she was right. “You said, ‘most pirates.’”

“Not me,” he agreed. “You have no chance to bargain for your freedom; not even if you try to use that cunning little knife concealed in your sleeve.”

Unsealing the top of his pressure suit one-handed, he drew the knife and sheath from her sleeve and tucked them inside the metallic fabric.

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Suddenly his mouth came down on hers...hard. He nipped her lower lip and then sucked on it in a rhythmic beat that matched the hot, edgy need racing through her blood.

Her free hand slipped up to the opening in his suit and spread on the fabric over his beating heart. Past betrayals said she should shove him away and resist his mouth.

Before she could act, he seized her free hand and forced both hands behind her back, while his lips continued to ravage hers.

Her breasts swelled and grew hot. Her nipples tightened into sensitive buds. She cursed her body’s helpless, sensual response.

Abruptly he released her. “Hold your hands out in front,” he ordered. Reaching behind his back, he brought out two neuro-cuffs and a neck ring.

“Not those,” she gasped.

He paused. His mouth was tight and grim. “Cooperate if

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you want your crew released and allowed to return safely on this vessel to Atarka.”

Sylinda shivered, but knew what she had to do. “Prisoners don’t question their jailors,” she said quietly and extended both hands.

Did she detect a flash of relief in his eyes?

Wordlessly, he snapped a thin, silvery band on each wrist, crossed them in front of her waist, and pressed a dot on his belt. Instantly, her arms and hands were paralyzed in that position.

She clamped her lips to hold back a groan.

He fit the larger, cold metal ring around her neck, and she felt it tighten against her skin.

“Don’t fight this,” he instructed in a dark, grim tone. “It’s a neuro-ring now keyed to the nerves in your neck and spine. You would not like its affect on your body.”

\* \* \*

Justin studied his prisoner as she hesitated before entering the small, spare brig on his ship. It held a bunk built into the wall, one blanket, and a toilet in the corner. A thick, clear sheet of permaplas closed off the side facing the corridor. A prisoner had no privacy, but it was the safest place for her on the ship.

She took a deep breath, then entered the cell with her spine straight and a proud expression in her eyes.

“Ms. De Corvic-Morgan, turn toward me and I’ll release your bonds,” he ordered in a deliberately harsh tone.



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“You may call me Madam Ambassador.” She faced him with her head held high.

He switched off the wrist controls and watched her shake her arms to restore feeling; all without a whimper.

Damn, he admired her courage under conditions that would daunt other women and men, but he couldn’t show any admiration of sympathy. They had an unseen audience watching on monitors—desperate men who would seize any opportunity to dispose of him and take his place as captain.

Before closing the door, he said, “There will be a guard stationed at the end of this corridor at all times. Of course your cell is monitored both automatically by an artificial intelligence—AI—unit and with a direct feed to the bridge and my cabin. I’ll keep the electronic key to this door panel.”

She glared at him. “As I said, prisoners don’t question their jailors.”

Disgusted by what he had to do next, he said, “Just so you understand one consequence of defiance,” and pressed the belt control to the neuro-ring around her neck.

Her back arched. Her legs gave way and she collapsed on the floor with a moan.

As part of his training, he’d experienced the searing effects of the neuro jolt at a higher setting than he’d used on her. Bleakly, he watched her shudder and then grow still.

In a businesslike manner, he leaned down and pressed a life-meter to the tender place below her ear. “All systems go,” he reported in a disinterested voice.

“So noted,” the AI cell monitor responded.

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Everything in him screamed to give her medical aid. At this point, he couldn't. Even the slightest deviation from standard procedure would bring him under suspicion and remove any protection to her he might offer.

He touched the life-meter to her bare skin again and once more studied the readout. "Monitor, the prisoner's body temperature is now slightly below normal. This prisoner is to be escorted to face Admiral Blass. It is imperative to keep her warm and alive."

"So noted," the AI said. "Proceed with lifesaving measures, Captain Reiver."

Justin knelt beside the slim woman, gathered her into his arms, and carried her to the bunk. He bundled her under the blanket, and checked her pulse below her ear and just above the twice-damned neuro-ring.

*Better.*

The com unit interrupted him. "Captain, there's a classified communication for you from the base."

"Coming. Send Dirk to guard the brig corridor."

Justin closed the clear door panel behind him and left the prisoner unconscious on the bunk.

She claimed to be Ambassador Consuela de Corvic-Morgan. She looked like the ambassador, and sounded like her, except for a minor variation in the voice pattern that could be accounted for by stress. The visual and voiceprint he'd send with his report would verify this was the Atarkian ambassador. That would keep her alive—at least for a while.

But Justin knew her true identity—Sylinda Rianna de

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Corvic-Morgan, cousin to the ambassador and the woman he still loved.

## CHAPTER 2

Sylinda stood at the top of the ship's external lift one step behind Justin. His familiar body heat and masculine scent reminded her of the short, explosive kiss they'd shared before he'd once again turned into the cold, harsh Captain Reiver.

Maybe not so cold, she mused. She had a brief memory of him carrying her to the prison cot and covering her with a blanket. Something in the way he'd tucked the cover around her conveyed a concern for her welfare. And she could swear he'd stroked a finger down her arm on the side of her body turned away from the AI monitor's visual pick-up.

That had been over forty-eight hours ago—hours in which her body had adjusted to the effects of the DNA altering

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serum. The meals and hot tea or coffee he'd brought to her in the cell had revived her energy.

Once more her hands and arms were held immobile by the neuro-cuffs—this time behind her back. The position made her breasts thrust forward and, she had to admit, made her feel more vulnerable. Justin had muttered something about regulations.

A light tingle in the neuro-ring around her neck warned her it was active. Her stomach clenched. She never again wanted to experience that sickening jolt through her nerves and down her spine.

From her vantage point, she scanned the pirates' landing field. It was set at one side of a wide tropical valley surrounded on three sides by rough, steep ridges with a volcano in the middle. A fantastic blue ocean curved along the fourth.

The hot air carried the heavy, sweet fragrance of blossoms and the fresh aroma of vine-draped trees. Flocks of unfamiliar, brightly feathered birds dipped and wheeled overhead—settled on the ground and trees, then leaped into the sky.

*How could such a lovely place be home for pirates who brought destruction and death?*

Closer by, just beyond the dense tropical forest, she caught glimpses of the base camp buildings with thatched roofs. In a time when pre-fabricated structures could be erected in minutes, the primitive structures were probably for camouflage against casual observers. No wonder the pirates in this base and others had been able to remain hidden.

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Below where she stood with Justin, members of the crew unloaded boxes and pallets of items. The expensive trunk containing her clothes and emblazoned with the ambassadorial seal was off-loaded from one pallet and promptly claimed by the crewmember, Dirk, who'd been her guard.

He added it to an airfloat already holding other boxes and even a folded mini-aircycle. Then he marched off toward a surfaced road leading into the jungle, guiding the airfloat with one hand.

Around him, the remaining pirates placed items onto their airfloats.

The four other ships had landed and their crewmembers claimed various items of cargo. A brief squabble erupted. Curses and fists flew. One pirate fired a needle gun into the ground close to another pirate's foot. The crew chief in charge of the cargo knocked the gunman down and seized the deadly weapon.

Other pirates rushed forward to lay claim to the prize.

Justin activated the lift, then swung over the side at the last ten feet and dropped to the ground. He waded into the melee, reinforcing his command to, "Step back," with fists and feet.

When a sullen circle of pirates formed, Justin said, "There's enough loot for all." Then he opened the disputed box and distributed the jewelry, piece by piece to each claimant.

A heavily muscled blond, wearing an open vest and skin-tight red pants that showed off his thick male package, swaggered over to her grinning. "Here's a nice piece of

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plunder.” He grabbed her butt.

“Don’t touch me,” she said in disgust and jerked away. Thrown off balance by her wrists fastened behind her back, she fell heavily against the railing.

He laughed and pinched her nipple through the tunic fabric.

Braced against the railing, she kicked him, barely missing his groin when he moved aside at the last second.

“I like taming a bitch who plays hard to get.” He fingered the hilt of his belt knife. “Tonight, I’ll win you at the challenge and then fuck you blind.” Chuckling, he went back to his loaded airfloat.

Filled with loathing, Sylinda watched him collect his loot and head toward the jungle road.

Justin returned to the lift. He glanced at the departing blond. “Captain Vogel give you any trouble?”

Something in his tone warned her not to mention the assault. “He was just bragging.”

“So why did you kick him?”

“He’s a jerk.”

Justin raised one eyebrow. “That’s a given.” His mouth tightened into a grim line. “I’ll have the truth now—all of it.”

“All right,” she said in resignation. “I didn’t want to start trouble.”

“Why?”

“It’s obvious you’re surrounded by humans and aliens who want your job and don’t care who they kill to become captain.”

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“Better the devil you know than the one you don’t?” Justin said loudly enough for any interested observers to hear.

She looked at him scornfully. “You can all go to hell.”

“I’ll get there soon enough, Madam Ambassador—but I have plans for you first.” He gave a harsh laugh. “You’ll call me ‘Devil’ and more before the night is over.”

The nearby pirates suddenly got busy, and Sylinda realized they’d been listening. Had she made a mistake challenging Justin in front of his crew?

Justin gripped her upper arm, directed her off the lift, and they went toward the road cut through the jungle.

A few paces later, they marched in the warm shade bounded by trees and fernlike plants in varying shades of green and purple. Birdsong, in trills and chuckles, filled the air. Otherworld scents brushed their skin. A pack of golden-furred creatures peered down at them from massive branches, or kept pace—swinging from tree to tree. Here and there, she glimpsed a baby peeking from a stomach pouch or perched on an adult’s back.

Snarls and growls announced the presence of other creatures moving unseen in the dense foliage on the jungle floor.

Bold hoppers crossed the road, paused and sat erect on their hind legs and thick tail to study them and then disappeared into the green and purple wall of plants.

Sylinda wished she could dive into hiding as easily as the little hoppers.

A soft, “Whoop,” called her attention to a heavy branch



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overhanging part of the road. A female goldenfur curled one arm around a youngling perched beside her on the branch, while a baby peeked out of her pouch.

Impulsively, Sylinda called, “Your children are beautiful.”

The female made a curious gesture with her empty hand. Then she and her small family turned and were lost from sight.

*What would it be like to move so easily through the jungle? If only I could and escape from this pretense.* She glanced at Justin striding beside her and shivered. What would happen to her when they reached the pirates’ camp?

\* \* \*

Justin cleaned his knife blade and watched the Kolarian limp away from the challenge ring. Light from the traditional lamps and fire in the stone pit flickered on the non-human’s blood. His black humanoid arms and legs bore evidence of their battle. One of his shoulder tentacles, dripping poison, writhed on the ground as evidence of Justin’s victory. “To the second blood.”

The Kolarian would grow a replacement, but before his defeat, his serrated knife had opened a slash in Justin’s arm.

As prescribed by the rules—once the fight was over, medics stopped each combatant’s bleeding with a medi-wand, then stepped back and settled on the sidelines, waiting for the next challenge.

While his wounds were being sealed, Justin studied Sylinda, where she stood shackled to a wooden post—again a tradition and this one he appreciated because it meant he could

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remove her neuro-cuffs and collar. In the hands of another, along with the belt controls, both restraints could be used as torture.

He watched in resignation while another crewmember from Vogel's ship, *The Raptor*, sauntered out of the shadows toward the challenge ring. When would Vogel decide enough men had softened him up for the final kill?

From the time the captain of *The Raptor* had seen Madam Ambassador, he'd tried a variety of ploys to have her assigned to him. Tonight he'd made it clear he would challenge for possession of her.

Justin took a sip from the water bottle he carried in a holder on his belt—a precaution against someone slipping a drug or poison into it.

As he prepared to meet the next challenger, he knew Admiral Blass was watching the proceedings from his holographic form hovering above the sender-receiver platform.

Maybe this time the elusive supreme leader of all the pirate bands in the star system would finally summon him to a face-to-face meeting at the secret headquarters. When that happened, Justin could plant the locator signal, activate it, and fulfill his mission.

The next challenger, a slender, wiry Atarkian, arrived at the line of stones set in the ground to mark out the formal combat ring.

Other fighters might discount the danger presented by the smaller opponent, but Justin recognized the physical clues of a

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deadly Kin-Sha fighter in the smooth, controlled way the man moved.

“What is your challenge?” Justin asked, in a bored manner. “To first blood, to second blood, or, to the death?”

“To the death, of course...dog-fucker.”

The Atarkian stepped into the ring, knees slightly bent, and a long dagger in one hand. “While you’re dying, I’ll screw the bitch where you can watch.”

Ignoring the fighter’s taunts, Justin drew his own dagger and focused on the man’s eyes, watching for clues to his next maneuver.

The fighter did a somersault and landed facing him with the dagger ready. Justin stepped aside and swept the Atarkian’s feet from under him.

Cursing, the fighter sprang to his feet.

The two faced off.

As they came together, blades raised high, their daggers glimmered in light from the fire and flickering torches.

They moved slowly around each other, searching for an opening.

Justin feinted to the right, leaped back from a deadly thrust by the Atarkian, then pressed forward in attack and slashed the fighter’s shoulder.

Pirates watching from the sidelines shouted encouragement and cheered them on.

“That’s first blood,” Justin said. Stepping closer, he lowered his voice. “Warrior, there is no dishonor if we end the combat now. Let Captain Vogel fight his own battles, instead

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of wasting your blood for his petty jealousy.”

“He is my captain,” the fighter declared. “I have my orders. You must die.” He drove in with his wicked blade.

Justin deflected it with his dagger and opened a deep cut above the Atarkian’s knee. Then he felt the sting of the man’s weapon across his ribs.

The fighter staggered two steps away. He dipped his blade into the puddle of poison leaking from the previous fighter’s severed tentacle and came at Justin in a rush.

As he prepared to meet this deadlier weapon, Justin heard a shouted, “Halt, warriors, by order of Admiral Blass.”

Armed guards stepped into the challenge ring to enforce the supreme commander’s order.

Justin and the Atarkian eyed each other, then straightened and saluted the admiral’s holographic image.

\* \* \*

In desperation, Sylinda tugged at the chains holding her arms bound to the wooden post behind her. Somehow she had to get loose before the pirates turned their attention back to her. It was creepy enough to have the holographic figure of the man they called Admiral leer at her. She didn’t want to think about what would happen to her and Justin if he lost and Captain Vogel gained possession of her.

Icy fear twisted through her stomach as she watched the medics stop the bleeding from the Atarkian and Justin’s fresh wounds while the holographic figure looked on. Justin had fought a series of challengers long enough for two of the

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planet's moons to move halfway across the sky. The third and largest natural satellite had just risen to throw double shadows across the cleared ground.

Time and again, the medics had applied their medi-wands to clean and seal Justin's injuries. How long could his strong body absorb the loss of blood before he grew weak and easy prey for another challenger?

She gave another pull on the chains and smothered a moan as the metal cuffs dug into her abraded wrists.

Justin must have heard her. He gazed at her with a face devoid of expression, then looked back at the holographic figure dominating the clearing.

Bowing to the admiral, he said, "Sir, I have answered many challenges tonight in defense of my claim to the woman prisoner. Now I assert my privilege, under the rules, to be declared winner of the challenge."

The holo-figure frowned. "You are bold, Captain Reiver."

"A pirate captain must be bold or he's of no use to you, sir."

Moments passed before the admiral smiled. "Well spoken, Captain. I grant you possession of the ambassador with two conditions."

"Sir?"

"Fuck her. Do what you want to subdue her to your will, but keep her alive."

"My pleasure," Justin said. "And the second condition?"

"To give each ship's personnel who aided in her capture a reward, you and the four other captains in your squad will

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appoint one crewmember each to accompany you and the prisoner to the pleasure house. They will record and broadcast your taming of the woman.”

A flash of red at one side of the circle caught Sylinda’s attention. Vogel stood close by with his arms crossed as if holding in his anger. Just his nearness made her skin crawl.

Under cover of the pirates clamoring to be chosen as part of the committee, he said in a deadly tone, “This isn’t over, cunt. Soon I’ll have you, even if it’s over Reiver’s dead body.”

“You’ll be a dead man before that happens.” She spat at him and had the brief satisfaction of splattering his face.

One of the guards stepped between them saying, “The woman is now Captain Reiver’s property.”

Wiping his face, Vogel threatened, “Remember my promise, Madam Ambassador.”

As he moved away to select a crewmember from his ship for the privilege of watching her degradation, her stomach rolled, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her upset. She straightened her spine and gave the ribald crowd a haughty look.

She hung onto her façade of cool composure as Justin and the committee of five came for her.

At Justin’s nod, Dirk released the chains from the pole, then refastened her wrists in front of her body.

“The admiral has given me orders to tame you.” Justin fastened a black cazleather collar around her throat, hooked a matching leash to the ring in front, and tugged on it.

“Come, Madam Ambassador,” he said in a harsh tone.

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“It’s time to begin your lessons.”

His words were greeted with guffaws and suggestions from the watchers, but all she could think of, as she stumbled toward a small building at one end of the street, was how different this Justin’s behavior was from the man she had once loved.

Hands reached out to pinch and poke her body, but the cold-eyed man leading her didn’t seem to notice.

Captain Vogel, who’d appointed himself to represent his ship, pinched her breast, his smirk daring her to protest.

As it grew increasingly clear that Captain Reiver would do nothing to protect her or ease the coming ordeal, the tormentors increased their efforts.

When one pirate shoved his fingers low into her butt crack, she jumped and choked back a scream.

Justin turned around, snarled, “She’s mine—hands off,” and knocked him down. His dark gaze swept the other committee members, lingering on Vogel. “Anyone else need a lesson?”

After that, the disgusting touches stopped.

\* \* \*

Justin led Sylinda into the pleasure house, knowing what he must do to protect her from the hands of Vogel and the other pirates would shock her. At the same time, a small curl of anticipation both disgusted him and made his cock grow heavy. If she were worldlier in her sexual tastes, he could give her—and himself—pleasure in many more ways than when

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they had been lovers years earlier. But she had been raised in a new colony, where sexual practices were inhibited by the culture and enforced on pain of exile.

He tethered her leash to a ring in the floor and hardened his resolve to ignore the vulnerable expression in her eyes as she gazed around at the assorted whips and lashes hung on one wall, chains suspended from the ceiling, and the large pleasure-pain bed dominating the end of the room—with straps dangling from the headboard, footrest, and along both sides.

“Present your wrists to me, slave,” he commanded.

Mentally cursing, he unlocked the cuffs and chains, and dropped them to the floor. The metallic rattle punctuated the muttered comments from the watchers. Sharp, musky odors of sweat and sex rose from their bodies. Already he could see their cocks had swelled in arousal.

Steeling himself to show no reaction to Sylinda’s bloodied wrists, he taunted her. “Can’t endure a little bondage without damaging your delicate skin, Madam Ambassador?”

She raised her chin in defiance and looked at him like she would a piece of shit she’d found on the sole of her boot.

“You still defy me?” He ripped open her tunic, exposing her breasts—then gripped her forearms when she swung at him. “The sooner you call me master and obey my orders, the better it will be for you.”

“When pigs fly.” She aimed a knee at his cock.

He turned and caught the blow on his hip.

“Dirk, remove the prisoner’s pants and attach the restraint



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bar between her ankles. Use the soft cazleather cuffs. We wouldn't want her tender skin damaged—yet.”

In spite of her struggles, Justin held her arms, just above her wrists, while his crewmember stripped the garment down and off—leaving a silky scrap of thong panties covering her pussy—and forced her legs apart.

Even after the stiff bar was locked into place, she tried to twist away from Justin's grip.

The more she fought, the more it inflamed the watchers. They pressed forward, each seeking the best view for himself and his recorder.

Justin sensed the committee would soon be a mob out of control. He locked Sylinda's wrists together in one hand and gave her a sharp slap on one bare ass cheek.

She gasped and looked at him.

“Your performance is exciting the audience too soon, slave,” he drawled. “Time to prepare for the next act.”

While she stood, legs far apart, trembling, he examined her abraded wrists. “Admiral Blass has commanded me to keep you alive. I'll clean your injuries. The medics will seal them against infection and fit your wrists with padded cuffs.”

Opening his own water flask, he washed the scrapes and cuts, leaving the water and blood for the self-cleaning floor to absorb.

He stepped behind her, slipping one knee between her legs against her hot, moist pussy and braced her while a medic completed the treatment.

As he held her sweet body, she shivered and tried to pull

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away. He'd caused that fear, he thought in resignation, and her ordeal wasn't over.

With his arms around her, he fingered her breasts, playing with her nipples and gently tugging on her ear with his teeth. Under cover of the committee members' comments, while the medic fastened the cuffs on her wrists, he murmured in a barely-there tone, "Sylinda...danger. Trust me."

She grew still. Her breasts swelled under his hands.

Before she could speak, he straightened away from her back and said, "Slave, time for a new lesson."

He picked up the leash and drew her to one side of the bed. "Bend over the edge, face down, ass in the air and prepare to be trained for my pleasure."

\* \* \*

*Oh, goddess, what next?* Sylinda's mind was a jumble of hope, doubt, and fear—and a strange anticipation. Even the constraint of the rod between her ankles, which made her walk by swinging one leg and foot, then the other forward, had added to that odd excitement.

Hands seized her arms, stretched her body partway across the bed—so she bent over the side—and her panties were cut away. Quickly they locked her wrists in place. Her stiff nipples rubbed the fabric underneath them, sending little shocks to her vagina.

The mattress under her cheek bore traces of old perfumes, sweat, and sex. She watched Justin stroll to the wall and unhook a lash.

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“No,” she whimpered.

Her protest brought a fresh snigger from the men surrounding the bed. She knew their recorders were carrying the sights and sounds to every person on the pirate base, and probably to the admiral, wherever he lurked.

Why was Justin doing this to her? Where was her once-tender lover? But buried deep in her most hidden desires, she again experienced that stir of excitement. Her pussy felt hot and swollen. The rod keeping her ankles spread apart let cool air caress the damp folds between her legs.

She watched Justin return, slapping the lash against his leg. The strips curled and uncurled around his leg, until he moved behind her out of sight.

At each sharp swish, her muscles tensed. How hard were the multiple strands? Could she take the punishment silently?

Justin’s voice came from behind. “Here’s a pretty sight.” His hard hand rubbed circles on her ass cheeks, first one and then the other.

Suddenly he spanked one bare cheek. It stung. He spanked the other side and she jerked at the impact. Her muscles quivered, waiting for the next blow.

Instead of his hand, she felt strips of cazleather brush back and forth across her buttocks.

“Good slave,” he crooned, ruffling the pliable strands.

Vogel said, “Get on with it, Reiver. Show the bitch who’s in charge—or I will.”

“You never did understand the finer points of domination,” Justin drawled. “That’s one reason you lost command of the

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squad to me.”

Sylinda felt his hand rub over the tender surface of her butt. Now she wanted his touch.

He changed to a series of spanks—each one harder. Her butt stung, but warmth built higher, spreading across her lower body.

The slaps changed to strokes from the lash. Fire raced through her blood. She desired wanted—had to—satisfy that hot, urgent need.

Suddenly he cupped her wet pussy. She gave a soft moan. He inserted one long, broad finger into her channel, drew it partway out, then slid it back in. Goddess, it felt good. She squeezed her muscles to intensify the sensation.

“Draw her higher on the bed,” he ordered.

Willing hands moved her farther onto the mattress. The restraint bar still forced her legs apart. Her pussy rubbed the rough fabric. The scent of her own arousal filled her nose.

The bar between her ankles was raised onto the bed. That forced her butt into the air and left her stretched open for all to see her in intimate detail.

A hot blush spread down her body, mixed with excitement.

The side of her face was forced deeper into the mattress and her raised arms obscured part of her line of sight, but she still saw the lascivious, feral grins of the watchers. The ones in her range of vision held a recorder pointed at her in one hand and rubbed their bulging fly or exposed penis with the other.

A sharp slap on her butt raised a new anticipation and drew a low, hungry sound from her.

## TEST OF TRUTH

“Call me master,” Justin demanded.

“Pirate,” she gasped.

A nasty chuckle ran around the room.

Someone shouted, “She doesn’t believe you, Reiver.”

Another voice added, “Show her who’s in charge.”

She closed her eyes against the sight of all those faces twisted in lust.

To her heightened senses, the sharp musk of male sweat filled the room.

She heard the rustle of clothes being removed—then the bed dipped and Justin settled behind her. His masculine heat made her heart trip and beat faster.

Once more he slipped one finger, then another into her damp, quivering slit. His other hand slid around to her breast and plucked at one nipple. “Call me master,” he crooned.

“Pirate,” she said and pushed herself into the broad hand teasing her from behind.

“Master.” His fingers were replaced with the tip of his hot, thick penis. He moved partway in and stopped, as both his hands stroked and tugged at her engorged nipples.

Everything else faded away in the lush, sharp hunger for him to completely take her—possess her—fill her. But even in the fog of desire, she knew she had to keep his real name a secret.

“Captain...”

His cock pumped in and out—three times and stopped, with just the tip inserted. *Damn the man’s control.*

She whimpered for the promised release.

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“Slave...” his voice rose warningly.

Every fiber of her being clamored for him to fill her and fill her, and—“Master,” she gasped.

## CHAPTER 3

She called me master, Justin thought in triumph, and pressed into her hot channel, fighting to keep control just a little longer.

Now he could have her in private.

“Leave...get out,” he ordered the watchers, “and take your recorders. I have fulfilled the admiral’s orders.”

“Finish fucking the cunt before we go,” Vogel demanded.

A low growl from the other watchers echoed his arrogant request.

Justin slipped off the pleasure-pain bed, gripped the needle gun he’d concealed under his shirt beside Sylinda, and turned to confront Vogel. “My slave called me master. You and the

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others have watched me subdue her. Admiral Blass' orders are fulfilled—now get out!”

Vogel's gaze slid past Justin to Sylinda's naked body. He looked back to Justin and the needle gun pointed at him. Rage and frustration simmered in the pirate's eyes, along with the knowledge Justin could incapacitate or kill him before anyone else raised a weapon.

“One day you'll make a mistake, Captain Reiver, and I'll be there to fuck your bitch and watch you die.” Vogel pivoted on his heel and marched out the door, followed by the rest of the committee.

Justin locked the door behind the last straggler and went back to Sylinda. Vogel had threatened him before. Danger from other pirates was part of being their captain. This time, though, Sylinda was also Vogel's target.

As he released the restraining bar from between her ankles, he silently vowed to protect her until she was free and safe. Once that was done, he'd complete his mission—one he had little chance to survive.

“Master”—Sylinda twisted her hips and tugged at the wrist restraints—“I need...”

“Me, too.” Justin's balls drew tight. His cock pulsed with hunger. He rolled her over onto her back, leaving her arms above her head—the straps twisted together—and took her mouth in a hard kiss, while he slid his hands under her butt cheeks and raised her hips—positioning her for his entry.

Under cover of the kiss, he breathed a low warning, “We're still under surveillance.”



## TEST OF TRUTH

“I hear,” she murmured against his mouth, and bent her legs wider for him.

He eased the broad head of his cock into her channel—drew out—and entered in deeper—holding there in spite of his body clamoring to finish.

Her breath came faster. Her warm, humid sheath clasped his cock and bathed it in another rush of her woman’s honey. She tugged and twisted against the restraining straps.

“Please, I want to touch you. Release my wrists,” she pled.

“Not yet.” He twisted his hips.

She gasped and fumbled for the straps tethering her wrists.

He moved again, fighting to hold back his release.

“Don’t stop—please, J...master.” She thrashed her head from side to side. She thrust her pelvis up, drawing his cock deeper. Her internal muscles rippled. Her breath came harsh and fast, then, with a scream she exploded in orgasm.

Riding the hot wave, he pounded into her—hard and deep. Everything faded away in the hot, hungry need to give and take, and fly.

\* \* \*

Sylinda slowly became aware of Justin releasing the straps holding her wrists above her head. When the restraints were gone, her arms wouldn’t move. *Oh, Goddess, help.* She tried to force them. Pain shot through her shoulders.

Cursing under his breath, Justin knelt beside her and curled his fingers over each shoulder. “This will hurt, slave,” he said loud enough for surveillance to record. “You must learn to

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endure pain.”

His hands worked the knotted muscles. Ribbons of fire seared her nerves. She clamped her lips tight.

“Groan, scream,” he murmured, massaging her shoulders. “Make them think you’re helpless.”

In spite of the pain, she glared at him.

“Now, slave,” he said in a harsh voice. Gripping both arms, he eased them down to her sides.

And she did scream—loudly.

He nodded. “That ends your first training session. More will come later.”

Nauseated and trembling, she lay there, naked, in the flare of lights and watched Justin pull on his pants and boots, and fasten his belt with the precision and economy of motion she remembered from earlier and happier times.

Which was the real person—the tender, caring Justin Kade or the harsh, relentless Captain Reiver?

\* \* \*

Justin snapped the braided cazleather leash onto the collar ring. “You’re mine, bitch,” he said in a normal tone. “The collar will remain in place as a constant reminder.”

Her sapphire-blue eyes met his, and he cursed the bewilderment he saw there.

“As my slave, I have access to your body anytime I want.” He flicked her tight nipple—then bent his head to soothe it with his tongue. She made a low sound. Goosebumps rose on her bare skin.

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“Nobody will look at your treasures without my permission.” He picked up his shirt, drew it up her arms over her shoulders, and ran a finger down the fastener strip between her breasts.

“Come with me and don’t try any tricks, or you’ll spend the rest of the night bound to the stake outside my quarters.”

Gripping the leash, he tugged her out the door and across the compound to his base quarters. He would have preferred the greater security of his ship, but the admiral had issued orders for all captains to stay on base. With Sylinda in his care, it was important not to draw any suspicion.

The weight of her jeweled pendant in his pant’s pocket stirred his curiosity. *Had it been given to her by another lover?* With the thought came a swift jolt of anger mixed with regret. Hell, he thought he’d anticipated everything that would happen when he escaped from prison and joined the pirates. What he hadn’t factored in was the impact of Sylinda’s presence on his dangerous life.

He spotted the bundle tucked in the deeper shadows on the small porch of his bachelor quarters.

“Wait here.” He left Sylinda behind one of the ancient sycamore trees spared by the pirates when they’d set up the base.

Minutes passed while he checked out the surrounding area, first visually, and then with a palm-size multi-scanner. He still wasn’t satisfied. Blocking out the familiar night sounds of the jungle—the sleepy croon of the goldenfurs, the cough and roar of a night hunting fangcat, and the squawk of birds disturbed

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by passing nocturnal predators—he focused on the predatory men and women on the base.

Motioning for Sylinda to stay sheltered behind the tree trunk, he slowly approached his quarters and the mystery package.

One look at the bubble seal reassured him it was safe. It was marked with an ancient Atarkian script known to only a handful of beings. His silent partner had left the package.

\* \* \*

Sylinda sealed the fastener seam on the all-seasons boots Justin had brought her earlier that morning. After telling her to get ready for a day away from the pirate camp, he'd been gone for two hours.

She surveyed herself in the mirror and ignored the tiny red light in the ventilator where the all-seeing eye of the camp AI monitor kept watch.

Since the night he'd brought her to his bungalow, Justin had provided her with clothes—first those in the mysterious package left on his porch, and since then selections from her own trunk. He'd bought the formal ambassadorial cape and some of the more comfortable pants, tops, and underwear from Dirk. Today, she wore timeless jeans and a light blue, soft cotton tee-shirt over silky panties and bra.

For the last five days, Justin had paraded her around camp, first on the leash, then without, but always engaged in some menial task. She'd cleaned and raked the portion of ground around his quarters, scrubbed out his bathing room in full view

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of his ship's officers during a regular meeting, and served refreshments to them afterwards.

Here and there, she'd detected sympathetic looks from a small handful of pirates at Captain Reiver's harsh words and demands.

To make it more difficult, every once in awhile she'd fought a short-lived fever and dizziness, and struggled to conceal signs of weakness caused by the experimental serum.

This morning she felt strong and alive.

"I'm ready to go," she muttered, staring out the window. Ready to leave here forever, she thought, but this was only the seventh day since she'd temporarily changed her DNA. She knew from the briefing before she'd left Atarka that her cousin and the other members of the conference needed the full ten days to finish their plans.

She watched a silver DeCorvic Eagle 300 appear from out of the jungle and pull to a stop in front of the bungalow.

The driver's side door of the skimmer slid open, and Justin stepped out. He saw her at the window and acknowledged her with a nod. His impassive expression hid any other thoughts.

Stepping away from the window, she waited for him as she fought a wave of homesickness brought on by sight of the skimmer from one of her Uncle Harold's manufacturing plants on Atarka.

Justin entered with his typical silent, gliding step and reached for the leash on its hook beside the door.

"Come, Madam Ambassador," he said caustically, clipping the lead to the ring on her collar. "I will prove to you the

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futility of trying to escape.”

Stung by his sarcasm and her own fear, she said, “Call me prisoner. That’s my true status.”

“As you wish,” he said in a tone devoid of emotion, and started to lead her out the door.

When the leash grew taut, she gripped it with both hands. “You can lead me like a dog, you bastard, but—”

He yanked on the restraint. She gave a choked cry and fell to her hands and knees on the porch.

“Call me master,” he said in a flat voice.

Holding the leash close to the ring on her collar, she looked up at him, more shaken than she cared to admit—even to herself. Why did he choose to punish her after his tenderness last night?

The door behind him remained open while Captain Reiver stood with his arms crossed and gazed at her. “I will hear you address me as master, or our only trip will be to the house of pain and pleasure for more training.”

“Master.” She bowed her head. How much more humiliation would she have to swallow before completing her assignment?

\* \* \*

Justin watched Sylinda settle into the skimmer’s passenger seat and fasten the safety harness. Aware of the security monitors trained on them, he secured her leash to one of the harness links behind her seat as dictated by prisoner protocol.

She gave him a look that should have fried him in his own

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skin. He silently cheered to see he hadn't broken her spirit. Would she ever understand he had to continually convince the pirates she was a prisoner with enough value to keep alive and out of the camp brothel?

*Damn the ever-present monitors throughout the pirate base. And damn the circumstances that had brought her from the quiet village of Waterdown in the Valley of Ten Thousand Falls to this camp of the corrupt in the steaming jungle of Vardon.*

Her fame as a storyteller and singer had spread throughout Atarka, and she was welcomed with honor wherever she went on that planet. Why had she left the safety of her home for the dangerous game of interplanetary politics?

\* \* \*

Sylinda caught her breath as the skimmer shot into the air and swept across the great green, gold, and purple expanse of jungle trees below the shimmering hull. In her excitement at viewing one of the last great spreads of untouched tropical forest, she forgot she was a captive and not a companion of the pilot, Justin.

"This is an amazing sight." She began to compose words to a new song she'd sing in villages back home.

Justin touched a switch, then swiveled his seat to face her. Silently he leaned forward, pressed his thumb on the seal of her collar, and removed it.

She rubbed her neck where the collar had chafed her skin and cautiously eyed him.

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“It’s no trick,” he said. “I thought you’d be more comfortable without the cazleather.”

“Why? I’m your prisoner. You’ve made that clear—*master*.”

“Sylinda, I know your true identity—remember?”

“My true identity?” Her stomach convulsed and she fought to hide her reaction to his statement. Her survival depended on her maintaining her cousin’s identity with the pirates.

Her expression must’ve revealed her apprehension.

In a patient tone, Justin said, “Sylinda, you can speak freely here. This is my personal skimmer. It’s been secured in the *Space Prowler*, and I spent time this morning completely sweeping it for any possible monitoring bugs. Nothing we say or do will be overheard or recorded.”

“How can I believe you? You’re not the same person I knew three years ago. From the moment you illegally boarded my cousin’s space yacht, you’ve humiliated me in front of the pirates and made my position as a prisoner very clear. Why should I believe anything you say?”



## CHAPTER 4

Justin sent his skimmer soaring over the dormant volcano and brought it in for a landing in a rough circle of dwarf golden-grass on the far side of the mountain.

A mix of native trees, dotted with a few purple-leafed shugar trees, surrounded their landing spot.

After switching off everything necessary to secure his machine, he turned again to Sylinda. She'd carefully ignored him since the confrontation over her identity. When she apparently realized he wasn't going to question her—at least for a while, she'd relaxed and stared out the windows.

A couple of times, she'd turned to him with excitement shining in her eyes, but had looked away without speaking.

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From time to time, her lips had moved and her fingers tapped out a rhythm on the armrest. Probably composing a new song, he thought.

The moment they'd left the pirates' compound, he'd activated the skimmer's outer chameleon surface. Now colors rippled and changed across the body, blending the vehicle with its surroundings and hiding its position from any surveillance. A flight of orchid butterflies danced across the clearing and swirled around this strange creature invading their home.

His passenger gave a low laugh and touched the front window. The flower-colored creatures lifted from the hull and clustered around that point of contact on the plasglas.

"You just gave away your true identity—again—Sylinda Rianna de Corvic-Morgan, singer and storyteller. You're the only person I know of who communes with butterflies."

"Not exactly commune. It's more a sense of excitement, but certainly no thoughts or words." She rubbed the nape of her neck. "Sometimes I feel a prickle in my head, but it's probably nothing more than wishful thinking."

She drew her fingers away from the window and the butterflies flitted away. Shaking her head, she said, "Why would I tell you that?"

"Because deep inside you realize I'm not your enemy."

Sylinda gave him a long, measured stare. "I'm your prisoner. You've made that clear."

"For your protection."

"Is that why you kidnapped me in the first place?"

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What could he say? An honest and complete answer would place her in greater danger, and assure both their deaths by torture.

When he didn't answer, she turned her attention back to the scenes outside the skimmer. "Are we going out?"

"When it's safe."

He studied his surveillance equipment and the instruments measuring outside air quality and temperature.

"All clear." He slung a backpack over his shoulders, picked up his laser rifle, and slid open the doors.

After a short walk through the dim green light under the canopy of jungle trees and vines, they reached a denser section of orchid-draped tree branches, giant ferns in shades of green, and the tangle of plants that grew wherever sunlight bathed an opening in the jungle.

Birds chirped in trills and gong-like sounds. A troop of goldenfurs rustled through the trees, pausing to study her and Justin before they moved on.

Insects buzzed and flew through the shade. Her clothes clung to her in the heavy, sticky heat, but Sylinda experienced a growing anticipation as they moved closer to Justin's destination. At least they were away from the constant surveillance of the AI monitor.

She tripped over a thick root. Justin reached back and clasped her arm to steady her. Her heart skipped at the memory of those warm, powerful fingers gliding over her body—pressing and caressing points of pleasure she'd never known she had until her first day and night in his arms years

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earlier on Atarka.

“Justin,” she breathed, recalling how he’d brought the same pleasure to her this morning in the privacy of his quarters.

He glanced at her, but didn’t speak. Instead, he continued moving forward up an increasingly steeper slope.

And then, beside Justin, she stepped out of the green and purple wall into an open space at the foot of the volcano.

Here, still shaded by a shugar tree, a light breeze lifted her hair and cooled her skin.

“The air feels wonderful.” She turned to Justin with a smile and then froze at his searching gaze. Something intense flared in his silver-gray eyes.

“What?” Suddenly self-conscious, she took a step back.

“You.” Silently he stepped forward. His fingers trailed down her temple. “Your bravery leaves me breathless.”

She didn’t know what to say, but she did know she wished he’d keep touching her forever.

The thought—and dream—died. Justin had killed her brother, Chase.

Even while she struggled with her heart, she sensed a disturbance in the air—a sense of quiet understanding. As suddenly as it came, it went.

She inhaled a shuddering breath. The normal sounds of the jungle returned and a single yellow-and-black butterfly danced in the air. As if by magic, more butterflies appeared out of the green shadows into the open area where she stood.

Her nape prickled, and she raised her hands in welcome to

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the butterflies that dipped and swooped around her.

The orchid-butterflies were joined by a flight of pearly-white luna butterflies and the great blue sapphire-wings in a swirling cloud.

For a few moments, she thought she'd felt—rather than heard—a whisper of voices.

Justin said her name and the butterflies swirled away, leaving her with a vague wistfulness.

“Just a little farther.” Justin pressed aside a cluster of bright green, heart-shaped leaves—each one as long as her arm from shoulder to wrist. Water droplets flew from the tip of each leaf and spattered her.

“Damn,” he muttered.

“No problem. They're like a giant version of the floppy ear plants we have back home.”

He didn't answer, but there was a new warmth in his eyes. “Floppy ears? I didn't hear of any plant named that when I was on Atarka.”

“Of course not.” She smiled at him companionably. “There's a long, scientific name for it, but we kids called it floppy ears. I even had one hanging in my bathing room. They love low light and moist air.”

“Lucky plant,” he muttered.

“What?”

The next step she took drove the question out of her mind. They stood on a low crest overlooking a great swirl of hardened lava with a large, shimmering blue pool cupped in the black basin. From her vantage point, she could see how the

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bottom to just above the waterline had been coated in a natural cream-colored layer tinged with swirls of palest pink like the inside of a great seashell.

At the end closest to the bulk of the volcano, bubbles rose from the bottom and burst—sending ripples across the water.

At the other end, water slipped over the lip into a series of gurgling cascades ending in a larger pool—this one partly shaded by a silkwood tree.

“The upper pool is too hot for our skin, but the lower pool is just right.” Justin led her around the rim and down a path worn by animal life coming to the water.

She’d been expecting the heavy sulfur odor that usually emanated from thermal pools, but only a faint, clean mineral aroma drifted in the air.

Justin set his laser rifle on a shelf of lava rock within easy reach, swung the backpack off his shoulders onto the ground, and touched the open tab. Extricating a metal cube, she recognized as an alarm and repellent device, he set it in a secure spot and activated it. “That’ll keep the insects away and warn us of any larger wildlife.”

He faced her and his hands went to his belt. For an awful moment she wondered if he planned more punishment. The next moment, she was shocked by her edgy eagerness to welcome more of the sensual discipline he’d administered both in the pain-pleasure house and in his quarters.

His lips twitched in a faint smile. “Never try lying to me. Your expression gives you away.”

He pulled two towels out of his backpack and draped them

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on a lower branch of the sweet-smelling shugar tree. “We’ll play in the water first and make love in the shade later.”

\* \* \*

Standing thigh-deep in the temperate water, Justin drew Sylinda’s wet, nude body into his arms. They’d played and teased in the pool until all he could think of was ravishing her mouth, tasting her nipples, and fucking her with his tongue and aching cock.

He looked down into her eyes. The fierce desire there met his.

“I can’t wait any longer to take you,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Then don’t.” She laced her fingers with his and drew him toward the shore.

Together they stumbled up onto the rock-free patch of ground under the shugar tree. He whipped both towels off the branch and laid them on the low-growing ferns padding the ground.

Gathering her close, he felt her shudder and brush her breasts across the raspy expanse of his chest.

He slipped one hand down between her legs and rubbed with strokes sometimes gentle, sometimes hard, but all meant to rouse her higher and give her pleasure.

Give *her* pleasure? Hell, it was making him hotter and harder than any pussy stroking had a right to do.

He slipped one finger and then two into her humid slit. Her woman’s honey flowed around his hand.

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A low sound escaped from her throat. Her knees buckled. She fell heavily against him.

"I have you," he muttered, and stretched her out on the padded towels.

Kneeling beside her, he feasted on the sight of her delectable body spread out for him in the fragrant shade.

Just for today, they were free of pirates and the admiral with his ruthless demands.

A warm breeze cooled the water from his body. He saw Sylinda shiver.

"Justin," she murmured, tracing the side of his face with a languid finger, "I'm chilly. Make me warm."

She offered herself to him so openly and without reservation that he wanted to take her immediately, but unlike the night in the pleasure-pain house, he'd show her a gentle wooing.

"Sylinda"—he pressed the heel of his hand on her padded pubic bone and watched her eyes fly open and darken with new pleasure—"your body is a treasure waiting for me to taste and explore."

"Taste? Down there? You never did before."

"The old Sylinda wasn't ready for a lot of what I want to do now."

Silently she raised her knees and spread her legs wide. "Show me."

Her new boldness warmed his heart. He stretched out on his stomach with his head between her legs and inhaled her warm, womanly scent. Tenderly he pressed the lips of her



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vagina together and dropped a warm kiss on these nether lips.

She made a soft, sensual sound.

He kissed again, this time adding a quick tongue lick, and she shuddered.

“Justin,” she murmured in a low, languorous tone. Her fingers trailed over his wrist and then slipped to the ground.

He nudged her labia apart and touched his tongue delicately inside her sensitive opening. Gently he circled inside and out.

She moaned. Her fingers scrabbled at the towel, and she shivered. Justin paused, inhaling her woman’s perfume and listening to her small cries of delight.

“Why did you stop?” She gripped his hair. “I... Please...more.”

“Yesss.” He settled down to a feast—licking at her *yoni* and all around, with long strokes—like a boy with an iced dainty. But he didn’t feel like a boy—not the way she murmured and gasped, thrashing her head from side to side.

Lifting his head, he gazed up her length. Her full breasts and erect nipples, and the bright flush of sexual arousal tinting her face kindled his needs. He wanted her—now, but he couldn’t get enough of sending her higher; of pleasuring her until everything on the planet faded away to just the two of them locked in each other’s arms—fused in each other’s body.

Lifting her legs high, he spread them wider and fitted his cock to her warm, fragrant *yoni*. He braced himself over her and slowly sank into her welcoming heat.

Conscious of her delicate frame, he paused to give her

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body time to adjust—but she raised up, taking him deeper into her body. He was so close to coming he could feel the feathery sensation along his spine. But he wanted to hold off the final explosion—to prolong the time before their bodies would have to separate.

And then she made the little hungry sound that drove him wild and he lost control. He drove into her with increasing power—pulling her legs higher around him so he could have more and more of this woman. She chanted his name and drove him out of control. There was no longer any sense of time, or the danger haunting their lives, only the feel of Sylinda around him. While he was in her arms, there were no deceptions, no cruelty and darkness haunting his steps.

In her he found rest and healing from the dark shadows of his existence.

\* \* \*

Time drifted by, measured by the soft rise and fall of Sylinda's chest in her sleep. After easing away from her slender body, he spread his shirt over her, from throat to knees, to shelter her from the drift of leaves.

How could he protect her if they were separated?

Opening his backpack, he extracted a small durium packet from inside a concealed pocket and set it within easy reach.

After a careful examination of the cazleather collar he'd removed from her earlier, he found a hairline separation where the hide had been folded over and joined. Selecting a dot-sized signal transmitter from the packet, he slipped the tiny sender

### *TEST OF TRUTH*

into hiding and smoothed away the split.

He despised the necessity of her wearing the slave collar as long as she was held by the pirates, but at least it gave him and his silent partner a way to keep track of her location.

As he dressed, he felt the pendant in his pocket and decided to examine it more closely.

## CHAPTER 5

“Did you think you’d get away with it?” Justin’s voice held a bitter, dangerous note.

Sylinda froze in the act of pulling on her boots. “Get away with what?” Lifting her gaze to where he lounged against the smooth tree trunk, she saw the pendant in his hand. A muscle flicked in his tense jaw. His eyes were stony with anger.

“This.” He sat forward and pressed the slightly raised button in the filigree, revealing the hypo-spray injector. “Did you plan to lure me close enough on your yacht to incapacitate or kill me? Did I ruin your ill-conceived plans by the simple precaution of seizing this innocent-seeming weapon?”

Before she could form a response, he added, “Do you hate

## *TEST OF TRUTH*

me that much?"

"Hate you?" She gave a choked laugh. "How could I know the pirates would stop the yacht or that you'd be in command? The last time I saw you was three years ago just before Chase died."

"At our betrothal party," he said in a flat tone.

"Our betrayal party," she amended, turning her back to him.

She finished drawing on her boots and used the chance to get her grief and anger under control. "As for the serum, I don't know what it would do to you...most likely give you a headache. It certainly wouldn't cause your death."

"Then why have it?"

"Why should you care?" Standing, she picked up one towel, gave it a shake, and folded it, while trying to bury the memories of their lovemaking. How could she have been such a fool?

"I do care." Rising, Justin faced her and laid his hand over hers. "I care to hell and back why you've put yourself in danger by impersonating your cousin."

He plucked the towel from her hand and dropped it to one side.

"Did someone force you to take her place on the trip?" he asked in a calm, reasonable tone that set her teeth on edge. "I know you're smart enough to do a better job than Victoria, but since when have you taken an active part in interplanetary politics?"

"Since the pirates killed Chase," she spat, horrified by the

## *TEST OF TRUTH*

tears gathering in her eyes.

“Sylinda...”

She had the impression he wanted to say more, but he closed his mouth and drew her into his embrace. She struggled in his arms, confused by her conflicting emotions to either jerk away or snuggle close.

“Sweetheart”—he caught a teardrop on his finger—“I’d give all I have in the universe to keep you safe and happy.”

“Then why kill my brother? He was your friend.” She pulled away, breathing hard, and fell to her knees on the thick ferns, overwhelmed by the battle of emotions storming through her heart. Deep inside, in spite of what she’d learned about Justin’s betrayal, she loved him. How could that be when his treachery only made the circumstances worse?

While she struggled with traitorous thoughts, she was aware of Justin watching her with eyes haunted by some inner pain.

Then her own words came back. She’d said “the pirates,” instead of Justin. With the clarity that often followed tears, she realized she’d never seen or heard proof that Justin had been the one who’d murdered Chase. In fact, everything she’d observed about Justin—her experiences with him—had composed a picture of a thoughtful and caring man in an honorable warrior’s body.

With exhaustion dragging her down, she lifted her gaze to him. “I have one question, and I want an honest answer.”

She watched his muscles shift and his fists tighten as if bracing himself for a blow. “What do you want to know?” he

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asked slowly.

“Did you really kill Chase?”

He fell to his knees in front of her, reached out with one hand, then stopped as if unsure his touch would be tolerated. “No. I never had any part in his death.”

His words rang with truth, and a great load fell from her heart.

“Hold me,” she said in a low voice, rocking forward into his arms.

Justin shifted her so she sat cradled in his lap with the side of her face pressed over the steady beat of his heart. Once more his back was propped against the shugar tree. And this time he held her in his comforting embrace under the shelter of the fragrant branches.

\* \* \*

Justin lightly fingered a loose tendril of Sylinda’s hair, taking pleasure in this time of peace with her away from the need to be always on alert to everyone around him. Too soon they’d return to the pirate camp and he’d be back to his detested role of her hard-nosed captor.

She stirred and clasped his hand in hers. “This is like our times three years ago when we...I thought we had a future together.”

Moved by the memories, he drew her hand to his lips. “If it were in my power, I’d take us back to those days.”

She raised her face and gazed at him. “So would I, but I haven’t heard of anyone inventing a time machine.” She gave

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him an impish grin. "Have you?"

"Probably never will. My time here is running out."

She sighed. "So will mine in two days."

Annoyed by her lack of confidence in him, he said, "I can protect you as long as you follow my directions and guard your impudent tongue."

Her lips curved in a smile. "Your dick liked my *impudent* tongue a lot this morning."

His cock stirred at the memory and he shifted the pressure of her ass away from the danger zone.

With a knowing grin, she moved out of his lap, settling on the soft ferns facing him. "Justin, how much longer do we have before the admiral wants to see me in person? From the leer he gave me the night of the challenge, I'm surprised he hasn't already sent for me."

"So am I." The thought of Sylinda caught in the admiral's physical presence made Justin's gut knot. Then he realized there was more than fear of being pawed behind her question.

"How do you figure you have two more days? Why not four, five days, a week or a year?"

She gave him a searching look. "Since the moment you took me captive in the space yacht, you've made sure the pirates saw you put me through hell."

He opened his mouth to explain and she pressed a finger across his lips.

"I know you had to do it—had to convince them I was your prisoner and not your sweetheart."

He felt the impact of her long, searching look.



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“Justin, in spite of appearances, you never really hurt me, and I came to realize you were protecting me in a difficult situation.” She paused as if gathering her thoughts. “I’m trusting you to keep my secret.”

“I will. Go on.”

“We both have our roles in this life. Mine changed right after Chase’s memorial service, when my uncle talked to me about switching places with Victoria long enough for her to take part in a series of secret meetings.”

“Is that why you changed your appearance and mannerisms?”

“Part of the package. I had to make all the changes, so certain people would believe I was Victoria.”

“Certain people?” Justin gripped her hand. “Do you mean your cousin and uncle set you up as a decoy for the pirate brotherhood?”

“Not at all. They tried to discourage me, but family sticks together and Vicky needed the time so I *volunteered*.”

“Family,” Justin muttered, recalling how his uptight parents had declared him dead to them years earlier when he joined the Space Intelligence Agency and went undercover.

Sylinda was looking at him with a puzzled expression, and he realized he’d been staring into space.

“The tests I did proved you were Victoria, but I knew you were Sylinda.”

“You didn’t test my DNA, unless...” She stabbed a finger at him. “You tested my spit on the wipes you saved.”

He nodded. “The results were a little off, but in my report I

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attributed that to my rushed handling under combat conditions. The markers were close enough to be acceptable.”

“Probably because I gave myself the injection just before you boarded and the full effect hadn’t had time to develop.”

Icy fear slithered down his spine. “What the hell do you mean by injection?”

“The serum to temporarily alter my DNA.”

“For how long?” he demanded. “And how do you restore your own DNA?”

“Ten days. The hypo-spray I was wearing has the reversing serum.”

“Won’t your DNA revert back to normal?”

“Not according to the biotechs’ reports.” She looked away and fingered a small, lush fern, curling and uncurling the frond around her finger.

“Damn it, don’t shut me out.” He gripped her chin and turned her face toward him. “This is too serious to ignore.”

“Like hell I’m ignoring the consequences.” Her tone went shrill. Her eyes took on a hunted look. “I’ve lived with the prospect for months and weeks, and the reality for days. Don’t you think I’d change it if I could? But I can’t. The meetings are too important.”

He scooped the pendant out of one pocket. “At least I can give you the injection.”

She shook her head. “Not until after I meet Admiral Blass and pass his tests. The peace of the solar system depends on plans finalized by the Central Worlds Alliance. Victoria is a key part of that decision. I must give her—and them—time to

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complete their work.”

Slowly Justin nodded. “I don’t like your part in it, but you’re right. The council has to stop the pirates before they destroy trade between worlds and throw the whole system back to centuries of war and destruction.”

Her face lit with joy. “I knew it. You’re not a pirate.” She threw herself into his arms, and he drew her closer, inhaling the delicate perfume of her hair and the feel of the strong, amazing woman in his embrace.

With one hand, he traced the sensual line of her spine. His heart pounded. His cock hardened. But this was time for tenderness.

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and reluctantly said, “We can’t stay here much longer or the commander of the base will try to contact me. If he doesn’t get an answer, he’ll send out search parties—and they won’t be friendly.”

Her eyes darkened. She frowned. “Have you put yourself in danger?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” He gave her a searching look, wishing he could bundle her back to the *Space Prowler* and take her away from the pirates and danger.

*If only it were that simple.* Once again he cursed Sylinda’s involvement in his assignment to get close to Admiral Blass, locate his headquarters, and send the coordinates to the waiting government forces.

When she discovered his secret, would she feel used? Would she send him away forever?

He stared at her tempting lips, and she smiled. “Justin, if

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you're wishing we could fly away together, I agree. But we both know we couldn't live with the consequences if we bought temporary happiness at the expense of fear and death for billions of people."

"You're right." He caressed her cheek. "When this is all settled, we'll go to an island I know where the air and water are warm, flowers bloom year round, and we can make love as long and as often as we want."

"Done." She gave him an impish smile. "I'll hold you to every bit of your promise, especially the part about making love."

She straightened away from him. "How much time is left before we have to return to the base?"

"Enough to give you a little protection when we're not together."

Holding up her cazleather collar, he said, "In case we're separated, I want to know your location, so I hid a signal receiver in this while you were sleeping. It'll only respond to the signal generated by my locator and one carried by my associate."

"Your associate?"

"The one who left the packet of clothes for you that first night."

He touched the fastener. "I won't set the lock with my thumb print, but remember, as long as you're wearing the collar, I'll know where you are."

Opening a hidden compartment in his belt, Justin pulled out a nearly invisible skin-colored adhesive oval. "This earbug

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pickup will register anything you say or I broadcast from my com implant. You can also activate it by pressure when you tap on your ear or swallow hard.”

Recalling the first time he’d eaten while wearing an earbug, he said, “Give your ear a double tap to turn off the unit, otherwise...”

“Otherwise it’ll turn off and on each time I chew.” A fleeting smile lit her eyes. “That gives new meaning to my mother saying, ‘Don’t talk with your mouth full.’”

“Yes, it plays hell with conversation.” He smiled back, filled with pride at her ability to absorb shocks and keep her sense of humor. “Will you wear it?”

“Of course. Then we can stay in touch.” Turning the left side of her face to him, she held her hair away from her ear to give him easy access.

He stripped off the protective cover and fastened the tiny receiver barely inside the opening to her ear canal.

“The earbug won’t be discovered, except by close examination,” he assured her. “Even then, it’s logical for an ambassador to be in communication with her office.”

Sylinda laced her fingers with his. “If I do have to face that man, I’ll feel a lot better knowing you and I are linked.”

“Sweetheart”—he drew her closer and pressed his lips to hers in a soft kiss—“I’ll move heaven and the planet to be with you or close by when that happens—or die in the attempt.”

“Don’t die...live for me.” She returned his kiss, then sat back and gave him a bright, determined smile. “Show me how

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this nano-receiver works.”

\* \* \*

The long shadows of late afternoon raced ahead of the skimmer as Justin contacted the pirate base to clear for a landing, and minutes later settled on the ground near his quarters. The disguised injector seemed to weigh heavily in his pocket. Now he knew why Sylinda had carried it and had been so adamant about not telling him her reason.

She'd finally been completely honest with him.

*Have you been completely honest with her?* He glanced at Sylinda, once more wearing a slave's cazleather collar. *No, but that was for her protection.*

\* \* \*

Less than an hour later their time had run out when Vogel appeared at the door with an armed escort party composed of his men.

“What do you want?” Justin demanded.

“We're here for Ambassador de Corvic-Morgan.” Vogel's lips pulled back in a feral grin. He held out a memo cube. “My orders are to deliver her to the admiral's skimmer immediately.”

“I'll accompany her and give my report to the admiral.”

“Admiral Blass has sent verbal orders for you to remain here at the camp.” Vogel's grin broadened. “It appears some questions have arisen about your loyalty to the pirate

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brotherhood.”

As the pirate finished speaking, the Kolarian and Atarkian from the *Raptor's* crew stepped up—one on each side of Justin—with weapons at the ready.

Holding his hands clearly in sight, he turned and called, “Come, prisoner, and bring your ambassadorial cape for your meeting with Admiral Blass.”

In the short time it took for Sylinda to join them, Justin studied the six men chosen to deliver her to the courier skimmer. He'd faced and defeated all of them in the challenge ring.

Two, in particular, had specific reasons to hold a grudge. The Kolarian had lost a shoulder tentacle and Justin had drawn blood from the Kin-Sha-trained Atarkian before Blass had stopped the duel.

In the brotherhood, that would be enough motivation for either fighter to inflict as much damage as possible on him at the slightest provocation. Justin didn't worry about that for himself, but if he were disabled in any way, it would destroy his chance to rescue Sylinda.

He could only hope they didn't use her to get revenge.

## CHAPTER 6

Sylinda, her wrists once more restrained in neuro-cuffs, huddled in her cape and stared to her left out the skimmer's window. Silver rays from two of the three moons touched the dark land below. The third, smaller moon had already set and the other two would soon follow as dawn approached.

Only this morning she'd delighted in sitting beside Justin as they'd raced above the lush jungle. Now she sat surrounded by brutal guards and on her way to a man who, even in holographic form, gave her the creeps.

What would happen when she met him in person?

At her right side, the Kolarian, whom she'd heard addressed as Loki, waved an undamaged tentacle and said in a



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low tone, “You show great courage for a human female.”

In her persona as the cool ambassador, she said, “I am a representative of my planet. I must behave as such.” Inside, she quaked. She couldn’t read Loki’s expression, but he still bore evidence of his challenge fight with Justin, including the new tentacle forming where the old one had been severed. Did he blame her for the loss?

The skimmer lost altitude and rushed toward a great volcanic peak spearing high into the night sky. Suddenly a wide oval of lights appeared midway up the mountainside directly in the skimmer’s flight path.

The lights chased each other around in a sequence of red—green—red—green, finally switching to solid green. The oval of rugged rocks opened downward to form a shelf.

As the skimmer arrowed through the light-filled opening, the size of the portal dwarfed the ship. Inside, a long lit tunnel offered a smooth road for the skimmer.

Sylinda watched lights move past and saw smaller corridors opening away from their tunnel.

Stationed at regular intervals, soldiers in full battle armor cradled laser rifles and kept watch.

Sylinda’s heart sank. She was surrounded by guards and in the depths of the impenetrable mountain. Would Justin be able to communicate with her or even trace her?

He’d shown her how to swallow to activate the earbug. She tried that, but got no response. Had the signal been blocked? Worse, was Justin incapacitated or dead? At the thought, her throat ached with grief and she closed her eyes to

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hide her despair.

The skimmer came to a stop in a vast chamber ringed by walkways. More armed figures stood on alert around the perimeter.

“Come, Ambassador, and meet your host.” Vogel tugged on her leash. At the same time, Loki released her safety web, gripped her arm and drew her up from the seat.

She thought she heard him murmur, “Courage.” Then he lifted her out of the skimmer and she was led across the chamber room toward a waiting group.

As they drew closer, the figures resolved into six guards in battle dress including helmets, two males in uniform, and—her body stiffened in shock—Victoria.

\* \* \*

Back at the pirate settlement, Justin staggered away from the Buckets of Blood bar in the business section of the settlement, waving a half-empty flask of moon-whiskey.

As he lurched down the dark street past an outdoor AI monitor, Kyler Brown, one of his crewmen from the *Space Prowler*, offered a supportive arm. “Ahoy there, Captain. Looks like your control gyros are wobblin’.”

“Not wobblin’, jush a hair out of true.” To prove his point, he straightened his spine and ran a hand through his rumpled hair. “Nothin’ wrong with a man shelebratin’ the capture and reward for Mish High-and-Mighty Ambassador. She’s gone to Admiral Blass, and I have time to enjoy my other loot with her out of the picture.”

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He staggered a step, then awkwardly patted Kyler's shoulder. "Yer a good crewman. Wanna drink to help me shelebrate?"

Kyler grinned and draped Justin's arm around his neck. "I've had my limit for tonight, sir. I'll walk you home."

"Shat's...that's a good plan." Justin leaned heavily on the man's support and stared at him owlshly. "You the one who stowed my skimmer in the *Prowler*?"

"Yes, Captain. By your orders, I locked her down. She's right and tight."

Justin thumped Kyler's chest with a friendly paw. "Good man. Lesh go home."

As they reached the front steps of his lodgings, Justin bumped into the pole supporting the small porch roof and wavered there long enough to glance back at the two men assigned to keep him in camp. Like the Kolarian and Atarkian who'd left with Sylinda, his two guard dogs had a grudge against him. Tonight they'd taken great delight in urging him to drink more and more, apparently unaware most of the liquor he'd seemed to imbibe had found its way to the self-cleaning floor.

"Captain, key in your code, and I'll tuck you up in bed," Kyler urged in a good-natured tone.

It took three tries for Justin to enter the correct code and open his door. He stumbled into the room and ordered the usual captain's privacy in his quarters to turn off the AI's surveillance for the night.

While the monitor light went dark, he watched his silent

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partner close the door. They stood at either side of one window in the unlit room and gazed at the guards strolling back toward the bar.

His act had bought him time from human surveillance, while he supposedly slept off a drunken stupor.

Kyler murmured, “Good luck,” and left.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, Justin, wearing a chameleon suit, stealthily eased through a lower hatch into his ship and headed toward the parking bay for his skimmer. A quick scan of the ship’s auxiliary panel beside the hatch had shown it empty of all personnel except him.

Every minute that passed since Sylinda had been led away had increased her danger, but he’d needed to buy time to penetrate the admiral’s fortress and rescue her before his disappearance was discovered and the alarm raised.

Outside the *Space Rover’s* hanger airlock, he paused long enough for his partner to scramble onboard the skimmer, into the co-pilot’s seat, then he checked the scan tracing Sylinda, and lifted into the pale, predawn sky.

Kyler, in reality Chase, asked, “How’s my sister doing?”

“She signaled me while I was doing my act for the camp monitor.”

“Twenty-five minutes ago?” Chase growled. “And you let her wait?”

“Couldn’t blow my cover—had to wait until the monitor was off. I responded while we watched the guards leave.”

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“And?”

“She didn’t answer,” Justin said in a savage tone. “Feedback from the earbug shows she’s alive. I heard sounds made by the engine in flight, but that’s all.”

Justin glanced at Chase, then back to his controls. “My skimmer’s faster than the courier. At top speed, we’ll be there in thirty minutes.” *Thirty minutes too long.* Fueled by a sense of Sylinda’s growing danger, Justin fine-tuned the power output, coaxing every bit of speed.

He clicked to send, and murmured, “Sylinda, we’re in the air and on the way. Swallow twice if you hear me.”

Long moments passed while he silently cursed and waited for her response. At last it came—two clicks. *Thank the gods.*

He looked at Chase, so much like Sylinda with blond hair gleaming in the cabin lights. “Your sister just answered.”

“Under her fluffy exterior, she’s tough—had to be to thrive growing up in a pioneer settlement.” Chase glanced at the locator readout. “She was a fifth degree Kin-sha and dumped me on my ass more than once.”

“Kin-sha?”

“Yeah, that and Tai-kwon-do—the not-so-gentle version. She and Vicky went to classes the two years our parents fostered her.”

\* \* \*

Sylinda shivered in the grip of another chill, brought on by her body trying to reject the foreign DNA. By the end of tomorrow, she’d need the neutralizing injection or the

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symptoms would get worse until finally her blood and organs shut down.

According to the chronometer on one wall, they'd been held in the chamber for over an hour when Vicky said, "I demand to know what's happening. Why the delay?"

In spite of their desperate situation, Sylinda hid a grin at her cousin's arrogant behavior.

"We're waiting for the admiral to finish his breakfast," one of the uniformed men, Major Ruck, said in clipped tones. "He must not be disturbed."

His face momentarily took on a blank expression and he touched his visible earbug, obviously listening to a transmission. "Admiral Blass has ordered you both to be held in the interrogation room until he's ready to conduct tests to determine which woman is the real ambassador."

"Tests? This is an outrage," Victoria said coldly. "I'm the Atarkian ambassador. Release me and this other woman immediately."

Sylinda squared her shoulders and gave them a haughty look. "Submitting to a test of true identity by pirates is not commensurate with my position as ambassador."

"Silence!" Vogel slapped her across the face. Her vision blurred. She staggered backward against the Kolarian.

She felt the pressure of his hands grip her shoulders, holding her steady. "Do not fight your fate," he said in his accented Space Lingua. She had a brief recollection of his severed tentacle oozing poison on the challenge ring ground. She should be afraid of those deadly tentacles he kept curled

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on his shoulders, but she remembered it was Justin's next opponent who'd tried to use the poison, not Loki.

"Deliver both women to interrogation," Major Ruck ordered. "And prepare them to answer the admiral's questions."

\* \* \*

Surrounded by guards, they were marched through long tunnels that gradually changed from smooth, laser-sealed corridors to natural cave passageways with minimal treatment. Stalagmites had been removed and the cave floor smoothed, but stalactites hung overhead like the jagged, broken teeth of some mythical monster.

The sounds of engines and conversation she'd heard when they'd left the great chamber now died away in the distance. If the questioning involved torture, would anyone but their tormentors hear the cries of Vicky or her when they finally succumbed to pain?

Dark, unknown depths beyond the lighted path stirred her atavistic fear of predators lurking in the night, ready to strike. The slow drip of seeping water added to the clammy atmosphere. If this corridor had been left in its rough, natural state to intimidate prisoners, Sylinda thought, it was doing its job. Fear, colder than the unheated cave, twisted in her stomach. What would happen to her and her cousin?

If she didn't survive, would Justin ever know—or care?

*Of course he'd care.* The certainty warmed her heart.

The testing room was set in one side of a circular cove

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with laser-sealed walls at the end of the tunnel. A variety of equipment, whose purposes raised the hair on the back of Sylinda's neck, were organized along the closed edge and shrouded in clear, protective covers. Most of the room had been left open as part of the larger cave.

"Secure our newest *ambassador* in shackles," Ruck ordered.

The power indicator on Victoria's neuro-cuffs switched from on to off. She erupted into a flurry of slashing, chopping moves with hands and feet.

As Vicky began her attack, Sylinda whirled, twisting the leash around her upper body, elbowed one guard in the solar plexus—left him doubled over and gasping—and kicked a second in the knee. At that moment, another guard snagged the leash. The collar around her neck tightened into choking pressure. Someone slammed her to the floor.

Sylinda lay there half-stunned and watched two guards roughly overpower her cousin. One guard stripped away Vicky's cape, spread her arms above her head, and fastened her wrists into clamps imbedded in the cave wall. The other squatted at her feet, pinning her legs against the cold stone.

Disheveled, clothes torn, and bleeding from scratches on her skin, she spat at both soldiers.

Major Ruck gestured toward Sylinda. "Leave the one on the wall for later. Prepare Vogel's ambassador for questioning."

At his order, Sylinda's throat closed up. She swallowed hard and belatedly realized it would activate her hidden



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earbug.

Two of the guards dragged her the short distance to the chair dominating the room. Deliberately, she sagged in their grip, as if barely conscious.

The moment her neuro-cuffs were removed, Sylinda lunged, kicked, and used her teeth against the two humans. Cursing, one twisted her arm behind her back and up. Pain seared her arm and shoulder. She bit her lip to muffle any cry.

The second guard methodically stripped off her boots and clothing and strapped her naked into the cold metal chair bolted to the stone floor.

Furious, afraid, and helpless, she glared at the men. Her wrists were immobilized to the armrests by metal clamps, and her ankles fastened to each of the two front legs—exposing her most private and delicate parts. In fact, the whole chair, composed of open, flat bars, left her body vulnerable at every point.

The words of her self-defense instructor, Sarge, came to her. “If you’re ever taken prisoner on a planet’s surface, your captors will probably take away your footwear to make it harder for you to go very far if you escape.” He’d nodded toward her and two other women in the small class. “Accept the idea that you’ll be stripped, restrained, assaulted and raped—always remembering their cruelty isn’t your fault.”

At the time, she’d assured herself she’d act brave if ever captured. Now all she could think of was, had Justin learned of her fate and was he coming to rescue Vicky and her with enough fighters to overcome the admiral’s troops?

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As if summoned by her thoughts, she heard Justin's voice in her left ear. "Sylinda, we're inside the caves. Swallow twice if you read me."

While she sent her response, she watched technicians uncover various machines and switch on their power.

He'd said, "We're." Did he have a force with him, or just one more person? *Goddess, keep him safe.*

The major stepped closer and her attention snapped back to her own peril.

"Remove her slave collar," he said in a cold tone. "If she does not cooperate with answers, we will need easy access to her top vertebrae."

Her vivid imagination supplied the image of shocking power applied directly to unprotected flesh or critical nerve endings.

Grinning, Vogel sauntered forward with a knife in his hand. "Don't move, cunt, or the blade will slice a strip off your soft skin."

With intimidating slowness, he slipped the blunt side of the sharp metal between her skin and the cazleather, and cut it away from her neck.

Major Ruck gave one sharp nod. "Now, Captain Vogel, we will play with our ladies as we wait for the admiral to arrive."

*Play?* Every fiber of her being cringed at the implication, but she lifted her chin and met Ruck's icy stare straight on.

Holding her gaze, the major said, "Captain, I believe you have questions for this one about Reiver. Now would be a good time to ask."

## *TEST OF TRUTH*

Her attention switched to Vogel. Apprehensively she watched him light a Vandelian cigar and puff it to a glowing end.

He took the cigar from his mouth. "What do you know about Reiver?"

"He's a pirate."

"Wrong answer." Vogel took a leisurely puff, then pressed the glowing end to the tender skin under her right arm.

"Sylinda," Justin said through her earbug, "tell him everything you can."

"Nooo!" She gasped, struggling to control the fire in her side.

Vogel held the cigar close enough to her left armpit for her to feel the heat. Involuntarily she flinched away.

"Again, who is Reiver?" He pressed the fiery brand to her delicate flesh.

Groaning, she fought the nausea rolling in her stomach. Sweat broke out on her skin.

"Tell him," Justin insisted. "We're coming."

Smoking his cigar, Vogel gripped her sensitive nipple and gave it a vicious twist. "One more chance. Who is Reiver?"

"Go to hell."

She screamed as he pressed the fiery end on her nipple and held it there. The smell of burning flesh—her flesh—sickened her.

Justin's frantic voice came through the earbug. "Tell him. Tell him or I'll spank your ass to a rosy glow when I get there."

## TEST OF TRUTH

\* \* \*

As Sylinda's scream pierced the dark cave, Justin fought to contain his rage. He and Chase were only minutes away from her location, but it might as well be hours when measured by the torment in her cry.

Fighting units of spaceforce hovered high above this quadrant, waiting for his orders to launch an attack. First he had to get her and her cousin safely out of here.

While he and Chase searched for a way around a deep pit, Justin listened—through her earbug's pickup—to Major Ruck directing a military tech to set up the nerve probe.

By faint illumination from the open corridor they found a narrow ledge past the pit and came in sight of the circular room where the women were being held.

Sylinda, naked, bruised, and bloody, sat bound to a torture chair. Another disheveled woman—obviously her cousin—hung from shackles embedded in the wall.

Chase muttered, "Both Vicky and my sister put up a helluva fight."

The breath came raw in Justin's throat at the sight of the tech stretching the connection cord of a two-prong nerve probe in preparation. Everything in him screamed to dash in and rescue Sylinda, but caution ordered him to plan a way to get her and her cousin out alive.

He scanned the open room. *Where in hell was Admiral Blass?* Tagging him with a locator was the main goal of this four-year assignment. Now Sylinda's rescue came first.

A brief commotion in the passageway answered his

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question. The admiral strolled in, accompanied by two bodyguards.

He went first to Victoria, studied her for a few moments, then shook a finger at her. "Naughty, naughty lady," he said in a scolding tone. "My sources inform me of your conspiracy with other council members against me."

She gave him a mocking smile. "We call it exterminating fang-rats."

Turning away from her, the admiral's gaze raked across Sylinda. He prowled across the cave floor to her side and wound a length of her hair around his fist. "Here's Captain Reiver's pet," he purred.

Reaching between the metal slats of the seat, he rammed one finger up her ass. She jerked and said in a high, breathy voice. "I'm nobody's pet."

"You're Reiver's cunt pussy." He combed his fingers through her female bush. "Before we're finished with our tests, you'll scream like a wounded rabbit."

Justin felt Chase grip one arm and realized he'd been one blink away from charging into the center of the guards to beat Blass to a pulp.

He sucked in a deep breath, quivering with the effort to control his actions.

Then the technician announced, "Admiral Blass, sir, the probe equipment is hot. Shall I begin on medium charge?"

"Start on high," he drawled. "Set the head clamps."

Vogel moved up behind Sylinda, fastened the ring-shaped clamp, attached to two bars, around her forehead to

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immobilize her head.

Through the earbug, Justin heard her low groan as the ring tightened.

Vogel's dead, he vowed.

While Vogel positioned the probes, ready to use the nerve torture device on her spine, Blass, Ruck, and six guards watched with lascivious interest.

Justin saw Sylinda's hands curl into fists. She inhaled and braced her body, obviously preparing to endure the pain.

As they moved closer, confident of their invisibility in the chameleon suits, Chase muttered, "What the hell is the Kolarian doing?"

Loki, his face impassive, had worked his way to a place behind Vogel and the tech.

Through Sylinda's earbug, Justin heard the tech counting down the seconds, while the machine whined toward maximum power.

Even as Vogel pressed the probe tips to sensitive spots between Sylinda's top vertebrae, Justin and Chase raced toward the torture room, splitting to attack and disable or kill separate guards.

Justin took out his first target with killing hand-chop to the throat. While he aimed for the guard between him and Sylinda's torturer, he saw the tech collapse at the Kolarian's feet.

Cursing, Vogel dropped the probes and spun on his heel directly into the Kolarian's fist. The alien's good tentacle wrapped around the pirate's throat, shook him like a terrier

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shakes a fang-rat, and slammed him against the far wall in a splatter of blood.

Rucker and the remaining guards had appeared to be stunned by the Kolarian's attack. Now they jumped into action against the silent, marauding beings in their midst—sometimes visible, often not.

They watched their comrades fall and then they died.

Justin realized the admiral had made a cowardly escape instead of standing with his men.

Only the Kolarian remained alive.

Just when it seemed safe, Major Ruck rose from behind a rolling equipment box, shoved it into Justin, then turned his needle gun toward Sylinda.

Her cousin screamed a warning. Both Chase and Justin fired at Ruck. He dropped before he could squeeze the trigger.

While Justin and Chase checked on the other bodies to be sure no other immediate threat remained, the Kolarian released Sylinda's skull from the clamps, then knelt at her feet, to one side, his face politely turned from her nakedness, and unlatched her ankles.

Vogel, now purple in the face, sprawled lifeless in a pool of his own blood.

Aware Admiral Blass might leave the base and escape, Justin sent orders for the ships to come in and begin their invasion of the mountain fortress.

Finally, he hurried over to Sylinda to finish freeing her.

"Many thanks for your help," he said to the Kolarian, while he carefully lifted Sylinda from the chair and embraced

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her.

The Kolarian rose and stepped away. “Call me Loki, sir. Your woman is brave.”

“I’m in your debt for saving Sylinda, so I’ll give you a chance to escape justice this time. In the next few minutes, fighting units of spaceforce will attack and destroy this base.”

Snapping to attention, Loki gave Justin a fist-over-the-heart salute. “Sir, I understand. Years ago I was bound to that slime snake by my parents to settle their debts, and even then he only paid them half of the agreed price. I never fully followed his ways. His death has released me from him, but not from his superior, Admiral Blass.”

His jaw tightened with grim determination. “What little honor I have left demands I return to the admiral’s troops, but I will not disclose the impending invasion.”

Sylinda stirred in Justin’s arms and looked over her shoulder at the Kolarian. “Loki, you did what you could to help me—and you faced Justin in a fair fight in the challenge ring. A Kolarian bond pledge can be dissolved with no disgrace to the one bound, if any of the parties reneges on the terms. Vogel did. Your honor—and your choice to make your own decisions—have been restored.”

“Honored lady, I did not know,” Loki said. He went down on both knees and raised his hands shoulder high, palms up in supplication. “You have given me back my life. I pledge that life to you, or may the thunder god strike me down.” He rose to his feet and nodded to Sylinda and Justin. “Now I will hunt down Admiral Blass and give him to the spaceforce troops.”



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As he strode past Chase, who'd been guarding their backs, the sound of distant explosions signaled the beginning of the assault.

Vicky handed Sylinda her boots. "Your clothes are unwearable." She indicated the blood-soaked garments scattered under a corpse. "Protect your feet and I'll get my cape..." Her voice trailed off as she saw it was under another body.

Justin unfastened and pulled down the top section of his chameleon suit. Peeling out of his t-shirt, he bundled Sylinda into its warm folds.

Chase, his face still obscured by the chameleon suit, called, "Here come the first fang-rats looking for a way to escape the spaceforce guys."

\* \* \*

Sylinda worked her way around a thick stalagmite, conscious of Justin's silent partner directly behind her in the narrow tunnel. The lamp he wore on a headband illuminated the pathway in front of her, and he'd offered her a supporting hand from time to time as they'd headed away from the sound of combat. She hadn't seen his face, but there was something in the way he moved that brought back memories of Chase.

Her brother was dead, but now she no longer blamed Justin for his death. She'd come to love and trust him.

She stumbled and the silent man's hand was there to catch her. "Careful Syl, we're nearly there."

Syl? How did he know her childhood nickname? But her head throbbed, her body ached, and a great lassitude seeped

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through her body, warning her of the coming DNA change.

Belatedly, she recalled the scientist who'd developed the serum commenting on the possibility of prolonged action and stress accelerating the need to neutralize it.

Ahead, Justin and Vicky came to an abrupt halt. There was a pause, then an abrupt flood of daylight from outside.

She staggered, forcing herself to concentrate on placing one foot in front of the other. Freedom beckoned, and she was determined to leave the caves inside the mountain of terror on her own feet.

Reaching Justin, where he stood on a bluff just outside the opening, she heard him issuing orders to a man in battle armor marked with the spaceforce insignia. Below and around them, more troops climbed—or flew in self-contained units—up the mountainside.

Vicky put a supporting arm around her waist and said, “Looks like the fight’s almost over.”

“Yes.” Through blurring vision Sylinda saw the door to the huge skimmer entrance had been blasted away. Inside, captured pirates were being loaded into space shuttles.

*Had Loki survived? Had he captured the admiral?*

The soldier talking with Justin saluted, saying, “Right away, Major Kade.”

*Major?* Another puzzle. She struggled to make sense of so many questions, but her thoughts were sluggish.

She heard a voice that sounded like her brother, saying, “Justin, Sylinda needs you.” The speaker stepped into view, peeling back his face cover.

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Shocked by the discovery, she gasped, “Chase, you’re alive.”

She felt herself sag—heard a harsh cry, “Syl,” from Chase, and Justin’s curses coming closer. Then the dark came.

## CHAPTER 7

Justin knelt beside Sylinda in the triage tent and pressed the hypo-spray to her bare shoulder.

After a quick assessment, the med-techs had carefully transported her here on a life support airfloat and placed her in an open med-tube. The sight of her bruised and blood-spattered face and body had struck him like hammer blows.

Chase settled beside him. “How’s she doing?” He scrubbed his hands through his hair. “She took one look at my face, said, ‘Chase, you’re alive,’ and fainted.”

“Don’t take it so hard.” Justin gripped the younger man’s shoulder. “The expression on your mug after a battle is enough to frighten anyone.”

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“Even my own sister?”

“Especially her. For the last three years, she’s thought you were dead.”

“Hell, you’re right.”

Chase nodded toward the med-tube across the tent, where his cousin lay surrounded by medics, brass, and high-ranking government civs from Vandelia. “Vicky took my identity in stride.”

“The ambassador may have had inside information on our operation.” Justin cradled one of Sylinda’s hands, then continued, “You know how difficult it is for a civ to keep a secret, especially when they might impress a pretty face with their inside knowledge.”

“You’ve got a point.” Leaning forward, Chase tenderly brushed a loose strand away from his sister’s cheek. “Sylinda’s color is coming back. What was in that hypo-spray you gave her?”

“A serum to restore her own DNA. She’d altered it to match Victoria’s, so she could impersonate her cousin during the conference.”

“The brave, little fool.” Chase’s expression went bleak. “Of course she’d accept any consequences if she thought her actions would help.”

Sylinda’s eyes slowly opened. She gave Justin a faint smile, then her gaze drifted to Chase and froze.

“Chase? Is it really you?” She struggled to sit up. Her gaze never left her brother’s face.

Justin pressed her back. “Wait for the medic to give the

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okay.”

With obvious reluctance, she settled back. “Chase, I thought you were dead. We had your memorial service and sent your ashes into space as recorded in your declaration of last wishes.”

Chase tenderly tugged on a lock of her hair. “I hated like hell to leave everyone upset, but I had to do it for Atarka’s security. Ask...”

To Justin’s relief, Chase stopped when a medic joined them. He figured he’d be the next one to face Sylinda’s questions. What if—no *when*—she learned he’d lied about his reasons for meeting her, would she ever again trust him? After years of slowly losing his soul in the dark shadows of covert operations, his days with Sylinda had brought him light, and peace, and—love. Had he lost his chance for that love?

The medic completed her examination and discharged Sylinda with orders to, “Take it easy.”

“She will,” Justin and Chase said in unison.

Sylinda gave them each an annoyed look. “I can answer for myself.”

Chase laughed. “That’s my sister.”

As they prepared to leave the medical tent, a spaceforce patrolman entered and saluted Justin. “Major Kade, we have a problem.”

“What is it, sergeant?”

The patrolman moved closer. “It’s the damnedest thing I ever heard of or saw.” He nodded to Sylinda. “Beg your pardon, ma’am.”

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Her lips quirked as if suppressing a smile, and she solemnly said, “No offense taken, sergeant.”

Hiding his impatience at the delay, Justin said, “Report, soldier.”

The sergeant snapped to attention. “Sir, this big Kolarian got through all the patrols unchallenged carrying a prisoner wrapped up like a Kolarian bride gift and slung over one shoulder. He insists on speaking only to you. Says he has something for the lady you brought here.” He continued in a more conversational tone, “Do you want me and a couple of guys to take care of him?”

“We’ll come out.” Smiling, Justin offered his arm to Sylinda. “Want to see who Loki’s brought?”

In spite of wearing an oversized t-shirt instead of a formal gown, she tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow with all the dignity of an ambassador attending a royal reception. “I can hardly wait.”

\* \* \*

Hours later, Sylinda took a long drink of water from Justin’s canteen and tried to relax where she sat on a flat rock at the edge of a pool in the warm, tropical shade. The butterflies that’d come for a visit had flitted away, and a troop of goldenfurs dozed or played in the ferns and saplings a short distance away.

She fingered the sparkling, now-empty hypo-spray once more around her neck. Once Justin had administered the neutralizing serum, her strength had rapidly returned.

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Through a break in the trees, she watched members of the spaceforce troops methodically search the mountainside for any pirates who might have escaped the main battle. How could anyone have withstood that withering wave of weapons fire and explosives?

She shook her head to dispel the horrific images and looked across the clearing at Justin, stripped to his waist in the heat as he examined the skimmer for any possible damage. Watching the muscles rippling under his tanned skin made her pulse quicken.

I'm wearing his t-shirt, she thought smugly.

While she enjoyed the hard-won peace, her thoughts wandered back to the events of the last few days. When she'd agreed to be the decoy for her cousin, she'd never imagined the chain of events would test her heart, mind, and body to such extremes. How could she have known that, in working to protect her world, she'd find her brother alive and reconnect with Justin, the one man she'd really loved?

Chase, she thought lovingly. Growing up, she'd been the little sister who'd teased and tagged after her big brother. As adults, they'd gone their separate ways, but had nurtured a mutual respect and the tight bonds of a loving family. The hour they'd had earlier this afternoon had strengthened those bonds.

After hugs and many reassurances he'd contact their parents immediately, Chase had gone away to some unknown duty.

That left her and Justin alone while he finished checking



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out the skimmer. Ever since she'd regained consciousness in the med-tube, Justin had seemed preoccupied with dark thoughts.

Loki presenting her and Justin with the furious and obviously frightened admiral, had lightened Justin's expression for a while, but now he was back to treating her like—like a pleasant acquaintance.

Had he grown tired of her?

Was he planning to leave her forever?

As if summoned by her thoughts, he strolled across the grass to her shady spot and settled on the blanket, facing her with a grim expression.

"Sylanda, I have something to explain."

Swallowing her panic, she raised a hand to stop him. "I thought we loved each other, but you're getting ready to tell me goodbye," she blurted out.

"Love?" His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You love me?"

"Of course I do, you—you big dummy." She went up on her knees. "Do you think I was faking my response each time we made love?"

He rubbed a hand across his face, and said slowly, "No. That was real, even though I was pretty rough on you that first time in the camp."

She remembered the fire racing through her blood that night and reached for his hand. "Justin, you had to put on a show for the pirates. You had to prove your loyalty. Besides, you were amazing."

"Amazing?" He shook his head. "If so, it's because I was

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with you.”

He carefully pulled his hand away and put more space between them. “I said I had something to explain.” He squared his shoulders, as if preparing himself for a blow. “When we first met four years ago, I was under orders to get acquainted with you so it would be easier for Chase and me to work together undercover.”

“You used me to do your job,” she said in a tranquil tone.

“Damn it, don’t you understand? I took advantage of you.”

“And I took advantage of you—lots—and it was wonderful.” Her heart ached for the wary uncertainty she saw in his eyes. “Justin, when I thought about it later, I suspected our first meeting had been a set-up.”

He took a breath, and she hurried on before he could interrupt. “None of that matters when I recall of our times together—the way you protected me and even risked your life to keep me safe.”

She went into his arms and he held her close, as if he would never let her go.

Gazing into his eyes, she saw love—and a deep desire for her—burning in their depths. In spite of being scratched and bruised—her lips, her breasts, her whole being ached for his mouth, his body.

Justin must’ve sensed her thoughts, or seen her desire when he said, “Beloved, we’ve been through hell together; our minds and bodies tested at every turn.”

His lips came closer to hers and he murmured, “I love you—will love you for all time.”

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And she knew that love would last with a bone-deep certainty that would always surpass any need for a test of truth.

## APRIL REID

April Reid is the pseudonym for award-winning author Barbara Clark, who wanted to stretch her writing skills into the romantica genre. Readers will find the same quality in stories by “April,” as they have come to expect in stories by “Barbara.” The only difference is the stories will be more steamy and over-the-top. Always, they will be action-filled...in more ways than one.

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