



A PART OF TOMORROW
**FORGET
ABOUT
TOMORROW**

LIZ KREGAR

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Forget About Tomorrow

Liz Kreger

Dedication

Forget About Tomorrow is dedicated to my family, of course, who put up with my long hours and attempted to give me uninterrupted writing time. They weren't always successful, but they tried. Also, to my critique partners, Edie Ramer, Michelle Diener and Karin Tabke, who dropped everything to make sure this book was everything it could be.

I couldn't have done this without all your help.

Chapter One

“Not to sound dense here, but I assume the wedding is off.”

The look Mac gave his brother was incredulous as he stubbed out a cigarette. “No shit.”

“Hey, just checking.” Paul was silent for a moment as he moved his mug of beer in a little circle, seemingly fascinated with the pattern formed by the moisture condensed from the glass on the scarred wood of the bar. “How are you going to break it to Mom?”

“I’ll leave that to Joanna. She can do whatever she likes. As long as I’m not the one standing at that altar.

“She’s going to play the jilted bride, y’know.”

“So what? Let her.” Mac tilted his mug back and drained it before setting it down with a thunk. He signaled the bartender. This was not his first beer. And certainly not going to be his last. Right now he was halfway to achieving his goal of feeling no pain. A pleasant numbness cocooned his brain. Perfect. After what happened this afternoon, just what he wanted.

“I just don’t plan on being there. In fact... Thanks, Joe.” He broke off as the bartender placed yet another foaming mug in front of him. Joe looked him over with a practiced eye before he checked on the condition of Mac’s companion, no doubt to make sure that one of them was able to function. He gave a nod before moving down the length of the bar to serve the next patron. Mac paused long enough to light another cigarette, taking a deep draw before he continued. “Seein’ how I cleared my schedule for the next month in anticipation of a honeymoon that ain’t gonna happen, maybe I’ll just vanish for a little while.”

He halted long enough to sample the contents of his mug. He hadn't given the plan much consideration, but the more he thought about it, the better he liked it. It might be the coward's way out, but what the hell. Let Joanna do the explaining to the hundred or so guests expecting to see them get married. It was no longer his problem.

"Y'know," he continued as he stared straight ahead at the row of bottles lining the wall behind the bar. He noted the labels without much interest. "It's one thing to suspect that your girl is screwing around on you. It's another to catch her at it." Mac dropped his gaze to the glowing tip of his cigarette, watching the smoke curl upward. His mouth twisted.

"You actually caught them in bed?"

"Oh, yeah." Mac moved his beer from one sweat spot to the next. "Going at it."

"Jesus!"

An unwilling smile curved his lips as Mac glanced at his brother. Paul was to be his best man at the "wedding that wasn't going to happen". They had already made plans to meet at Joe's Pub this afternoon. A little later in the evening, granted, but Paul had not hesitated when Mac called and told him to meet him now. Paul lived nearby and had walked the couple of blocks to the bar.

Earlier that afternoon, Mac had intended to surprise his fiancée with flowers and dinner. Instead, he was the one surprised when he walked in on her and Ben Compton, his chief competitor. He had taken one look at the two of them tangled together on the bed before he turned without a word and walked out.

"That must have been a shock."

"Not really." Mac muttered. He'd never have admitted his doubts to anyone, but tonight was an evening of confessions. Either that, or he'd had just enough to drink to loosen his tongue.

He had a feeling Paul intended tonight to be his bachelor's party. About an hour ago, his brother had left him for a prolonged period. No doubt to contact his various buddies and co-workers to call off the

festivities once he'd heard Mac's news. "I've been wondering if this whole thing was a good idea for quite awhile now."

"You're saying one week before the wedding, you were having some serious doubts?"

"Yep." Mac paused long enough to stub out his half-finished cigarette before he took another drink. The combination of cigarettes and beer was beginning to leave a nasty taste in his mouth.

His glance wandered over the bar. Not the worst place he'd ever been in, but certainly not one of the best. Dark, slightly dank, it was familiar and comfortable. An eclectic mixture, its patrons ranged from the rough dockworkers to business suits with a smattering of women. Some obviously coming off work, some just coming on, if the suggestive clothing and exaggerated makeup were any indication.

Joe's Pub had become his home away from home about three months ago when the Cisero job went sour. For a while, he had tried to drink his demons under the table. Until the day Joe literally whooped him up the side of his head. Only then did he realize where the booze was taking him. After that he kept himself under control. Tonight was an exception.

Joe had evidently caught enough of their conversation to cut him some slack. As long as one of them remained sober enough to drive.

Mac was just about to drain his mug once more when the bodacious blonde walked in. His arm halted in mid-air. In fact, all movement within the bar seemed to stop as every male eye and a number of female ones turned toward the blonde.

She was drop-dead gorgeous.

Tall, she had to reach six feet, every foot perfectly proportioned. A physique of sculpted muscle, she moved with the grace of a panther, her beautiful eyes never still. Her gaze swept over the occupants of Joe's Pub, noting and cataloguing the location of each person. From previous observation, Mac knew her eyes were ice blue, fringed with impossibly long black lashes. Her pale, near-white hair couldn't possibly be natural. Not with those dark lashes. Yet the contrast was stunning.

This was the third time in the past month she'd come into Joe's. You couldn't overlook her. Not only was she the stuff wet dreams were made of, but he couldn't help but notice the huge, no-neck gorilla who was her constant companion. Although she was tall, the gorilla towered over her.

In his own way, the Neanderthal was just as striking as his female companion. Not only was he huge, he was so heavily muscled Mac felt sure he couldn't cross his arms over the width of his chest. His shaved head gleamed under the dim lighting. He was dark, almost Hispanic...maybe mulatto. Each time they'd appeared, the boyfriend wore all leather. From his heavy boots to the dog collar around his neck.

Going by his size, the guy needed every piece of clothing custom made. Despite the damp coolness of the evening, he wore no shirt. Only a leather vest that left his arms bare and revealed the numerous tattoos adorning his arms from his shoulder to the backs of his hands. The markings were strange, more like hieroglyphics than anything. Not the usual skulls or snakes preferred by bikers.

He was a mean-looking sonofabitch. Could probably give lessons on intimidation to the Hell's Angels, Mac thought as he watched them. He continually hovered over the woman, rarely leaving her alone for a moment. Which was just as well since the instant he left, half the men in the bar would have probably been all over her. Or maybe not. In her own way, the blonde was just as intimidating.

Mac ignored the gorilla. He only had eyes for the woman. According to Joe, they'd begun coming in about two months ago. No one knew who they were or where they came from. Just that he'd overheard them speaking in a peculiar language.

In Joe's opinion, it wasn't any known language of this world. He was of the belief that they were aliens. But then, Joe had a conspiracy complex. Everyone was either a spy or an alien from outer space. Although, with this pair, he might not be too far off. They were the oddest pair he'd ever seen.

Now, even as he watched, they took seats at the end of the long bar and signaled Joe. Without bothering to take their order, the bartender

served up two tumblers of Grey Goose. Joe had mentioned they always drank the same thing. Vodka straight. No ice, no mixes, nothing to cut the potent liquor.

Mac continued to stare at the woman, doubly glad he'd taken a seat near the end of the bar. He had an unimpeded view of her. His gaze traveled down the luxurious length of curling white-blond hair, finding unexpected highlights of gold and red picked out by the dim lighting overhead. It curled down her back to end just at the curve of a luscious butt. Her black leather pants clung to her long legs like a second skin, making him wonder how the hell she managed to get into them. The image this thought conjured nearly had Mac drooling. A white sweater hugged a pair of incredible breasts, perfect in size and shape.

He tore his gaze from that beguiling portion of her anatomy, then followed the line of her throat, over a surprisingly stubborn-looking chin and clashed abruptly with the gray of her gaze. The look in her eyes was frozen disdain. A slight sneer came over her face as she deliberately gave him the same slow up and down inspection before she pointedly turned a contemptuous shoulder on him.

Self-derision twisted Mac's lips as he returned his attention to the mug before him. Served him right. He had been ogling her with all the finesse of a pre-pubescent boy with his first girlie magazine.

Although... He could have sworn her eyes were blue. Not gray. Maybe he'd been mistaken. The bar was fairly dim.

"Damn!" Paul breathed in awe, completely unaware of the undercurrents between Mac and the woman. "I didn't think women who looked like her existed."

"Forget it, kid. She's way out of your league."

Paul tore his gaze away from the vision to spare him a glance. "What about yours?"

"Mine, too. Besides, you want to try to get past that boyfriend? He'd probably take you apart."

Paul turned once more to stare at the couple, evidently noticing the no-neck gorilla hovering over the blonde for the first time. While Mac

watched, his brother's jaw dropped with astonishment as his gaze traveled over the enormous mountain of testosterone.

"Don't tell me you're only just noticing him?"

Paul snorted before returning his attention to his beer. "Why should that surprise you? With her around, who'd notice anything else?"

Mac's gaze flickered back to the quietly talking pair, their heads close together. Frowning, Mac noticed for the first time that there was little or no physical contact between them. Despite his intimidating size, the biker gave an impression of deference while her manner was almost regal. More like she called the shots. Very curious.

The few times Mac had seen the two of them in Joe's, the guy only left her side long enough to take a leak. Even when the woman went to the ladies' room, the gorilla followed her and stood guard outside the door.

Stood guard!

Mac's full attention snapped back to the pair. Eyes narrowed, he scrutinized their behavior in a new light. The muscle-bound mountain rarely, if ever, touched her. He watched everyone and everything around them. He never left her alone for more than five minutes.

The guy was a bodyguard!

Why hadn't he noticed that before? Mac shook his head in disgust. *Pitiful, MacNaught*. You'd think he would have spotted that immediately since he rented out his own services as a bodyguard from time to time. MacNaught & Associates provided an all-in-one shopping experience for security and he was the designated bodyguard when the occasion warranted it. With his training and his background, he was a successful babysitter for the rich and the stupid.

Staring at the woman with this new knowledge, he wondered who she was. He didn't recognize her. She sure as hell wasn't someone easy to forget. Even under the dingy lighting her skin glowed with a faintly golden sheen. High cheekbones narrowed down to a slightly pointed, stubborn jaw. Hell, even her eyes tilted upward ever so slightly, giving a further impression of a catlike beauty.

No, beyond a couple of times in the bar, he'd never seen her before. She wasn't an actress nor was she a socialite, although she did have that irritating holier than thou attitude. European? He'd spent enough time in both the British Isles and Austria to be familiar with most of the more prominent families, both royalty and nobility. MacNaught & Associates had more than once infiltrated a residence to test the security measures already in place. His company was in demand on both sides of the Atlantic.

Shaking his head, he turned away as he fought the need to stare at her. What did it matter? He had more pressing problems right now. Like how he was going to handle his mother when she found out he had no intention of appearing at the altar next week.

Stella MacNaught was going to go nuclear when she was told. His one-time fiancée was the daughter of one of Stella's oldest friends and she'd been thrilled when Joanna and Mac began dating. The dating drifted into an engagement and wedding plans.

His mood turned pensive as he reflected on how he actually felt about finding Joanna in bed with Ben Compton. Surprise...yeah, that had been there. Outrage...sure. Some anger; not much, but some.

But underlying it all, was...relief. His beer-soaked brain grappled with that fact for a moment, turning the idea this way and that. It had been relief he felt as he sat in his car and decided what he wanted to do.

He took a moment to wonder if he had ever really loved Joanna. They'd been comfortable together. He'd known her since she was a kid. She had been a pretty girl who had grown into a beautiful woman. She would have been a perfect hostess for the functions he was forced to attend during the course of his business. She would have kept an immaculate home, knew all the right people and had the right connections.

Logically, she had been a perfect choice for a wife.

But did he actually love her? In bed they were fairly compatible but there had certainly been no fireworks. Probably because she'd been

getting her fireworks from another source. For a moment Mac wondered how long she and Ben had been lovers.

Had to be right around the time of the Cisero job. He'd blamed himself when the kid under his protection got killed, and hadn't even noticed Joanna's withdrawal. If it did register, he probably would have put it down to the flurry of wedding plans.

Damn! He wasn't normally this dense.

That botched job must have thrown him more than he'd thought. It didn't matter Jason Cisero had been a punk with more balls than brains. His uncle had hired MacNaught & Associates to escort him through the Mardi Gras festivities and make sure the golden heir-apparent didn't come to any harm.

Terrence Cisero failed to reveal he was the one who wanted his nephew gone. He planned on using Mac as the fall guy for failing to protect Jason.

After the kid was killed, Mac did some careful digging. It came as no surprise to discover the uncle was in neck deep with some unsavory business associates. With the death of his nephew, he'd inherit the Cisero kingdom and bail himself out.

Once Mac turned his information over to the cops, he returned to Seattle and began the centuries-old process of drowning his sorrows in a bottle. He hadn't even liked Jason. Still, it hadn't kept him from reliving that last instant before the guy in a bird-like costume pulled a gun and began firing. Mac had tackled Jason but it had been too late. One bullet had caught the kid in the neck, severing an artery. By the time the medics had arrived, Jason was dead.

Shit! He wasn't going to dwell on that one failure for another night. He'd spent far too much time trying to second-guess himself. Terrence Cisero had hired a hit man to gun down his nephew, giving the man the date, the time and the location when he could get a good shot.

It didn't matter that he told himself that he should have been more alert, more careful, more paranoid. Nothing he could have done would have prevented the death of Jason Cisero.

“Uh, Mac?”

Mac turned a vacant gaze on his brother. For the first time he noticed the two new beers sitting in front of them. His attention sharpened and he immediately deserted his empty mug for the newer, colder one.

“Yeah? What?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about me.”

“I, uh...gotta go pretty soon. When I called Kelly earlier and told her the party was off she asked me to come by to...uh...”

It took a moment for his meaning to get through Mac’s beer-soaked mind. He grinned with sudden understanding. “You go ahead. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure? I mean...I’ll stay if you want me to.”

“Nah. You go and have fun.”

“You good to drive?”

Mac gave that a bit more thought. He was experiencing a pretty good buzz, but nothing that would impair his reflexes. Hell, if he did stay for a few more beers, he’d get a cab. “I doubt if Joe would let me drive no matter what my condition, so I’ll leave my car and catch a cab.”

Uncertainty crossed Paul’s face. He brushed a hand over his hair, mussing the curls into greater disarray. Mac was glad he had escaped that particular gene, much preferring his own straighter locks. He kept his hair, the same color as his brother’s, neatly tied back with a band. It was far longer than their mother cared for, but Mac was way past the age where she was allowed to dictate his hairstyle.

He flexed his fingers around his mug, feeling the cold dampness slide over his skin. Well, he had a choice. He could stay here and drink himself into oblivion, or he could go home, pack up a few things and take off for that extended vacation he’d mentioned to Paul earlier. Seeing how he’d cleared his calendar for the next month, he wouldn’t be missed at the office. His partners could carry on without him. He had every confidence in their abilities.

“Tell you what. You take my car and go meet Kelly. I’m gonna finish up this drink, maybe have one more and catch a cab home. In the morning, I’m gonna be on my way to somewhere warm and tropical where I can relax and forget this whole thing.”

“Where are you going?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. As long as it’s on a beach. I’m gonna leave Joanna to clean up this mess, and you to explain to Mom.”

“Thanks.”

Mac grinned at his brother’s dry retort. “Sorry, but I can’t be the one to tell her. She’d do her damndest to get me to that altar. Right now I don’t have the energy to fight with her.”

Paul got to his feet. Like all of the men in his family, he was tall, slightly over six feet. Mac knew he topped his brother by at least two inches. Paul was one of his partners at MacNaught & Associates; in charge of computer security. His years of hunching over a keyboard had given him a slightly stooped back, but he was one of the best in the business. Mac felt confident leaving the company in his capable hands for a month.

Mac dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out his car keys, flipping them to his brother. Paul automatically caught them, but hesitated, obviously torn.

“Go on. Say hi to Kelly for me. Just don’t expect to find me for the next coupla weeks. I’ll let you know how to contact me when I decide where I’m gonna crash.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.” Clapping his brother on the back, Paul turned and left. Mac watched as his stride faltered when he drew near the bodacious blonde. The gorilla went on the alert, his growl audible from where Mac sat. Paul immediately picked up his pace and made for the exit.

Mac bit back a snort of derision. Paul probably could have taken the guy. Maybe. Although the gorilla had both weight and strength on his side, Paul had speed and skill.

Watching the exchange via the mirror that lined the back bar, Mac saw the big guy relax once the perceived threat had passed. The woman put a hand on one tattooed arm, soothing the gorilla with her touch. There was a low consultation before the bodyguard stood, moving aside as the woman slid from the barstool. For a moment Mac felt sure they were leaving until they both turned in his direction. For an instant his heart threatened to stop.

He turned in his seat to lean back against the bar. Resting one elbow on the scarred surface, he cradled his mug in his other hand. He didn't bother to hide his admiring gaze from the woman. He had just enough booze in him that he almost looked forward to the bodyguard starting something. The guy irritated the hell out of him.

This close she was incredible. She didn't just walk. She glided with all the grace of a dancer. Every move sensual and graceful. Mac felt his body react just to her close proximity, hardening, swelling within his jeans.

Jesus! Joanna had never affected him this way. The blonde did nothing to entice him, yet he was reacting with the finesse of a callow youth.

As the pair neared, her beautiful glance flickered over him. Yeah, they were ice blue again. Maybe he had been wrong earlier. Her gaze lingered for an instant before sweeping onward. It was clearly a dismissal. Self-derision tilting his mouth, Mac saluted her with his mug.

The bodyguard eyed him with dark menace. Another low growl trickled from his lips, designed to intimidate.

Mac met his dark gaze and gave him a deliberate smile.

"Yeah, same to you, buddy," he muttered under his breath as he watched the sway of her hips encased in those leather pants as she moved down the short hallway toward the ladies' room.

The gorilla continued to watch him even after they'd passed, turning his head to keep Mac in sight. He was so intent on Mac that he nearly ran down the woman when she stopped at the entrance of the facilities. She said something sharp which snapped his attention back to her.

Mac shook his head with amusement and swung back to lean his elbows on the bar. He kept track of the pair through the mirror. The gorilla stood guard outside the ladies' room while the woman did her business. He actually took a stance and crossed his arms over his massive chest. Mac's brows shot upward. So he could manage that maneuver despite the muscle-bound arms. The guy radiated menace as he eyed the other occupants of the bar. His scrutiny returned time and again to Mac.

Again raising his mug in mock salute, Mac finished his drink before he set the glass on the bar with more force than necessary. Time to go. He had just enough beer in him to pick a fight with the gorilla if he wasn't careful. Although he was confident in his abilities, given the amount of booze he'd consumed, he wasn't quite up to par. No sense in getting his ass kicked for no good reason.

He was about to stand when a furtive movement to his left captured his attention. Something, some instinct, made him hesitate. Easing back onto his barstool he turned his head, using the mirror to watch a hooded figure linger at the end of the bar where the blonde and her bodyguard had been sitting. Their half-finished drinks remained on the bar.

Mac's glance went to Joe, but he was arguing with a kid who was trying to convince him he was old enough to drink. Mac seriously doubted the kid even shaved yet.

Curious, he returned his attention to the shrouded guy, straining to get a better look at him, but he was already heading for the door. Tall, on the lean side, he wore a simple hooded sweatshirt. It was impossible to get a look at his face as he vanished into the night.

Mac stared at the door for another moment, wondering if he should follow. Then, giving a mental shrug, he subsided. Not his business.

"You wanna 'nother, Mac?" Joe's bulk filled his vision as the man began his circuit of the bar to make sure all his customers were served.

"Yeah, one more." He hadn't planned on staying, but what the hell. Now he was curious.

“You ain’t gonna drive, are you?” Joe placed the foaming mug in front of him, eying him with professional experience. He paused long enough to run a once-white rag over the surface of the bar, at the same time scooping up a couple of bills left as a tip.

“Nah. Paul’s got my car. I’ll get a cab when I leave.”

“Good.” Without another word, Joe turned away to serve another patron.

Mac cradled the drink between his hands, but he didn’t raise it to his lips. He was aware when the blonde emerged from the bathroom. Once more they passed Mac, giving him another opportunity to admire her through the mirror. This he did automatically, his mind on alert with the strange behavior of the hooded fellow.

He continued to surreptitiously watch as the pair returned to their seats near the door. The woman leaned one elbow on the bar and cradled her chin in her palm as she stared into space. She looked pensive, deep in thought while her companion picked up his drink and tossed it back with a practiced motion. He made a comment too low for Mac to pick up, but either way, the woman ignored him. Frowning at her thoughts, she tapped out a tattoo on the bar with her fingers.

Dropping a couple of bills on the bar, Mac made up his mind to approach them about the odd occurrence. As he stood, he noticed the bodyguard sway. The guy put his hand up to his head and gave himself a shake. He said something to his companion, but she didn’t appear to hear. He stood, stumbling. The woman’s eyes snapped open wide. She caught his arm and was almost pulled off balance. She said something urgent in a low voice but the mountain shook his head, confusion clouding his expression. The glance she swung around the room bordered on frantic.

Mac was already on his feet and moving toward them. He swore viciously under his breath as he berated himself for his own carelessness. He should have seen this coming.

The “Date-Rape” drug. That sonofabitch had slipped something into their drinks. Mac had seen these effects before. It wouldn’t be long before

the big guy was incapacitated. No telling how much had been slipped into his drink or the effect on someone that size.

"Here, let me help," he said as he caught one of the gorilla's arms and slung it over his shoulder. The bodyguard growled something in a weird language and tried to pull away. Mac tightened his grip as the guy stumbled again and would have dragged Mac down if he hadn't grounded his stance.

"What is wrong with him?" Her voice was slightly singsong, musical. Totally enchanting. Worri furrowed her brow as she took the other arm of her bodyguard and slipped her shoulder under it to add to his balance. Although he had a three-hundred-pound gorilla on his back, Mac had no problem distinguishing her scent from the myriad of smells in the bar. It was a light floral scent reminiscent of summer. He drew a deep breath in appreciation. Jeez! Just the smell of her was turning him on!

Getting his libido under control, Mac glanced around until he caught Joe's eye. The proprietor immediately started toward them.

"It's called Rohypnol. I saw some guy hanging around your drinks while you were in the bathroom," he told the woman as he angled the bodyguard toward the bar's back room. The guy wasn't completely out of it, but Mac figured it was only a matter of time. "I didn't actually see him slip anything into them, but he must have."

"What is this Rohyponol?"

"Better known as the Date-Rape drug."

"What is that?"

Leaning forward to slant her a glance of surprise, Mac nearly lost his balance. How could she have never heard of the stuff before?

"It's a narcotic which impairs coordination and leaves you to the mercy of whoever slipped it to you. You wouldn't remember anything the next day. It's sometimes used by men who want to take advantage of a woman without her resisting."

"How barbaric!" He barely heard the words as she murmured them under her breath.

Between the two of them, they dragged the bodyguard down the short hallway and past the restrooms. Joe met them in front of the men's room.

"What's the matter?" He gave the woman a hard glance before he turned to gauge the condition of the other guy. "He didn't have enough to be falling down drunk."

"Drugged," Mac muttered as he leaned the gorilla against the wall and braced him there. He glanced behind them toward the entrance. The hooded dude wasn't anywhere to be seen, but that didn't mean he wasn't outside. Drugging the woman, Mac could understand, if the jerk was interested in having her at his mercy. But it didn't bode well that he wanted them both incapacitated. Something was going on here. "We're going out the back way, Joe."

"Want me to call the cops?"

"*Nei!* No!"

"Don't bother."

They both protested at the same time, the woman far more vehemently. Mac eyed her. There was definitely a look of panic on her face at the mention of bringing in the authorities. Things were getting weirder by the minute.

He also knew how much it took for Joe to make the offer to call in the police. Joe wasn't too kindly disposed towards them. This side of town was a little on the rough side and the Seattle police weren't eager to rush in when trouble started.

The bodyguard chose that moment to stir and his head came up to stare around with a glazed intensity. His massive muscles tightened, giving Mac all the warning he needed as the guy suddenly swung one arm up. It slammed into the wall where Mac's head had been an instant ago. The plaster cracked with the force of the blow.

"Shit!" Mac released him to avoid another assault. "Call off your gorilla, lady!"

“*Nei, Tutsi!* Stop!” With no regard for her own safety, she latched onto the other muscled arm, hanging on as she was nearly pulled off her feet. “Tutsi! Obey me!”

The man immediately halted. He swayed on his feet for an instant before he began to topple. Mac was tempted to let him hit the floor, but had the feeling once the gorilla was down, there was no way they’d get him up again. He caught him in the chest and pushed him back up against the wall, bracing him once more.

“How long does this narcotic last?” Her breath came rapidly as she helped him hold her bodyguard upright.

“Depends on how much was slipped into his drink. Could be anywhere between eight to twenty-four hours. Although, given the size of this guy, I wouldn’t count on it lasting as long as twenty-four hours.”

She muttered something under her breath which sounded suspiciously like cussing. Hard to tell given the fact that she was using what sounded like a cross between Russian and a hissing cat.

“Look, Joe. I think we’re going to have some trouble if we go out the front. We’ll just slip out the back and vanish.”

The bartender hesitated, obviously torn. Avoiding trouble in his joint won out as he signaled them to follow him. “C’m on. The back door leads into the alley. Take a left and you’ll come out on Elliott Street.”

Cautiously slipping the bodyguard’s arm over his shoulder, Mac staggered under the guy’s weight before he regained his balance. The woman immediately took his other side and together they managed to get him moving once more. His feet were working to some extent as he slid one in front of the other, but he seemed totally disorientated. He continued to mutter under his breath, too low to be understood.

Joe led the way past the restrooms and down the narrow hallway that ended at a storage room. Cluttered with stacks of boxes, holiday paraphernalia and other junk, there was barely room to navigate as they headed for a door at the far end. Joe eased it open and stuck his head out in the cool evening air to make sure the coast was clear. Mac listened intently, but heard nothing beyond the slow drip of moisture somewhere

in the gloom and the occasional car passing at the end of the narrow alley.

“Looks okay.” Joe turned to them. Indecision again crossed his blunt face. “Mac...”

“It’s okay, Joe. I’ll just get them out of here. Don’t worry about it.”

“If you’re sure.” He swung the door wider. “The door’s gonna lock behind you.”

“Good. You go back to the bar and watch for a tall, skinny guy in a hooded sweatshirt.” Mac spared a glance for the woman, but she was talking softly to the bodyguard, patting—no, slapping his face in an attempt to bring him around. Mac could have told her it was useless. Date-Rape didn’t wear off that fast. Turning back to Joe, he continued. “I didn’t get a look at his face. He had the hood pulled forward. If you see him, try to keep him occupied while we get out of here.”

“Will do.”

Mac turned his attention back to the woman. “C’mon. We’re outta here.”

Chapter Two

Larissalyia gave up trying to revive Tutsi and glanced over at the man who had come to their aid. With an expert eye, she assessed his character. Accustomed to making snap judgments of people, she was rarely wrong. Between her trading experience and her superior senses, she had little trouble determining the depth of his character.

She'd noticed him earlier in the bar, of course. Had noted the way he watched her. On one level, deep, deep down inside, she preened at his obvious admiration, yet on another she was annoyed. Being leered at had worn thin long ago. She was a capable woman, not an ornament to adorn the arm of some male.

With his height and athletic build he looked physically fit, more than capable of aiding them. Something about him generated confidence and trust.

As unaccustomed as she was to trusting people, particularly on this barbaric planet, his air of competence appealed to her. But was it fair to endanger him? Her future was precarious at best. She had no right to inveigle a stranger into it.

"Do not worry about us." She forced herself to make the offer even though she knew she and Tutsi wouldn't get far without his help. Her bodyguard was swaying, without any coordination whatsoever. The effect of this Date-Rape narcotic was debilitating, but with luck, his alien metabolism might process the drug differently than was normal for these Earth people. "You must not endanger yourself any further on our behalf."

The look he gave her was skeptical. "Lady, you wouldn't make it out the door alone."

Larissalyia gritted her teeth but couldn't deny his charge. Delicately she flared her nostrils, seeking to read his scent as he leaned out the door to take a careful look around. His masculine fragrance teased her senses as she negated the various smells coming from her surroundings. She shut her eyes to better filter out the smell of beer and the aftershave he had used that morning—a silly custom she found to be common among these males. There was a lingering scent of cigarette smoke which he had ingested while he sat in the bar. Another custom she disliked.

With an effort, she disregarded the acrid sting of the habit as she sought to read his deeper qualities, finally locating the spicy, clean scent of his character. She drew a deep breath, sensing a slight darkness clouding his scent. Yet underlying everything, she detected the strength of honor he harbored deep within him. Yes, he was a man to be trusted.

Opening her eyes she watched as he drew back in. It must have begun to rain. Droplets of moisture glistened on his thick, dark hair. The uncertain lighting made it impossible to discern its color but she'd noticed earlier it was the rich shade of a *mira* nut. An unusual shade on her world.

He gave every appearance of having led a rough and ready life. This was a man accustomed to taking control. It was there in his eyes. In his manner.

“Ready?”

Larissalyia snapped her attention back to her surroundings, angry with herself. Even though danger surrounded them, she allowed herself to be distracted. She suffered another pang of remorse. No matter how capable, the Earthman had absolutely no idea of the type of beings who hunted her.

Without waiting for her response, he slung Tutsi's arm over his broad shoulders and braced himself for her companion's weight. Automatically she took the other side and together they muscled Tutsi out of the small storeroom and into the alley.

Larissalyia quickly glanced around, trying to get a sense of their surroundings. Something was wrong. She felt it. Using all of her senses

she attempted to pinpoint the source of her unease. Now she knew why she'd been edgy all evening. Fool that she was, she should have been heeding her instincts rather than admiring the Earthman who occupied the barstool just a short distance from them. She and Tutsi had been hidden for nearly four of this planet's moon cycles and she had believed them safe. That went beyond foolish. It bordered on stupid.

The evening air shimmered with scents as they emerged from the building. The door closed behind them with a sharp click. Automatically she filtered out the reek of waste and the acrid scent of combustion engines, seeking that dry, almost pungent odor of the Kyrions. They had to be here. No one else sought her so diligently.

"This way."

The man started to the left, grunting slightly when Tutsi stumbled over his big feet and almost sent the three of them crashing to the wet pavement. What began as a light mist quickly evolved into a drizzle. Larissalyia cursed softly under her breath. This dampness made it impossible to use her sensitive sense of smell to pinpoint danger. She looked around them, her eyes probing the deeper shadows for any movement. There was little illumination other than the occasional light at the back of a business.

They nearly reached the end of the alley when she caught the scent.

Alarmed, she halted and looked around. Her unexpected move made the Earthman stumble. Tutsi seemed to come out of his stupor long enough to realize they were in danger. Somehow he kept his balance as he pulled away from the two of them and swung around to face the direction they had come from. The huge man continued to sway, but he had an air of coherence that had been missing only seconds ago.

"What the hell!"

Ignoring the Earthman, Larissalyia concentrated on the deeper shadows coalescing into the forms of seven humanoid shapes. They flowed from the dingy gloom to spread out and surround the three of them. All wore hooded cloaks that reached to their knees. The darkness concealed their faces, but Larissalyia knew they were Kyrions. Her luck

had run out. It seemed souMaloch's minions had finally caught up with her.

"*Stand back, m'lady!*" Tutsi growled. He swung one massive arm, moving with a speed unexpected in a man of his size. He caught one Kyrion full in the chest and sent the creature flying through the air to crash into the structure opposite them. The Kyrion hung there for an instant before he slid down the rough brick in a crumbled heap. He did not get up.

Without hesitation, the other six rushed them. Larissalyia heard the Earthman curse under his breath but could not spare him a glance. She immediately went on the offensive. Charging the nearest assailant, she twisted to one side at the last instant so the Kyrion grabbed only thin air. She whipped around and jammed her elbow into the back of his neck. With the advantage of her height she caught him just right. There was a sickening crack and the creature went down.

She turned in time to see the Earthman feint to one side. His leg came straight out to connect with the abdomen of the nearest Kyrion. With a whoosh of escaping air, the creature doubled over. The man immediately brought his arm down on the back of his neck. Again that sound of cracking cartilage and the Kyrion dropped. Without pause, the Earthman wheeled around to the next assailant.

Larissalyia took an instant to admire the grace with which he maneuvered, flowing into a series of defensive moves. Within seconds he disabled the next Kyrion and glanced briefly in her direction. Their eyes met and she read the fierce light of battle in his. It occurred to her he was enjoying this.

Without hesitation, he turned away to aid Tutsi. The bodyguard was surrounded by the three remaining Kyrions. Two of them held glowing blades that gleamed with a frozen blue fire. She cursed under her breath. *Sinion* blades were outlawed in the Federation of Worlds. The vicious wounds they left festered even after they appeared to be healed.

The Earthman hesitated only an instant, evidently surprised by the sight of the weapons, then moved in with deadly stealth. The first Kyrion

didn't know what hit him as the Earthman spun him around and struck him in the face. The Earthman grunted with pain and Larissalyia winced. He couldn't have known the Kyrion's face was covered with tough scales. Still, the force of his strike threw the creature off balance enough so the Earthman was able to swing around and bring his foot up in an arching blow. He caught the Kyrion along the side of his head and dropped him. The creature's hood fell back, exposing its face. The uncertain lighting of the alley revealed grayish-blue scales covering most of the exposed flesh. Hairless, the scales feathered out to cover the creature's head and run down his back.

The Earthman hesitated for an instant as he stared down at the alien creature.

"What the hell!"

Small, slitted eyes blinked up at him, no discernible nose was visible and a wide, straight opening edged with smaller scales opened and shut with a gasping sound.

Larissalyia caught a movement behind him. "Look out!" she shouted. Too late she saw the gleam of a *Sinion* blade flashing downward, heard his hiss of pain as it scored down his shoulder blades.

Fury flashed across his face as he spun and brought his foot up in a sweeping motion to connect with the Kyrion's wrist. The creature howled with pain, the blade sent flying. The light blinked out as the now useless weapon vanished into the surrounding rubbish.

Crouching low, the two males circled each other as each searched for an opening. Larissalyia spared a quick glance for Tutsi and was relieved to see he had disabled the final Kyrion. But as she watched, he swayed drunkenly, his eyes once more glazing over. He slumped backward, hitting a bricked wall. Slowly his knees folded and he sank to the ground, his backside immersed in a puddle of dank water. She guessed the adrenalin that had carried him through the attack had seeped away and left him at the mercy of the drug he had ingested.

For the moment, she could do nothing for him. She watched the Earthman's opponent, waiting until the creature turned its back to her.

Fair play didn't enter into this. Without hesitation, she moved in and brought her elbow down on the exposed back of its neck, crushing the bone instantly. Scaled over two-thirds of their bodies, Kyrions were most vulnerable at the back of their necks. These were rather inept assassins if they did not bother to add extra protection to that portion of their bodies.

Either that or...

The thought trailed off even as her senses brought a new stench to her nostrils. About to turn, she felt the light touch of a blade against her throat. Instantly she froze, afraid to move. She didn't need to look down to know that the glow of a *Sinion* blade was pressed against her vulnerable flesh.

"Getting a little careless, m'lady," a low voice hissed in her ear. She shivered at the blatant amusement which edged the rough tone. *"You allowed yourself to be distracted by this useless trash."*

"Useless they may have been, Nicos, but rather effective," she muttered, careful not to make any movement. The blade was barely touching her flesh, yet it wouldn't take much for the razor sharp edge to score her throat. Even the slightest wound had to be avoided.

She deliberately used the Earth language. Her head was turned slightly to the right, which brought the Earthman into her line of vision. Staring straight at him, she tried to signal him with her eyes. She caught his slight, almost imperceptible nod before he groaned and slumped forward to drop to his knees. The action brought him within a few feet of Nicos. It also exposed the long cut which ran from one shoulder to the small of his back. Involuntarily, Larissalyia winced and nearly nicked herself on the blade. Although the wound looked shallow, hardly more than a scratch, if it wasn't treated soon, it would fester and the poison would infiltrate his blood stream.

The Kyrion's laughter was harsh, mocking. "You brought an Earth creature into this, m'lady?" After one downward glance, Nicos ignored the man. "Whatever would the Council say if they knew you involved one who is unsanctioned by the precious F.O.W.?"

"I seriously doubt that you or souMalocho particularly care what the Council thinks, Nicos." Out of the corner of her eye, Larissalyia saw the Earthman ease closer. His movements were stealthy, barely discernible.

Desperate, she knew she had to keep the Kyrion's attention centered on herself. With care, she leaned back until her head rested against his shoulder. The half-breed was taller than she, standing another half head above her. The movement eased the blade from contact with her throat. Deliberately she began to emit the pheromone essence from her pores. The light aroma slowly penetrated the dank smells raised by the rain.

She felt Nicos stiffen behind her as his nostrils caught the beguiling combination of *lavindaria* underlaid by a faint, but pervasive smell of musk. Knowing it could heighten the sexual attraction of the opposite sex, she rarely released this pheromone. Although she didn't know if the effect was the same on Kyrions, she was willing to chance it in order to distract Nicos. Another quick glance down revealed the Earthman was even now within touching distance.

She heard Nicos's quickened breathing as the arm holding the blade to her throat relaxed ever so slightly. Taking a chance, she dropped her head forward and immediately snapped it back to smash it into the Kyrion's face. Pain exploded as her skull came into contact with the hard scales and for an instant she saw stars. She had the presence of mind to brace her hands against the arm holding the blade. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the Earthman spring to life, twisting until his leg scissored between hers and Nicos's. The unexpected move threw the Kyrion off balance and Larissalyia tore herself free. Without hesitation she pinched the nerve at his wrist, causing him to drop the *Sinion* blade. She snatched it out of midair.

The Earthman was already on his feet and put himself between her and the Kyrion. The uncertain lighting was just enough to see the bluish ichor that covered the lower half of Nicos's face where her skull had broken the scaled skin. Evil hatred gleamed in his eyes for an instant before he turned and ran.

Larissalyia caught the Earthman's arm when he would have followed.

“Leave him. You won’t catch him.” Kyrions might be brutes, but they were fast brutes. No doubt Nicos was on the next block over by now.

She looked down at the knife she still held and absently thumbed it off, making the blue blade vanish. This left the alley danker than before. The only sounds were the steady patter of rain as it hit the puddles and the heavy breathing from the man whose arm she held. Both she and the Earthman were soaked to the skin. Water ran off his hair and down his face. The dim lighting did nothing to diminish the fierce light of battle that still burned from his eyes.

He had the face of a warrior.

The conviction rose without conscious thought. She was unaccustomed to admiration for any male, but this Earthman had proven himself in battle.

“He got away.” His tone was almost accusatory. “What the hell was that?”

Larissalyia ignored his words as she frowned with rising concern. She didn’t like that slight wheezing sound she heard as he attempted to catch his breath. That scratch had to be tended soon. She glanced at Tutsi sitting in a filthy puddle of water. He raised his head, his eyes squinting as he stared across the alley at the two of them.

“Nicos is a vicious coward,” she told the Earthman. “He will return with reinforcements. We had best be gone by then.” She left him standing in the steadily dripping rain and crossed to Tutsi. She crouched to lay a hand on one massive arm.

“*Are you able to stand?*” she asked as she assessed his condition.

He nodded. She straightened as he heaved his bulk off the ground, swaying for a second before gaining his balance. Although he was unsteady on his feet, he was mobile. With her help, they returned to the side of the Earthman. She frowned at the flicker of pain in the man’s eyes. The wound on his back was beginning to fester.

Briefly, Larissalyia glanced around the alley. Her gaze came to rest on the bodies of four Kyrions. The other three must have skulked off after Nicos. They were nowhere in sight.

She grimaced. Nicos could take care of clearing up this mess when he returned. She had no doubt he would remove all evidence. The penalties for revealing their presence on an unsanctioned planet were harsh. Should the F.O.W. get wind of this, the Kyrions would be paying for many eons to come. Criminal though he was, Nicos feared his government too much to let that happen.

For that matter... Her gaze rested on the barbarian. Her world of Kador would be paying for eons to come if she didn't do something about him. The Earthman knew too much.

"Come." She gestured to him. "Let us be gone from here before Nicos returns."

The barbarian didn't move. He watched her with expressionless eyes. "What were those things?" he asked again. "It's too early for Halloween."

Larissalyia muttered a curse under her breath. She had to get him moving. Explanations were better left until later. "You are injured. Your back must be seen to."

Still, he didn't budge. His face betrayed no sign of discomfort as he crossed his arms over his chest and stood there in the rain while he waited for an answer.

"I will answer your questions when we are safe," she said, hearing the undertone of anxiety in her voice. They couldn't stay in this alley. Every passing minute increased their danger. "I have a room on the next street."

Besides, if she didn't do something about that wound soon, explanations would be unnecessary. Although...letting the poison run its course would solve this particular problem.

The thought floated up into her consciousness before she could quash it. Guilt stabbed through her. The Earthman had not hesitated to help her when she needed it. She couldn't—wouldn't—let him die.

When he continued to stand and stare at her, she sighed and reached out to lay a hand on his arm. His muscles bunched under her touch and heat grew in his eyes. She wondered if he had felt the effects of the pheromones she emitted to distract Nicos. Her people had used

this method to entice the opposite sex for eons, but she rarely resorted to it, preferring an honest reaction.

"I swear to you. I will explain all when we are safe, but I must see to your back very soon or the poison of the *Sinion* blade will render all of this moot."

"Poison?"

"Yes. The blade is tainted."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Wall Street Inn."

His eyebrows shot up and she stiffened in defense. "It may be cheap but it's comfortable. Besides, I was trying to keep a low profile."

Why was she bothering with an explanation? This was a backward planet from what she'd seen, not worthy of inclusion in the Federation of Worlds. That made *him* a primitive. Certainly beneath her notice.

"Lead on, MacDuff," he said with a sweep of his hand. Evidently, he decided to take her up on her offer to explain all when they were safe.

"I do not know who this MacDuff is, but we are only a street over." Without a word she started down the alley. She had only taken five steps when she realized both the Earthman and Tutsi might need her help. She turned back in time to see the Earthman sling Tutsi's arm over his shoulder to provide support as the big man stumbled after her. With an imperial lift of her chin, she turned and continued.

Leading the way down the street, she monitored his progress as they stumbled out of the alley and onto Wall Street. The distance to her hotel was nominal. Since Nicos accosted them at the pub, she knew he had not yet discovered her exact whereabouts. They might be safe for the moment.

Chapter Three

“So.” Mac was out of breath as he heaved the bulk of the bodyguard into the small, yet well-appointed room. “What are you and do you have a name?”

The blonde led the way into the room, then paused inside the door to give him a hard stare. He ignored her and took a moment to memorize the layout of the hotel room. Modest, it was no different from a thousand others. It housed a kitchenette small enough to make any type of cooking a challenge. The main area branched off into one room which he assumed led to a bedroom, but the lumpy looking sofa had a pillow and blanket neatly folded on one end. Further evidence that the gorilla was hired muscle rather than a lover.

Somehow that reassured him.

The furnishings were simple, yet comfortable in a shabby sort of way. It was definitely a hotel where everyone minded their own business. They’d passed a couple of people on their way up, yet no one commented when he and the blonde staggered in, soaked to the skin and lugging the weight of a small mountain through the lobby.

This proved a man could move a mountain, Mac thought. He twisted his body until the bodyguard angled over the sofa, then he dropped the big man onto the lumpy cushions. The gorilla groaned as he stretched out his massive legs and dropped his head back against the back of the sofa. Although he was handling the drug far better than Mac would have guessed, he was still experiencing its effects.

As Mac straightened, he grimaced when a stinging pain radiated up his back. Damn! He was sure he had only taken a scratch from that weird glowing knife, but it still hurt like hell. And—unless he was very

much mistaken—it was getting worse. He felt the heat radiating around the graze.

He turned away from the bodyguard to find the woman still just within the door, poised. For flight or fight, he'd bet. Question was, which one?

This evening was getting stranger by the second. If he didn't know better, he'd say he was the one who had been drugged and dragged into some bizarre waking dream.

Going by the evidence of his eyes, he had a feeling the question of whether mankind was alone in the universe was about to be answered. No way in hell were those scaly things people in costumes. Even Hollywood couldn't have come up with something so bizarre.

Which left only one explanation.

He cocked one eyebrow upward when she didn't answer. "Let's start with something real easy, lady. You got a name?"

Her chin came up in the same imperial manner he had noticed earlier. That gesture was beginning to irritate him. Her regal attitude tried to relegate him to the status of an underling, but he wasn't falling for it. The grin he gave her was designed to infuriate and, going by the frown gathering on her brow, he'd succeeded.

Then he was distracted from his amusement when he noticed something else. Her eyes were now the color of dark storm clouds. He was sure she had ice blue eyes. No, they'd been a pale gray. He shook his head. He was a trained observer and he couldn't even say for sure what her eye color was.

"Yes, I have a name." He again noticed her sing-song manner of speech. It feathered up and down his spine in a very intriguing way. Hell, with that voice, he'd listen to her read from a dictionary. It was steamy and cool at the same time and everything in between. Sexier than hell.

"It is Larissalyia Sarisekko Ashanti."

He stared at her for several seconds, dumbfounded. The way she pronounced her name inserted vowels where he wouldn't have guessed

any existed. He began to laugh. The movement irritated his back but he ignored it. "I couldn't pronounce that on a bet. I'll just call you Lacey."

"You will do no such thing."

"Look, lady. It's late, I'm hurting and I'm really not in the mood to put up with a *prima donna*." With slow deliberation, he stalked her, exuding intimidation. He was pleased to note she refused to back down. She had guts, he had to say that for her. If anything, that stubborn chin came up higher. This close, he saw that her eyes were no longer gray. Even as he watched, they bled into a deep brown with reddish specks emerging.

Shit. No wonder he couldn't put a color to her eyes. They changed with her moods!

Before today, Mac would have said he didn't believe in aliens. Tonight's events proved him wrong.

Watching her closely, he picked out little hints of her otherworldliness. It wasn't just the eyes—unusual though they were. Her hair color had to be natural—for her. It sure as hell didn't come out of a bottle. Under this lighting the luxurious tresses melted into a whole spectrum of colors which ranged from golden to reddish strands intermixed with the pale of near white blond. Besides being drop-dead gorgeous, she had few other indications that she came from another world. Hell, she was probably from a different universe.

"I do not know who or what this *prima donna* is, but I assure you I am not accustomed to being treated this way."

"Tough! Get used to it."

"I will do no such thing, Earthman—"

"The name is MacNaught, Victor MacNaught, but I won't answer to anything but Mac."

"How about barbarian?" she shot back before pausing to draw a deep breath. The gesture did all sorts of interesting things to the front of that tight sweater. Mac had to concentrate to keep his gaze on her face.

"I did not ask for you to help us," she added.

"Honey, you wouldn't have gotten out of that bar without my help."

That shut her up for a second. He took the opportunity to glance around for a mirror. He spotted a large one taking up a good portion of the wall over a long table. Ignoring her, he made his way toward it.

“What were those scaly things, by the way?” He asked the question over his shoulder as he angled his back so he could get a look at the wound. Yeah—just a scratch, but damn it hurt.

He directed a glance at her through the mirror in time to find her watching him, a pensive look on her face. Her eyes had changed again, now a deep, deep blue. It was impossible to guess her thoughts.

Giving her head a shake, she seemed to come to a decision. Using the mirror, he watched her approach and halt just behind him. Despite her obvious irritation, she eased the sliced material of his shirt from his back with gentle fingers. Even her light touch sent a shiver of reaction over his skin. He couldn’t say whether it was sexual or the result of pain.

Shaking her head again, she grasped the edges and tore his shirt open the rest of the way to expose the length of his back. Mac drew in a hissing breath as her movement sent shafts of pain down his spine.

“I apologize,” she murmured as she continued to inspect his back. “This must be tended before it is too late.”

“What? That scratch? It’s nothing. It’ll heal.”

“You took an injury from a *Sinion* blade, Earthman. The smallest wound will kill you unless it is treated.”

Listening to the beauty of her voice, Mac froze as her words sank in. “How late is too late?”

“We have time. Not much, but enough.”

She turned away and moved to the door he assumed opened into the bedroom. She vanished inside. Long enough for Mac to begin sweating. What if she decided to let him die? That would eliminate the problem of what to do with him. He hadn’t given it any thought earlier, but from what that scaly thing—Nicos—said, he figured Earth was supposed to be kept ignorant of alien visitors. What had the guy said? Unsanctioned by the Federation of Worlds? That sounded like a lot of inhabited worlds.

And all of them far more technologically advanced than Earth was.

It was a disturbing thought.

He used the mirror to take another look at his injury. With his shirt hanging on either side of his back, he got an unobstructed view of the injury. Yeah, a redness was forming around the scratch, radiating a good inch outward. It also made him aware of the steadily growing pain.

Lacey returned with a small box in her hands. He felt a wave of relief. She wasn't letting him die.

She set the box down on the tiny dining table and opened it. "Please, sit down."

Without argument Mac turned the chair and straddled it with his back to her. He had to take her word in this. A *Sinion* blade was far beyond his experience. Or knowledge. He twisted his head to watch her in the mirror. He might have to trust her in this, but it didn't mean he had to be gullible.

He saw a fat tube in the box as well as a tiny bottle that looked like it was made from a solid piece of crystal. She uncapped it and dipped one slender finger in to scoop out a generous measure of clear salve. When the light hit it, tiny flecks of gold flared to life. Her touch was gentle as she smeared the salve over the scratch, careful to cover every bit of it as well as the surrounding flesh. Mac sighed with relief. The pain diminished on contact, an icy coolness sinking into his skin.

He was about to move when she placed one hand on his shoulder. He froze as his body immediately came to life. Damn! He'd never had such an intense reaction to a woman before.

"Please, you must not move." Her concentration remained centered on his back as she reached out to pick up the tube. He couldn't see what she pressed but the object ignited with a green light. Where she ran the tube over his back, the salve ignited with the same light. It was eerie to see his back glowing, but he felt the immediate relief as she slowly ran it over the length of the scratch, careful to leave no area untouched.

"Those scaly things, as you called them, were Kyrions," she said after a long moment. Her tone was soft, losing that imperial note as she

focused on his wound. "They are not very bright and are sometimes used as assassins by the more unsavory elements of the F.O.W."

"That Nicos didn't strike me as particularly stupid." Mac closed his eyes, savoring the relief from pain. "Seemed to me he used the muscle to distract us so he could get close enough to grab you."

He opened his eyes when she hesitated. "Nicos is a little different. He is a half-breed and not completely given over to his brutish heritage. This makes him a very valuable mercenary."

"So when you say assassin, you're saying they were sent to kill you." Mac watched her expression in the mirror. She revealed little, keeping her attention on the tube, finally moving it away from his flesh to inspect her handiwork. She was meticulous, inspecting every inch of his back. Mac could almost feel the weight of her gaze. Finally she gave a satisfied nod.

"No," she answered as she replaced the bottle and the tube in the box. There was a soft click as she shut it. "They were to take me alive."

"Why?"

Mac twisted around in the chair to face her. Her glance flicked over to the bodyguard stretched out on the sofa. Mac ignored him. The gorilla would be out for a few more hours.

Again she hesitated. He could almost see her consider and discard several explanations. And damned if her eyes had changed again. Now they were a deep emerald green. He figured this meant one of two things. Either she intended to lie or she was being cautious with how much to reveal. This could get interesting.

"I suspect I am to be held...hostage," she allowed in a cautious tone.

"Why?"

The glance she shot him was annoyed. Mac was almost amused to see gray bleed into her eyes to replace the green. Okay. Gray was for irritation.

"Is that your favorite word?"

"It's effective." Mac stretched his arms upward, relieved he felt no pain, no discomfort. Nothing. Twisting once more he used the mirror to peer at his back, shocked to see smooth, unblemished skin. "Damn. It's gone!"

"The *Miratortian* is a healing agent that is absorbed into your skin. They are microbiological creatures and will continue to heal as long as there is a need for it. They will then be...excreted naturally."

"Pissed out."

She shot him a startled glance, then smiled reluctantly. "Yes, pissed out."

"Handy. Earth could use something like that."

She was shaking her head before he finished. Her expression closed up again as her eye color bled back to that emerald green. "The technology of the F.O.W. will not be released to an unsanctioned world."

"Why is Earth unsanctioned?" Mac couldn't believe he was having this conversation. Here he was speaking with a real live alien. No one would believe him. Hell, he was having trouble believing it.

He held up a hand when she parted her lips to answer. "Never mind. We'll get back to that later. We're getting off the subject here. Hostage against what?"

"You are persistent!" She gave him a frustrated look.

"Part of my charm. Look, Lacey. I just want to help. Don't make me pull every bit of information out of you."

"Stop calling me Lacey. My name is Larissalyia."

"Honey, I couldn't pronounce that sober, much less with a buzz. It's either going to be Lacey or I'll have to call you honey, babe or lady."

She continued to stare at him with annoyance—gray again—before she finally gave an abrupt nod. "Very well, barbarian, call me Lacey if you must." Her voice changed to a mutter. "It won't be for long, anyway."

Mac frowned. He got the feeling he wasn't supposed to hear that last part.

Picking up the small box, she stood. "I will return in a moment." Her hips, in those tight leather pants, swayed as she returned to the bedroom. Mac's gaze didn't leave that impressive portion of her anatomy until she passed from sight.

With a sigh, he leaned forward to rest his chin on his linked hands. He'd seen enough science fiction movies to know that not all aliens were humanoid. That cantina scene in *Star Wars* certainly pointed to that conclusion. It would be arrogant of mankind to suppose all intelligent life had to look like them. He wondered how many worlds comprised this Federation of Worlds Lacey mentioned. From the sound of it, he guessed quite a few.

Mac took another glance around the room. Nothing indicated its occupants were anything other than the usual tourists who flocked to Seattle. He saw a number of items one could pick up in any corner store. A bottle of Coke, a slew of chocolate bars, a small tin of coffee and another of cocoa mix.

He smiled. Someone had a sweet tooth.

From where he sat, there wasn't anything which looked alien. Other than the gorilla, of course, and even he looked perfectly human. In a hormone gone wild sort of way.

Mac frowned as he stared at the bodyguard. His breathing had changed. Not quite as deep as it had been earlier. Was he still out of it? Or was he faking?

Mac was about to check when Lacey returned. In her hands she carried another small box, this one dark blue in color. She gave him an intense look before she set it on the table. He was disappointed to see she had changed into a pair of loose khaki trousers and a vaguely military-looking jacket of the same color. Low-heeled boots encased her feet and she had pulled her gorgeous hair back into a long tail that trailed down her back to her buttocks. With her hair up, he saw the numerous gems encircling her right ear. Each stone was a different color. All of them looked valuable.

Over her shoulder she carried a bag that looked like a knapsack. It already bulged, yet she moved to the table below the mirror and began stuffing the items he had noticed earlier into it.

Evidently they were leaving.

Mac nodded toward the bodyguard. "Does he have a name?"

Returning to the table she struggled to fasten the straps. "It is Tutsi."

"Tootsie? You're kidding, right?"

"What is this kidding?"

"Joking. Making a jest."

"Ah, no, I am not kidding. Tutsi is a *Mandujano* warrior. He has been with my family for many cycles."

She continued to wrestle with the straps, at the same time glancing around to make sure nothing was left behind.

"Are we leaving?" Mac took the bag from her and easily fastened the straps, taking a second to heft it. It weighed a ton.

"Yes. Nicos knows we are in this vicinity. He will not rest until he finds me."

"Which brings us back to the question of why you're hostage material."

"We do not have time for this."

"We'll make time."

Irritation flashed over her face before she glanced beyond his shoulder. "*Tutsi!*"

"Yes, m'lady?"

Mac swore under his breath as he swung around but he was too late. The bodyguard stood behind him.

Before Mac could react, Tutsi pinned his arms against his sides and lifted him until his feet dangled a good foot off the ground. Mac couldn't get any leverage. Even slamming his head back did little good since he struck the bodyguard in the heavily padded muscles of his upper chest. The guy didn't even grunt with the impact. He gave no notice to Mac's struggles.

Mac twisted forward as Lacey opened the blue box and pulled out another tube, this one shorter than the previous one. Without a word, she reached up to press it against the side of his neck as he struggled to get free. There was a tiny sting and a hissing sound.

"Damn you!" He snarled. An odd lethargic sensation raced through his body. Slowly, his head fell back against the bodyguard's chest as he lost all usage of his limbs. He was still able to see and glared his fury at the woman as she peered into his eyes. His mind remained sharp, cataloguing and processing as much information as he could.

"He is very disrespectful, m'lady," the gorilla rumbled over Mac's head. He noticed Tutsi continued to speak in English. All the better. The more he knew, the better he could defend himself when this stuff wore off.

What a fucking fool he'd been to trust her. This day was going from bad to worse. First Joanna, now Lacey.

She shook her head with regret. "The barbarian has no way of knowing who I am, Tutsi."

"Will you wipe his memory, m'lady?"

Mac's mind went blank with shock. Sonofabitch!

"There is no time. I suspect Nicos will be here within the hour with reinforcements. He cannot return to souMalocho empty-handed. That would be a death sentence for him."

Through the fog beginning to edge his peripheral vision, Mac watched as she stuffed the blue box into one of the pockets of her baggy trousers.

His consciousness was on borrowed time. Already his hearing was fading.

"I cannot take a chance of a hurried memory wipe. That would do more damage than good. We will bring him with us and do it when time allows."

"You wish to bring the Earthman with us? Is that wise?"

"Perhaps not, but it is for both our safety and his. Nicos will not hesitate to harm him if he thinks I have any attachment to him."

“And do you, m'lady?”

“You overstep yourself.” Mac saw her raise that imperious chin again, her voice freezing over. “How can I have feelings for this man? He is a barbarian.”

“Yet you fret over his safety.”

“The safety of *all* of us. I cannot take a chance he has seen or heard something which might be used to track us after we leave here.”

Mac's head fell forward as the drug began to spiral him into the black hole of unconsciousness. He felt the bodyguard's arms loosen enough to twist him around and sling him over his shoulder. His upper torso and arms hung down the man's muscular back like a broken marionette. Mac fought to hold onto cognizance long enough to hear the rest of their argument.

“Your father will be displeased if you were to return to Kador with an Earthman.”

“Then we'll sell him into slavery.” Her snarled words were the last thing Mac heard before the darkness swallowed him.

Chapter Four

Mac returned to consciousness slowly, swimming against the current of blackness until full awareness returned.

It took him a moment to orientate himself, to form a cognizant thought. Considering he'd been completely out of it, he was surprised to find his mind sharp and alert. For a moment he lay unmoving as he tried to pick up some hint of his surroundings. On his stomach with his head twisted to one side, he felt the softness of a mattress under his body and a light blanket covering him. A slight wiggle of his toes revealed his boots had been removed but he was fairly sure he was still clothed. At least in his jeans. His shirt had been history.

The sequence of events rushed back through his mind. He remembered everything. Helping Lacey and then finding out she was an alien using Earth as a hideout. The fight. Her healing his back and his attempt to get information out of her. The gorilla—Tutsi—grabbing him from behind and the coldness of the tube Lacey had pressed to his neck. He played back the conversation they'd had while he slowly lost consciousness. Something about that Nicos character coming back soon and having to get out of there.

Wait! They'd talked about wiping his memory. Did that mean a short-term wipe or a complete mental lobotomy? He broke out in a cold sweat.

No, Lacey had said something about not wanting to rush the process as it would do more damage than good. That didn't sound like she planned on anything permanent. Which left a short-term memory loss. Probably beginning with seeing that guy hanging around their drinks at the bar and right up to the brief time in her hotel room.

He also recalled in those last few seconds of consciousness hearing her say something about selling him into slavery. He stiffened for an instant, then he forced himself to relax. He was fairly sure he was alone, but couldn't be positive.

Mac drew a deep breath, using his olfactory senses in an attempt to make further determination of his surroundings. The air wasn't fresh, so he was indoors, yet there was no scent to give him a clue as to where indoors. Carefully, he slitted his eyes open just enough to find that he had a limited view of his surroundings.

The lights were dimmed, but not enough to conceal the fact that he was in a small room—about the size of a ship's stateroom. The walls were plain with no visible windows or doors. A table or desk occupied one wall with a chair that appeared to be attached to the floor. There was nothing on the table.

Shifting his weight one muscle at a time, he slowly turned over, ready to leap to his feet should any threat appear.

Nothing happened.

Still moving with care, he sat up. The light blanket fell from his shoulders. As he'd guessed, the ruined shirt was gone.

With his movement, the lighting brightened to illuminate the room until he was able to view it more clearly. Not that it made much difference. Other than the bed and the table, the room was empty of furnishings. He saw a door opposite the bed as well as a smaller, narrower opening which he assumed might be a closet or storage of some sort.

He was alone. His surroundings were completely unfamiliar and he was wearing only his trousers.

Could this get any better?

Deciding nothing in the room would help him determine his whereabouts, his gaze went to the door. Would it open?

Only one way to find out.

* * *

Well, the damage was done. The Earthman had seen far too much. Something had to be done about that. What choice did she have? None.

Morose, Larissalyia sat staring out the view screen which filled the wall in front of her. Although they traveled at an incredible speed, the array of stars in front of her didn't move. They stared back at her, cold, distant. For once their beauty was lost on her as she pondered her dilemma.

What was she going to do with him? If she had any brains, she would have wiped his memory and left him in her hotel room with no knowledge of how he got there. That would have been the smart thing to do. But as she told Tutsi, they hadn't the time to perform such a delicate procedure. Although she had only just met the Earthman, she found herself unwilling to cause him permanent damage. When Tutsi was drugged he came to their aid without hesitation. How could she reward his actions with harm?

Or was she just searching for excuses? She could have easily initiated the procedure while he lay unconscious in his room. Yet she put it off. As the Earthman constantly asked—why?

Her gaze dropped to the navigation console as her mind replayed their encounter. There was something about him she didn't understand. Something she was not comfortable with. He was attractive, no doubt about that. With that long, beautiful hair and hard, whipcord body, he was eye-catching. A gorgeous face despite the hard lines that bespoke of experience and readiness. But she had known far more handsome men. Had known numerous charming and more accomplished men. Somehow the Earthman diminished them all.

This Victor MacNaught was brash, insolent—yet he also gave every evidence of reliability. Dependable in a tight spot.

A novelty in her experience.

With a sigh, she leaned her head back in the cushioned chair. Yes, this was a problem.

But a problem that needed to wait. Right now she had to find a new sanctuary. As of yet she hadn't given much thought as to where to go. When she'd first sought a refuge, she aimed for somewhere so very different from her own arid world. Somewhere no one would think to seek her out. The city of Seattle on the unsanctioned planet of Earth had been ideal. It was wet, chilly, overly crowded. The exact opposite of Kador.

"Where do you intend to go now?" As if reading her mind, the *Mandujano* voiced aloud her thoughts.

Larissalyia spared him a glance before she went back to her pensive study of the stars. He stood just inside the entrance to the bridge, arms crossed over his chest. She knew he could hold that position for hours, never moving, never growing weary.

"Good question." They had blasted off Earth without replenishing their supplies. Water on board the ship was low and wouldn't last very long. They had to find somewhere they could restock before seeking a more secure hiding place.

With a weary sigh, she leaned forward and began to call up the star maps. Her fingers danced over the console as she scrolled through countless charts, concentrating on worlds that bore no resemblance to her own. Although, upon reflection, that idea was probably blown.

Larissalyia decided to skip any type of requirement and search for a world both habitable and remote. Another question tickled the back of her mind. Should she return Victor MacNaught to his world as soon as possible, or should she hold him until it was safe? Was Nicos smart enough to stake out Seattle with one of his men on the off chance she would bring the Earthman back? Probably. He hadn't become souMaloch's right hand man by being stupid.

Which meant she was stuck with the barbarian for an extended length of time.

What a mess.

Once this whole thing with her father was resolved, she'd be free to return Victor MacNaught to his world, his mind carefully wiped of any

memory of her. He would go his merry way and she would return to her life.

The thought sent a curious twinge through her chest. Why would the prospect depress her? Obviously it was the logical thing to do. She had a lucrative career to pursue and this Victor MacNaught no doubt had a life to lead.

She banished her musings as she paused on one chart. Hmm. The world of Dakar was a possibility. It had a sparse population and was remote enough to suit her. Although the natives were hostile to strangers, it wasn't impossible to avoid contact. Still...the one and only time she'd been on Dakar, she had been inordinately nervous. Absolutely no reason to be, but there was something about that planet which made her want to avoid it.

A possibility, but she decided to continue her search. Flipping through her options, she paused once more as she came across another candidate.

Cyber Five might do. It was a warm world, comprised of eighty percent oceans and a tropical climate. Fresh water wouldn't be a problem and they might even be able to take on some fresh foods which would go a long way to preserving her supplies.

"What do you think of Cyber Five?"

Tutsi left his post at the entranceway and glided forward. The blue light of the star map bathed his hard face as he studied the charts.

"Not a bad choice. Could work."

"It would only be for a short time." Somehow she had to convince herself of that. Her father was sure to find the evidence he needed to prove souMalocho was behind the disappearance and murders of all who played a role in his conviction and imprisonment. Then she would be free to return to her home and to her business.

She had to count on her father to do his part. As Chief Magistrate of the F.O.W., he was the best in the business and rarely lost a case. Still, souMalocho was a wily bastard and had beaten countless raps. This last

deed had finally landed him in prison with enough evidence to convict him.

“All right. Cyber Five it is.”

With renewed purpose, she hunched forward and fed the coordinates into the onboard computer. They’d make the first wormhole within a ship’s day and connect with the second another ship’s day after that.

“With luck, we should make Cyber Five within the next three ship’s days.” Satisfied, she sat back and allowed herself a luxurious stretch, working the kinks out of her back and shoulders. She had been more tense than she realized.

With their destination decided, she was free to consider the next problem. The question of how her hiding place had been compromised. Earth had been perfect for her uses. Isolated, somewhat primitive, and best of all, unsanctioned. No one should have even considered the possibility she might have gone there. Yet the presence of the Kyrions proved someone had.

Frowning, Larissalyia pursed her lips together. Only two people had known where she was. One was Tutsi, of course, and to suspect him was ludicrous. She’d trust her life to the *Mandujano* warrior any time.

The second person was her father. She had contacted him one Earth moon rotation ago and left him a coded message. Could someone have intercepted her message? How likely was that? Her father was far too cautious to allow his private missives to fall into the wrong hands. He had personally created the security code for just this use and any communication had been on an ultra secure link.

She knew her ship couldn’t have been traced. Far too often she’d found it necessary to stay one step ahead of her competition in the trading business. Her contacts were many and her maneuvering legendary. Her father might not always understand her need for independence, but he tried to be supportive. Her family had more money than they could spend, but she had a knack for making more.

In a business dominated by males, there was satisfaction in besting them. She had the freedom to travel where she wanted and do what she

wished. There were no obligations or duties to anyone other than herself and the people she employed.

“What of the Earthman?”

The quiet words snapped her out of her thoughts. Her mood immediately soured. This was the question she’d been avoiding. However, she knew it was one she had to address.

“What about him?”

“The F.O.W. will not look kindly on an unsanctioned barbarian within its borders.”

“I know.” Her face pensive, Larissalyia fell silent as she stared out the forward screen. The stars were still distant, yet somehow they didn’t seem quite as cold as they had a short time ago.

“The fines would be astronomical.”

“I know!” Did he have to state the obvious? Annoyed, she swung around to face him. She had to admit she was more irritated with the knowledge he was right. The fines were only one of her worries. The F.O.W. council was rabid about the infiltration of unsanctioned creatures. Somehow she didn’t think even a man of her father’s position would be able to clear her of this one.

Trouble was...how long would she be forced to keep this barbarian with her? She couldn’t take him back, she couldn’t set him loose. Her only option was to hide him until it was safe to return him to his world.

This brought up a whole new myriad of problems. There was no telling how long they would be on the run. She couldn’t very well keep him locked up on the ship. Well, she could, but somehow she couldn’t see Victor MacNaught calmly agreeing to that. He didn’t strike her as the type of man who would tolerate captivity for any length of time.

“What about a temporary identity for the barbarian? At least until we return him to his world?” She’d found it necessary to create a number of personas for herself in the past. Purchasing one for the Earthman shouldn’t prove a problem.

“Might work.” Tutsi considered this possibility. “It might even be wise. But what of his inability to speak U.B.?”

Yes, she'd considered that. It had been bloody difficult learning the English language of her refuge. Those scant twenty-six letters they used in their language had been a major pain in the ass.

"He should be able to accept the sensory input of an Educator."

"Yes, but will he? We must assume he will not be very trusting after you drugged and kidnapped him."

She nodded. That much was true. Victor MacNaught was not likely to be very forgiving when he regained consciousness. It was imperative he understand their actions. Hopefully, he would allow her to explain.

If not—he was going to have to spend an awful lot of time locked up in his room. A necessity she did not relish and one that would not be practical.

A soft ping from the console claimed her attention and she glanced down to see a yellow light flare to life. Ah, her unexpected guest had emerged from his room.

She directed a glance over her shoulder to where Tutsi stood. "Would you please escort the barbarian to the bridge?"

With a nod, the *Mandujano* warrior turned on his heel and vanished. It always amazed Larissalyia how such a huge man would move so silently. When he wasn't drugged, that is.

She turned back to stare out the view screen as she considered what to tell the Earthman. She owed him some explanation. After all, she had just kidnapped him from his world, involved him in a life-threatening situation and to top it all off, she was going to have to eventually eliminate all knowledge of his adventure. Somehow, it didn't seem fair.

The question was—how much to tell him? She probably needed to reveal all since he was so deeply involved. Plus, there was a good chance they were going to meet up with more trouble. Cyber Five ought to be safe, but then she would have bet she had been secure on Earth.

"M'Lady Ashanti."

Larissalyia turned in her seat as she heard Tutsi announce their presence. She'd been in such deep thought she hadn't heard their approach. To cover her chagrin, she raised her chin and shook back her

hair. Damn! She meant to put it up to look more regal. Make it clear to the Earthman she was captain of this ship and therefore in charge.

She was unsurprised when the Earthman bypassed Tutsi and stalked forward. The bridge wasn't large to begin with and he filled it with his presence.

"Just what the hell are you..." He only took two steps before he was brought up by the scene before him. His words trailed off to silence as he caught sight of the vastness of space outside of the view screen.

Larissalyia had never seen anyone's jaw drop before, but his certainly did. The color drained from his face as he slowly closed his mouth. She knew what he was feeling. It was the same sensation she'd experienced the first time she saw the view outside a ship's screen. Awe. Reverence. How could he not feel the same thing?

While she waited for him to overcome his shock, Larissalyia took a moment to note the broadness of shoulders, appreciating the way the muscles rippled under his skin. How he managed to obtain a tan in such a damp environment, she couldn't quite figure out. She seemed to recall hearing a jest that the people of Seattle didn't tan. They rusted.

Her gaze slid down from the width of his shoulders and over the mat of hair bisecting his chest to vanish into the waistband of his trousers. The men of Kador did not have chest hair. She rather liked it on the barbarian.

To cover the sudden dryness of her mouth, Larissalyia leaned back in the captain's chair to casually clasp her hands over her stomach. She had a feeling if she didn't, they would betray their trembling.

"You do not appear to have taken any ill effects from your little nap, Victor MacNaught."

With an obvious effort the Earthman tore his gaze from the array of stars that covered the velvet black background and focused on her. "Dammit, Lacey—!"

A low growl was the only warning Tutsi gave before stalking forward to grab Mac by the neck. He swung him around and slammed him

against the wall beside the door portal. "You will address Lady Ashanti with respect, barbarian!"

Mac grunted at impact, his hands coming up to catch the bodyguard's arm to keep him from throttling him. Larissalyia remained where she was for a moment, careful to keep her expression neutral. Perhaps a show of force would encourage the barbarian to cooperate. She allowed Tutsi to hold the Earthman for a minute longer before she came to her feet.

"Tutsi, stand down!" The *Mandujano* warrior immediately obeyed and released the Earthman. Larissalyia expected instant obedience and certainly would have tolerated nothing less. Mac slid down the wall to drop to the floor. Somehow, he managed to keep his feet.

She stepped forward but Tutsi put out a hand to prevent her coming too close to the Earthman.

"*Caution, m'lady,*" he advised, using Universal Basic. The big man's gaze rested on the other male, menace radiating from every inch of his body. "*Do not make yourself a hostage.*"

The glance she flung the bodyguard was startled but she subsided. Tutsi was correct. Victor MacNaught—Mac—was justifiably incensed. And therefore, unpredictable.

Without another word, Tutsi took up a post at the doorway, crossing his massive arms over his chest. He had changed from his leather attire to a plain khaki suit similar to her own. His bald head gleamed despite the dimmed lighting and dark satisfaction glinted in his eyes as he continued to stare at the Earthman.

Larissalyia sighed before she turned back to Mac. "I should apologize, Victor. If there had been some other way, I would have taken it."

He pushed away from the wall with little trouble. The look he flung at the bodyguard was seething. When he turned his gaze on her, it wasn't much friendlier.

Regretful, but she could hardly blame him.

"How about the truth?"

Larissalyia blinked with surprise. "The truth?"

“Yeah. Regardless of what your pet ape believes, I’m hardly a barbarian. A simple explanation of how and why would have sufficed.”

She stared at him with cool eyes as she crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head to one side. The truth. It never would have occurred to her. “And what do *you* think happened yesterday, Earthman?”

Mac’s gaze flickered to the view screen. He appeared mesmerized by the sight of the bright pinpoints of light within the vastness of space. As she watched, he drew a long breath, visibly coming to grips with the fact that he was traveling in space. He was taking it better than she would have suspected. From what she had learned of Earth, few of his people had experienced the joy of traveling beyond the borders of their world.

“I gather we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

“Kansas! What are you—”

“Never mind.” His glance returned to her and Larissalyia was again struck by the oddity of these Earth people only having one eye color. It never changed. She had realized this early on and found it difficult to read their emotions, having to rely instead on their facial expressions and her heightened senses.

Mac’s eye color remained a rare shade of a *tournic* gem. As blue as the seas of Cyber Five. With the rich cinnamon shade of his hair, it was an intriguing combination.

Despite her better intentions, she opened her senses to him. To once again enjoy the masculine quality of his essence. His scent reminded her of the many spices she had sampled while on Earth. Cinnamon, paprika and nutmeg were a heady delicacy to her olfactory senses. All of those spices combined made up his scent. Plus a certain something that was his alone.

Always on the lookout for trading possibilities, she had used her time on that backward rock to investigate the numerous products which appeared to be exclusive to that planet. Chocolate, for example. Nowhere else in the universe had she encountered such a taste. Delicious! Fascinating and certainly addicting. If she gained anything from her stay

on Earth, it was the discovery of the mouth-watering delicacy. That alone made her enforced exile worthwhile.

She realized Mac had turned away from the view screen and was watching her with expressionless eyes. Damn! She had no idea what he was thinking. This one eye color business irritated her.

“Again, Victor...”

“The name is Mac.”

“Victor is a noble name. It is obviously derived from your English word victory.” The glance she threw him was casual. “If you continue to call me Lacey, I will call you Victor. It will be either that or barbarian.”

He actually growled at her when she smiled with a feigned innocence. It really was a petty triumph, but she enjoyed it nevertheless.

She sought to regain her composure and return to the matter at hand. “As I was saying...what do you think occurred on your world?”

“Not an alien invasion. That much I know.”

Larissalyia made a rude sound in her throat.

“No, I’m thinking you were hiding from someone or something. You used a nondescript hotel in a rougher area of town. Kept a low profile, as it were. From what Joe said, you spoke with no one, ignored virtually everyone and everything and made every effort to blend in. From the instant you realized the gorilla had been drugged, you acted. No surprise, no questions. You knew your cover had been blown.” He slanted her a look of inquiry. She noticed the way he concentrated on her eyes. “How’m I doing?”

With a conscious effort she kept her eye color neutral. It wasn’t easy, but possible.

He was guessing. Good guesses, granted, but still guessing. She gave a regal nod, indicating he should continue.

“Those goons somehow knew where you were, and were supposed to take you alive. You yourself admitted that you were hostage material, so that points towards using you as leverage to force someone to do something they don’t want to.”

This time Larissalyia couldn't keep the shock from bleeding into her eyes and knew they turned to silver.

He scrutinized the change and nodded. "Since you're hiding, I assume few if anyone knew your location. Which points to the fact that of those few people, someone leaked the information."

Larissalyia drew a deep breath. She'd made the mistake of underestimating his intelligence. Unsanctioned didn't mean stupid. The people of Earth may be backward and somewhat barbaric, but she had to remember where their roots originated.

"But you've already figured that out for yourself," he added, relentless.

"Yes." Her voice was faint as she backed away until her knees hit the captain's chair behind her. Without a word she dropped into it, slumping back into its cushions. She curled her fingers over the armrests as she sought the comfort of the familiar.

"I had no right to involve you in this, Victor MacNaught," she admitted at last. Her voice felt thick with emotion. She wondered if the months of strain were finally taking their toll on her. She felt downright teary-eyed. It was not an emotion she was familiar with—nor tolerated. She stared down at her feet as she fought to control her emotions.

His legs came into her line of vision. She slowly ran her gaze up the length of his legs, over a trim waist and the broadness of shoulders to his face. Resting her head against the cushioned back she allowed herself to stare into his eyes. No longer expressionless, they gleamed with both shrewdness and satisfaction. Mixed in was a certain degree of caution.

"But you didn't involve me," he corrected in an equally soft tone. He leaned forward to grip the arms of her chair, caging her in and making her shatteringly aware of him. Her breath caught as she felt the heat of his body so close to her own. "I involved myself."

Larissalyia caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and, without breaking eye contact with Mac, gestured to Tutsi to remain still. She did not detect any threat coming from this man. She couldn't determine what she sensed from him, but it wasn't danger.

“Would you have involved yourself had you known what you were facing?” she asked

His eyes narrowed for an instant before he grinned. The sudden change startled her. She was even more surprised when he straightened and moved away to stand before the view port. He stared into the darkness, his hands clasped behind his back, looking for all the world like *he* was the captain of this ship. Silence reigned for a moment as he stood there. Then he turned to look at her, pinning her with that direct stare.

“Would you believe I’m supposed to get married in a week? No—make that about four day’s time. We’ve been traveling for a couple of days, haven’t we?”

Shock radiated through Larissalyia. Followed quickly by an emotion she’d never felt before. It slammed through her with the force of an imploding star. She knew her eyes had changed, morphing from the deep blue that reflected her regret to the silver of outraged shock.

“Now that’s interesting,” he murmured as he stared into her eyes.

Belatedly she realized he was cataloguing her emotions and correctly matching them to her eye color. Damn. It had been cycles since anyone read her so easily. In her business she had learned to regulate that natural reflex. Yet, something about this man shredded her control.

“I am sorry, Victor MacNaught, but we cannot return to your Earth.” The knowledge he belonged to another woman was disturbing. Painful. And completely illogical. “Not only is it not safe for me, but it is unsafe for you.”

“I’ve already figured that out. Besides, I said I was *supposed* to get married in four day’s time. Not that I *was* going to be married,” he said. His voice held an infuriating calm. “I was in Joe’s Pub drinking myself to oblivion because a change in circumstances canceled my plans.”

“And what would that be?”

“It’s not important. Let’s just say that I had no intention of going through with the ceremony.”

Larissalyia drew a slow breath, surprised at the degree of relief she felt. It didn't make much sense, but she couldn't deny the emotion.

"So," he continued when she didn't speak. "Are you going to tell me what's going on? Who is after you and why?"

"I do not wish to involve you any more than you already are."

"You're too late, honey. I'd say I'm in up to my neck."

She bit her lip, unable to deny that. But how much to tell him? To be sure, the more he knew the better able he'd be to defend himself should the need arise. SouMalocho had enough resources to station his people at most every space port she might seek sanctuary, so frequenting familiar ground was out of the question.

Cyber Five would be adequate for a brief stop to stock up and decide her next move. With luck they'd be in and out before anyone was aware of their presence.

Not only did she have to find someplace where she could create a false identity for Mac, but she also had to eventually find someplace to do a memory wipe without danger of interruption. What he experienced or did would be forever lost to him. In the long run, it would be in his best interest. But in the short run... The chances of Nicos harming him out of sheer spite ran high if she had left him on Earth with his memory carefully edited. The creature was spiteful enough to kill Mac and make sure she learned of it.

"Besides," Mac continued when she didn't answer, "you intend to wipe my memory anyway, don't you?"

Again shock swept through her. Did the people of Earth read minds? She'd never encountered such an ability during her stay there, but how else could he put into words what she'd just been thinking?

"How do you know that?"

"I see you don't deny it."

"Would it do any good?"

"Nope. I wasn't quite out of it when I heard you and the gorilla talking."

Larissalyia shrugged as relief surged through her. It was a lucky guess. The Earth people couldn't read minds. "Then I will not deny it."

"Would it make any difference if I told you that I'd rather not go through with that?"

"No. It will eventually be necessary." She heard the note of regret in her voice. Victor MacNaught would only remember an evening of drinking in a bar and vaguely recall seeing a tall, blond woman, but little else. He'd lose a few days, but maybe he'd chalk it up to his drinking too much.

"If you intend to remove all memory of our adventure," he went on, "there's no reason you can't tell me what's going on."

That much was true. Larissalyia shot a quick glance over at Tutsi and received a minuscule shrug in response. The bodyguard hadn't moved a muscle since he stationed himself at the entrance of the bridge. His dark face remained without expression as he held himself ready should the need arise.

"C'mon, honey. Maybe I can help."

Her gaze snapped back to Mac. Outrage sparked to life at his insolent endearment. No doubt his intention.

Larissalyia heard a soft snort come from the bodyguard as she came to a decision. What could it hurt? Mac had certainly proven himself in a tight spot. He might have some insight into her situation.

"Very well." Leaning back in her seat, she waved a hand to the co-pilot's seat, inviting him to make himself comfortable. She waited until he was seated before she twisted around to face the console once more and made unnecessary adjustments to their coordinates. Even to herself she wouldn't admit she was a bit nervous.

"I am of the Ashanti family," she said finally. "My father, Lazarus Elinnis Ashanti, is the Chief Magistrate of the Federation of Worlds. Approximately one cycle ago—a bit less than one of your years—he tried and convicted a madman by the name of Audon souMalocho. SouMalocho was sent to the prison planet of Death's Landing. Not long after, unexplainable accidents began to occur. First to the prosecutor—"

“What happened?”

“To all appearances, he and his entire family were killed in a transport accident while returning from a holiday trip.”

“Hmm.”

“Then, various members of the jury who had been instrumental in his conviction either vanished or turned up dead.”

“I think I know where this is going.”

“Even his own attorney disappeared. I can only assume souMalocho deemed him incompetent since he had been unable to get him acquitted.”

“And you say your father is the Chief Magistrate and was therefore most instrumental in putting this guy in prison.”

“Correct. At present, he is in the process of gathering evidence to prove souMalocho is behind these *accidents*.”

Although she faced away from him, Larissalyia knew Mac watched her, felt the weight of his gaze on her. She moistened her lips before she continued. “I’d watched some of your television while on Earth and I suppose you would equate souMalocho with one of your Mafia dons. He has ties in every aspect of crime. Extortion, slavery and even genocide. He kept his criminal activities to the outskirts of the frontier. The Federation of Worlds is so vast that as long as his interests remained discreet, Federation Security had not the time nor the resources to prosecute him.”

“But he did something to bring himself to the attention of this Federation.”

She shot him a swift glance of surprise, impressed by his quick grasp of the situation. “That is correct. Adeline Eustacia was a princess of the world of Benvolio. She was young; a bit impulsive and somewhat foolhardy.”

“Was?”

“She decided on one last adventure before she settled into marriage to a man of her family’s choosing. She wanted to explore some of the frontier —”

“And souMalocho found her.”

“Correct. His people captured her, sold her into slavery where she died at the hands of a particularly brutal master.”

“Jesus!”

“Unfortunately there will always be a black market for slavery in the universe. Personally, I find it repugnant that it is only because Adeline was the daughter of a prominent family that the F.O.W. finally took steps to stop souMalocho.” Larissalyia shook her head to dispel her thoughts, a bone of contention between her and her father. “Anyway, after a long search and the loss of many good soldiers, souMalocho was taken into custody and is now in prison. At his trial he hinted to my father it would be in his best interest and the interest of his family that he not convict him.”

He nodded. “The reason you hid on Earth.”

“Partly. I am in the business of trade and have numerous contacts. However, souMalocho has far more resources. One kidnapping attempt was made while I was completing some business on WestFalia. My father thought it best I sequester myself on my home planet of Kador until he finished his investigation. To put his mind at ease, I allowed him to convince me I would be safer in my old home.” She fell silent.

“What happened?”

“SouMalocho’s reach was longer than we suspected. His people must watch the comings and goings on my own home world. As I was landing on Kador, another attempt was made. I barely escaped. It was then I decided to disappear without informing anyone of my whereabouts.”

“Someone found out.”

“Yes.”

“Who knew?”

Larissalyia nodded toward the *Mandujano* warrior without turning in her seat. "Tutsi was one and my father was the other. I contacted my father about one of your Earth's moon cycles ago to let him know where I was and that I was safe."

"So there's someone close to your father who is a traitor."

Larissalyia noticed Mac didn't make any accusations against Tutsi. Did that mean he had no doubts about her bodyguard's loyalty? Or did he think Tutsi incapable of harming her?

"My father keeps a number of advisers close to him, as well as servants who have been in the employ of my family for decades. Still, there is a constant flow of strangers in and out of my father's home. Then there is my stepmother." Larissalyia was careful to keep her tone neutral.

"Whom you apparently don't like."

She smiled half to herself. No, this Earthman did not miss much. "No, I do not care for her. The funny thing—is that the correct word? Funny?" She slanted him a look of inquiry, satisfied when he nodded. "The funny thing is, I introduced Cereese to my father. She is the daughter of one of my chief competitors and we had become friendly. About three cycles ago, I introduced her to my father. She took one look at him and began to actively pursue him."

"Jealousy?"

This time the look she gave him was far from friendly. "No. My father has been alone for a very long time. I would have been pleased that he found someone he loved and who loved him in return. No, I cannot help but suspect that Cereese befriended me in order to meet my father and make an advantageous marriage." She gave a wave to dismiss the subject. "Anyway, after the attempt on my own home world, I told him I was going to do this *my* way and I simply vanished one night."

"So you came to Earth, hid out in Seattle and for the most part managed to stay out of trouble for—what? Three months? Four?"

"Yes. I sent a communication to my father using his personal code. It has a tight security that no one should have had access to."

"Your stepmother?"

“That was my first thought. However, what would she gain? Cereese has everything she wanted. When she took my family name, she gained a loving husband, position and great wealth. She has no need to betray my father. To do so would endanger her own position.”

“Hmm.”

Larissalyia watched as he leaned back into the comfort of the co-pilot chair, looking very much in control. Like he belonged in that chair. She rarely used a co-pilot when she traveled, whether during business or for pleasure. Captaining her own ship gave her a sense of total control that she didn't like to share.

The silence stretched. The overhead lighting brought out the sheen of his chestnut hair and made it gleam with a deep fire of its own. His eyes were slitted as he pondered what she had revealed.

She glanced over at Tutsi to find him still in place. He betrayed no sign of having moved in the past twenty rotes. He kept his eyes on the Earthman, no expression betraying his thoughts. The bodyguard was not of Kador. Like the Earthman, his eyes didn't change color with his emotions. It had been cycles since Larissalyia had been able to accurately guess his feelings.

“So, now what?”

Her attention snapped back to Mac. He hadn't turned from his contemplation of the stars outside the ship, yet something in his manner told her he was aware of everything she did.

“Now we go to Cyber Five where we regroup and make plans.”

“We?”

“You are along for the ride, Victor.”

The use of his name gained her a look of irritation. For a moment she thought he was going to protest her use of his name, but then he shrugged.

“Do you plan to wipe my memory there?” he asked.

Larissalyia hesitated. It would be a good place to do it. She had everything she needed for the procedure. There was really no reason to

wait. Other than the fact that she couldn't return Mac to Earth yet. Not while it was likely that one of the Kyrions might be lying in wait. It didn't make sense to wipe his memory quite yet.

Finally she shook her head. "No, as I said, I cannot return you to your world until the danger is past," she replied as she justified her decision in her own mind. "I have no doubt my father will succeed within another one of Earth's moon's cycles. I'd only have to wipe it again after that time."

"That's reassuring."

She pretended not to notice his dry tone. "Cyber Five is just a stop off for supplies and somewhere I can figure out where to go to create a new identity for you."

"Is that necessary?"

"Very. I am not quite sure what the F.O.W. would do with you if it is discovered you are from an unsanctioned planet, but I do know I would be in big trouble."

"So it's in your best interest that I keep my mouth shut."

She slid him a quick glance. This conversation was entering dangerous space. "It is in *both* of our best interest."

"I'd say you're the one who's ass deep in alligators, honey. After all, you kidnapped me. It isn't like I had much of a choice."

Larissalyia twisted in her seat to focus on the look of satisfaction in his face. *He thought he had a hold over her.* Her anger threatened to erupt.

"Look, barbarian. It would be just as easy for me to jettison you from this ship."

"I doubt you'd do that." There was no mistaking the smugness in his tone. He too swiveled his chair until he faced her. "Seems to me you went through a lot of trouble on Earth to make sure I took no harm from that *Sinion* blade thing. You could have just as easily let me die from that wound. You're not the type to commit cold-blooded murder."

“And how would you know that? I am an alien to you. You have no idea what I may be capable of.”

“Let’s just say I’m a great judge of character.”

Larissalyia could think of nothing to counter his self-assurance. He was right. She could not ruthlessly dispose of him in such a manner. Damn, he did have the upper hand.

She’d be a fool to let him know that. Giving him a cool glance, she said nothing and turned back to the console. Checking their coordinates, she made a few more unnecessary adjustments.

Once again she was aware of his gaze on her. It slid over her like a warm hand gliding down her body. She could almost feel the brush of it and a response sprang to life deep within her. It uncurled deep in the pit of her stomach and spread outward in ever-widening circles. It was not an uncomfortable feeling, just unfamiliar.

Frowning, she glanced over at him once more. He hadn’t moved. He merely continued to watch her with that fathomless expression. A slight smile quirked his lips and drew her gaze to that portion of his face. He had a beautiful mouth. Firm, the lower lip slightly fuller than the upper. It was a mouth made for kissing. Made for pleasure.

“Look, I’ll make you a deal.” He waited until her gaze returned to his. There was a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. “I promise to cooperate with you in keeping this F.O.W. ignorant of my presence in the hallowed halls of the known universe, and...”

“And?”

“And in return, you don’t wipe my memory of all of this.”

Larissalyia stared at him, stupefied. “Impossible!”

“Why?”

She blinked. Why, indeed? Standard procedure dictated alien species not sanctioned by the F.O.W. be kept ignorant of the existence of the federation. Harsh penalties ensured this rule was followed. To her knowledge, no one had ever violated the dictum of the Council. Who would know?

But if she agreed with the Earthman, who would know? And was it a gamble she was willing to take?

Although she'd known him a short time, something about Victor MacNaught told her she could believe him. She sensed an honorableness about him that instinctively made her trust him from the moment he held out his hand to her in that bar. In her business she had honed a highly refined instinct when it came to sizing up people. She had never entertained any doubt he was trustworthy.

Still, to take such a chance...?

"This is an adventure of a lifetime, Lacey," he went on when she didn't answer. "I want to experience everything I can. Savor it. I don't want to have all of this wiped from my memory. I don't want to forget what it looks like to stare out that screen." He nodded toward the panoramic view, for a moment recapturing the awe of the experience. When he brought his attention back to her, there was something different in his expression. His gaze slowly slid over her face, lingering on her lips with an intensity that made her breath catch and brought a responsive rush of heat. "I don't want to forget you, Lacey."

He reached out and took one of her hands, holding it between both of his. He smoothed her fingers open before he slowly raised her hand to his lips to press a tender kiss to the very center of her palm. Larissalyia felt that gentle caress all the way down to her toes. He looked up at her.

"Do we have a partnership?"

"Partnership?" she repeated in a faint voice, completely undone. He was manipulating her. She knew he was, but was powerless to stop him. Didn't want to stop him.

"I will do whatever you say, behave in any manner you deem appropriate. In return, you don't remove any of this. I give you my word of honor I will never repeat anything I've ever seen or done while I'm with you. Even after I return to Earth."

"Are you willing to take a blood oath on that?" Larissalyia felt rather than saw Tutsi stir in protest, yet the *Mandujano* warrior said nothing. Her cheeks heated as she realized she had forgotten all about the

presence of the third person on the bridge. Somehow with a few words and a tender gesture, Mac had completely scattered her wits.

“Yes.”

For a moment longer she stared into his eyes, searching for some sign of subterfuge. He gazed back at her, his steadiness convincing her of his sincerity.

Well, she was the gambler here. How could she blame him? In his place, she would do anything possible to hold onto this experience.

“Tutsi.”

“*Are you certain of this, Lady Ashanti?*” The big man’s voice was a rumble of doubt as he strode forward. From the belt at his waist he removed a sheathed knife, holding the weapon out to her upon both his open palms. “*He is a barbarian, after all.*”

“*I am certain, Tutsi.*”

With a bow, the bodyguard backed away until he returned to his post beside the entrance. Larissalyia unsheathed the blade, turning it this way and that, the dimmed light of the bridge gleaming on the blood red metal. She stood and gestured to the Earthman to follow her lead. Taking one of his hands, she turned it upward. Even then she hesitated, smoothing her hand over his palm much as he had done earlier with hers.

“Legend has it that anyone who breaks a blood oath taken with a *Mandujano* blade will have that betrayal return on them threefold.” She looked up into his eyes. “Are you prepared to chance that?”

“Yes.”

“Very well.” Without giving him time to react, she drew the razor sharp blade over his palm, creating little more than a scratch. Blood welled up in the shallow wound. She was pleased to note he never flinched. Turning the blade, she made a similar wound on her right palm and pressed it to his, mingling their blood.

“Do you swear on this blood oath that you will never betray my trust and reveal any knowledge of the Federation of Worlds?”

“I swear.”

“Do you swear on this blood oath that you will never speak of the presence of aliens on your planet?”

“I swear.” His grip tightened on hers. “And do you swear not to wipe clean any memory I have of the F.O.W. or yourself?”

“I swear.”

For a moment longer she held her hand pressed to his as she stared into his eyes. She experienced a brief flare of heat as their blood sealed the oath. Silence reigned as their combined blood disbursed throughout their bodies. A part of her fancied she actually felt his alien life-force permeating her body.

“It is done!”

Chapter Five

Lazarus Elinnis Ashanti paced the length of his office, his hands clasped behind his back. Only the sharp tattoo of his heels striking the marble floor broke the night's silence. He paused at the tall windows leading onto a balcony. They were flung open, the warm night air streaming into the room, cool compared to the heat of the day. The twin moons of Kador threw a silvery sheen over the city, illuminating it with a pearlescent beauty. Generally, no structure stood more than six stories high. Most of the dwellings were built belowground in defense of the harsh desert environment.

The palace of Ashanti rose a full eight stories. Unheard of in this world of raging winds and merciless suns. Kador's wealth was drawn from its countless mines that gave up its treasures of priceless gems, making it one of the wealthiest worlds within the F.O.W.

Lazarus absently fingered the row of gems encircling his right ear as he stared out into the night's beauty. It had been over a month since he had last heard from his daughter. Surely she was still safe. Worry ate at his guts, but he had to force that aside. Larissalyia was a resourceful woman. Her choice of sanctuary proved that.

When he first decoded her message and learned where she had gone, he had been horrified. Earth! Never would he have suspected she'd ever go there. Fear curled deep within his guts. If she were to learn...

With an effort, he shook off his unreasonable foreboding. He had erased those memories of that world cycles ago. If he never thought of that lone world at the very edge of the universe, neither would anyone else. Which, of course, made it a perfect sanctuary for his daughter.

Other than the one communication, he had heard nothing from her. Was that good?

With an effort, he tried to put aside his worry and concentrate on the matter at hand. SouMalocho. Lazarus's investigators were the very best in the F.O.W. He had no doubt everything was being meticulously prepared, every detail researched and investigated.

SouMalocho's present attorney was also the best money could buy. The madman had made certain of that. Granted Ang monJanick was also one of the lowest, most underhanded attorneys in the F.O.W., a perfect fit for his soulless client.

Lazarus tried to remind himself of his neutrality. At least until he heard all of the evidence. A difficult thing to do when he was convinced souMalocho was behind the attempts to abduct his only daughter. There was no proof, of course. The man was far too cagey to leave any evidence. Lazarus had only a vague threat so carefully worded it couldn't even be proven as such. Still, the two attempts made on Larissalyia had not been a figment of his imagination.

The lone cry of a night bird rang out, drawing his gaze up to one of the moons where he watched the long slender creature appear. It was briefly silhouetted against the silvery disk before it vanished into the blackness, its second call distant.

He had just turned to continue his pacing when a discreet tap at his door captured his attention.

"Come!" Few people would disturb him at this time of night. Other than his wife, none were welcome. They no doubt bore bad news.

The door opened to reveal one of his captains. Lazarus stopped a grimace as Captain Montrose strode forward, his helm held under one arm while he carried a slim packet in the other. His uniform was covered with the red dust of the desert, streaking the pale material and marring the once polished blackness of knee-high boots.

He came to a halt before the Chief Magistrate and executed a smart salute. "A message has just arrived from Investigator Gilkison, m'lord. She marked it urgent."

“Thank you, Captain.” Eying the condition of the man’s uniform, Lazarus waved a hand toward the table holding several carafes of liquor and glasses. “You’ve traveled hard. Feel free to refresh yourself.”

“Thank you, no, Your Honor. I am still on duty and have much to attend to this night.”

Lazarus’s nod was absent as the information revealed in the packet captured his attention. “Damn!” he muttered under his breath once he’d read the contents. “Another juror missing.”

“Yes, Your Honor. The third one this month.”

Anger threatened to erupt, but Lazarus fought it down. Cool and collected. He couldn’t allow his emotions to jeopardize his impartiality. He was the Chief Magistrate. Entrusted with passing judgment on the guilty and exonerating the innocent. Gilkison indicated she could not prove who was behind the disappearances, but surmised souMalocho had something to do with them. Despite being imprisoned and cut off from all outside contact, the man was still able to direct his minions.

“Place the remaining witnesses and their families under protective custody,” he instructed Captain Montrose, his voice harsh. “Immediately! I do not want any more people vanishing without a trace!”

“By your leave, Your Honor.”

Lazarus didn’t bother to watch the man stride out the door. His hand closed on the missive, crushing it in his fist.

Where was Larissalyia?

* * *

Mac closed his eyes. The ship shuddered as they entered the atmosphere. He gripped the armrests of his chair so tight his fingers threatened to leave permanent imprints in the material.

Lacey hummed softly under her breath, apparently unconcerned they appeared to be seconds from crashing. Opening his eyes, he forced himself to watch the woman at his side as she made minute adjustments

to their heading, her motions smooth and sure as she handled the controls. While he didn't have a clue as to what the hell she was doing, she was certainly directing the ship with an expert skill and competency he couldn't help but admire. He took heart from her lack of alarm. This entry had to be normal.

With a conscious effort he relaxed his grip on the armrests. A quick glance behind showed the bodyguard strapped in to the navigational chair, staring at Mac with that hard menace in his eyes. The same stare he'd given Mac since he walked onto the bridge. Evidently trust wasn't part of his vocabulary. What did he expect Mac to do? He wasn't exactly in a position of control right now.

Returning his gaze to the view screen, Mac nearly closed his eyes again as the ship tilted and dove toward the planet of Cyber Five. Despite his trepidation, he admired the beauty of the world they rushed toward. Lacey mentioned this world was mostly ocean with only a smattering of habitable land. She compared it to Earth's Hawaii, which made it a tropical paradise as far as he was concerned.

He held his breath when it looked like they were going to dive straight into that aquamarine ocean, but at the last instant Lacey did something with the controls and the ship banked sharply until they soared parallel with the water. They flew low, perhaps ten feet above the surface, racing toward a speck on the horizon. With each passing minute that speck grew until he finally recognized an island. Soon they were close enough to enable him to pick out foliage and a stretch of sand. Not quite like Hawaii, but there were similarities.

Another quick flick of a lever and Lacey abruptly slowed their approach until they hovered over the water just shy of the beach. Through the screen he saw blinding white sand with some sort of flecks that reflected the sun. He squinted in order to see clearly. It was at once beautiful and irritating.

Like any tropical island on Earth, the vegetation began well away from the shore, every shade of blue-green visible, from a near black to the palest of olive. The tree trunks were spindly, none taller than maybe twenty feet.

For some reason, they looked odd. It took Mac a moment to realize that rather than fronds like on a palm tree, the leaves were more like cotton balls, topping the thin trunks and rising to the sky. They were in constant motion, the winds coming off the ocean whipping around them.

"A storm is coming, but it should miss us," Lacey said.

Mac turned to find Lacey staring out the view screen, her attention focused on the dark purple clouds which sat on the horizon.

"Perfect," she murmured.

"Why perfect?"

"The static electricity generated by that storm will have concealed our entry into Cyber Five airspace. Fivers aren't the friendliest to begin with, so I'd just as soon avoid them."

"So why are we here?"

"This is just a temporary sanctuary. We need water and a few supplies. Plus, I want to decide where we can go to find you another identity. You will need papers and clothes other than Tutsi's. Besides, we have to start you on U.B."

"U.B.?" Mac felt like an idiot as he parroted her words back at her. He agreed with the need for clothing that fit. He wasn't a small man by any stretch of the imagination, but the shirt Lacey had filched for him from the massive gorilla hung on him.

"Universal Basic. Fortunately I have the headgear here on the ship as well as the necessary disks. I had to rig something together when I decided to hide on Earth. Your language was difficult to assimilate. You have so many dialects and with the different regional accents, it took me a bit of time to gather enough to create a learning disk for the Pacific Northwest." She made a careless motion with one hand. "The headgear comes equipped with the software for learning U.B. but the disks I created will help you translate your English language into U.B."

Mac regarded her with some distrust. "And what would I have to do?"

"Not much. You just sit with your eyes open. The device will fit over your head much like one of your motorcycle helmets. Instead of a visor, the shield before your eyes will open your optical senses to their fullest

and begin to transfer the instructional information directly to your mind. It is a painless procedure.”

“Forgive me if I don’t exactly jump at the chance, but I’m having a hard time trusting you after what you pulled on Earth.” Mac made his tone dry and allowed the wealth of his distrust to seep into his voice.

He watched as Lacey shot him a quick glance, then turned back to the screen with a shake of her head. A slight color came to her cheeks. She had pinned her hair to the back of her neck, which left the purity of her profile free for his admiration.

The severity of the style made him itch to release that gorgeous blond mass from its binding and comb his fingers through its softness as he held her face still for his kisses. Kisses that would turn into caresses, and eventually turn into—

Shit! What was he thinking? She was an alien, for God’s sake. From an entirely different universe. Never mind the gorgeous packaging. Was he out of his mind?

Although...his glance flicked down the length of her body clad in that khaki flight suit, lingering on various intriguing curves. She seemed to have all the equipment in the right place. Did women of her world make love? He’d seen enough science fiction films to know that was not necessarily the case. But that was fiction. This was reality.

“I apologize for my deceit, Victor.”

His attention snapped back to her face. He watched her finger the gems encircling half of her right ear. They were many colored, all small, dotting the curve of her ear. He’d noticed earlier and wondered if they signified anything.

“Time was of the essence,” she continued, “and I could not take the time to explain matters to you.”

Mac grunted before he returned his stare to the island.

“Learning Universal Basic will be necessary if you are to blend in. You have to trust me in this.”

Allowing his silence to stretch a bit longer, Mac knew she was right. Besides, this way he would know what was being said around him.

But trust was a double-edged sword. Just a short time ago he'd overheard her threatening to sell him into slavery. Given her advanced resources, would there be anything he could do should she decide to go that route? How difficult would it be to do this mind wash and drop him on a planet without memory of who or what he was?

He clenched his jaw. He'd just have to trust in this blood oath they shared. But even that was questionable. Why should he believe anything she said?

Yet he had to. He didn't have a hell of a lot of choices.

"So, now what?" he asked.

"Now we disembark."

Mac heard a click, his attention drawn to the screen as a walkway extended from the front of the ship. Even as they hovered over the water, the mechanical path reached the beach.

"Convenient."

"And we will not even get wet." Lacey reached into a console drawer and extracted an object the size of a cell phone. She slipped it into one of the many pockets of her flight suit and stood before she gestured and led the way from the bridge.

When they reached the outer doors they were open. Tutsi was already outside, his gaze turning in all directions. A small pile of equipment rested at his feet and a large knapsack was slung over one massive shoulder. The bright sunlight made his skin appear darker.

He turned to Lacey, his nod indicating all was clear.

Mac drew a deep breath of the scented air, savoring its freshness after a couple of days with canned air. There was nothing wrong with the ship's air supply. It just smelled...dull.

Now a brisk wind flowed over him, bringing with it the smell of the ocean and the sweetness of flowering plants. He took a moment to appreciate the beauty of the island, his gaze moving from the gleam of multi-colored sand to the odd vegetation a short distance away. The sun which Cyber Five rotated around was mostly yellow with a strong undertone of orange, but he assumed the ultraviolet rays were similar to

that which he was accustomed to. It felt the same, warmth caressing his bare skin.

He was on an alien planet. The thought staggered him. Never in his wildest imaginings would he have believed this. It went beyond surreal.

“Are you all right?”

The soft voice at his side steadied him. He knew he was gawking like a country yokel. The look in Lacey’s violet eyes told him she understood. She took his arm and urged him from the ramp and onto the beach. He could feel the heat of the sand beneath the soles of his boots.

The moment they stepped off the ramp, it immediately began to retract. It slid into the ship to vanish without a seam. A glance at Lacey showed her pressing a series of buttons on the little device, her attention centered on the ship.

The vessel was bigger than Mac had suspected. Maybe the size of the Millennium Falcon from the Star Wars series. That was where any similarities ended. This ship was sleek, a dark metallic gray with few protrusions from its body. Not a flying saucer, but certainly not shaped like the space shuttle. Something in between, he decided.

Then, to his astonishment, it suddenly began to sink.

“Uh, Lacey...”

“Hmm?” She glanced up from her controls, her irises now brown as she concentrated on the task at hand.

“Is that supposed to be doing that?”

“What?” She followed the direction of his gaze. “Sinking? Yes.” She pressed another series of buttons. “It is supposed to submerge. How do you think I managed to conceal my ship while on your Earth? It was at the bottom of the Elliot Bay while we lived in Seattle.”

“Slick.” He continued to watch until the ship vanished from sight, disturbing the water for a moment longer before it once more rippled with the natural motion of the ocean. There was no indication a spaceship hid just beneath its surface.

"The Talon has something similar to what you would call a cloaking device," Lacey explained as she turned to take in their surroundings. The color of her eyes bled into a pale jade. He knew it was a look of caution. He was slowly cataloguing her moods to match them to the shades which her eyes took. It was difficult, but fascinating.

"Once under the water," she continued, "it reflects its surroundings to render it virtually invisible."

"Sort of like a chameleon."

"What is that?"

"A lizard that changes color to match its environment."

"Yes. Much like that."

She bent to gather up some of the equipment. Stepping forward, Mac took most of the stuff from her and slung it over his shoulder. He noticed Tutsi only carried that one knapsack. Either the man was carrying the crown jewels, or he had an arsenal in his pack. Which made sense, Mac surmised. It was best that the bodyguard didn't weigh himself down with equipment. He needed his hands free in case they were attacked.

Lacey led the way into the trees, her steps confident as she wound her way on the barely discernible path. Mac followed on her heels while Tutsi brought up the rear. There was little sound other than the gentle wash of the ocean on the shore and the wind in the trees. Here and there he caught a chirp or hiss that gave evidence of animal inhabitants, but he saw nothing of the creatures of this world.

The shade was welcome after the heat of the sun, cool only by contrast. Lacey was correct when she compared Cyber Five to the Hawaiian Islands. The climate was much the same. Even the vegetation possessed a tropical feel. If he squinted, he might be able to fool himself into believing the weird-looking trees were palm trees.

After they traveled for several minutes, Mac asked, "So, where are we going?"

"There is a lagoon of fresh water just ahead. This island is remote from the main islands and is therefore rarely used."

"I gather you've been here before."

Lacey tossed him a glance over her shoulder, her face unreadable. “A few times.”

Mac was beginning to wonder if her profession as a trader might involve a little bit of smuggling. He allowed himself a small grin. Somehow the image fit her. Lacey had a slightly swashbuckling, devil-may-care attitude which was fascinating.

Hell, everything about her was fascinating.

When they broke out of the trees, Mac halted, nearly causing Tutsi to run into him from behind. The big man grunted something under his breath and sidestepped him, but Mac didn’t notice. He was too busy staring at the incredible sight before him.

Pure paradise.

The lagoon was large, fed by a waterfall cascading down a rock formation of at least twenty feet. The water possessed a violet tinge that darkened where the basin was deeper. In most places the vegetation grew right up to the water’s edge, many of the trees soaring high in the air to overhang the lagoon. A stretch of the fine sand edged one portion of the water, looking soft and inviting against the lavender water.

It had to be one of the most beautiful places he’d ever seen.

Lacey halted at a carpet of low-growing groundcover and dropped her burden. She paused a moment to stretch her arms over her head to relieve the tightness of muscles. Mac felt his mouth go dry as he watched the flight suit pull taut over her breasts, emphasizing her narrow waist. The material faithfully followed every intriguing curve and line of her figure. His interest was immediate and promised to become embarrassing unless he was careful.

He arranged one of his bundles to conceal the effect she had on him. The last thing he needed was to hand her another advantage over him.

“We will stay here the night, replenish our supplies and depart tomorrow.”

“What’s the hurry—” Mac broke off as a shadow crossed over the sun and drew his attention upward. Through the trees he saw birds flying high overhead. Maybe a half dozen of them. Despite the distance they

appeared enormous, their wingspan better than double their length. Riding the air currents, they appeared both graceful and powerful as they canted and swooped before the whims of the wind. Their long necks tapered to a smallish head. He wasn't sure, but there seemed to be large beaks.

"That is one of the reasons we cannot remain."

"Because of birds?" Mac's tone was skeptical, his interest still focused overhead as the birds passed from sight.

"Yonnies, for the most part, hunt in flocks. They tend to prefer the creatures of the oceans, but are not adverse to a quick meal from whatever they find on land."

"They're carnivorous?"

"Oh, yes. Quite vicious and very dangerous." Lacey stooped down to unpack her bundles. She gestured for him to join her. "Do not allow them to catch you on the open beach. They have large talons that could easily pick up a human being. If you do see one while you are in the open, drop flat to the ground. They are far more graceful in the air and while hunting in the sea. With solid ground they find it difficult to judge depth."

"I'll keep that in mind." Mac quickly scanned the sky again, relieved to find that the creatures—Yonnies—had moved on. Damn, he had a lot to learn.

"We will be safe in the trees. As I said, they do not maneuver well on solid ground." She pulled out various items from the bundles she took from Mac, shook out a lightweight material and spread it on the ground. With small stakes she kept it from flapping in the steady breeze. She set out a second sheet before she tossed a folded packet to Mac. "We'll camp out under the stars tonight. The nights here on Cyber are very mild so there will be no need for shelter. It's unlikely that storm will swing this way."

She indicated he spread his own groundsheet across from her and extracted a small object from one of the packs. After setting it on the ground between them, she switched it on. The soft glow was just visible

in the brightness of the remaining day. "There is very little twilight here. Darkness falls quickly."

Mac followed her example and spread his own sheet out. He sat, giving it a try. With the springy groundcover, it made a bed as comfortable as the finest mattress. Unbidden the thought of sharing a bed with Lacey came to mind and—

He got to his feet, banishing the vision. No chance of that. Not with the gorilla watching his every move.

A glance in Tutsi's direction showed the man had emptied his knapsack, his entire attention focused on the various items he set out. As Mac watched, he sank a tubular object about the length of his arm in the ground and immediately switched it on. A small light came on and it began to hum.

"That will warn us if any other ships are in the vicinity."

Mac glanced over at Lacey to find her watching him with leaf-green eyes. He hadn't seen that particular shade before and wondered which emotion it denoted.

She sighed. "There are not many places we could have gone after leaving Earth. I am afraid that Cyber Five was a rather obvious choice. Which makes it the second reason we cannot linger here."

Mac grunted, but his attention was still on the bodyguard. With interest he watched as the man pulled several more objects from the pack. Out of professional curiosity, Mac crossed the slight space and hunkered down beside Tutsi.

"What are those?" He eyed the dozen or so largish silver balls. They were about the size of a billiard ball. None of the array of items strewn around were remotely familiar to Mac. He kept his hands by his side, careful not to inadvertently activate anything.

"We will encircle our camp with the Guardians." The big man's voice was a low rumble. It carried a heavy accent that proved his command of Earth English was nowhere near Lacey's. Mac shot him a glance and found Tutsi regarding him with a hint of interest. "They act much like the camouflage of the ship."

“No kidding.” His interest piqued, Mac began peppering the bodyguard with questions. Together they fell into a discussion of various security methods. Although Tutsi’s English wasn’t perfect, they worked around the language barrier.

It wasn’t long before Mac had a working knowledge of most of the bodyguard’s equipment. Under Tutsi’s expert eye, Mac helped set out the Guardians until they encircled the camp. When they were in position, he watched with interest as the big man activated them. Only a soft green glow indicated they were running.

“How do you know if they’re working?”

“Step back beyond the perimeter of the Guardians.”

Mac carefully moved beyond the closest silver globe. To his astonishment the entire camp, along with Tutsi and Lacey, vanished. There was nothing to be seen but the undisturbed vegetation and the lagoon beyond it. Mac paced the length of where he knew the camp was, eyeing the area in an attempt to pierce the concealing veil. Nothing hinted there were two people a few feet in front of him.

“It’s seamless.”

“Unfortunately, the concealment does not extend beyond a certain point.” The disembodied voice came out of nowhere. Mac shook his head and paced forward until he passed the outer circle. Instantly Lacey and Tutsi reappeared. She sat cross-legged on her sleeping sheet, watching the two of them with a touch of amusement.

“What is it you do on your world, Earthman?” she asked as she unwrapped what looked like one of the chocolate bars he had seen in her hotel room.

“I own a security consultation firm.” Yeah, it was a Hershey bar. Confirming his suspicions of a sweet tooth.

The chocolate halted halfway to her mouth as surprise widened her eyes. “Truly?” Her expression turned thoughtful as she took a hefty bite of the candy. “Interesting.”

“I see you found something from Earth you like.”

“Hmm?” She looked down at the chocolate and a touch of embarrassment crossed her face. “Ah...yes. It is very addicting.”

“I have yet to meet a woman who didn’t like chocolate.”

“Well, this is mostly for trading purposes. I have not found anything like this in the universe and I am certain it will prove profitable.”

“From an unsanctioned planet?” Mac raised one brow, tilting his head. There was a spot of chocolate at the corner of her mouth. He swallowed. Right next to those luscious lips. “How would you swing that?”

“Swing that”? What is the meaning of this phrase?”

“Arrange trade with an unsanctioned planet. Isn’t that a big no-no?” A grin threatened to appear. He could almost see her selecting and discarding answers. “Or perhaps you would indulge in a little unsanctioned trading?”

“That would be smuggling, Earthman.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It is against the law.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I am an honorable trader.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Will you stop saying ‘uh-huh’?” As her irritation flared free, her eyes bled to a very stormy gray. The change came between one blink and another.

Mac dropped to his sleeping sheet and allowed the grin to spread across his face. Despite the shadow of uncertainty, distrust and being chased by bad guys, he felt damned good. At that moment he realized how stagnant his life had become. Between building MacNaught & Associates and his ambiguous feelings regarding Joanna, he hadn’t noticed when the challenge had gone out of living.

Hell, thinking about it, he hadn’t felt this good in a long time. Here he was, abducted by a beautiful alien, threatened with having his memory wiped clean and being sold into a slave market, a chance of becoming

Yonni chow, sitting on an alien planet which looked like the Garden of Eden and right now he didn't want to be anywhere else.

His thinking had to be flawed, but there was little he could do about it except roll with the punches. It would be in his best interest, and in the best interest of his world, to learn everything he could of this F.O.W. Granted he had given his word—hell, sworn an oath—never to reveal the existence of the F.O.W. to anyone on Earth, but that could change if Earth made the cut.

“So what do you plan? Try to have Earth sanctioned?”

“It is a thought.”

“But then anyone would be free to trade there.”

“True.”

“You would no longer have exclusivity.”

“Also true.”

He grinned again at her disgruntled tone. It had to be a bitch being the daughter of a Chief Magistrate and walk the straight and narrow. Provided she did. Somehow, he couldn't see her following any law to the letter. Lacey had too much brashness for that. She'd find a way around it.

“You might need a liaison who could smooth some of the way for you.”

“A liaison,” she murmured. She kept her attention focused on the remainder of her chocolate bar. “Someone like you, perhaps?”

“I have a number of contacts with both the United States and several foreign governments.” Although that oath swung both ways with Lacey promising not to wipe his memory, he didn't think making himself indispensable would hurt.

Who was he fooling? He also wanted a guarantee that this woman wouldn't vanish from his life forever. How he went from nearly getting married to this fear he'd never see Lacey again, he didn't know.

And he didn't particularly like it.

Mac got to his feet in a violent motion. The suddenness of his move drew her glance back to him. He stared into those beautiful leaf-green eyes for a moment before he turned on his heel and stalked away from the campsite. He crossed the barrier which held their party invisible—or camouflaged—and made his way through the trees to the beach.

He glanced upward for those Yonni things, but the violet blue of the sky remained empty save for clouds tinged with a pinkish sheen. Without hesitation he prowled across the stretch of sand to the water's edge where he stared out over the endless expanse of ocean. The waves were gentle, undulating to the shore and receding. The sand was pristine, showing none of the debris which normally littered a beach. Seaweed, dead fish. Not even driftwood.

It was almost too perfect, if such a thing were possible.

He automatically registered the beauty, but his thoughts were turned inward. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd thought he was in love with Joanna. After dating for nearly a year, they fell into a comfortable relationship. The next logical step was marriage. Well, that went all to hell the day he found her in bed with his chief competitor. How could he go from believing himself in love with his fiancée to lusting after a woman who wasn't even of his world? Regardless of the packaging.

The thought didn't sit well with him.

Movement far offshore caught his attention, a ripple in the water that didn't match the motion of the waves. Even as he watched, something broke the surface for only an instant. He got an impression of dark blue smoothness before it vanished beneath the water once more. A sea creature of this world? Lacey hadn't said anything about any danger on the beach other than those bird things, so he had to assume nothing was about to lunge for him from out of the ocean.

He returned to his musings as he paced the length of the beach, his feet sinking into the soft sand. Perhaps what he told Paul had been true and not just the beer talking. Maybe it was relief he felt when he found Joanna in bed with Ben Compton. Had he subconsciously wanted an excuse to call off the wedding?

Well, Joanna certainly provided him with a helluva good one.

What he wouldn't give to access his answering machine right now. He could guess the calls waiting for him. Joanna, of course, with some excuse. His mother. That went without saying. Mac nearly winced as he imagined her messages. No matter what his reasons for calling off the wedding, Stella MacNaught was sure to be furious. He was going to owe Paul big time when he got back home.

If he got back home.

For the first time he wondered if he had been missed yet on Earth. Paul wouldn't expect to hear from him for at least two weeks. He'd told his brother he was going to be out of touch until he found himself a nice beach to loaf on.

A short bark of laughter escaped him as he looked around. Well, you couldn't find a nicer beach than this, that's for sure. But this wasn't exactly what he had in mind.

Still—right now, trapped on an alien world with two beings from outer space, being pursued by the lizard people, he felt more content than he had for a long time. He was alert, in top shape. Hell, he hadn't had a cigarette in four days and didn't even feel an urge for one.

Intent on his thoughts, he didn't realize the light was fading. One moment it was daylight, then in the space of around sixty heartbeats, the sky darkened to the most incredible array of colors he'd ever seen and just as quickly went black. He stood perfectly still to allow his eyes to adjust to the sheer blackness.

Lacey wasn't kidding when she said night came quickly on Cyber Five. There was no moon, nor any indication that this planet possessed one. The blanket of stars in the night sky didn't help much. Except for the continued wash of water and the slight strengthening of the wind, little sound disturbed the night. He lifted his face into the breeze to enjoy its caress, feeling it catch his hair and whip it back behind him.

What ifs and what could have been—useless musings. If Lacey was to be believed, this should be all cleared up within a few weeks. Probably

before he was even missed. Provided her father did his part and nothing went wrong.

He would be returned to Earth, hopefully none the worse for wear, and Lacey would be gone.

Crud.

A slight sound came from behind him. His senses sprang to full alert and he whipped around, going down into a defensive crouch.

Only the faint shine of a handheld light betrayed Lacey's presence. She halted and went very still, careful to make no move that might provoke a charge. The illumination shined on her from below to throw intriguing shadows over the lines and curves of her face. She had taken down her hair. The mass of pale blond tresses fell about her shoulders and curled down her back. The steady breeze tossed it into a silken disarray.

"I was becoming concerned when you did not return," she said. A trace of uncertainty crossed her face when he merely stared at her. "I thought perhaps you were having trouble finding our camp."

"No," Mac answered after letting the silence stretch for another moment. Turning away, he dropped onto the soft bed of sand and drew his knees up to rest his arms on them. "I had some thinking to do."

Lacey hesitated, then joined him, setting the lantern down in front of them. The soft illumination created an intimacy that closed around the two of them. Together they stared out over the blackness of the vast ocean. The heavens were sprinkled with countless stars, strewn like jewels across the velvet of space. The starlight threw off barely enough light to enable them to watch the advance and retreat of the water as it washed upon the shore.

"Were you..." she began, then stopped.

Mac turned his head to look at her. The lamp allowed him to watch her sift sand between her fingers, creating a small pile before she smoothed it flat.

She paused to clear her throat. Her voice sounded hesitant when she spoke again. "Were you thinking about the woman you were to marry?"

“Joanna?”

“That is her name?”

“Yeah.” Mac blew out his breath as he continued to stare at those long fingers.

Gather, sift, smooth. Gather, sift, smooth.

If he didn’t know better, he would say that Lacey was nervous. That would be quite a switch. He would have bet nothing could make this iron maiden nervous.

“Yeah, I was thinking about her. Among other things.”

“Perhaps, when you return to your world, you could find some way to—”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. Like I said before, I have no intention of marrying Joanna.”

“Oh.”

He had no idea what that little sound meant. Was she pleased? Disappointed? What?

“Thing is, she evidently preferred the company of another man to me.”

Lacey went still. Then her head came up with a jerk. The light from the lantern just bright enough to read the affronted look that crossed her face. He couldn’t see her eye color in this dim light, but there was no mistaking the outrage in her expression. Her hand came down to squash the little pile of sand she had formed.

“Has she no honor?” she raged in a tight voice. “Has she no decency?”

Mac caught the flailing arm she used to express her indignation. He retained his hold on her hand, folding it between the two of his. The gesture drew her closer, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Don’t worry about it, honey. Take it easy.”

“How could a woman of your world give her word and then betray you in such a way?”

“Are you saying nothing like that happens on your world?” He reached out and tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear. The wind promptly whipped it free once more. He allowed his fingers to linger in the soft mass, marveling at the silken quality.

The glance she shot him clearly doubted his sanity. “Of course it happens. But only with those who have no honor. Why do you think I am alone? I will never make a promise I am unable to keep.”

Leaning closer, Mac inhaled deeply to savor the sweetness of her scent. Heat licked across his skin and his fingers tightened in her hair. Even as he watched, her eyes widened as she realized for the first time how close he was. With his free hand, he curved his palm around her cheek. Her skin was smooth, soft. Softer than he’d imagined.

“Victor...” she murmured. Was that a protest? Or an invitation?

Without giving himself time to think, he leaned forward and kissed her. His lips skimmed hers before he deliberately deepened the caress. Her lips were incredible. Full, moist and delicious. When he slowly withdrew, he knew it wasn’t his imagination when he felt her lips cling to his for an instant.

He had never tasted anything so sweet in his life. It left him hungry for more.

He dragged her closer as his lips claimed hers once more, hungry, insatiable. His nostrils flared as an indescribable scent reached them. He drew the fragrance deep into his lungs and felt his senses ignite to a conflagration. He couldn’t figure out where it was coming from. It was the most...

Even as the thought began, it faded. The hunger which had begun to well from his groin infused his entire body. Every inch of his flesh felt sensitized with need for this one woman.

He sensed more than felt her shiver. Heard her low moan. It was all he could do not to lay her in that soft bed of sand and take her then and there.

His hand slid down her cheek to curve over her shoulder, twisting her more fully into his embrace, her sweet bottom cradled in his lap. Her

hand fisted into the material of his shirt to tug him closer until she was pressed against his chest. One of her arms came up to curl around his neck, long fingers tangling in his hair.

Mac raised his head long enough to take in her languid expression. Her eyes were half closed as she watched him through the screen of her lashes. Even with the dim lighting, he saw the gleam of desire. He couldn't detect the color in her eyes, but thought they burned with the intensity of liquid gold.

"Tell me to stop, Lacey," he said, his voice rough with passion, even as he wondered whether he was out of his mind. Why was he giving her an opportunity to call a halt?

"No." She murmured something in her own language, her voice sultry. "Do not stop."

Mac drew a deep breath, savoring that scent. His control evaporated under her words. With a growl, he buried his face in the curve of her neck and pressed a string of kisses down the tantalizing length of her throat. He paused only long enough to nuzzle the material of her flight suit out of his way. Her clothing was opened low enough to give him access to the upper curve of her breast. He continued his sensual investigation until he encountered what had to be her underclothes. Made of a stiffened material, it encased her breasts and encircled her body. More like a shell than a brassiere. And a hell of a lot more inaccessible.

He concentrated on what was available and ran his tongue over her perfumed flesh. A mewl of sound came from her throat before she arched her back, offering herself up to his ministrations.

Mac slid his hand up her rib cage to cup one breast, fitting his hand to perfection. Through the heavy material he felt her nipple stiffen against his palm as a shiver of anticipation raced through her.

That fragrance grew stronger, swirling around to envelope him until his head spun.

Christ, she was responsive! He was so hard and heavy it was fast becoming sheer agony. Her bottom pressed against his erection, making

every movement a new test in control. If this went on much longer, he was going to come in his jeans.

His mouth returned to hers once more, nipping at her lower lip before he soothed it with his tongue. The moan she gave was raw, hungry. Her fingers tightened in his hair, demanding. Without further urging, he parted her lips and swept his tongue into the honeyed interior of her mouth. He was thorough as his tongue danced over her teeth before indulging in a sensual dual with hers. Both their breaths turned ragged. Mac was just about to lower Lacey to the bed of soft sand when he sensed more than heard another presence.

“M’lady.”

Lacey jumped at the sound of the deep growl behind them while Mac swore viciously under his breath. His arms tightened for an instant when she struggled to free herself from his embrace, then he released her. He remained where he was as she leaped to her feet to face Tutsi. She rattled off a quick question in what Mac assumed was this Universal Basic. Hell, it could be her actual language for all he knew. It had that same singsong quality that laced her English. Its cadences flowed down his spine and ignited a whole new series of sensations.

He leaned back on one elbow, uncaring that the position stretched his jeans over his erection to the point of pain. Right now, he hurt so bad it made little difference. The lantern didn’t throw enough light to reveal the full extent of his discomfort, for which he was grateful.

He listened to the exchange, a bite in Lacey’s voice betraying her displeasure. She was just as pissed as he was with the interruption. But Tutsi’s response caused her to glance up at the sky with some concern. Although he couldn’t see her expression, he felt her growing worry. He followed the direction of her gaze, but saw only the countless stars strewn across the heavens.

“Tutsi tells me the storm has changed course and is headed this way.”

“Is that bad?”

“I am not sure. It could be. Because Cyber Five is mostly water, the storms here tend to be very violent.” She bent to gather up the lantern. She looked everywhere but at him. Her embarrassment crackled in the air.

He took a deep breath and got to his feet. When he loomed over her, she shot him a quick glance and put a bit of distance between them. Oh yeah. She was rattled.

“There are some shallow caves beside the waterfall. We will take shelter there until this blows over.”

With a mocking bow, Mac swept his arm out before him. “After you, m’lady.”

He watched with amusement as she lifted her chin and gave him her patented haughty look down the length of her nose. Well, she certainly didn’t let embarrassment get her down for long. The ice queen had returned.

Curiously, that intriguing fragrance he’d noticed earlier had faded until it vanished completely. Along with the fire that had licked through his veins. He shook his head.

Without another word, she turned on her heel and led the way from the beach, her stride sure and in command. The bodyguard gave him another flat stare before he followed her ladyship. Mac trailed after them at a leisurely pace.

It was going to be one hell of a frustrating night.

Chapter Six

Cerese Nadirusta Ashanti broke off in mid-sentence when she felt the vibration of the communicator in the hidden pocket of her skirts, then continued her conversation with the ambassador of Minea. For a few minutes longer she continued her socializing as if nothing disturbed her.

She cast a discreet glance around the room before she excused herself with a smile. The device continued to vibrate against her thigh as she wound her way through the assorted beings who comprised the small gathering she and Lazarus hosted.

Here and there she lingered to share a comment or a joke with her guests, signaling the servants to replenish drinks as she made her way to the doors that opened onto a wide balcony.

She paused an instant before slipping through the sheer hangings that concealed the glass doors. No one noticed her departure. Once out in the night, she hesitated for a long moment before drawing a deep breath as a wave of trepidation washed over her. Few people had access to this communicator.

Outside, the evening was mild, far cooler than the swelter of the Kadorian days. It was dark, the moons having yet to rise. A scattering of stars provided the only light. Other than shadows, little could be seen beyond the stone banister. This side of the Ashanti palace overlooked the gardens and all was dark save for the lanterns scattered along the pathways of manicured landscape.

The beauty of the night was lost on her as she moved to the far end of the balcony, well away from the doors where her conversation might be overheard. Even then she took the precaution of peering over the banister. It was a three-story drop.

Wetting suddenly dry lips, she reached into the pocket and extracted the small device, forcing herself to activate it.

An image appeared, not the one she dreaded, but a close second. The bluish-hued face of Nicos filled the little screen. No emotion betrayed his impatience for the time she had taken to respond to his summons. But then, it was almost impossible to decipher the expressions of a Kyrion with any degree of accuracy.

"It took you long enough to respond, Cereese." Even his voice possessed little emotion. "Why?"

"I have a number of guests here tonight. I could not very well whip out this communicator in front of them." She made her voice hard, determined to betray none of the fear which ate at her. Why would Nicos be contacting her? What went wrong? The answer was not long in coming.

"She escaped."

Cereese did not need to ask who he referred to. "When?"

"One day span ago."

"How?"

This time the slitted eyes of the Kyrion slid to one side. Only someone familiar with the reptile-like race would recognize that evasive gesture. "She had aid from an Earth creature."

"You could not hold her?" Cereese sneered. She made sure her contempt was visible over the communicator. "I practically gift-wrapped Larissalyia for you and you could not even capture her?"

His gaze snapped back toward her. Nicos forgot himself long enough to allow his animosity to flare until it was plain even over the tiny screen of the communicator. Why souMalocho persisted in using these Kyrions was beyond her. But then, few dared to question souMalocho. Not if they valued their lives.

"I must know where she went."

"Other than that one time, she has not contacted her father."

"Are you certain?"

“Of course I’m certain. Lazarus would have told me.”

“You will find out.”

“There is just so much I can do.” Cerese glanced around once more. The soft murmur of conversation came from inside the drawing room, punctuated by an occasional burst of laughter. Soon she would be missed.

She lowered her voice. “Think, you fool! Where would she have gone after leaving that barbaric planet? She would need somewhere to recoup.”

Nicos was silent for several seconds as he gave this some thought. “Yes,” he muttered under his breath. He had evidently forgotten about her. “There are few worm-holes in that sector. She would have been limited in her destinations.”

“The emissions of her ship would not have time to dissipate. Even you should be able to pick up her trail.”

The final look he gave her was vicious as, without another word, he cut off the communication. Cerese didn’t know whether to be insulted or relieved. Light! She hated this. She hated Nicos. Almost as much as she hated souMalocho. How he managed to...

The thought scattered as the glass doors opened. For an instant the murmur of voices amplified before the doors closed once more. She slipped the communicator into the hidden pocket as she turned with a smile pasted onto her lips. Expecting to find a wandering guest, she was unprepared to see her husband close the distance between them.

“Are you all right, my dear?” Although he had reached his fifty-fifth cycle, Lazarus Ashanti was still an incredibly attractive man. Even in the dimmed lighting, the gleam of silvery hair was visible. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, enabling her to see the concern on his face. The lack of light made reading his mood through his eye color impossible, so she relied on facial expressions.

“I’m fine, Lazarus. I just stepped out for a breath of fresh air.”

Without a word, her husband reached to enfold her in his arms. She took a moment to savor the comfort of his strength. For this space in

time she forgot everything else. He always seemed to know just what she needed.

Conscious of what she had to do, she rubbed her cheek against the stiffened material of the brocade tunic covering the expanse of his chest. The look she directed up at him was provocative, deliberately sultry. "How long before our guests leave?"

The smile he gave her held a wealth of promise. "Not much longer. Why? What did you have in mind?"

Cerese ran one blue lacquered nail down the side of his face to trace the line of his lips. Leaning closer, she brushed her breasts against the hardness of his chest.

"I've seen so little of you lately, my love. You have been working so hard."

"This investigation is very important, Cerese." He sounded distracted as he dipped his head to steal a quick kiss. "I must carefully balance everything I know of souMalocho in order to uncover his criminal activities."

Cerese caught his face between her two hands and pulled him back to deepen the kiss for a brief moment. Her tongue slipped out to lave his lower lip.

"You are certain Larissalyia is safe?" She pulled away to gaze up into his face, relieved that the night was too dark for him to see her eyes. Although she was not Kadorian, she knew her eyes reflected her guilt. She had never been good at concealing her emotions.

"I am sure she is fine," Lazarus said. "I would never have guessed that she would go to that backward planet." His chuckle sounded a little forced. "A brilliant maneuver on her part, when you think about it."

"You've heard nothing more after that one communication?"

"No. Nor I do not expect to. Larissalyia knows the less contact between us the better. I still have not found evidence that souMalocho was behind those earlier two attempts to kidnap my daughter, but I'm taking no chances."

Cerese digested this information for a moment. Good. She would have nothing to report should she be contacted again. Lazarus was not aware his daughter had been flushed from her cover. But how long before Larissalyia contacted him? After she found a new sanctuary, she would inform her father, if only to relieve his worry.

“Please.” She made sure her expression reflected only concern. “Let me know when you hear anything. I worry about her. She is all alone and vulnerable.”

“I will, my dear.” With reluctance he released her and threaded his fingers through hers. “Come, our guests are sure to notice our absence.”

He turned to escort her from the balcony. Cerese cast one last glance over the tranquility of the night. Regret clouded her mind. When was the last time she’d had any peace?

* * *

“I just received this message, sir.” The words were muttered under his breath as Ang monJanick made a show of studying the computer screen in front of him.

Audon souMalocho leaned forward in a pretence of studying the text. The program his attorney activated simulated the low murmur of voices, covering the true discussion they were having. The cameras and the listening devices would record them speaking but hear an entirely different conversation. Everything had been carefully inspected by the guards before he entered the conference room, but the small program imbedded deep in his equipment went through undetected. The F.O.W. didn’t know this particular program existed.

Ang turned the small monitor more fully toward his client as if to show him his plans for his legal strategy. In the lower right corner of the screen, a tiny window opened to reveal the face of the Kyrion, Nicos. MonJanick continued to silently move his lips as the recorded message played.

“I have a lead on the Ashanti woman, sir,” Nicos reported. “There are only two places she could have gone after leaving Earth. My reports indicate that she had visited Cyber Five in the past on more than one occasion and her ship’s vapor trail leads in that direction.” The Kyrion’s eyes cut to the left for an instant before he returned his gaze to the screen. “I will have her in my possession before the next five day.”

The message vanished as the program instantly destroyed itself. SouMalocho leaned back in his chair, his long satirical face creased into lines of reflection. The expression in his dark eyes when he glanced at his attorney made monJanick shiver.

“Contact me the instant Nicos has her.” His lips barely moved but there was no mistaking the intensity of his words. “I must have Larissalyia. She is imperative to my plans.”

“What of Cerese?” For the benefit of the cameras, the lawyer pointed out a passage of legal interest to his client. In a few minutes the guards would end their session.

“What about her?”

“Lazarus Ashanti is far from a fool. Won’t he grow suspicious of his wife once he learns that his daughter’s sanctuary has been compromised? After all, Cerese is the only one he would have revealed her whereabouts to.”

“That is Cerese’s problem.” SouMalocho barked out an abrupt laugh. “My daughter is nothing if not resourceful.”

Chapter Seven

Larissalyia leaned back in the captain's chair even as a sigh of relief escaped her lips. From behind her she heard a series of soft curses that came from the direction of the *Mandujano* warrior. He had sequestered himself in the small room outside the bridge to work on the damaged security devices. She allowed herself a small smile as she listened to his grumbling.

That damned storm had lasted two days. Safe in its underwater hiding place, the Talon didn't appear to have taken any damage.

The storm had descended with astounding speed. They'd barely had time to snatch up the sleeping sheets and some of the equipment and make a dash for the cave. They had been lucky to find one fairly deep before it broke. Her first choice would not have provided much coverage, but Mac located a second, deeper cave just behind the waterfall. For two days they huddled inside its solid protection, watching as lightening pierced the sky from behind the wall of water cascading over their shelter. The claps of thunder had been constant, deafening.

They'd gotten little sleep, leaving them all on edge. The limited space forced them into close proximity and the sexual tension thrumming between her and Mac was palpable. She felt certain he spent the entire time staring at her, making her aware of him with every fiber of her being. She'd never encountered such an unwavering attraction for a man before. It unnerved her.

Although not a virgin, her experience was rather limited. She rarely had the time or the inclination to indulge in the intricate dances required of an affair. Her few sexual encounters were forgettable and had left her unsatisfied. Certainly not worth the effort.

Now, along came a barbarian who awakened sensations heretofore dormant. With Mac, she experienced a whole plethora of passions she hadn't even known existed. Just one heated look in those eyes and she melted. If not for the presence of Tutsi, she had no doubt they would have spent those two days generating their own electrical storm. The brief interlude on the beach had been a teaser for her. A taste of bliss that left her hungry for more.

Which, of course, made absolutely no sense. This was a man she barely knew—someone she viewed as inferior to her in every way. His world was primitive, his people barbaric. Why would she feel such a strong attraction for a man who was beneath her?

Yes, she was glad Tutsi had interrupted them. She told herself she was relieved. Victor MacNaught was a complication she could do without.

So why was it difficult to convince herself? They had no future. A relationship between them, sexual or otherwise, was doomed to be short-lived. After she returned Mac to Earth, she would resume the life she'd spent cycles building.

The knowledge became a litany for her. Somehow she had to make herself believe it.

They'd finally emerged from the cave to unimaginable destruction. The once placid lagoon was muddied and filled with debris, while the surrounding trees were either broken or completely uprooted. Larissalyia hadn't realized the storms of Cyber Five could be so ferocious. In their hurry to outrun the tempest, they'd left behind the Guardians and the warning signal. Both had been destroyed, which irritated her. That security equipment had been bloody expensive.

Now, while Tutsi attempted to salvage something from them, Larissalyia inspected the ship for possible damage. All the diagnostics she'd run revealed nothing other than some minor dents and dings. The hull itself had not been breached.

They'd been very lucky.

Scrubbing her fingers through her hair, Larissalyia idly wondered what Mac was up to. His enforced stay in the cave didn't appear to have

affected him. Their shortage of food was the only physical discomfort they suffered. She'd intended to be on Cyber Five for only a night and hadn't brought much by way of provisions from the ship.

Now that the storm had passed, their first order of business this morning had been to replenish the water supply on the Talon and attempt to salvage any edible provisions not destroyed in the tempest. So far their best luck was the water.

Reaching into the pocket of her flight suit, she extracted a Hershey bar. As she checked the last of the tests, she munched on the chocolate. A murmur of bliss emerged from her throat. Damn, she couldn't get over how good these things were. The dark confection slid over her tongue and bathed it with its addictive flavor. She'd sampled the milk chocolate and the white version but neither, in her opinion, was as satisfying as the dark. She knew she could make a fortune with this export.

With a smirk, Larissalyia switched the computer to a dormant state and began firing up the engines to do a final diagnostic check on them. All in all she was satisfied with the condition of her ship.

An impulse of childish glee made her swing her chair around until she completed a full circle. She was surprised to realize that she actually felt happy. The emotion had been missing from her life for quite some time. Between building her business, her ongoing arguments with her father about her need for independence and now someone trying to kidnap her, she'd been too busy for the past several cycles to dwell on her emotional state.

But now, here on Cyber Five, in the midst of what once was a paradise, she felt content. Which made absolutely no sense. Nothing had changed. She was still building a business. She was still having arguments with her father and she was still on the run. The only difference was the fact Victor MacNaught was now a part of her life. For a little while.

The stray thought sobered her. She stared at the bit of remaining chocolate before she slowly re-wrapped it in the foil packaging.

Her good mood dimmed.

A movement through the view screen caught her attention and she glanced up. The man she'd been dwelling on strolled along the beach, the sun shining down on him as he paused to inspect a bit of debris washed up with the storm.

He looked wonderful.

Even with the oversized shirt engulfing him, the five days growth of beard on his face and the wind whipping that cinnamon hair back over his shoulders, he held a look of command. The two days they'd been forced into such close proximity had allowed her to question him more closely about his background. She learned he was once enlisted in the military service and was a part of what he called the Special Forces. With considerable persuasion, she drew out some of the experiences he had encountered during that time. His tales of the conflict they called the Gulf War had been particularly fascinating.

Even Tutsi had been impressed with the extensive training Mac described. He was a hard man, accustomed to hardship and able to rise to any occasion.

If she had to abduct anyone, how fortunate to snatch someone useful to have around. He had proven his worth during the encounter with the Kyrions.

She watched him bend to pick up what looked like a shell. It was about the size of his palm with broad spines radiating out from the center. Even from this distance she could see that it was a deep red. A rare find even by Cyber Five's standards. He tucked it into the small pack he'd borrowed from her.

Larissalyia was suddenly eager to join him on his meandering walk. Without giving herself time to reconsider, she sprung from her chair. It would take some time for the engines to warm up. It would be safe with Tutsi on board.

"Tutsi! I will be on the beach," she called as she made her way to the ship's entrance. *"Be prepared to leave shortly."*

He responded with a sour grunt followed by the sound of something being thrown. A grin stretched the muscles of her mouth. She recalled

how pleased he had been when she finally broke down and allowed him to purchase the state-of-the-art equipment. He'd been like a child with a new toy. She didn't know who was more upset over the damage to the equipment. She or Tutsi.

When she emerged into the sunlight she paused a moment to enjoy its warmth. The heat of the sun was sheer bliss. Despite the destruction wrought by the tempest, this island was still beautiful. With the reflection of light on the pearlescent sand and the now-gentle waves of violet washing up onto shore, it was peaceful, idyllic.

Larissalyia stepped from the ramp onto the sand, her feet sinking a bit. She had the mad urge to kick off her boots and feel the sand between her toes. Absurd. She couldn't remember the last time she had indulged such a childish impulse.

She was bending down to untie her laces when a furtive movement within the trees captured her attention. Frowning, she straightened to shade her eyes to get a better look. Nothing moved. The wind continued to set the vegetation swaying, but that wasn't what had attracted her notice.

Everything was quiet.

Any creatures native to this world were invisible. Nothing stirred.

Instinct pulled at her, urged caution. She scented the air, but only detected the lush smells of the foliage and the freshness of the ocean.

She glanced down the length of the beach, but Victor was nearly out of sight. Only the line of footprints gave evidence of his passing.

Instead of following him, she started toward the trees. The shade beneath the vegetation was cool after the heat of the sun. Larissalyia paused just inside the tree line, her gaze shifting from shadow to shadow.

Whatever had captured her attention must be gone. She saw nothing.

She was about to return to the beach when a piercing cry sounded high overhead. Her gaze darted upward to search the clear sky. No clouds impeded her view of the flock of birds flying in over the ocean and dropping lower with each sweep of their massive wings.

The blood drained from her face.

Yonnis.

And Victor was out on the open beach. Completely vulnerable.

“Victor!” she cried out.

Frantic, her glance followed the line of vegetation running parallel to the beach. They would provide her some cover. She might be able to reach him before the Yonnis did.

Without warning, a pair of arms reached out and caught her around the waist. The breath was crushed out of her as she was pulled back against a hard chest. At the same time, the dry scent of a Kyrion reached her sensitive nose.

“Well, well, well.” A voice hissed in her ear. A horribly familiar voice. *“All alone, m’lady?”* Nicos laughed softly against her hair. *“Such a pity. For you, that is.”*

Larissalyia reacted immediately, driving her elbow into the solar plexus of her captor. She didn’t have enough leverage for a hard blow, but it was enough to loosen his hold on her. As she tore herself away, one taloned hand caught her by the arm and dug into her flesh through the sleeve of her flight suit. She heard the material tear as she jerked free. A line of pain burned down her arm.

Without hesitation she deserted the tree cover and dashed out onto the open sand.

“After her, you fools!”

The harsh order spurred her faster. Her feet felt leaden, sinking into the sand, making her flight difficult. Her only consolation was knowing the sand also slowed her pursuers. A glance over her shoulder showed three Kyrions hot on her heels. That coward Nicos remained in the tree line.

Another cry from overhead drew a fearful glance upward. The creatures were closer. The sun was in her eyes, making it impossible to see the Yonnis but she knew they were closing.

The wind whipped her hair into her eyes and nearly caused her to stumble. Where were the Yonnis? How close were her pursuers? The questions became a litany in her mind.

Ahead of her she saw a figure racing toward her, flying across the sand. His feet didn't seem to touch the ground.

Victor!

Closer and closer he came. A quick glance at the sky above him showed two Yonnis dropping into attack formation, massive wings propelling the birds toward them at a terrifying speed. Enormous talons stretched out, ready to snatch their prey from the sand.

"Lacey!" The Earthman yelled something more but the wind whipped his words away. All she caught was something that sounded like "zig zag." Whatever that meant.

When he began weaving back and forth, she suddenly understood his meaning. An erratic moving target was difficult to seize. She immediately began to emulate him.

The distance closed between them. Two hundred meters. One hundred meters. The Yonnis were almost upon him. Their huge bodies were oddly graceful, almost beautiful. Every white feather tipped with black stood out in stark relief. Their beaks opened, showing razor sharp teeth designed to tear and rend.

Larissalyia tried not to think about that. From behind her, she heard heavy breathing, her attackers closer. She risked a quick glance over her shoulder. They were scant meters behind her.

The Yonnis shrieked.

"Drop!" Victor yelled as he dove to the sand.

Larissalyia fell flat to the ground, the sand kicking up into her face to blind her. She felt more than heard the brush of wings as the Yonnis overshot her. The force of their passing threw a vortex of sand into the air. She actually felt the brush of one talon as it raked just shy of her back. From behind came a scream and she knew at least one of the Kyrions had been snatched from the ground by the creatures. There was a second scream, then a third.

When she chanced a look over her shoulder, she saw the Yonnis flying off, each bearing a Kyrion in its talons. Knowing the Kyrions were destined to be the creatures' next meal, she felt sick. By the Light she hoped they were already dead.

"C'mon!" Rough hands grasped her by the arms and hoisted her to her feet. She looked up into the hard face of Victor MacNaught and thought she'd never seen anything more welcome.

"We've got to get out of here. There are more of those things coming."

Panicked, Larissalyia glanced upward in time to spy the new flock closing in. They were far away, but with those enormous wings, they would quickly reach the island.

"Nicos is here."

"I figured that. Where's the gorilla?"

"Tutsi is on the ship. I left him working on the Guardians."

"Good. Let's get the hell out of here."

Victor took her hand and pulled her along with him. Larissalyia fought to catch her breath. Her wild run across the beach had winded her far more than she thought possible. Victor appeared unaffected.

She hoped Tutsi had heard the commotion and prepared the Talon for departure. Nicos was certain to impede them. Provided he emerged from the relative safety of the trees. A quick glance over her shoulder showed the new flock of Yonnis approaching fast. They might keep him pinned.

Or they might snack on her and Victor. Forcing herself to ignore the stitch in her side, she picked up her pace.

They reached the ramp to the Talon when she heard the high-pitched whine that heralded the discharge of a weapon. She reacted without thought. Using her shoulder she bumped into Victor and sent him sprawling to the ground just as a blaster fired, missing them both. A small geyser shot up where the blast struck the water.

Larissalyia looked over her shoulder toward the tree line, seeing the tall figure of Nicos as he prepared to fire once more. She pulled Victor to his feet and stumbled up the ramp.

“Inside!” she gasped, giving Victor one last shove before she followed him. Inside the ship’s entrance, she punched the pad to retract the ramp and seal the hatch. She heard the ping of a blast as it struck the door. She shivered, even though the hull of the ship was strong enough to withstand the force of a hand weapon. With luck, Nicos had hidden his vessel on the other side of the island in an attempt to sneak up on them. It would take him time to reach it and even longer to get it space worthy. It was difficult to cold start a ship.

Her earlier diagnostic tests had primed the engines of the Talon. Leaving Cyber Five shouldn’t prove to be much of a problem.

She pushed past Victor and headed for the bridge where she found Tutsi in the captain’s chair already making the necessary preparations for launch. Without a word he leaped to his feet and headed for the navigator’s station.

“Strap yourself in,” she shouted at Victor as he followed her. She took her seat just as another blaster shot ricocheted off the view screen. She bit off a vile curse and hit the shields. The Kyrion was a better shot than she’d given him credit for. The shields still allowed some visibility through the screen, but not much. Larissalyia couldn’t quite make out Nicos from this distance but she had no problem seeing the Yonnis as the new flock circled the beach several times before they headed back out toward more familiar hunting territory.

Her fingers flew over the console as she completed the priming of the engines. The Talon rose out of the water and hovered for an instant before it shot into the air. The force of their passing sprayed sand into the air, hopefully showering Nicos with the fine grit.

Despite needing to warm the engines of his ship, it wouldn’t take long for the Kyrion to follow them. This sector contained only three worm holes, so there would be a good chance of Nicos selecting the correct one.

As they soared through the atmosphere and into the blackness of space, Larissalyia called up star maps to locate a new destination. Faster than most eyes could follow, she flicked through the maps, pausing and discarding them one after the other.

With their entry into space, the lights on the bridge automatically dimmed to allow her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Only the light reflected up from the console lit her face, the colors changing with each new map she called up. Her choices were limited since there were so few worm holes to select from.

Then she stopped. A slow smile came to her lips as she stared down at the map she had selected.

“What?”

Larissalyia glanced over at the Earthman seated in the co-pilot chair. Her smile widened until she grinned at him. He was trying to peer over her shoulder at the maps. With one long, slender finger, she stabbed the tiny dot that occupied the third rotation of dual white suns.

“Chaos!”

Chapter Eight

Walking the streets of Chaos, Mac kept his face blank, revealing nothing in his expression. Inside he felt like a country bumpkin visiting the big city for the first time.

Chaos was like nothing he had ever seen before. Dry and dusty, its twin suns beat down on its inhabitants with merciless force. He guessed the temperature hovered at the hundred-degree mark. Still, the dry air wasn't exactly uncomfortable, just—odd. A sweat-dampened band around his forehead held a head wrap in place. The shirt Lacey had procured for him already had sweat marks staining the armpits. When he mentioned the necessity of keeping hydrated, she gave him one of those “duh” looks women reserved for men stupid enough to state the obvious.

As he paced alongside Lacey, he twisted his head in an attempt to take it all in. Gray buildings, constructed of either rock or mud, bordered the narrow streets, blended into each other, giving an impression of a solid wall broken by deep set doors and windows. Even the pavement was of the same material, and hot enough to fry his feet.

A fine coating of dust covered everyone and everything. There didn't seem to be much by way of bright color anywhere. The citizens leaned toward the more neutral shades of browns, tans and grays. Most wore desert-like garb, long robes and thick head wraps to protect them from the suns. A scrap of material covered their lower face, mostly to filter out the dust.

After they landed, Lacey had vanished for a brief time. She returned within the hour and handed him similar clothing, reminding him of garments from Earth's Middle Eastern countries. His desert training had

enabled him to don the robes with a minimum of trouble. The head wrap concealed his hair and left only a small portion of his face visible. Lacey remained in her tan flight suit although she donned a similar headdress. The material provided a suitable disguise.

They left Tutsi on board to guard the Talon. Lacey said Chaos was not the most law-abiding planet in the system and she didn't want to take any chances of anyone swiping her ship.

Lacey fretted about being stopped by the port authorities before he obtained his papers, but fortune had smiled on them as they exited the space port. A small group of humanish-looking people were arguing with the security squad in charge of checking IDs. As they slipped past, Mac had spied more guards hurrying to the scene to regain control over the growing mob. He and Lacey continued on without incident.

As they passed through a crowded square, Mac picked out snatches of various conversations. He had spent the last two ship days with the language helmet glued to his head, learning Universal Basic. Although he was still leery of the gadget, he admitted it was convenient to know what was being said around him. Not that he was fluent, but he'd absorbed enough to give him a working knowledge of the language. Some inhabitants weren't speaking U.B., but he ignored them. What he did understand was fascinating.

Chaos was a world on the fringes of the frontier. Primarily a trading post, according to Lacey. Merchandise of every shape and form found its way through here. Some legitimately. Most questionable.

In many ways it reminded Mac of America's Old West. There was a sense of lawlessness and self-reliance that appealed to him.

Humans weren't the only occupants of this world, although they appeared to be predominant. He couldn't tell if some of the odder life-forms he spied were intelligent or domestic critters. He wasn't about to make the mistake of speaking to someone's pet.

Traders of every size and shape hawked their wares, demanding inflated prices and intent on outdoing each other in both business and volume. The sound level was incredible. If someone wasn't doing

business, they were hurrying along; many with head down and with sidelong glances at the other denizens. These Mac made a point of avoiding. They had a furtive look about them and although he had virtually nothing worth stealing, what little he possessed was dear to him.

A light touch on his arm claimed his attention and he glanced down. Lacey was eying the nearby inhabitants with caution. She'd been on edge since they arrived on this planet.

"This way," she said quietly. He noticed she spoke in U.B. rather than English. Apparently she was taking no chances of being overheard.

They walked for several minutes, their surroundings growing rougher. The streets narrowed with piles of garbage rotting in the hot suns. The stone—or were they mud—buildings lining the streets looked dilapidated, crumbling in places. The inhabitants were dressed in the same desert garb, but shabbier than he'd seen a few streets over. The dust covering the planet appeared to be permanently imbedded in these people.

Music flowed out what looked like a tavern or some sort of public house, punctuated with raucous laughter. Just up the street, a creature was being thrown out of a building. The three assailants dusted off their hands as they returned to the structure, laughing uproariously between themselves.

The creature...human?...got to his feet and brushed himself off. Yet Mac noticed that he pocketed a coin purse with an air of satisfaction. Mac hid a smile within his hood. One of the thugs who tossed the little guy out of the bar was minus his purse.

He glanced at Lacey to share his humor but she turned toward a wide arched door that opened into a small courtyard. It looked like an outdoor warehouse more than anything. Boxes, crates and items of every conceivable shape and size were piled everywhere. No space was wasted. In a cleared area at the center a small, greenish humanoid stood. He appeared to be taking inventory, making notes on a flat device he held in his hands. He too wore the robes common on this planet, but didn't

bother with the head wear, his bald pate gleaming in the suns. If the heat disturbed him, he gave no sign.

“Sava.”

The man whipped around at the sound of his name. Even before the motion was completed, he had clicked off his device and thrust it into his robes. His look of guilt made Mac smile beneath the material covering his mouth.

Sava rearranged his expression into a cautious welcome. Mac saw that his features appeared human-like, but that’s where the resemblance ended. What he had thought was greenish skin was actually a fine coat of fur, matted in places and mottled in others so that he looked almost moldy. Dark eyes peered out from deep sockets while a pointed nose twitched as if testing the air. His eyes widened as Lacey unwound the veil which concealed her face.

“My Lady Ashanti. An unexpected pleasure.” The little creature spoke U.B. with a squeaky pitch. There was just room enough for the three of them to stand together, but Mac hung back, wanting to observe. That dark gaze swept over him for an instant before it centered on Lacey once more. “How be business?”

“Good as always, Sava.” Lacey glanced around, her gaze going to the arched windows of the second floor. Although her expression never changed, Mac sensed a heightened caution. He followed her glance and caught a flicker of movement at one of the deep windows. Someone or something was watching them.

“And you?”

“Oh, fine, fine. Business always be good, my lady.”

Lacey’s glance made another circuit of the incredible jumble surrounding them. “So I see.” She leaned closer to the man. “I must speak with you, Sava.”

The alien’s expression turned sly. He touched his robes as if to reassure himself his device was still secure, before he gestured for the two of them to follow him.

Sava led the way through another archway and into one of the structures. The shade after the intensity of the twin suns was a relief, although Mac was careful to betray no sign of it. It took only a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting provided by the sconces dotting the grimy walls.

He glanced around. Compared to the packed jumble in the courtyard, the interior was nearly empty. A table and several chairs occupied one corner while shelving jammed with small objects took up the rest of the wall space. He couldn't begin to guess what any of it was for.

Without a word, Lacey produced a bottle of water from her knapsack and handed it to Mac. He took it silently and removed the veil that concealed much of his face. The liquid was already tepid but refreshing all the same. He nearly emptied it.

"Who be the male?"

Mac turned his attention to the alien to find Sava scrutinizing him with an air of assessment. His dark gaze traveled up and down over Mac's length and finally settled on his face.

"Hmm?" Lacey flicked a look over her shoulder toward Mac and made a dismissive gesture. "Oh, he is a mute. Just call him Vic."

Mac hesitated an instant before he continued to unwind the headdress. They decided on the mute disguise before leaving the ship. Since his command of U.B. was somewhat shaky, there would be less chance of a slip.

When he shrugged the turban to his shoulders, the alien's eyes lit up with something akin to avarice.

"Ooooh, this prime stock, my lady." Sava looked up at Larissalyia, a glint revealed in his beady eyes. "You be willing to sell him?"

Larissalyia shot him an icy look. "You know I don't deal in slaves, Sava."

"Who said anything about slaves?" Sava made a show of glancing around. "Sava does not deal in slaves, my lady. That be an illegal practice." His voice rose slightly. "This one would make a good...house

servant. Very pretty, very strong. You say he be mute? Sava know someone who would love to have this male in their...household."

It took Mac a moment to decipher the exchange and he stiffened. Lacey touched his arm in warning. With an effort, he kept his expression neutral and held his silence.

"Forget it. He is not for sale."

"Pity. Sava could give you a fair price."

Larissalyia snorted. "You wouldn't know a fair price if it bit you in the butt."

Sava didn't deny the charge. Giving Mac a final look of regret, he turned to the matter at hand. "What may Sava do for you, my Lady Ashanti?"

"I need to purchase an identity."

Sava's face lit up. "Of course, my lady. Who would you like to be?"

"Not for me. For the male."

Sava's attention swerved to Mac again. His expression assessing, he circled Mac, eying him up and down. This close, Mac could see that the fur was indeed threadbare in spots, as if he were molting. The little alien reached the center of his chest, perfectly proportioned for his size.

Sava turned away with a shake of his head. "No, m'lady. Too risky."

Lacey said something that Mac didn't understand. Her tone made him suspect the U.B. software didn't cover cussing. "Risky? Since when, Sava?"

"Even Sava get checked out once in awhile, Lady Ashanti."

Lacey leaned down, preparing to dicker. Mac suspected by the gleam in her now blue eyes that she'd been looking forward to this. Listening to them start the dance of point and counterpoint, he leaned against the arched doorway and folded his arms over his chest. He had a feeling he was in for a long wait.

He was correct.

With growing amusement, he watched them go at it. Although understanding only about half of what they said, he'd back Lacey any

day. Every time she made a point, Sava would counter with another; at which time Lacey would annihilate his reasoning. She was good at this. Soon the little furry guy began to look desperate, his glance darting around the small building as if looking for an escape route.

"I cannot make the male a Kadorian, lady," Sava grumbled as he admitted defeat, his expression sullen. "His eyes be all wrong."

"I know that. He can be passed off as a Tageant."

"Hmm. Possibly. His head be too small and he be too tall."

"Everyone is too tall to you, Sava." With the argument won, Lacey allowed humor to color her tone. She cast a glance at Mac and gave him a thumbs-up gesture. He smiled back at her but kept his attention on Sava. He didn't trust him any further than he could throw him. Something furtive in his manner kept Mac on edge.

"Make him a Dakarian," she said. "He's tall and certainly good looking enough."

Mac's brows shot up at that.

"No." Sava shook his head. "Dakarian would stand out. Rarely does anyone come from Dakar. It may cause comment."

"Then how about Salazar? You can't turn around without stepping on a 'Zarian."

"Yes. Good choice, m'lady. No one would question the presence of a trader from Salazar."

After some more discussion, Sava rubbed his hands together. "Now let us discuss payment, Lady Ashanti."

"Standard price."

His dark eyes gleamed shrewdly. "You must need identity very bad. Sava would say you would be willing to pay Sava better than standard price."

Lacey muttered something under her breath as all vestige of humor vanished. "What's it going to cost me, you little thief?"

"Premium...double."

"Done!"

Sava opened his mouth, obviously with his argument ready. At Lacey's easy agreement, he was left sputtering. "You do not wish to negotiate?"

"No. As you say, we need this identity and we do not have the time to linger on Chaos."

The little guy's face scrunched. Mac thought he was replaying the bargain in his mind, wondering if he'd somehow gotten the raw end of the deal and looking for a loophole. Finally his shoulders slumped. "As you say, my lady. Sava will have the tag to you in three day's time, standard."

"If you need to contact us, we're at docking bay twenty-six. Have the tag ready within one standard day."

"That be too little time, my lady." Sava's whiney protest was immediate.

"With what I am paying you, you'll do it."

With a sigh, Sava made a small bow, spreading his hands out. "As you say, Lady Ashanti."

He gestured toward Mac. "Male must wait here for a moment." Without waiting to see if Mac obeyed, Sava turned and vanished through a doorway.

Mac glanced at Lacey and received a shrug. In a moment, the little guy returned with long narrow box in his hands. He set it on the table and waved Mac over.

"Sava will need an iris record and a molecular sample."

Neither of which sounded good to Mac. Remembering he was supposed to be mute, he threw Lacey a look of inquiry. She gave a slight nod of understanding. Pulling him aside, she watched Sava unpack several items and murmured in a low voice.

"The iris record is a scan of your eye. Much like your fingerprinting, but far more accurate. The molecular sample is similar to a DNA specimen. Neither procedure is painful."

"No sample!" He kept his voice low, just a breath of sound. The idea of having a sample of his DNA floating out there in the universe disturbed him. Besides, it would increase his chances of discovery. Given the isolated location of Earth, his DNA was probably vastly different from the run of the mill.

"But..." Lacey got a look at his face and her mouth compressed. Mac knew the instant she gave over. She shrugged. "Well, the eye scan should be adequate enough."

With a nod, Mac stepped back. Sava had stopped his unpacking to watch them.

"The sample will be unnecessary, Sava. Stick with the eye scan."

"As you say, m'lady."

The scan was painless. Sava shined a light in his eye for an instant, then packed up his equipment. "Sava will have the tag ready for Lady Ashanti in one standard day."

With a final nod, Lacey turned on her heel and left the building. Mac gave the alien one last hard look before he followed her. They paused only long enough to don their headdresses in deference to the unforgiving heat. Neither spoke a word until they passed well beyond the courtyard and were once more immersed in the sea of humanity and all else.

Mac looked up at the sky. Although they'd been with Sava for better than two hours, the position of the suns seemed unchanged.

"Uh, I know that my U.B. isn't the greatest, but did you tell Sava we're at docking bay twenty-six?"

"Yes."

"Aren't we at number twenty-nine?"

"Yes." She slanted him an amused glance. "I am not about to tell Sava our exact location. The fewer people who know where we are, the better."

"I see." They continued walking. "You gave in on the price awfully easy," Mac commented after a few minutes. He spoke in English but

made sure his voice was low. Even the nearest being could not hear his words.

“Actually, I did.” There was a wealth of humor in Lacey’s voice. A glance at her eyes showed they were lilac. A shade he hadn’t seen before. Although the headdress concealed much of her face, there was no mistaking the laughter in her eyes. “I fully expected to pay considerably more.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Sava? No, of course not. I would not trust anyone on Chaos.” She chuckled under her breath. “Like I said—Sava is a little thief, but he is a Struturian and therefore true to his word. At least until he is paid, then he will try to double-cross me.”

“Then why do you deal with him?”

“Because he is the best in the business.”

They left the seedier part of town and returned to the main thoroughfare. Although no less crowded here, the surroundings were prosperous compared to the warrens they had just exited. Lacey reached into her knapsack and handed Mac another bottle.

He took a long swallow of the warm water, careful to allow none of it to escape down his chin. He knew the value of water on a world like this. “The heat doesn’t seem to bother you.”

“No. Kador is not quite as arid as Chaos, but it is a desert planet. I am accustomed to such conditions.”

Mac glanced around casually before he took Lacey’s arm and made an abrupt left turn down another street.

“What...?”

“Just keep walking. We’re being followed.”

He noticed she didn’t glance around but kept moving. Nor did she ask any questions. Deliberately he slowed and made a show of replacing the bottle in her knapsack. This allowed him to keep the corner they’d just turned in sight. In seconds, the robed figure he’d first spotted

appeared. Although unable to tell if it was a man or a woman, Mac was fairly sure it was human.

The figure hesitated when he realized his target had halted. Mac gave no indication he had made their tail. He closed the knapsack and took Lacey's hand in his, then continued their stroll down the dusty street. The wind kicked up, but it brought no relief. If anything, it made the heat even more oppressive as it stirred up the dust and swirled it around them.

"Did you get a look at him?" Lacey asked, her voice low.

"Human. That's pretty much all I could determine. He or she is swathed in the same robes as most everyone and everything."

"How did you spot him?"

"I noticed someone lurking about while we were at Sava's."

Lacey was silent for a moment as she mulled this over in her mind. Mac kept her walking in a seemingly random manner.

"It is not likely to be Nicos or his men." Lacey's tone was almost absent. "There is no way they could have known we would come here. He knows you are with me and that I would need to conceal you, but there are dozens of worlds where I could have gone to accomplish that."

"You said this souMalochos has eyes everywhere. Could this be one of his spies?"

"Yes." Her voice still held that note of thoughtfulness. "We cannot discount that possibility. Although that lowlife is in prison, it does not appear to have slowed him down much."

They turned into another square, this one evidently a marketplace. Mac's smile was grim under his wrapping as he took in the milling crowds. Just the place to lose a tail. It seemed like every conceivable life-form was present. From where they stood, it had all the order of a kicked-over anthill. Merchants dickered with customers, pedestrians meandered with no goal in mind, and questionable individuals lingered beside open carts or near what might be gullible aliens. The volume of noise was incredible, a dozen languages overlaid by Universal Basic. Best of all, most everyone was dressed in the flowing robes common on Chaos.

“How likely is it for the tail to know where your ship is?”

“Tail?”

“Our shadow.”

“Ah.” Lacey gave it some thought. “I would say not very likely. When one lands on any of the F.O.W. planets we are required to transmit our ship’s identification, which in turn is logged into that planet’s computer. The Talon has...various identities which I use for security reasons.”

Mac had to smile at that. He just bet she did.

“It is a standard practice in some of the outlying worlds to transmit a fake identification. I would wager very few here on Chaos used their true identity when they landed.”

“So if someone was monitoring the transmissions, it is doubtful they would know it was your ship which landed?”

“Correct. It is not impossible we were spotted by chance.”

“But how likely was that? Everyone here is pretty much concealed with these wraps.”

Lacey shrugged. Evidently she had no answer.

He nodded, deciding not to chance leading their follower to the Talon. Giving her hand a tug, he guided her into the enormous square where the crowds immediately swallowed them. Mac kept their direction aimless, weaving through the stalls and wagons with no goal in mind. He tried to keep one eye on their tail, but he soon lost sight of him. One merchant tried to interest them in a bolt of material that shimmered with countless colors under the bright sun, while another enticed them with a product he swore would magnify their sexual experience a hundredfold. Lacey gave him a scornful glance and urged Mac away when he would have lingered. He followed her with a grin.

Six arches provided exits from the marketplace and back into the maze of narrow streets. Mac noticed the sky was beginning to streak with color and realized the day was waning. He led Lacey to one of the arches. They needed to be gone from the square before the crowds began to disperse.

“Can you find your way to the docks?” He was hopelessly turned around. Normally his sense of direction was perfect, but with all the twists and turns they had taken since leaving Sava’s, he had no idea where they were. Every one of these buildings looked alike.

“Of course, this way.” Without hesitation she set off down one dusty street. With a shake of his head, Mac followed her. This street looked no different than the other three choices they had.

They had walked for about twenty minutes when she paused, looking first one way and then the other. A slight frown drew her brows together. For a moment she didn’t look very confident.

Great! Now they were both lost. The good news was there was no sign of their tail. The bad news was night was coming on fast, along with a blast of cold air. The icy wind tore through their clothes and threatened to snatch their wrappings from their heads. Mac noticed few inhabitants in the streets. Looked like everyone made it a point of being indoors when night fell.

“Are you sure this is the right way?”

“Yes! No! Maybe.” Lacey came to a complete halt, her gaze went up one street and down another as she attempted to get her bearings. Finally, her shoulders slumped. “No, I have no idea. Tutsi had spent a number of cycles here on Chaos and I generally relied on his knowledge whenever we were here.”

She wrapped her arms around herself and glanced up at the nearly dark sky. “We have to get off the streets. The temperatures will drop swiftly and it is not a good idea to be caught on Chaos without protection.”

Mac put his arm around her, his other holding his robes shut to keep them from flapping in the wind. He wondered why the stones didn’t retain some of the heat of the day. Unless the temperatures dropped far lower and faster than he knew. But Lacey was right. They had to find shelter.

“Are there any hotels or inns on this world?”

“Yes!” she shouted over the wind. Its force rose with each minute. She looked around the structures surrounding them. For the first time, Mac noticed several had what could have been signs over the door jambs. It was like no writing he had ever seen but Lacey appeared to be reading them. As he watched, one of the doorways slid open and a being swathed in robes dashed out into the night. He hurried across the street and slipped into another doorway to vanish from sight.

“Nothing here. Come, let us try the next street.”

Hanging onto each other, they staggered against the force of the gale. Even when they turned the corner, its power didn’t lessen. Mac felt a numbness beginning in his fingers and toes; the cold was fast reaching deadly levels.

“Here!” He barely heard Lacey’s shout though she was only inches away. She caught his arm and pulled him after her to a nondescript door that looked no different from a dozen others. She pressed an unseen lever and the door slid open. They crowded into what looked like a tavern. The blast of warm air after the freezing tempest outside was a welcome relief.

Almost as one, the room’s inhabitants turned to look at them. After one long scrutiny, the beings from a great number of planets returned to their various activities. It was those whose attention lingered that Mac was alert to. They huddled in badly lit corners, yet Mac felt their stare as he and Lacey wound their way through the scattered tables to where a woman was serving drinks.

The buxom woman was of medium height, attractive in an overblown sort of way, her blouse cut low enough to show her attributes to their greatest advantage. She barely glanced at Lacey when she unwound her headdress, but her interest perked when Mac began to remove his.

“How may I help you?” she asked in Universal Basic as she placed a wide bowl of greenish brew before a tall and lanky humanish-looking being.

Mac did his best not to stare, but it was difficult to keep from gaping when a tongue emerged from its mouth and it began to lap up the drink.

Lacey's elbow dug into his side. He tore his attention away from the strange being and back to the woman.

"You will have to forgive him, madam," Lacey broke in. She leaned over the bar and lowered her voice to confide to the woman. "He is a little slow and this is his first time off planet." She gave the barkeep a shrug that conveyed shared amusement. "We have need of rooms."

The woman shook her head even before the sentence was complete. With a regretful sigh, she eyed Mac for a moment longer before turning back to Lacey. "The Night Storms have come early this season, madam, and I am nearly full. I have only one small room left."

Lacey stared at the woman with a haughty expression. "I assure you we can make it worth your while for two rooms."

"You can pay me all you like, lady, but I still only have one room left. Take it or leave it."

"We will take it," Mac interjected with his unfamiliar U.B.

The woman gave him another regretful sigh, as if his slow use of the language confirmed Lacey's earlier assertion that he was feeble-minded. Lacey glared at him.

He pulled her aside until they were out of hearing range. "What choice do we have?" he whispered in English. "We can't go back out into that cold."

Lacey grumbled under her breath but returned to the barkeep and bargained for the final room. Despite her efforts to strike a bargain, Mac knew they ended up paying far more than the room was probably worth, but unless they wanted to sleep in the common room, they would have to pay whatever the landlady demanded.

They learned that the inn they had stumbled into was called the Lonely Traveler and the patroness was Mineo Putrin. In his mind, Mac immediately dubbed her Minnie. She continued to toss him sultry glances but he ignored her.

One thought revolved in his mind. There was one room, probably one bed, one man and one woman. He was going to be alone with Lacey.

Chapter Nine

A diminutive lad escorted Larissalyia and Mac to their room. Following him, Larissalyia felt a sense of anticipation. Foolish, but present nonetheless. She was conscious of the man walking at her side. The way his arm occasionally brushed hers. His spicy smell.

The hallways were dim, almost dank. Fortunately the cold night had not penetrated the thick walls of the inn. When she turned over the key, Mineo Putrin had assured them in the unlikely event that should happen, each room in the Lonely Traveler was equipped with a fireplace which could be activated. She confided the other innkeepers thought her mad to install such an extravagance, but the backup precaution had come in handy many nights when the Night Storms were particularly bad. This made her inn popular with a good number of regular patrons.

Their guide turned several corners and continued down the long hallway. Doors lined both sides of the corridor, all of them closed. Voices came through a few, but they met no one.

Finally, the lad halted before a bright red door. He opened it for them and waved them in. Mac stood aside and allowed Larissalyia to precede him, which made her more aware of the delicious warmth radiating from his body.

As she passed him, she opened her senses and drew a deep breath. Despite his bland expression, she sensed Mac's heightened anticipation. His body temperature had risen by several degrees and a sheen of perspiration betrayed his arousal. His clean, masculine scent increased her own awareness and nearly triggered her pheromones. Ruthlessly, she suppressed her natural reaction. Not yet.

With another male she might have taken offense, but she matched Mac's anticipation. Those few moments on the beach of Cyber Five had been a teaser, a promise of what was to come. She had no doubt she and Mac would eventually consummate their relationship. It was almost destined.

It did little good to tell herself this was not a good idea. That as soon as all of this blew over, Mac would be returned to his world and she would continue with her life. This was a complication she didn't need. Deep down inside, she knew it wasn't just sex. A part of her was afraid she'd leave a piece of her heart with this barbarian, never to be reclaimed.

These thoughts flowed through her mind in the few seconds it took to pass him and enter the room.

She felt her own temperature rise to match his. A fine trembling threatened to make her stumble but she caught herself. She turned in time to see the lad give Mac the card key and a wink before he departed. The door shut quietly behind him.

Hmm, perhaps the boy wasn't quite as young as she'd first supposed. Hard to tell with Bandorians. They matured early.

She stared at Mac. She liked that he was taller than she was, muscular in all the right places without that hard, added bulk she found unattractive. Without the desert wrapping on his head, his long hair had escaped the binding he'd used to restrain it earlier and fell about his shoulders and down his back in sleek disarray. She itched to explore the silken mass, to smooth it back, clasp it tight in her fingers and...

In an effort to distract herself from her increasingly lascivious thoughts, she glanced around. It was a small room, but comfortable and clean. A wardrobe was partially inset into one wall and the massive bed took up much of the space. Her glance lingered on the bed before she tore it away.

An actual fireplace claimed the wall opposite the wardrobe, the crackle of flame rocks audible in the silence. She stared into the flames, aware it would take the entire night to consume the few rocks in the

hearth. Despite the expense, Mineo evidently felt tonight rated the extra warmth.

“You hungry?”

The words after the long silence brought her glance back to Mac as he leaned against the closed door, his legs crossed at the ankles in a casual stance. There was nothing casual in the heat of those blue eyes that swept her from head to toe. The warm caress of his gaze curled her toes inside the boots she wore.

Whatever hunger he felt had little or nothing to do with food.

She was about to deny any need for nourishment when her stomach growled. In the hush of the room, it was embarrassingly loud.

Mac grinned. “It looked fairly clean in the common room and although I’m not sure what was cooking, it smelled good.”

Larissalyia returned his smile with a somewhat abashed one of her own. “I guess I am hungry,” she admitted. Now that it was brought to her attention, she realized she hadn’t eaten all day. She’d been too stressed with the logistics of getting into Chaos anonymously, bypassing security with an unsanctioned being, and getting to Sava’s, all the while avoiding any contact with anyone who might be the eyes and ears of souMalocho. Just the usual, everyday activities.

Besides, she could do with something cold and refreshing. Anything to take her mind off the man who stood before her.

“I need to contact Tutsi first. He will be worried that we did not return.”

Mac’s expression darkened. “You had a means of calling the gorilla and didn’t bother to ask for directions back to the ship?”

Larissalyia avoided an immediate answer by burying her nose in the knapsack until she finally located the communicator. Naturally it had worked itself to the bottom. She felt the color rise in her cheeks and busied herself with punching in the ship’s communication code. “I...did not wish to admit I was lost.”

“Typical,” he muttered under his breath. She glanced up in time to catch him shaking his head in disgust.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, typical. I have yet to meet a woman who'll admit when she is wrong."

Larissalyia narrowed her eyes, aware they were bleeding from a stormy gray to an ice blue. "I am willing to admit I am wrong, *when* I am wrong."

"And you don't think getting caught in a Night Storm—" Mac broke off and drew a deep breath. "Why am I arguing with you? Make your call to Toots so we can get something to eat."

"I—" Her communicator chirped, drawing her attention. She was relieved to see Tutsi's face appear on the small screen but felt a twinge of remorse at the worry in his dark eyes. "Ashanti reporting in."

"M'lady. Where are you?"

"Safe. We were followed from Sava's and managed to lose him in a marketplace. Unfortunately we were too far to return before night. We've taken lodgings at the Lonely Traveler." After the lecture Tutsi had given her following her interlude with Mac on Cyber Five, she felt it prudent to leave him with the belief they had taken two rooms. The bodyguard tended to be overly protective at times.

"The Lonely Traveler? Good. It is a reputable inn, but if you go into the common room, you must be wary. This is a lawless planet and there are likely to be a number of unscrupulous individuals down there."

"You think?" Mac muttered under his breath as he straightened. He gave Larissalyia a mocking look and opened the door. "Shall we?"

She wrapped up the call, but not before she assured herself the Talon was secure and to inform Tutsi she would contact him in the morning. Pausing only long enough to snag her knapsack, she swept past Mac and into the hallway, her chin raised.

She saw a deprecating smile kicked up the corners of his mouth. So much for any potential seduction. He'd be lucky if she didn't toss him out into the cold night.

Virtually nothing was said as they traversed the hallways toward the common room. The same cast of characters as before occupied it, with a few new additions. Most looked just as disreputable as Tutsi feared.

Larissalyia touched the small weapon she kept at her side, making sure it was visible to the inhabitants of the tavern. Better to let the local riffraff know she was armed and no easy pickings. She also made sure her hair concealed the circle of gems on her right ear. The jewels would identify her as a Kadorian High Lady, which she did not wish this crowd to make note of and remember. Someone in this room could be in the pay of souMaloch. The shade of her hair marked her as a Kadorian, but there was little she could do about that.

She noted Mac scanning the crowd and cataloguing each individual. He appeared to mark the ones most likely to be trouble. When he took her hand and led her to a secluded table, she didn't protest. His choice was strategically positioned to give them a clear view of most of the room and to allow space to maneuver if the need arose.

After the initial attention, most of the beings turned back to their own business and ignored the newcomers. A few continued to watch them, but Larissalyia disregarded them. After automatically noting the location of the exits, she was able to appreciate the comfort of the common room. As she observed earlier, it was clean and well-kept. The tables scattered about the room were almost all occupied.

Despite the number of beings, the drone of conversation did not intrude on them. The low ceiling kept the inn cool during the day and warm at night. A few pieces of what looked like sandstone art decorated the stone walls. Soft music played from somewhere to provide a background to the low murmur of voices.

"Good evening. I am Patriana. What can I get you?"

Larissalyia's attention was claimed by the serving woman who appeared at their table. Out of habit, she glanced at her right ear and realized Patriana was a Kadorian. She raised her eyebrows. She didn't often find many of her people off of Kador, much less on a rough planet

like Chaos. Only one gem adorned the woman's ear, marking her of low birth.

Although the woman probably knew her world of origin, Larissalyia lifted one hand to ensure her hair still concealed her ears. "A Myst, please."

The serving woman punched the order into the small pad she held before she arched an inquiring brow at Mac.

"Same."

"Be back in a moment."

"Wait." Larissalyia stopped her. "What is available for a late meal?"

"There is *butto* stew." When Larissalyia made a slight face, the serving woman said, "Or there is some desert game."

Again Larissalyia made a face.

"Or...I believe Mineo ordered in some *tara* fruit."

"Perfect. Bring us a plate of assorted *tara* fruit."

"Very well."

Mac waited until the woman left them before he leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table. The move put him a few inches from her. "So, what's *tara* fruit?"

"Something a little less toxic than *butto* stew or desert game."

"And what is this Myst I just ordered?"

"Also a toxic drink." Larissalyia laughed at his expression. "I am...kidding. It is a distilled inebriant much like your vodka."

Mac appeared arrested by her eyes. Larissalyia self-consciously looked down, then back up to meet his gaze.

"What?" she asked.

"I don't think I've actually heard you laugh before. Or seen your eyes turn purple. Pale lilac, yes. But not this deep purple."

She knew a slight color rose in her cheeks and ducked her head with embarrassment. "I usually have better control than this."

"You can control your eye color?" He appeared startled.

“Yes. Although it is not general knowledge, most Kadorians can. It takes a conscious effort. It would not do to let your trading competition read your emotions while you are trying to swindle them.”

“True.” Mac leaned back and gave her a searching look. “So how many of the emotions you’ve been showing are real?”

“Most of it,” she admitted with a touch of reluctance. Larissalyia drew a deep breath. “I have never felt the need to dissemble around you, Victor MacNaught.”

Because she was staring into his eyes, she actually saw them flare. A flicker of heat licked through her veins in response. He was about to respond when their serving woman returned. Larissalyia bit back an oath. She would have given much to know what he had started to say.

“I found out that there are also *inya* morsels,” the woman informed them as she placed their drinks on the table. “They’re fresh. Mineo just got them in this morning.”

Larissalyia pulled her gaze away from Mac and nodded to Patriana. “Wonderful. Please bring a plate of those as well.”

It was difficult, but Larissalyia managed to keep her voice pleasant. She wanted nothing more than to have the woman vanish.

The smile Mac treated Patriana with was laced with charm. Larissalyia gritted her teeth as she felt her temperature rise with irritation.

“Thank you, Patriana.”

His U.B. was a bit stinted, but comprehensible. Mac had caught on to the language quickly. All the better for them, Larissalyia told herself.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” Patriana promised before she turned away.

Larissalyia tried not to notice the way Mac watched the sway of the woman’s hips. Was he admiring her? Or was that her own insecurities? She’d never felt such a possessiveness for another male before. It was an unfamiliar experience.

And one she didn’t like.

Why would it matter if this barbarian chose to admire another woman? She did not own him, nor had she known him long. What did she actually know of this man? Very little. Other than the fact that he was brave, resourceful and a pleasure to be around.

And, she had to admit, she did like him. The concession was difficult to make, but true nonetheless.

When Patriana returned several minutes later carrying a tray laden with delicacies, Larissalyia made a point of glancing around at the other patrons of the bar. Their little table was no longer the object of any undue interest, which suited her just fine. Perhaps realizing they were not easy game, the few, more questionable individuals had turned their attention elsewhere.

“Okay, now tell me what these are.”

Larissalyia swung her gaze back to Mac. Patriana had left and he showed more interest in the food than the pretty serving woman.

“The *tara* fruit are segmented delicacies imported from Dakar. They are quite similar to your citruses, only not as sweet.” She indicated the various tiny bowls of sauce positioned in the center of the platter. “Those are sauces to dip them in. They range from very sweet to tart.”

She reached over and selected one juicy segment, swirling it in the pale pink sauce before she took a bite. Juices exploded in her mouth, bringing a low hum of satisfaction from deep in her throat. She hadn’t sampled *tara* fruit in a long time. Delicious.

When she opened her eyes she saw Mac watching her with an arrested expression on his face. She blinked with perplexity before she realized his intent stare was centered on her mouth. Wondering if she had sauce smeared around her mouth, she licked the juice from her lips. His eyes flared with sensual interest.

Without breaking eye contact, he reached out and snagged a piece of fruit, dipping it in the sauce before he held it to her lips. With a touch of uncertainty, she parted her lips and allowed him to place the bit of fruit in her mouth. His fingers brushed her lips, evoking a blaze of sensuality.

She felt it rise from the pit of her stomach to spread throughout her body. Desire ignited every nerve ending until she felt almost dizzy.

A smile curved her lips as realization struck. Without giving herself time to think, her tongue darted out and licked the excess of sweet juices from his fingers. She held his gaze as she slowly drew one digit into her mouth, caressing it with her tongue before she released it.

His low moan was music to her ears.

“And...” Was that low, sultry voice actually hers? Larissalyia didn’t think she’d ever heard such a sound come out of her. “The *inya* morsels are marinated sea creatures from Montrose.” She chose a particularly delicious piece and dipped it in the spicy sauce provided, before she offered it to Mac. He never looked away from her as he parted his lips and bit into the crustacean. Releasing it, Larissalyia brought her fingers to her own lips and with a sensual sweep of her tongue, deliberately licked the sauce from them.

The rest of the room receded from her consciousness, the other occupants forgotten. SouMalocho could have walked in during that moment and fire-danced naked on the table in front of her and she would never even have noticed. Her entire focus was on the man before her. Her gaze traveled over his face, lingering on the strong lines of his jaw, his slightly crooked nose, and finally those stunning blue eyes framed by black lashes. She didn’t think she’d ever seen such a beautiful man.

Desire slammed through her body with a force that left her breathless.

For this short period of time, it made scant difference that there was no future for them. Nor that she was in a precarious position and on the run. None of it mattered. Only this moment, this evening was important.

Larissalyia reached for a portion of *inya* and lifted it to her lips. Rather than biting into the morsel, she brushed it along the bottom curve of her lip as she allowed her eyes to smolder to a hint of a golden sheen. For the first time in her life, she made a conscious decision to release her pheromones with the express intention of heightening the

sexual interest of the opposite sex. She knew the exact instant he inhaled her scent. A flush of sexual desire darkened his face and his eyes actually smoldered. She felt an answering spike of satisfaction at her success.

“What are you doing?” His voice was a low, rough growl.

The grip on his glass threatened to shatter it.

“I am seducing you.” She dipped the morsel into the spicy mixture, but instead of eating it, she began to lick the sauce from it. “What did you think I was doing?”

Her tongue swirled over the delicacy before she slowly drew it into her mouth. The action was blatantly sexual, completely effective. She lowered her lashes, then swept them upward, allowing Mac to see the metallic gold of her eyes. She knew the effect was stunning. Any Kadorian in the throes of sexual hunger would broadcast the fact through their eyes. She made no effort to conceal her desire. She wanted Mac to see how much she wanted him. Needed him.

Mac lifted his drink to down half its contents with something akin to desperation. “Dammit, Lacey!” he ground out in a low voice. “I want—I need to get out of here and be alone with you!”

“What is stopping you?”

“The fact that I can’t stand up without everyone in this room knowing I have a hard on!”

Larissalyia blinked, for a moment disconcerted. “Your robes...”

“Will tent out!”

Despite herself—despite the fact she was burning with hunger, Larissalyia grinned. The grin dissolved into a snicker, which in turn became all out laughter. She knew she was attracting the attention of the other patrons in the tavern, but couldn’t stop herself. The image which kept coming to her mind set off renewed laughter.

It might also have been the disgruntled expression on Mac’s face which struck her as funny. He didn’t appear to find the situation amusing at all.

It took several minutes before she got herself under control. With an unsteady hand, she wiped the tears from her eyes as she finally hiccupped to silence. In an effort to keep her mirth from overtaking her once more, she grabbed her drink and raised it to her lips even as her eyes continued to dance with merriment. "I am sorry," she muttered into her glass. "You must be very...uncomfortable."

"Not anymore." Mac's face creased with rueful amusement. "Having a woman laugh hysterically at this type of predicament somehow deflated the problem."

One final giggle escaped her before she set her drink down and leaned forward to rest her chin in her palm. Her gaze wandered over this self-confident male specimen. His eyes had not lost that aggressive stare, nor had the blatantly sensual interest faded from his demeanor. His obvious fascination gave her a sense of erotic power with which she was unfamiliar.

"So," she murmured with renewed confidence. She ran one finger around the rim of her glass. "Shall we adjourn to our room to continue this...discussion?"

"Absolutely."

He stood and caught her hand in his to pull her to her feet. Her glance dropped to his hips. Despite his assurance that his ardor had diminished, there was still evidence of his interest. A satisfied smile curved her lips.

This was going to be a night to remember.

Chapter Ten

Mac twisted Lacey around the instant they entered their room, his body pressing her against the door as he captured her lips with his in a soul-searing kiss. His hands rested on either side of her head as he angled his mouth over hers, stealing first one kiss, then another, and another. He'd wanted to take this slow, but after that sexual play in the tavern, he didn't think he could last. Lacey was not a woman for a quick tumble, but rather a woman for a long, leisurely ride.

Yet her response drove every intention of a careful seduction out of his head. Her tongue licked along the curve of his mouth before even white teeth captured his lower lip to bite down with exquisitely gentle pressure. At first her hands clutched his shoulders for balance, but now she slid them upward to thread through his hair and hold him prisoner as she plundered his mouth. She kissed him thoroughly, a moan of desire escaping her throat. It was the primitive sound of an aroused woman.

Mac swallowed the sound, reveled in her abandon. He wanted every sigh, every quiver, every response he could lure from her.

With a groan, he released her mouth to run his lips along the curve of her jaw. He pressed a string of tiny kisses downward until he found the line of her throat. There he paused to lave his tongue across the pulse where it beat so frantically. One hand left its place against the door to slide down the other side of her throat, spanning its length before he tilted her chin upward to bare more of her vulnerable flesh to his ministrations. A second husky moan emerged from her throat.

Then a thought occurred to him and he hesitated, raising his head to look into her passion-softened face. "Uh, Lacey?"

“Hmm?” She arched her neck for him to continue his caresses. When he didn’t, she opened her eyes with obvious reluctance. The gleam of gold he saw in them almost made him forget his question. “What is wrong?”

Mac wondered how he could delicately broach the subject of his ignorance without sounding like a complete ass. “Do you...uh...make love normally?”

“What do you mean by *normally*?”

He floundered even as he ran his hands through her hair, loosening the silken strands from its binding. For a moment he was distracted by the beauty of the near-white mass.

“I assume you are...completely human and that you...uh...” Again he hesitated. He was blowing this whole scene. He knew he was. Here he was virtually accusing her of being an alien—which she was, of course—but being less than human. She looked human, acted human in every way, but how could he be sure?

Lacey leaned back within the circle of his arms as understanding flared in her eyes. Rather than taking offense, an amused smile curved her lips. “Are you talking about an exchange of bodily fluids?”

“Well, yes.” Mac felt like an idiot. He assumed she made love in the usual way, but after viewing the various beings in Chaos, many looking far from human, he wasn’t so sure.

“I am human, Victor.” Laughter rang in her voice and sparkled in her eyes. “I have all the necessary working parts and yes, I do make love in a normal manner.”

“Just checking.” Mac buried his face in the curve of her throat.

She still bubbled with laughter. To distract her, he pressed the entire length of his body against her as he ran a series of nibbling kisses down the line of her throat, pausing to run his tongue to the curve of her breast, teasing her with quick little nips. She rewarded him with her moan and the press of her breast against his lips. All of her earlier amusement had fled.

“Ah, Lacey,” he murmured as he caressed the smooth, fragrant flesh. Leaning back, he pushed aside the collar of her flight suit to give himself

better access. His fingers found the nearly hidden fastenings. "I've wanted to do this since the first time I saw you."

He lifted his head only long enough to watch the rounded curves of her breasts as he drew the closure down. Slowly, each tantalizing inch was exposed until the fastener halted at her belt. He fumbled for a moment before he figured out the clasp and released it. The belt dropped to the ground with a thump. He immediately pulled the rest of the fastening free until her flight suit was opened to just below her navel. His senses flared when he realized that she wore nothing beneath her garment. Her skin was golden, smooth...perfect.

"Did you?" With a languid movement she leaned into him to rub her body against the length of his, igniting every nerve ending until he felt sure he was headed for meltdown. If he wasn't careful, this interlude was going to be over before it began. His erection pressed against the hard zipper of his jeans, threatening to do himself some serious damage unless he got out of his clothes in the very near future.

Her hands became busy with the fastenings of his robes. Within seconds the garment dropped to the floor to pool around his feet. Whether by accident or design, her fingers brushed across the stretched material of his jeans, wringing a harsh groan from deep in his throat. Mac clenched his teeth to master his body's reaction.

"What else did you wish to do the first time you saw me?" she asked.

Although he hung onto his control by the skin of his teeth, he grinned. Where to begin?

"Some of this." Mac buried his face between her breasts, his mouth finding the perfumed flesh through the gap in her flight suit. She cried out softly. He inhaled her scent, drawing that faintly spicy essence deep into his lungs. Then his tongue slid across her smooth skin in a long, slow caress. "And some of this."

He turned his head to one side and captured the peak of her breast, drawing the turgid tip into his mouth to gently suckle. His hand covered her other breast, caressing its fullness, kneading the plump flesh. Her nipples were stiff and with a growl, Mac switched his attention to that

breast, lavishing the same loving attention on it as he had the first, drawing it deep into the heat of his mouth.

Still nuzzling her, Mac glanced up. Lacey's eyes were closed, her head pressed back against the door and her moist lips parted on another moan. It was the most erotic sight he'd ever seen. Without taking his gaze from her face, he reached down until he found the apex of her thighs.

"And maybe a little of this," he ground out as he cupped her between her legs. Her eyes flew open with startled surprise. Holding her gaze with his, he rubbed his hand slowly back and forth. She was so hot. He could feel her moist heat through the material of her flight suit.

She pushed against his hand, widening her stance to give him better access to that most sensitive spot. Her lashes dropped once more as she worked herself against his fingers, another low moan seeping from her lips as the friction generated by the material increased her pleasure.

"That's it, honey," he whispered into her ear. Then his lips captured the lobe and tugged tenderly. He was careful to avoid the gems, using his tongue to moisten the inner curve of her ear with tantalizing little flicks. "Come for me."

His hand left her. Her gasp of protest turned into a moan when he slid his hand over her slightly rounded belly to delve into the opening of her flight suit. The garment was just loose enough to allow his hand to slip inside. He combed his fingers through the soft down of her pubic hair until he reached his goal, sliding into the moist heat of her slit. She was so wet; so ready. He knew it wouldn't take much to send her over the edge.

Without warning he slid his finger inside her narrow opening, his thumb brushing against her clit with a light, rhythmic touch.

Her fingers tightened in his hair as she approached her release. Her moisture bathed his fingers and he stroked into her harder, more insistently. He lifted his head to watch her face, seeing the flush climb up her throat and infuse her cheeks.

Suddenly she stiffened and moaned, long and breathless, as she arched more fully into his hand. The fingers wound in his hair tightened, just short of pain. He barely noticed, mesmerized by the sight of Lacey in the throes of her orgasm. Her eyes were screwed shut, her lips parted as she shuddered over and over.

When she finally calmed, he slipped his free hand under her buttocks to support her boneless weight. With reluctance he removed his hand from her flight suit, brushing his fingers against her wet, swollen flesh one last time. She gave a final sigh even as her lashes fluttered. He felt a sense of anticipation as he waited for her to look up. He needed to see what color her eyes were.

The stunning metallic gold of her gaze startled him. It was like looking into liquid gold; made all the more vivid by the long, dark lashes which framed her eyes. He'd had a hint of the golden sheen before, but nothing like this.

Seconds passed as they stared into each other's eyes, then Mac smiled. Holding her gaze, he raised his fingers to his mouth and slowly ran his tongue over each digit. A new flush rose in her cheeks and her gaze became even more heated.

"That..." She stopped and cleared her throat of its huskiness. "That was quite an appetizer."

Mac gave his finger one last lingering lick, then cupped his hand behind her head, capturing her mouth with his in a kiss which left them both breathless. Their lips parted. She sucked in air and her breasts brushed against his chest, making him more aware of her soft roundness, of his own sinewy hardness.

"The main event is going to be mind-boggling," he murmured against her lips.

"Mind-boggling?"

"Incredible," he clarified

Lacey eased away and glanced down. She stared for a long moment then looked up at him. "That cannot be comfortable."

"Downright painful."

Her hand came down to rest on his chest, pausing to investigate the taut muscles under the white shirt he wore. The smile curving her lips was full of feminine mischief as her fingers stroked lower to brush over his flat belly. Then down lower until she came to the waistband of his jeans. Mac held his breath, knowing what her touch was going to do to him.

When her fingers grazed against his thick erection, Mac gritted his teeth.

Oh yeah, pure torture.

“Lacey, honey...”

“Hmm?” She slanted him a golden glance that held a wealth of promise. Whether the promise was for pleasure to come or future agony wasn’t really clear. Her hand spread to press firmly against the fly of his jeans, cradling him intimately before she leaned forward to run her tongue down his throat in a long, lavish lick. Her free hand slid up his chest to the fastening of his shirt. As she released the closure and maneuvered her hand inside, her fingers trembled. Mac sucked in a breath as she teased the hard muscles of his chest with her other hand, lingering on one flat nipple.

“I’m not going to last much longer if you continue.” He caught her hands in his, halting her exploration before this interlude ended in an ignoble manner. Besides, why the hell were they standing by the door when there was a perfectly good bed behind him?

Without a word, he captured her lips with his and stepped backward to lead her toward the large bed occupying the center of their room. They had turned the lights low when they left the room earlier. Both the dim lighting and the still burning flame rocks threw everything in shadows, creating an intimate atmosphere. The only sounds were their soft, wet kisses and the moans of rising passion.

When his legs hit the back of the bed, Mac let himself fall backwards, taking Lacey with him. Her little cry of surprise was lost against his mouth. The pain where her elbow jammed into his ribs barely registered

as her breasts pressed against his chest and her thigh slipped between his legs, nestling against his erection.

An instant later, he shifted his weight in an effort to ease the tightly-stretched material covering his throbbing body. Damn! If he didn't have her soon, he was going to explode. He needed relief. Desperation grew by the second.

His hands spanned her waist and he rolled over, taking her with him until he was poised above her. Her hair spread out over the thick bedspread, gleaming golden against the pale blanket. With a teasing smile, Larissalyia stretched her arms over her head, arching her body against the hardness of his. She looked like a sacrifice to a pagan god, but the vision was lost in a haze of passion.

He raised himself high enough to draw her arms down and slide the sleeves of her flight suit from her shoulders, his gaze following the progress of the material as her breasts were uncovered. Her flesh glowed with a pearlescent radiance in the dim light. They were tipped with dusky pink nipples, already drawn tight from his earlier attentions. He stared down at them for a long moment before he stripped the suit over her hips and down her legs. She had toed off her boots so he had no hindrance to removing her clothing.

He drew himself up the length of her body, his teeth scraping against the tender skin of her hip before he ran his tongue over the area to soothe any ache. Her fingers buried themselves into his hair, holding him fast as he paused to caress the rounded curve of her belly. Her intoxicating scent enticed him, tempted him, but he continued up the length of her body. Later. He promised himself a taste of her later.

For now...

She cried out in protest when he pulled away long enough to divest himself of his clothing. He flung his shirt across the room. His boots dropped to the floor with a thud, quickly followed by his jeans. His erection sprang free, hard and thick. He lost no time returning to the sanctuary of her body, to luxuriate in the smooth warmth of her flesh

against his, soft where he was hard, supple where he was solid. Everything about her was a study in contrasts.

He pushed her legs apart, exposing her heat to him as he settled between her thighs. She shifted against him, moving her hips until his erection pressed against the heat of her core. He raised her head to look down at her, knowing his eyes gleamed with stark possession. Hers blazed golden.

“God, you’re beautiful, Lacey,” he murmured. How the hell had this happened? The thought surfaced as he slid his hand up her thigh, drawing it up against his hip to give him more access to her. He wasn’t about to question his good fortune.

His hands tightened on her hips to draw out the moment, but he knew it was a lost battle. He surged forward to bury himself in her, feeling her liquid heat bathe his cock. Her breathless cry was captured by his mouth. His own groan was hoarse, triumphant.

He paused for countless seconds, allowing her body to adjust to his. To savor her. She was so tight, so perfect. Her heat would consume him. Unable to remain still, he moved, the tightness of her sheath clinging to his erection. The fiery friction threatened to shred the last of his control. The faint sounds she made at the back of her throat spurred him on, her hips meeting his with a passion equal to his. The musky scent of their lovemaking rose, as intoxicating as any aphrodisiac. It mingled with the essence exclusive to Lacey, a heady combination.

Perspiration beaded his forehead as he fought to master himself. He felt himself losing control and didn’t know how much longer he could last.

When her body tightened around his, he redoubled his efforts, surging into her again and again until Lacey suddenly stiffened, every muscle going taut. Her hands buried themselves in his hair even as her legs wrapped themselves around his waist and she arched herself against him in an effort to bring herself as close to him as she could. Her inner muscles clenched around him while a low, animal wail broke from her throat.

The sound triggered his own release. He tipped over the edge and joined in her pleasure, a powerful orgasm ripping through him. He made a strangled sound as he held himself still, ecstasy flooding his body with a near pain.

After what seemed forever, he collapsed on top of her. He just managed to catch himself on his elbows and avoid crushing her with his weight.

Mac continued to hold Lacey as he struggled to catch his breath. Lacey moved her hands over his hips, up his chest and around to his back where she hugged him close. They were both drained, satiated.

Mac lifted himself a few inches and stared down into her relaxed face.

"That was incredible," he murmured as he pressed a kiss to her damp forehead.

"Mind-boggling."

A smile stretched across his lips before it faded. He never wanted to let her go. For the first time in his life he felt complete. He murmured something inaudible to her before he bent to press a second kiss to the top of her head, moving to nuzzle against her throat. Even though he knew she couldn't see it, Mac felt a tender look cross his face. It was not a familiar expression on him.

He'd known she was something special the moment he saw her in Joe's Pub. It was as if she'd been made for him.

Giving a brief thought to Joanna, he experienced a twinge of guilt, but brushed it away. It was two days past their wedding date. He assumed she had laid the blame at his feet, but he didn't care. Right now the only emotion he felt was relief that he'd walked in on Joanna when he did. He'd like to think she wouldn't have gone through with the ceremony while involved with another man, but the matter was no longer an issue.

For an instant he wondered what would have happened if his life hadn't taken this unexpected turn. He'd probably be on a warm and sunny beach on Earth, soaking up copious amounts of alcohol, rather

than on an alien planet with a woman with whom he had just shared the most incredible sex of his life.

There was no question in his mind about which place he'd rather be.

Chapter Eleven

Last night might have been a mistake.

The thought floated to the surface even as Larissalyia tried to avoid any physical contact with Mac. But the crowds made it impossible. For such an arid, desolate planet, Chaos attracted a great many beings—human and otherwise. No doubt due to being on the fringe of the worlds held by the F.O.W. The government didn't monitor this planet quite as diligently as it did others.

When Larissalyia was jostled for the third time in as many minutes, Mac took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. She stiffened as renewed desire ripped through her, but forced herself to relax. Through the rising heat of the morning, she still felt the warmth of his body from the slight contact. The security of his gesture melted a few of her qualms as nothing else could.

The entire night had passed in an insatiable blur of lovemaking. She had never suspected there were so many different positions or methods to make love with a man. Her limited experience hadn't prepared her for such a—what was the phrase Mac had used? Mind-boggling encounter.

Despite her doubts, she smiled within the folds of her headdress. An odd saying, but apt.

Perhaps using her scent to enhance the sexual attraction hadn't been fair, but the pheromones of Kadorians worked both ways. It not only affected the opposite sex, it also heightened her own desires. She'd never used that particular trait before in her few sexual encounters; it had never felt right. Last night with Mac, it felt very right.

Neither one of them had gotten more than a few hours of sleep the entire night. Their passion was unquenchable. She was deliciously sore in the most interesting places. All it took was a glance or errant touch and the desire flared to life.

Which was half the problem. A sense of guilt threatened to engulf her.

Last night was everything she could have ever hoped or dreamed of with a lover. But now a stab of pain raced through her when she dwelled on the future. Or lack thereof. Eventually she had to return Mac to his world. This relationship was destined to end. Last night was a mistake and grossly unfair to both of them.

She had taken a blood oath to leave his memory intact and would honor her vow. She had little doubt Mac would keep his word and not reveal the existence of the F.O.W. to Earth. She knew he was a man of great integrity.

Perhaps she should take one day at a time and enjoy what they had for as long as she could. This business with souMalocho would be resolved soon enough. She hoped. When that happened, she could go back to her old life and Mac would return to his.

A depressing thought.

Sighing, she returned her attention to her surroundings. She'd been on Chaos a half dozen times, always in Tutsi's company. She was somewhat familiar with the layout, but with their twists and turns of the day before, she felt turned around again, unsure of her directions.

"You're sure this is the right way?" she asked.

"According to Minnie, it is." His voice confident, Mac turned down an alleyway. The suns vanished for a brief moment and threw the narrow passage into a welcome dimness. It was just wide enough for the two of them to walk abreast and was thankfully empty. A couple of piles of garbage forced Mac to take the lead and guide Larissalyia around them. All too soon they were back in the merciless glare of the twin suns, weaving in and out of the pedestrian traffic.

Finally their surroundings looked familiar, Larissalyia decided as she spied a café she recognized. Sava's warehouse was only three streets over. They should get there shortly.

"Why aren't there any transports?"

She glanced up at Mac to find him looking around the crowds of beings with curiosity. He hadn't said much this morning, perhaps having caught her mood. A stray breeze molded his robes to his chest, and she noticed how well the garment suited his tall form. He did something for it which was lacking in any other man she knew.

"I mean, I'd been accessing some of your databanks on the Talon. It seems that most worlds have some sort of ground transport to get around in."

"Chaos is an old world. Much of the city was built long before transports were in use. The streets are too narrow to allow mechanical traffic," Larissalyia answered absently. She was too busy remembering how his hard chest felt under her hands and the way those muscles flexed with her slightest touch. "And the fact that the blowing sand gums up the machinery. You might have noticed the spaceport is almost completely enclosed. Helps to keep the ships' engines free of dust and grime."

Mac grunted under his breath without taking his attention from the immediate area. Larissalyia noticed he was continuously aware of everything and everyone around him. Victor MacNaught was not a man who missed much. A good trait to have on Chaos.

Larissalyia started down the street with confidence, certain of where she was. With luck Sava would have the identity ready and they could leave Chaos. So far they'd been fortunate. Other than Sava, she hadn't run into anyone she knew. The fewer people aware of her presence on Chaos the better. Although the inhabitants of this planet were a closed-mouth lot there was always the chance word of their appearance could reach Nicos. There were just so many places they could have gone after Cyber Five. Much as she liked to imagine Nicos ending up as a Yonni snack, it seemed unlikely.

She spied the archway leading into Sava's courtyard and her step quickened.

"Wait!"

Mac's low command was filled with urgency. Without question she froze. He tugged her into a shadowed alcove and crowded her into the back of the scant shelter, his body covering hers. Leaning out of the doorway, he surveyed the area surrounding the archway.

"What is it?" Larissalyia kept her voice hushed and slid her hands around his waist, steadying herself to peer around him.

Nothing seemed out of place. She saw the usual crowds of beings passing their shelter, but only a few glanced casually in their direction. The dual suns beat down on the dusty street while a stray breeze whipped up a dust devil to swirl around the pedestrians. The curtain of grit obscured her vision for a moment before the wind died and the dust settled.

"Damn, I'm getting tired of those guys."

Larissalyia followed his glance and noticed the figure loitering against the wall across from Sava's archway. He was swathed in the necessary desert robes of Chaos, but where nearly everyone else wore their headdress draped across their face, his features were bare.

And also very obviously a Kyrion.

She muttered a foul curse.

"Another one at two o'clock."

"What?"

"A little to your right, on the same side of the street but further on."

It took her a moment to spot the second Kyrion leaning against the unrelieved beige of a wall. This one wore a headdress and his buff robes allowed him to blend in with the bland color.

There was no doubt they were both watching Sava's warehouse. She swore again. Where there were two Kyrions, there were sure to be more.

This meant one of two things. Either Sava betrayed them, or one of souMalocho's many spies had spotted them. Perhaps the character who'd

followed them when they left Sava's place yesterday. One other possibility was Nicos had guessed Larissalyia would seek out Sava for the identity. It was no secret that Sava was the best in the business.

"D'you think that little green guy double-crossed us?"

"I am not sure. Sava tends to stay bought. He may be a little thief, but he remains loyal to the highest bidder."

"What if souMalocho made him an offer he couldn't refuse?"

"Always a possibility." She tried to search out more watchers, but was unable to spot them. "There is a back way, but I don't think we dare chance it. If Sava betrayed us, there could be more waiting for us inside."

"I agree. Let's get out of here."

Mac turned to gaze down at her, his eyes above the concealing headdress assessed her lack of robes, which would make her stand out even in this crowd. She knew her flight suit was wrinkled where he'd dropped it to the floor when he—

Larissalyia slammed the door shut on her thoughts. Now was not the time to relive last night's pleasure. She needed to focus on their present situation.

Kyrions on Chaos were not uncommon, but she didn't care for the coincidence of their presence outside of Sava's warehouse. The Struturian's loyalties could be bought and souMalocho could be financially persuasive.

"You're sure to stand out like a sore thumb," Mac muttered as his glance swept over her curves. There was nothing of the sensuous lover in that frozen blue gaze. They were the eyes of a warrior. She knew if she could see the rest of his face, it would be just as hard.

"No time to get you some robes," he continued. "If these crowds thin out any more, we're sure to be seen."

His grip on her arm tightened before he pulled her in front of him and swept his robes out until she was partially concealed within their folds. With an unhurried motion, he left the alcove, careful to keep his larger body between her and any unfriendly glance which might turn their way. His pace was even as he merged with the flow of beings headed in the

opposite direction from Sava's warehouse. No one gave them a second glance as they reached an intersecting street and turned right. When they were out of sight, Mac crowded her into the first doorway and flattened himself just enough so he still had a clear view of the corner they'd just turned.

The hot stones heated Larissalyia's back, but she ignored the discomfort. She concentrated on the intersection as they waited to see if they'd been followed. She saw a steady stream of beings, some clad as she was in flight suits, but the majority enshrouded in robes. No one appeared unduly interested in them.

"I do not think we were seen," she breathed into Mac's ear. Without conscious thought, her hand curled around his arm. Some part of her needed the close contact.

"Hang on." They waited for a few more tense moments but no Kyrion came around the corner. Finally Mac pushed away. "Okay, let's go."

They left the shelter of the doorway and merged once more with the stream of pedestrians. Larissalyia fought the urge to glance over her shoulder. Her nerves were tightened to the screaming point. She tried to keep her gaze trained on the paved roadway rather than stare into each face they passed. That would only bring attention to them. One did not display curiosity on Chaos.

Everything came into crystal clarity. The suns beat down all the hotter, the dust rose in a visible veil to obscure her vision at the most inconvenient moments, the constant murmur of voices rose until it sounded like a swarm of angry insects. The streets seemed all the more narrow, closing in on her until she felt claustrophobic.

Her imagination? Perhaps. But nerve-racking all the same.

They had to get back to the ship. All thought of purchasing an identity had to be abandoned. She was too unfamiliar with the other frontier worlds to chance a trip to locate another dealer. Besides, the distances were too great. None of the closest wormholes led directly to any likely markets. They'd need to do multiple crossings and would lose a great deal of time.

But then, how long would it take her father to accumulate the evidence necessary to prove souMaloch's depravity? Had he made any headway?

Larissalyia decided she'd been out of touch for too long. She had no idea what was going on with the investigation. Had anyone else gone missing or been killed? Was her father even safe?

Far too many questions and no answers.

"This way." One large masculine hand touched hers lightly to direct her attention to the next intersection. It took a moment to bring her focus back to her surroundings. They were near the spaceport, the rise and fall of heavy engines audible above the clamor of the crowds.

As they passed into a long tunnel, the heat of the suns abruptly cut off to leave them in the comparative comfort of the shadows. And there were fewer beings since the spaceport was more heavily patrolled than the city. Uniformed members of the F.O.W. security mingled with a multitude of alien space travelers.

They needed to be even more cautious here. Usually it was the goof ups who pulled duty on Chaos, but there was still the odd eager kid out to prove himself. The last thing they needed was for someone to ask Mac for his non-existent identification.

With a practiced eye, Larissalyia inspected the two soldiers lounging in the shade of the tunnel, taking note of the wrinkles in their uniforms and the dust covering their boots. No high polish there. These two were definitely goof ups. Probably nothing to worry about.

Nevertheless she put a deliberate swagger in her step as they approached the men. Confidence was the key. Never show you were nervous.

She even went as far as to loosen the fastening which held her flight suit closed at the neck. Flashing a little skin never hurt either.

Beside her, Mac stiffened. She tossed him a quick glance.

"Relax," she said under her breath as she unwound her headdress from around the lower portion of her face. "You're a mute, remember?"

Larissalyia concentrated on keeping her eye color a neutral brown as they reached the soldiers. No need for these two to realize she was a Kadorian. She felt fortunate the dimness of the tunnel made clear sight difficult. Normally this end of the tunnel was better lit, but the perennial dust must have filtered into a few of the fixtures and shorted them.

All the better.

“ID.”

Larissalyia was pleased to note the boredom in the man’s voice. Nothing alert about this sorry specimen. She mimicked his apathetic attitude and reached up to unfasten the pocket over her right breast. When she saw the way the man’s gaze followed the motion of her hand, she pretended to fumble with the flap, brushing her breast with the heel of her hand and invariably pulling the neckline of the flight suit down a little further.

“Captain Miriam vonGallion.” Larissalyia handed the soldier one of her pseudo identities and yawned in his face.

“You’re a Kurilian?”

“Yep. Heading home after five cycles.”

“What about him?” The second soldier gestured toward Mac.

“Him, too.”

“No...I mean, where is his ID?”

Larissalyia shot a glance over her shoulder before she leaned closer to confide. The movement allowed the man a clear view down her flight suit. “He forgot his ID when we left the ship yesterday. He’s a...member of my crew. Not very bright...if you know what I mean.”

She directed an enticing pout at him and was rewarded with his rising interest. But the second soldier didn’t pay any attention to her. He only had eyes for Mac. In fact, she noticed the way his gaze traveled over Mac from head to foot. There was something more than the usual suspicion in that scrutiny.

“He’s one of your crew? What does he do?”

“Well, I don’t exactly keep him around for his brains.”

The first soldier sniggered and nudged his partner with an elbow. “C’mon, Yale. Shift change. Let’s get something to eat.” He handed Larissalyia back her identification and waved them on. “Move along, Captain.”

“Thanks.” Larissalyia took her time replacing the identification before she caught Mac by the arm and urged him into motion. “Come, *serti*. We have much to do before we leave.”

With a nod, she acknowledged the next pair of soldiers entering the tunnel and continued walking, her hand still on Mac’s arm. She resisted a final glance over her shoulder.

“What is this *serti*?” Mac’s voice was low, his lips barely moving.

Larissalyia knew her smile was slightly wicked and that she had lost control of her eyes. She could almost feel them bleed into the turquoise of mischief. “You know that female singer you have on your Earth? The one who coined the phrase ‘Boy Toy’?”

“You mean...”

“Uh huh. *Serti* is a term which indicates a relationship based strictly on sex.”

“Thanks a lot.”

She swallowed a laugh as they passed out of the tunnel and into the spaceport. Space-faring ships of every shape and size were docked at numbered bays. An aisle bisected the port, wide enough to allow ships to move into position for lift off. The drawback of the dust-blocking enclosure around the spaceport was having to wait in line to lift off. The panel enclosing the dome opened briefly for each departure. It was time consuming, but it was far more inconvenient to continuously repair ship’s engines destroyed by the elements.

They walked the long aisle for almost an hour, passing ship after ship. Many swarmed with beings—either human or otherwise—in the midst of repair, cleaning or preparation for departure. The din was incredible. Voices echoed throughout the interior, the clank of equipment and tools in use, the million and one different noises that accompanied

any busy port. The scent of fuel hung heavy in the dry air, mingling with a dozen or so other smells. Some almost pleasant, many downright vile.

Finally they reached docking bay twenty-nine where the Talon was berthed. Every time Larissalyia saw her ship, she knew a thrill of ownership. The Talon was the first ship she'd ever owned and although she now possessed a fleet for her business, it remained her favorite. Thanks to the modifications she and Tutsi had introduced over the cycles, it was also the fastest and most maneuverable vessel.

What she didn't expect was to find the *Mandujano* warrior pacing the length of the ship, worry etched on his dark face. His bald head gleamed where the overhead lighting caught it and he paused to run his large hands over his hairless pate. She'd never seen him so agitated.

"Tutsi?"

The big man whipped around at the sound of her voice. Relief flooded his blunt features.

"M'lady!" He glanced toward the open corridor to make sure no one was close enough to hear his slip, then he closed the distance between them. Ignoring Mac he caught Larissalyia hands in his and dropped to one knee. "M'lady," he repeated in a softer voice. "Thank the Light you are safe."

"Why would I not be safe?"

The gaze he lifted to Larissalyia held fear. That more than anything unsettled her. Tutsi never showed fear.

"SouMalocho has escaped from prison."

Chapter Twelve

“What do you mean, he escaped?” Lazarus Elinnis Ashanti roared after an instant of stunned silence. Leaning across the gleaming surface of his desk he pinned the hapless messenger with a fiery rage that he knew turned his eyes nearly black, the red sparks deep within giving him a demonic glare. “You’re telling me a dangerous criminal has managed to escape one of the most secure prisons in the Federation? How is that possible?”

“M’lord, eight guards are dead, countless others injured. It was a carefully planned and executed escape.” A line of white surrounding his mouth betrayed the man’s anxiety. His voice trembled each time he met Lord Ashanti’s gaze. “SouMalocho somehow managed to plant his own people into the prison staff cycles ago.”

“Is the man psychic? How under the Light could he have known he might one day be sent to Death’s Landing?”

The messenger wound his hands together, the extra joint in each finger allowing him to contort his hands into an intricate tangle. “There is suspicion, m’lord, that souMalocho has planted his people in nearly every major prison system in the Federation. The Security Force is trying to unravel his network of agents.”

His body suddenly boneless, Lazarus dropped back into his chair. He stared at the messenger as he evaluated the full spectrum of what this could mean. That a man like souMalocho had the foresight to install his own people in key positions on the off chance he might one day need them. It spoke of preparations made cycles ago; long before his criminal activities came to the attention of the F.O.W.

Where else did souMalocho have his people positioned? Why suppose he stopped at stocking the prisons with his agents? Who was to say the man didn't have his people infiltrated into key positions of the government, the financial world, the legal system?

The possibilities were horrifying.

"You are dismissed." Lazarus ignored the man's sigh of relief and subsequent departure.

He'd made considerable headway gathering evidence to implicate souMalocho in the deaths of the prosecutor and his family, the disappearance of the defense attorney as well as the "accidents" befalling the jurors. But not as much as he'd hoped.

How many of his own people were planted? That possibility disturbed him the most. Were any of his most trusted advisors on that maniac's payroll? How much of his investigation had been jeopardized or hampered by someone working on behalf of souMalocho? Although the puzzle was coming together bit by bit, was it possible some of the pieces had deliberately gone missing?

And what of his daughter? Trapped on that barbaric planet, with little by way of communications, Larissalyia would be unaware of souMalocho's escape. If his investigation was correct, that madman had managed to run his empire while incarcerated. What would he be like with full access to his resources?

The thought made the blood freeze in his veins.

Leaning forward, he pressed a button below a small monitor. The face of a Tageant female appeared on the screen. She could almost have passed for a Kadorian if hadn't been for the size of her head. Larger than normal, the increased brain size made Tageants prized on anyone's staff. They were incredibly efficient and never forgot anything.

"Yes, my lord?" Her voice was deep, almost masculine.

Although Saurey had been with him for cycles, Lazarus found himself wondering where her real loyalties lay. He shook off the thought. He could not suspect everything and everyone. Still, he had to remind

himself of her cycles of service. She had never shown herself to be disloyal or given him reason to be suspicious.

“Please come in and bring the records of all beings employed by both my office and my household.”

“Yes, my lord.” If the request surprised her, it didn’t show in her expression. Her pale face remained serene.

“Oh, and get me the *Mandujano* Premier. I want my daughter found.”

* * *

Mac watched Lacey as she digested this bit of news. Each time her lashes rose, her eyes were a different color. First silvery with shock, then a stormy gray with annoyance and finally they darkened to black. As he watched, he could have sworn he saw flashes of red deep within the darkness. Then her lashes dropped once more to conceal her emotions.

“I must assume my father is aware of this turn of events.” Her even tone revealed nothing of the churning turmoil her eyes had betrayed in those first few seconds. Her movements were careful as she reached up to lower the headdress to her shoulders. Her glorious hair was bound tight to her head and the gems in her ears glittered with a muted fire under the docking bay lights. There was nothing of the wild, uninhibited woman he’d held in his arms for much of the night. This was the captain of the Talon; confident and calm. A woman in charge.

“It was all over the radio transmissions this morning. I tried to contact you by communicator earlier, but you did not respond.” Tutsi’s face hardened as he doled out his glances between the two of them. His scrutiny was more than a little unfriendly when it rested on Mac. “I was about to go in search of you.”

Keeping his expression neutral, Mac returned the big man’s glare with equilibrium. It was up to Lacey to make explanations, if she were so inclined.

Her glance flashed briefly to him. She had gotten herself under control and her eyes were now a noncommittal brown. The effort she must be exerting to hold that color told him quite a bit in itself.

"I turned off the communicator. I...we did not expect to be so late this morning."

"Did you have trouble with Sava?"

Although the question was directed at his mistress, Tutsi kept his gaze on Mac.

"Sava's place was being watched," he answered before Lacey could. "We spotted two Kyrions outside his warehouse, but didn't know how many more might've been around."

Tutsi muttered something foul. "They know we are here."

The bodyguard's glance went around the docking bay. Mac knew that despite being cut off from the sight of most of their neighbors, the illusion of isolation was just that...an illusion. Anyone with listening equipment could easily eavesdrop. Primitive as it was by comparison with what was available in this F.O.W., even Earth technology could penetrate their privacy.

"Where do we go from here?" Mac asked. "It's only a matter of time before that Nicos character or his henchmen figure out where we are. And what of this souMalocho? He seems to be expending an awful lot of time and effort on getting his hands on you, Lacey."

"Quit calling me Lacey." The protest sounded automatic, as if she weren't paying attention to the exchange. Her face closed on a slight frown, she fingered the material draped over her shoulders.

Whatever her thoughts were, they weren't pretty, Mac decided as he watched one hand drop to her hip where he knew a weapon was concealed.

He had spent some of his time between destinations using the shipboard computer to do a little research on this souMalocho character. Although he couldn't read U.B., he was able to switch the data to audio.

The dude was bad news. From what he heard, Hitler and Stalin looked tame compared to Audon souMalocho. He'd been tied in with

everything ranging from petty smuggling to mass genocide. The Federation had managed to nail him with the slavery trade and eventual murder of the princess Lacey had mentioned. But even though his unlawful practices were common knowledge, they'd been unable to pin much else on him. The man was careful. Witnesses and informants regularly vanished without a trace.

"Why is he so hell-bent on getting you?"

Lacey shook herself out of her musings and glanced around once more. "Not here, we're too exposed. Let's get on board before I explain."

Inside the cramped galley, Mac used the dispenser to get the three of them hot drinks while Lacey and the bodyguard took a seat at the tiny table. Mac sat but no one spoke immediately, Lacey and Tutsi apparently lost in their thoughts.

"Lord Ashanti was most instrumental with souMalocho's conviction and eventual imprisonment," Tutsi said finally. "It is possible souMalocho is saving the best for last."

His somber gaze turned towards Lacey as she remained silent. Cradling her drink between her hands, she stared down at it.

"Since we have regained access to reliable communications," he continued, "I have been doing some checking."

Mac saw Lacey brace herself.

"Go on," she said.

He admired her control. Her hands were almost steady when she raised the mug to her lips. Only a fine tremble betrayed the strain she was trying to conceal.

"Besides the murder of the prosecutor's family and the disappearance of the defense attorney and his family, the jurors from his trial have had a series of accidents, some explainable, some extremely suspicious. Of the ten jurors, three are dead, four are missing and the other three may or may not have gone into hiding."

Lacey drew a deep breath, then slowly expelled it. She closed her eyes for a moment.

“And that’s what he managed to do from prison,” Mac said. “What’s he capable of now that he’s free?”

The glance Lacey slanted his way was hostile. Mac shrugged. “Someone has to say it.”

“I—”

A low hum interrupted her. It rose in volume, and in a millisecond, Lacey was up and headed toward the bridge with Mac and Tutsi close on her heels. Taking her seat in the captain’s chair, she pulled the console toward her. Her fingers flew across the keys as she brought up the security monitors surrounding the Talon. The forward viewing screen came to life, opaque for a second, before it split into four smaller screens to give them a view of the entire area encircling the ship.

“There!” A furtive movement caught Mac’s attention. Leaning forward, he put a finger on the screen closest to him. Lacey punched a couple of keys and the slightly fuzzy image sharpened into a robed figure. Small, it was impossible to determine its gender or race as the being hesitated at the wide gap leading into their docking bay. Sliding along the wall, it scuttled closer to the Talon. With its buff-colored robes, the creature faded easily into the beige walls surrounding the bay. It vanished from sight unless you kept your eye on it.

“I get the feeling we’ve just outstayed our welcome here,” Mac muttered into the silence.

“I agree.”

“Wait!” Tutsi continued to watch the intruder. “Look!”

Mac turned back to the screen. The figure made another careful circuit to ensure it was alone before reaching up to lower its hood.

Sava stood just outside the ship, looking straight into one of the monitors. He made a series of gestures, all of them frantic. Although it was difficult to read his expression, his urgency was unmistakable.

“I’d say he wants to come on board.” Mac watched the diminutive man skulk closer to the ramp. He cocked one brow in Lacey’s direction but she was staring at the intruder. It was impossible to guess her

thoughts. “And going by his expression, he looks terrified of being discovered.”

Lacey nibbled at her lower lip for a minute longer before she punched the door release in a violent motion. Mac noticed she dipped her hand into her pocket and palmed her weapon. Keeping it hidden with her body, she swung the chair around to face the portal.

Sava sidled onto the bridge, his darting gaze betraying his anxiety. “My Lady Ashanti.” The man bowed to Lacey, his hands tucked into the sleeves of his robe. “You be most kind to allow Sava on board.”

“Hold your hands out where I can see them, Sava.” Lacey’s voice was harsh as she leveled her weapon on the Struturian. “Nice and easy. No sudden moves.”

“My lady!” Sava appeared shocked at the sight of the weapon trained on him. “Sava have come to warn you.”

“About what? The Kyrions who have taken up residence outside your warehouse?”

“You know of them?”

Lacey said nothing as she watched him. Under her cold stare, the Struturian began to fidget. Moving with care, he took his hands from his sleeves. They were empty.

“My lady. That be what Sava came to warn you of. The Kyrions—they came during the night. Very brave or very stupid to be out in the Night Storms. Particularly if they be Kyrions. They do not like the cold.” Sava glanced at the other two occupants of the room before he settled his attention once more on Lacey. His dark eyes glinted in the muted lighting of the bridge. “They must want you very badly.”

Still Lacey remained silent, her face giving no hint of her thoughts. Even her eyes held to the neutral brown Mac was fast becoming familiar with. He had to admire her nerve. She didn’t move a hair or show any hint of worry. Only because he now knew her so well he detected the tension in the angle of her head, the way her hand gripped the arm of her chair.

“The Kyrions...they ask Sava if Lady Ashanti had been to Sava’s shop.” The little green man spread his hands out in a sweeping gesture. “Lady Ashanti has been a prized customer of Sava for many cycles. Sava tell them nothing.”

Mac leaned one shoulder against the wall next to the door and crossed his arms.

“Apparently they didn’t believe you,” he said.

Sava started, the few patches of fur which still adorned his face looking mangier than ever. “You not mute.” Sava’s high tone was accusing. He appeared almost affronted that he had been deceived.

Mac raised one brow. “You think?”

Sava stared at him for a moment longer before he turned back to Lacey. “No, my lady. Sava fear they did not believe Sava.”

“Do you have the tag I commissioned?”

A look of embarrassment crossed the Struturian’s face. “Sava could not. The Kyrions...you see, they took over Sava’s warehouse.” His voice was becoming squeakier by the minute. “Sava could do nothing with Kyrions looking over Sava’s shoulder.”

“How did you get here without them following?” Mac asked.

The look he sent Mac’s way was borderline hostile. Apparently Sava didn’t like this line of questioning.

“Good question, Mac.” Lacey turned her gaze back on Sava. Mac noticed that her eyes were slowly bleeding into an icy blue shade, the new color overtaking the brown. Sava must have noticed this as well, because he looked a little sick. “How did you manage to get here without them? For that matter, how did you know we were at docking bay twenty-nine? I told you we were at number twenty-six.”

“Sava knows back ways of Chaos very well. Few can follow. Sava went to twenty-six and found old freighter there. So obviously not the ship of Lady Ashanti. Kept going until Sava find you.”

Lacey didn’t look convinced. The hand holding the weapon never wavered.

“Pity male not be mute,” Sava muttered under his breath. “Still, he would bring a good price.” The little man recovered himself and spread his hands out once more, his smile back in place.

He did a good job of appearing harmless. Mac wondered how many people fell for his act. He was willing to bet not many noticed the gleam of craftiness in those beady eyes.

“We have company.” Tutsi’s words fell into the momentary silence. He’d continued to monitor the screens while he listened to the exchange.

Mac glanced at the screens in time to see a half dozen beings infiltrate their docking bay. Although they were clad in the same robes, there was no doubt they were Kyrions. This time they wore the headdresses, but hadn’t bothered with the concealing veil. Their scaly blue faces gleamed under the dim lighting. They entered cautiously and moved along the walls much the same way Sava had. Mac grimaced. Someone really should have told them blue didn’t blend well with beige.

Mac left his position at the doorway to circle around to Lacey’s side. He was careful not to come between her and the Struturian.

“How many?” Lacey asked quietly as she kept her eyes on Sava. She didn’t lower her weapon.

“Six—no, there’s a seventh still at the entrance.”

“Here.” She handed Mac the weapon. It was similar to a gun. “Keep him covered.” She directed a brash smile at Sava. “You better buckle in, Sava. We’re going to take a little trip.”

“What?!” A look of outrage crossed the creature’s mangy face. “Sava cannot leave Chaos! Sava have business to run.”

“You should have thought of that before you led the Kyrions here.” Lacey swung around in her chair, her hands already dancing over the controls. Lights came to life across the board. The monitors cleared until they had an unhampered view through the front screen.

Mac felt a faint vibration shudder through the ship, and he recognized the low-grade hum of the engines powering up. Without taking his gaze from Sava, he reached behind him and felt for the co-

pilot's seat. Tutsi was already strapped in at the navigation station. Sava looked around frantically, seeking a means of escape.

"Too late, buddy." Mac smiled at him. He knew it wasn't a friendly smile. "Have a seat and make yourself comfortable." It was awkward, but he managed to buckle himself into his seat and at the same time juggle the weapon.

"But Sava did not lead Kyrions here. They follow! Sava came to warn Lady Ashanti," the diminutive man protested as he strapped himself into a jump seat near the navigation station.

"Doesn't matter." Lacey's complete focus was on the controls. The Talon lifted a scant meter from the ground. Mac kept an eye on Sava as he turned far enough to see what the intruders were doing. Three of them were gesturing wildly while the other three rushed the ship with weapons drawn.

"What do you think would happen if I were to let you out now, Sava?" she continued. "The Kyrions would vaporize you first and ask questions later."

Lacey sent the Talon toward the entrance of the docking bay and maneuvered the ship down the corridor toward the launching pad. Klaxons sounded within the spaceport as dock workers scattered out of the way. Mac couldn't see what had happened to the Kyrions but that concern took second place now.

"Ship oh, two, two, oh, six, you do not have permission to leave your bay." The disembodied voice came over the Talon's communication. "Ship oh, two, two, oh, six, disengage. You do not have clearance. You are ordered to disengage."

"Shut that thing off," Lacey muttered as she boosted their speed. The Talon wove in and out of larger ships, easily avoiding collision, sometimes by inches. What had seemed a wide corridor when they walked through it earlier now appeared far too narrow. Her face intense, Lacey's entire focus was on the front view screen as she directed the vessel toward the launching area.

“Security will soon appear, my lady,” Tutsi informed her as he fed her information from his station.

“They’ll be too late.”

They reached the launching pad. A large, bulky-looking vessel had just arrived and was being maneuvered off the pad when the Talon darted in. With delicate skill, Lacey positioned the ship on the pad as the dome began to close.

Satisfied that Sava was secured and unlikely to do anything stupid, Mac swung his chair around until he faced the view screen. He saw beings rushing in from all directions, some in uniform, most dock workers wearing flight suits. Several of the security guards were waving weapons, their shouts soundless to the occupants of the Talon.

The engines rose to an ear-splitting pitch.

“Hang on, everyone!”

He only had an instant to brace himself before the Talon shot straight up, the G-force so great he knew he would have been squashed flat had he not been secured in his seat. There was a squeaky scream behind him, but he didn’t turn as he felt the ship shudder to a halt for a gut-wrenching instant before it turned and flung itself skyward. There was a blurred impression of the tall flight tower, then they soared into the brilliance of the dual suns.

Mac’s sense of vertigo was brief as they passed from the atmosphere and into the darkness of space. In the length of time it took to draw a deep breath, the blackness blossomed, dotted with an array of stars, each shining with its distant beauty.

For that one moment, there was peace. For only an instant. Then...

“Lady Ashanti have no right to abduct Sava!” The high-pitched voice grated on Mac’s nerves. His head throbbed with the effects of the abrupt departure and the little man’s screeching was making it worse.

“You’re getting pretty good at kidnapping, Lacey,” Mac muttered for her ears only. He grinned as he watched the color rise in her cheeks.

“Sava try to help Lady Ashanti and this be the thanks Sava gets?”

“Don’t worry, Sava. I don’t want you on my ship any longer than you want to be.” Lacey never took her attention from the front screen. Without turning, she barked something to Tutsi in some language other than U.B.

Tutsi replied in kind which only made Lacey’s frown deepen.

“What’s wrong?” Mac kept his tone low, using the continued complaints of the Struturian to cover his question.

“We are running out of viable places to hide. It seems Nicos is somehow anticipating our every move.” Her voice was just as low as she took her eyes off the screen long enough to dart him a glance. Her eyes were a dark blue that betrayed her worry. “With souMalocho free...” She shook her head. “I cannot think of anywhere he would have no eyes or ears reporting back to him.”

“What about Earth? Would he think we’d go back there?”

Lacey was silent as she fed coordinates into the console, her full concentration on the task. Finally she sighed and turned to face him. “You’ve accessed souMalocho’s file, Victor. You know what he’s capable of. Are you willing to endanger your world? The man once gassed an entire planet.”

Without waiting for his answer, she shook her head. “No, we cannot take a chance with a world so wholly undefended. Since Earth is unsanctioned, it would get no aid from the F.O.W.”

Mac reached over and took one of her hands in his, smoothing her fingers over his palm. He raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the center. Her palm trembled as if a shiver went through her. By the silence behind them, he knew Tutsi and Sava were watching them, but didn’t care.

“Male from world not sanctioned!” Sava suddenly erupted.

Mac glanced over his shoulder to find the Struturian staring at him with something akin to horror. The outrage was short-lived as his expression melted into cunning.

“Shut him up,” Lacey snapped.

In an instant Tutsi was out of his seat. He loomed over the Struturian, his expression a mask of menace.

Sava gave him a contemptuous glance before he turned back to Mac and Lacey. His glance dropped to their still-linked hands and a new craftiness came to his face. He ignored the bodyguard as he released the straps holding him and hopped down from the seat to approach Lacey.

“Perhaps Lady Ashanti and Sava can make a new deal.”

“Look, Sava. Don’t think I won’t hesitate to eject you like so much flotsam.” Her glance went beyond him to Tutsi. “Take him into the second storeroom and keep him there until I decide what to do with him.”

The bodyguard scooped up the Struturian under one massive arm and removed him from the bridge. They could hear Sava’s squeaking protests for several minutes before the sound was abruptly cut off.

Mac ignored the ominous silence and turned back to Lacey as she dropped his hand and heaved a weary sigh. Now that they were alone, she allowed her guard to slip. She looked so tired. Almost defeated. This was not the woman he’d gotten to know so well in these last few days. The tough exterior she presented to the outside universe effectively concealed this softer side of her.

He wanted to take her into his arms and assure her everything would be okay. But that was a promise he couldn’t make. And, perhaps, couldn’t keep.

Chapter Thirteen

Was he so eager to return to his world?

Larissalyia kept her focus on the console for a few minutes longer as she concentrated on punching in a series of possible destinations. She was almost afraid to look at Mac. Just the sight of him was enough to scatter her wits in an alarming manner. He looked so wonderful sitting there beside her in the co-pilot's seat. Like he belonged there.

She'd doubted the wisdom of sleeping with him the night before, but somehow those doubts evaporated in light of this new crisis. At this moment she could think of no one she trusted more at her side. Even Tutsi did not garner the same confidence, and the *Mandujano* warrior had been with her for cycles. How could this barbarian from a backward planet have wormed his way into her heart in such a short time?

Finally she allowed the computer to work on the dilemma she entered and turned to face Mac. He hadn't moved, staring at her with those blue eyes. Self-possessed. Confident. Her gaze moved over his face, memorizing every line and curve. He was still clad in the desert robes, his dark hair mussed. He had bound it this morning before he donned the headdress, but now it was coming loose.

She itched to relearn the soft flow of that mane over her fingers and down the length of her body. His lovemaking had been both wild and tender. Beyond her experience. It went beyond intoxicating.

It still was.

She reminded herself this relationship couldn't last long. There was no future for them. It was getting difficult to convince herself of that.

“What are our options?” he finally asked. She saw nothing of the ardent lover who made her come apart time after time the night before. His face was a hard mask of purpose. She wasn’t certain what that purpose was, but it was reassuring.

“I’m not yet sure. The computer is working on it.”

“Are you going to spend the rest of your life running?”

She stiffened as his meaning penetrated her absorption. Then anger threatened to erupt. She’d spent a good part of her life proving herself, both as her father’s daughter and as a person in her own right. Her family had expected her to be the dutiful daughter and marry well. Preferably into a prominent family of Kador and produce a passel of children to carry on the family name. Instead, she had struck out on her own, building an empire of trade few could match. She had taken chances and done things which would make the bravest man blanch.

But then, where did all this running and hiding get her?

Larissalyia looked away to give herself time to respond as she checked the computer’s readings. Nothing had changed. She made sure both her face and her eyes were under control before she turned back to him.

“I am not a coward.”

“I know you’re not a coward, Lacey.” His words were quiet, serious. As she watched, his eyes warmed with admiration. He once again took her hand in his. “You’re the bravest woman I’ve ever met.”

Warmth flooded her heart as Larissalyia realized he hadn’t been questioning her honor. Mac was merely pointing out the obvious. With a sigh, she let go of her anger.

He was also correct in his earlier assertion that she could not continue this scurrying about. With souMalocho free, no place was safe. Sooner or later he was sure to catch up with her.

“There is something you do not know,” she whispered so low she knew he had trouble catching her words. Larissalyia drew a deep breath, aware that she could no longer put off the whole truth. She darted a

glance at the doorway to make sure Tutsi was not about to return. Even he did not know this.

“What is it?”

“It is not only my father’s role in imprisoning Audon souMalocho which feeds his desire for revenge.”

She felt Mac go still, the hand holding hers tighten. She knew before she turned her head that his gaze was on her. Intense, centered. “A few cycles ago souMalocho wished for a union between he and I.”

She held her breath as Mac digested this bit of information. “He wanted to marry you?”

“Yes. I believe he felt that if he were to marry me, he would legitimize his business and gain some honor. My family name is ancient and very respected. At that time, souMalocho already had numerous warrants out for his arrest and had spent cycles building a reputation for himself. He was ruthless, a murderer, a smuggler and a womanizer. Well...you’ve accessed much of it.” She pulled her hand free of his.

“Not an admirable individual.”

“No. He also knew that if he married me, all warrants against him would be dismissed. After all, my father was the Chief Magistrate. No one would arrest and prosecute the son-in-law of Lazarus Elinnis Ashanti.” Her words were self-mocking before she fell silent. Mac didn’t interrupt her thoughts.

“I was on Grenoblia when his men picked me up and brought me to his lodgings,” she continued after a long moment. “I didn’t exactly go willingly. Needless to say, when I realized who it was who held me—well, I do not mind admitting I was terrified.”

When she paused once more, lost in thought, Mac left his seat and crouched down in front of her until they were eye level. He took both of her cold hands in his to gently massage her fingers until they curled around his.

She forced herself to stare into those beautiful blue eyes as she realized it was easier to relate the whole sordid tale when she was looking into his gaze. He said nothing. Just waited for her to continue.

“Imagine my surprise when he was a perfect gentleman,” she went on. “He invited me to share a meal with him, made sure I was comfortable, tried to ply me with fermented drink. I assume now that he was trying to soften me up or perhaps prove he could play the nobleman. Either way, when he broached the reason for my presence—I confess, I laughed in his face.”

“Not something a man like that would take lightly.”

“No, it was not one of my smartest moves. I can only concede I reacted before I thought. It is not something he would easily forget. Or forgive.”

“He didn’t try to keep you?”

“Yes, but the man set to guard me was lax and met with an...accident. I was able to escape.”

“So, not only is he hell-bent for revenge on your father for putting him in jail, but you think he’s also determined to get back at you for your refusal.”

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple.” Larissalyia tightened her grip on his hands. “If Nicos had instructions to dispose of me, he could have done it when he had me in his sights on your Earth or when he nearly had me on Cyber Five.”

“You think souMalocho is sticking to his original plan to marry you.”

“If he were to become my husband, he would be a Kadorian nobleman. By our laws, his past life would cease to exist and he would be considered born again as Lord Audon souMalocho Ashanti.”

“I see.”

Larissalyia wondered if he did. He looked thoughtful as he continued to caress her fingers. Unable to bear his gentle touch, she jerked her hands free, and got to her feet to pace back and forth across the bridge. Her steps were nervous as she ran her hands through her hair, shaking it loose from its bindings. Some of her tension melted away with the release of her hair, the heavy mass falling down her back. She stopped long enough to stare out at the black beauty of space.

“But since you have no intention of marrying him, that plan is moot. Right?”

Larissalyia stiffened. The words were soft, spoken from just behind her. She hadn’t heard his approach. For such a big man, Mac moved silently when he wanted to.

“There is a law on my world. Almost forgotten. It is rarely, if ever, used...”

“And what would that be?”

The fine hairs on the back of her neck rose seconds before his hands curved around her shoulders to pull her against his hard strength. For a moment she allowed herself the comfort of his presence, dropping her head back to rest against his chest. Luxuriated in it.

“By Kadorian law, if a woman is kidnapped and held for the term of one full cycle, she is considered married to her captor.”

“Whether she is willing or not?”

“It makes no difference. It was a common practice eons ago when my world used such means for political reasons. If the woman was unwilling, she would find whatever means possible to escape her imprisonment or...”

“Or?” The word was breathed against her ear. The kiss he brushed over the crest sent a series of shivers feathering down her spine.

“Or she would find a way to kill herself rather than be forced to wed a man she found abhorrent.”

There was a long moment of silence as Mac absorbed this information. Larissalyia held her breath as she waited for him to say something. Anything.

“Seems to me that souMalocho made it a point of learning everything he could about Kadorian law. You say very few knew this law, yet somehow he found out about it.”

“Well, he has never been accused of being stupid.”

“No. Not stupid, just thorough. So you think he intends to kidnap you for one full cycle.” He paused for an instant. “How long is a cycle, anyway?”

“A little less than one of your years, nearly ten of your moon cycles.”

“Okay, I can see where the plan would be attractive to souMalocho,” Mac mused half to himself. “What better revenge against the man who had put him in prison than to abduct his only daughter, force her to marry him and present himself on his new father-in-law’s doorstep. Your father would be forced to clear him of any past crimes and accept him as family. Yeah, I can see the logic there.”

Mac fell silent for a long moment. So long that Larissalyia couldn’t stand it any more and turned in his arms. His expression was thoughtful as his hands dropped from her shoulders to the indent of her waist where his fingers tapped out an absent tattoo.

Larissalyia leaned back in his arms. For the first time she noticed that she was just short of eye level with him. She took comfort in his embrace. Admitting her theories aloud left her feeling vulnerable. She’d spent far too much time bottling up her fears and suspicions.

“Well, number one plan is souMalocho doesn’t get his hands on you.”

“Agreed.” The relief at sharing her problems left her feeling slightly lightheaded. A smile curved her lips as she leaned into his strength. If she tilted her head just right, she’d be able to press a kiss to the hollow of his throat. Right above where the headdress draped his shoulders and revealed an appetizing expanse of tanned skin.

Despite the seriousness of their discussion, she gave in to the impulse and dipped her head to run her lips along the length of his throat. She followed the line upward until she met the curve of his jaw, pausing there to sweep her tongue over the roughness of his unshaven skin. He tasted faintly salty, so deliciously masculine. Visions of the night before returned to tantalize her.

“Stop it, Lacey. I can’t think when you do that.”

Contrary to his admonishment, she heard the deepened roughness in his voice. Satisfaction raced through her.

“Good! And stop calling me Lacey.”

Larissalyia nibbled her way up his jaw to his lips where she moistened the lower curve with her tongue, savoring the low groan that escaped him. Her fingers were busy with the fastening of his robes, loosening the garment to push it over his shoulders and let it fall to the deck.

Larissalyia splayed her fingers over the width of his chest, stroking the firm muscles through the material of his shirt and pausing to caress the nipple just visible through the fine fabric. She'd never really made much of a study of the differences between a man and a woman. The basics were obvious, but she had never noticed how the muscles flexed under the thin layer of skin, or how beguiling a man could smell.

She drew a deep breath, savoring his masculine fragrance. If she were to close her eyes, she'd know his scent anywhere.

There was a faint beep behind them, but she ignored it.

Without thought, she swept her tongue over his lips, teasing, tantalizing; playing the siren. It gave her a sense of power to draw such a sensual reaction from Victor MacNaught. He was by far the sexiest man she'd ever met, able to kindle her desire with one sensuous glance or lingering touch.

His hands tightened at her waist, hesitated for an instant before he pulled her against him almost roughly. Hard, masculine lips captured hers and put an end to her teasing. She moaned against his mouth as he breached her lips and swept his tongue into her mouth to dual with hers. The kiss was long and hard. It did more than ignite memories of last night.

Of lips caressing her body, exploring it in ways she'd never experienced before.

Of hands that made her come to life and burn for more.

Of a hard, superb body that made her aware of her femininity for the first time in more cycles than she cared to remember.

By the Light! How could she give this up?

And she would have to. When the time was right. When she could safely return Mac to his world.

Everything within her cried out against the necessity.

In an effort to deny the thought, Larissalyia caught Mac's face between her hands and ground her lips against his, aggressively leading the sensual dance of their tongues. She hummed at the back of her throat as she absorbed his taste, his scent. Her fingers slid upward into his hair, combing them through its softness, reveling in the luxurious feel against her sensitive fingers. She had to fight the urge to give in to her natural inclination to release her pheromones.

A second beep sounded and again she ignored it.

With sensuous intent, she deliberately rubbed the tips of her breasts against the hard masculine wall of his chest. The slide of the materials separating them made her conscious of the fact they had far too many clothes on. The heat of Mac's body burned through to hers, tempting her closer to his warmth.

The press of his erection against her belly made her moan and squirm against him, lifting one leg to hook it over his hip to grind her pelvis against his cock. If it were possible, he hardened even more. His answering groan rumbled up his chest to be muffled against her lips. Without warning, his hands tightened around her waist and lifted her so she could press the junction of her thighs more firmly against the bulge in his blue jeans. The friction drove her desire to the edge of control.

They both sighed with heightened frustration.

"Excuse me."

Larissalyia froze as the deep voice penetrated her passion-soaked brain. Much as she loved the *Mandujano* warrior, at that moment she wanted nothing more than to kill him.

"Damn it, Tutsi. If you interrupt us one more time, I swear..."

"You are in the middle of the bridge, m'lady."

Those simple words more than anything cleared up her fogged senses. Her eyes opened to stare over Mac's shoulder to where Tutsi

l lounged in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest as he eyed them with a twisted smile.

Conscious of Mac's aroused state, she slowly lowered her leg. The passion faded fast as she tried to form a coherent thought. After a quick glance downward, she bent and scooped up the fallen robes pooled around his feet. Drawing it up the length of his body, her cheek inadvertently brushed against his erection. At his sharply indrawn breath, she paused, then in a deliberate motion, brushed against it once more as she rose to her feet to pull the robe over his shoulders. With a couple of little jerks, she straightened the garment before she could bring herself to look up into his face.

She never realized how expressive eyes of one color could be. Passion burned in the blue depths. Beyond the desire, she detected amusement and a great deal of annoyance.

"This does happen a bit too often," he murmured as a self-deprecating smile curved his hard mouth. Disregarding Tutsi, he leaned forward to cup her face between his palms and capture her mouth in a quick, yet thorough kiss. When he finally released her lips, he rested his forehead against hers for a moment, breathing heavily as he fought a battle with his body.

Larissalyia marveled at his control. Hers was nearly nonexistent. A part of her was angry with Tutsi for interrupting them—yet another, very remote part of her, was relieved.

Emotionally, she was in deep and didn't want to get any deeper. In the past, she'd never allowed her heart to be touched.

Gazing up into his face, Larissalyia had a nasty suspicion she was fast falling in love with this barbarian.

Chapter Fourteen

Mac gritted his teeth against the ache of unfulfilled desire. This was definitely getting to be a bad habit. If that no-neck gorilla interrupted them one more time, Mac was going to do him some bodily harm.

And probably get his ass kicked in the process.

The thought brought a flare of badly needed humor. While he had every confidence in his own abilities, he had seen the way the *Mandujano* warrior moved. His size belied both speed and dexterity. During their journey from Cyber Five to Chaos, he'd observed Tutsi conducting a series of exercises designed to build speed and endurance. The workouts lasted for hours, with neither a pause nor break to rest. It had been like watching a machine work. Never tiring and never slowing down.

Although Mac knew himself to be in prime shape, Tutsi far surpassed him in skill and power.

Making his way to the co-pilot chair, he forced himself to forget his discomfort, easing into the seat and arranging the folds of his robes over his lap. There was no need to conceal his hard on, but he didn't want to cause Lacey any further embarrassment. The bodyguard's surprised reaction hinted that she rarely indulged in relationships.

The thought sent a shaft of satisfaction through him.

"What about Sava?" he asked the bodyguard. "Will he talk?"

Tutsi raised one brow at his question, but he didn't so much as glance at Lacey before he answered. "The little Strut will keep his mouth shut. I've made it clear if he wants to stay healthy it is in his best interest not to divulge that you are an unsanctioned barbarian."

And this coming from a man who looked more Neanderthal than a modern man.

"I'm getting real tired of being referred to as a barbarian," he muttered.

"Sava is also well aware that I have enough on him to have him put away for a very long time." Lacey passed him and took her seat. She'd made some effort to straighten her hair, but it was a lost cause. The thick mane tumbled down her back in luxurious abandon. She flipped it over one shoulder in a practiced motion to avoid sitting on it. "He will keep his silence."

"What will you do with him?"

"Let him reflect on his sins for awhile and then probably dump him off somewhere with enough currency to get himself back to Chaos." She slanted him a look of inquiry. "Why? Did you think I would truly jettison him into space?"

"Personally? No. But you sounded pretty serious at the time."

"That was for Sava's benefit. I have a certain—reputation to uphold in this business. The Strut would not hesitate to take advantage of any weakness on our part." She waved a hand in dismissal. "No, in their own way, beings such as Sava are valuable. There is always a need for a man of his talents. It would be a waste to dispose of him."

"I'm sure he'd find that reassuring." The soft ping of the console captured his attention and he twisted in his seat. A series of red lights flashed across the board while the screen scrolled messages he couldn't read.

Startled, Lacey swung around to stare at the controls. She hissed several curses under her breath as she read over the data. "When did this come in?"

"What is it?"

"We are being followed."

"You were otherwise occupied." Tutsi's tone was dry as he pushed himself away from the doorway and took his position at the navigational station.

Lacey shot him a filthy glance, which Tutsi ignored. Mac watched as she turned back to the console and punched in several commands. The viewing screens changed image a number of times before they centered on a barely discernable object.

"Damn." The word was softly spoken by the woman beside him. "This could be trouble."

"What is it?"

"F.O.W. Security. I get the feeling they didn't care for the way we blasted off that rock." Lacey didn't take her gaze from the screen as she shook her head. "Who would have thought they'd stir themselves long enough to give chase?"

"What happens if we're boarded?"

"Under normal circumstances I wouldn't worry about them. They would issue a fine and perhaps give me a slap on the wrist for an unauthorized launch, but if they find you here..."

"They would arrest the three of us, impound the ship, fine the world of Kador into poverty and probably wipe your memory clean of everything you've ever known." The *Mandujano* growled out the litany without turning from his station. "The penalties for harboring an unsanctioned alien are harsh, barbarian. I would have thought you'd realize that by now."

"That's only if they catch us." Lacey reached under the console and extracted another keyboard hidden there. She attached it to the mainframe and cradled it in her lap. Her fingers flew over the keys, a bit slow at first, then with gathering speed. "Right now, F.O.W. doesn't know whose ship this is. When I landed on Chaos, I registered with a false identification number. The Talon was officially logged in as the Millennium Falcon." The smile she shot his way was full of mischief. "I watched your *Star Wars* film while I was in Seattle."

There was a snort from behind. "Pure trash."

"It was amusing." The exchange had the earmarks of an ongoing argument. "Anyway, there is no way the F.O.W. could trace that identification back to the Talon."

“The computer has located four possible destinations where we can lay low.” Tutsi swung around in his seat to face Lacey, awaiting her instructions. There was little to be heard other than the staccato of the keys as Lacey fed data into the computer.

“So, we’re back to the question of running.” Mac folded his hands across his stomach as he watched Lacey. When her fingers froze over the keyboard, he continued. “If your computer has come up with four locations, you can bet souMalocho’s men will have the same information.”

“The barbarian is correct, my lady.”

“You stay out of this!”

Mac kept his hands still, fighting the urge to reach out and smooth back that mass of hair. Lacey fell silent as she stared at the view screen. The other vessel was closer now. The double suns of this system reflected off an oblong, silvery ship. There were markings on the nose, but they were still too far away for Mac to guess what it was.

“What would you suggest?”

The question snapped his attention back to the woman.

His woman.

The surge of possessiveness surprised him. He’d never felt so proprietary toward another person before. The thought of Lacey walking out of his life was intolerable. How she’d gone from abductor, to friend, to lover, to such a necessity was a mystery. Somehow she had wended her way into his heart, so deep he knew she was there to stay. He wanted to drag her off to his lair and keep her forever.

Perhaps he was more of a barbarian than he had suspected.

“With your connections, I can’t see this souMalocho guy getting his hands on you unless you get careless. But you can’t spend the rest of your life running from him. The only thing you can do is what he would least expect.”

“And what is that?”

“Go home.”

“What?”

“He’s managed to make you run from Kador once. Would he expect you to return there?”

Her fingers rested motionless on the keyboard as her eyes took on a faraway look. Another glance at the screen showed the F.O.W. security ship closer yet. The markings were clearer, but still incomprehensible to him. He really had to learn how to read U.B.

“He’s sure to have spies positioned within my father’s household.”

“Good. Then we’ll be waiting for him.”

“Are you saying we’ll entrap him?”

“Of course. I assume the F.O.W. prison system wants him back.”

“There will be a hefty reward for his capture.”

Mac waved a hand. That was unimportant. He was far more interested in Lacey’s safety. “As long as souMalocho is on the loose, he’s a threat to you. If what you say is true, the man won’t stop until he has you. You’re his ticket to freedom. Would he expect a trap?”

Lacey resumed her typing with only half her attention, her brow furrowed as she gave that some serious consideration. “SouMalocho may be an arrogant bastard, but he’s a wily one. He’ll see the snare.”

“Yeah, but would he pass up the bait?”

“Bait?”

“You.”

For a moment she just stared at him, openmouthed. Then she began to laugh.

“You give me too much credit.”

“Not at all. Don’t sell yourself short.” Mac leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and clasp his hands together. “We’re dealing with a man who has either bought, taken, stolen or swindled everything he’s ever wanted from life. You’ve denied him yourself. Do you really think that isn’t eating at him? From what I’ve accessed, he’s a classic case. Tell him no and he’ll want it all the more.”

“Again, the barbarian is correct, m’lady,” Tutsi put in. He’d been quiet for much of the conversation, listening with interest. “We would be the aggressor.”

Turning his head, Mac met Tutsi’s dark gaze and allowed his mouth to curve into a sardonic smile. “That really hurt, Toots, didn’t it?”

“What did?”

“That’s twice you’ve been forced to agree with me.”

“Rest assured, it does not go down well, barbarian.”

“I’ll just bet.”

Despite himself, Mac’s grin turned genuine. Somewhere, deep down, he was beginning to like the gorilla. They might never be buddies, but the guy was becoming tolerable.

“There!” Lacey finished whatever she was working on with an air of satisfaction. “Strap in. We are nearing the wormholes. When we enter one, the computer will leave an ionic trace of our ship in each of the four. The F.O.W. security will not know which one we actually traveled through.”

“Slick.” Mac reached over his shoulder and caught the belts to secure himself.

“This is not the first time I’ve needed to evade security.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re not exactly a law-abiding trader?”

“Because if I were a strictly law-abiding trader, I would be a considerably poorer one.” Her grin was reckless. “Hang on!”

Mac braced himself as she punched in a series of commands and the Talon leapt forward. The viewing screen cleared of the F.O.W. ship and returned to the scene in front of them. The stars abruptly elongated into streaks of light as the vessel exceeded the speed of light. Though there wasn’t enough G-force to plaster him to his seat, he knew they were traveling at a great velocity. He wasn’t able to see the wormhole, but he felt the difference when they entered one. There was a dropping sensation, much like the experience of being on a roller coaster.

An apt description. His life had taken on all the excitement of a roller coaster.

He wouldn't trade it for anything.

Chapter Fifteen

“My lord, we have received word of your daughter.”

The unexpected appearance of the *Mandujano* messenger brought Lazarus to his feet.

“Where is she?”

The man stood at attention, his bald head gleaming in the overhead lights. His black uniform swallowed the light and made him fade into the background of the entrance. The servant who had been serving dinner gasped. A silver bowl slipped out of his hands, crashing to the floor, the contents splattering in every direction.

Ashanti didn't allow his surprise to show as he waited for the warrior to speak. Nor did he betray his eagerness to finally receive news. For the past five days, he'd had the *Mandujano* warriors searching for Larissalyia. The only solid information he'd received was she had left Earth.

“Forgive me, my dear.” He bowed his head to his wife in apology for the intrusion. “It is imperative I speak with this messenger.”

Cerese waved him to continue before she returned to her interrupted meal. She gave no indication that she was listening.

Turning back to the messenger, Lazarus gestured him to proceed.

“F.O.W. security reported that three days ago, a ship matching the description of Lady Ashanti's vessel made an unauthorized launch from the planet of Chaos.”

“Chaos! What under the Light was she doing there?”

“That has not been determined, my lord, but security says the vessel entered one of four wormholes. They were unable to ascertain which one since residue of her ship traveling through was in each passage.”

Lazarus felt a flicker of pride. His daughter was nothing if not resourceful.

It was also reassuring to know that as of three days ago, his daughter had been safe and out of the hands of souMalocho. Lazarus had a company of *Mandujano* warriors scouring the Federation of Worlds for a hint of souMalocho’s whereabouts. So far, nothing had been learned. Upon his escape from Death’s Landing, souMalocho had managed to vanish.

Lazarus wished the man had actually disappeared for good, but that was unrealistic. SouMalocho was holed up somewhere, planning, biding his time. Ready to strike.

The fallout from the prison system was still reverberating throughout the Federation. More and more evidence was coming to light that souMalocho had been arranging this prison escape for cycles. Long before he’d ever been convicted. It bespoke of a man meticulous in his organizing and execution of plans.

It made Lazarus’s blood run cold that no one had an inkling of what the man was capable of.

“I want every possible destination computed. There must be some hint of Larissalyia’s whereabouts.” Lazarus paced a few steps before he turned back to the messenger. “When she is located, my daughter is to be picked up and returned to Kador. Without delay.”

“At your command, my lord. I will inform the Premier of your orders.”

“Excellent. Thank you.”

Lazarus waited until the man left before he returned to the dining table and took his seat. The servant was still cleaning up the mess but Lazarus ignored him as he resumed his meal. The effort was wasted as he found his appetite had fled and he pushed the excellent poultry around on the plate without interest.

“Why are you so eager to have Larissalyia returned to Kador, Lazarus? Isn’t that still too dangerous with souMalocho’s people looking for her?”

Lazarus glanced over at his wife. Her expression was serene as she lifted her utensil to take a delicate bite of her dinner.

“Audon souMalocho has escaped from Death’s Landing.”

The fork halted halfway to her mouth. Shock spread over Cerese’s face and her utensil dropped from nerveless fingers. After one look at her white face, Lazarus left his seat and came around to her side.

“My dear, do not worry. I will do everything within my power to keep you safe. That animal will not be allowed near us.”

Dropping to his knees, he tried to draw his wife into his arms but she jumped to her feet. The chair fell backward with a clatter as she backed away, her face wreathed in horror.

“You don’t understand.” Her words were a whisper as she raised one trembling hand to her throat. “You cannot possibly understand.”

To his stunned astonishment, his wife turned and fled the room. She nearly collided with one of the servants as he brought in the next course.

Lazarus could only stare after her.

* * *

“Mama, what shall I do?” Cerese Nadirusta Ashanti wept into the lap of the Lady Serita Adamo. She gained no comfort in the gentle hand that smoothed her hair back.

“Tell Lazarus the truth, my darling.” Although her mother was blind, Cerese knew she saw things far more clearly than most would suspect. Her voice was soft, gentle, serene. “The only way to castrate a blackmailer is to remove the threat of disclosure.”

Cerese raised her face from the comfort of her mother’s lap, shaking her head despite the knowledge her mother could not see the motion.

The denial that sprang to her tongue was forestalled by Lady Serita's next words.

"It is the only way, Cerese."

"Lazarus will hate me!"

"Not if you explain the circumstances."

"How do I tell my husband that I've been betraying his only daughter to a creature such as souMalochó? That I've been feeding my own father information that was sure to lead to her being captured and forced into a loveless marriage just so souMalochó would be free of his past? Lazarus will hate me."

"Will he hate you when you tell him how souMalochó's henchman held a blade to my throat while he related his master's plan? Will he hate you when you had no choice but to do what you were told or face sure disgrace when it was disclosed who your true father was?"

Cerese stretched up to cup her mother's face with one hand, seeing the lines which now ravaged her once smooth skin. What she suffered was nothing when compared to what Serita had endured as a young girl.

Forced by the poverty of her family to take employment in the souMalochó household, the beautiful Serita had the misfortune of attracting the notice of the master. Young and impressionable, she had believed his lies of love and devotion. Right up until the day she revealed she was with child. Audon souMalochó did not hesitate to turn her out into the streets to starve.

But he had underestimated the fortitude and determination of the young woman. Despite her pregnancy, despite her heartache and betrayal, she had endured. Finding employment with a kindly innkeeper, she was able to work for her room and board. Childless, the elder woman had taken Serita under her wing and provided her with a home in which to bear her child. Nerona menCanto never questioned the parentage of Serita's daughter. Not even when she eventually made Serita her heir.

Through Serita's innovative and clever management, the inn prospered to the point where a second inn could be opened in the neighboring city, then another and another. By the time Cerese reached

her tenth cycle, Nerona and Serita owned and managed better than a dozen establishments in every major city of Zertda.

It was shortly before Cerese reached her majority that her still beautiful mother met and fell in love with Alcindor Sabato Adamo. A Kadorian trader, Alcindor had adopted Cerese as his own daughter and moved his small family to Kador.

Cerese had never known the identity of her true father until the day the Kyrion, Nicos, had appeared in her mother's household and threatened them both with bodily harm and exposure to scandal if they did not cooperate with souMalocho.

"How can he not despise me, Mama?" Cerese stared into her mother's sightless eyes. A transport accident may have stolen her mother's sight, but not the resourcefulness of her mind. Widowed these past two cycles, she had moved into her daughter's household after Nicos's threats. "Lazarus is the Chief Magistrate for the Federation of Worlds. If it's discovered I am the bastard daughter of Audon souMalocho, one of the most hated beings in the universe, he would—"

"—say that the circumstances of your birth are not your fault."

When she heard the deep voice of her husband behind her, Cerese gave a squeak of fright and pivoted on her knees to face the doorway.

There Lazarus stood, his arms crossed over his chest, feet planted apart. He was still dressed in the casual garb he'd worn for dinner. The tunic with its high neck fell past his hips while the tight trousers were tucked into the knee-high boots. His pale hair was mussed, as if he'd recently run his fingers through the still thick strands in agitation.

As Cerese knelt there, staring up at him with horror, he left his position at the doorway and came forward.

How much had he heard? How much did he know?

Cerese glanced around frantically, seeking escape. But it was too late. Lazarus reached her and caught her beneath the arms to draw her to her feet. She bowed her head as she awaited his words of condemnation.

A finger below her chin raised her face to his, but she kept her eyes closed, too frightened to see the loathing she knew must be there.

“Cerese, look at me.”

She couldn’t ignore the command in his voice. Fearful, she lifted lashes made spiky with her weeping. Her breath caught in her throat at the look in his eyes. There was none of the denunciation she’d expected in the dark blue depths. She realized he wasn’t angry; nothing in the color of his eyes indicated disgust or scorn.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, his words soft. Gentle.

“How could I? I was terrified that you would turn away from me if you discovered who my true father was.” The words were choked out as she fought to control a new bout of tears.

“I’d hoped the truth of my daughter’s parentage would never come to light.” Serita stood and faced in their direction. Graceful, still slender, she held herself with pride, her sightless eyes turned toward Lazarus with a hint of defiance. “Cerese is not at fault, Lazarus. I am. She did not know herself until Nicos paid us a visit shortly after you had souMalochos imprisoned. He threatened us with physical harm and exposure if we did not do as commanded.”

“What did he force you to do?”

Cerese shuddered at the hardness of his voice, but his fingers were gentle on her chin.

“I was to convey any information you received of Larissalyia or her whereabouts.” Her voice shook as she revealed the full scope of her treachery.

Lazarus went very still and Cerese felt that ember of hope die. Shock and rage shot across his face before he abruptly released her and moved to the far end of the room to stare out the window. His stiff shoulders gave no hint as to his thoughts but he had to be furious. He must be. She had just admitted to exposing his only child to certain danger. Fresh tears welled in her eyes and threatened to overflow.

“So in exchange for his silence, you were to betray my daughter to that animal?”

"I was given no choice!" Her voice was raw with emotion. "Nicos would have killed my mother if I had not cooperated."

"What does souMalocho plan for my daughter?"

Although Serita could not see the frantic glance Cerese flung her way, she nodded nevertheless. "Tell him, Cerese."

"Mama?"

"He must know, my darling."

With trepidation, Cerese turned back to her husband. "He hopes to invoke the ancient Kadorian law of Diacommo."

"Light!" There was a moment of stunned silence before her husband whipped around to face her. She was unsurprised when Lazarus quickly grasped the whole of souMalocho's intentions. "And it would have worked had Larissalyia not stayed one step ahead of him."

"I'm sorry." The tears spilled down her cheeks as she hung her head with remorse. "I know you will never forgive me, Lazarus. I cannot forgive myself, but I did not think I had a choice." Her voice choked on the words.

"You should have trusted me." He rounded on her, his voice harsh. Deep within the blackness of his eyes, red sparks flared as he allowed free rein to his fury.

"I would not allow her to tell you," Serita put in quickly.

"No, Mama. As you said, it is time for truth." Cerese raised her chin and met her husband's gaze with a bravery she did not feel. The anger she saw swirling there nearly halted her breathing. "I did not tell you because I was ashamed. When I learned the truth of my birth, I felt soiled, unclean. Mother advised me to tell you everything, but I refused. I was certain you would reject me."

Lazarus was silent for so long that Cerese felt another stab of despair. Between one blink and the next, his eyes faded to the neutral brown she knew conveyed nothing. She could not read his expression nor guess his thoughts.

Without warning he stalked toward her and with a rough motion, pulled her into his arms. For a long moment he hugged her close, his face buried in the curve of her neck.

“Cycles ago, I lost one woman I loved through my own stupidity,” he said, his words muffled. “I would not lose another woman I love through misunderstanding.” He pulled back far enough to tilt her chin upward. Now his eyes shone with the dark gray of a storm-laden sky. “I love you, Cereze. I do not know if I can forgive you for placing my daughter in such danger but I will try to understand your reasons behind your decision.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as renewed despair rose in her breast. She did not expect forgiveness, but she had hoped.

“I cannot pretend the knowledge that your father is souMalocho is not disturbing, but I do not blame you. You are the woman I fell in love with five cycles ago and you are still that woman today. That souMalocho is your father will not change that.”

“Oh, Lazarus.” The scope of her relief threatened to overwhelm her and she would have thrown her arms around her husband’s neck but he halted her movement.

“But I do not know if I can ever trust you again.”

“I swear to you, Lazarus—”

“No! Do not make any promises to me. I am not the one you must ask forgiveness from. You must seek it from my daughter.”

In slow motion, Cereze dropped her arms to her sides. The pain she saw in his eyes ripped through her and left her with a sense of helplessness. After what she had done, how could she ever regain his trust? She should have listened to her mother when Serita counseled telling Lazarus everything after Nicos first accosted them, but she had been so certain her husband would be unable to accept her origin.

Finally, she straightened her spine and lifted her chin. “Then that is what I will do. If it will regain your trust, I will reveal everything to Larissalyia and ask her forgiveness.”

"You may have the opportunity sooner than you think. After you ran away earlier, I finally received a communication from my daughter." The look in Lazarus's eyes was assessing as he stared down at her.

"You've heard from Larissalyia?"

"Yes. She is on her way back to Kador. Through your information, Nicos found her on that backward planet and she was forced to flee it."

"Lazarus—"

"You will be confined to our rooms until my daughter is safe. You will have no means of communication, nor access to anyone but my most trusted servants."

Stunned, Cerece stared at him for several minutes, unable to speak. She read the effort it cost him to place her under house arrest. His eyes had bled into a deep blue that betrayed his pain.

She nodded and hung her head. "As you wish, Lazarus. If it will help prove to you my shame, I will obey without question."

"Cerece..."

"No, Mother. It was through my actions Larissalyia was endangered. It will be my duty to try to make it right." She delved into the hidden pocket of her gown and pulled out the communicator before handing it to her husband. "I was to contact Nicos the moment I heard anything about Larissalyia."

He turned the little device over in his hands, careful not to activate it. When he looked up a glint of gold appeared in his eyes. A color that gave her hope.

"My daughter is aware of souMalocho's escape. They are returning to Kador to entrap him."

Cerece stared at him with shock. Larissalyia was daring, at times reckless, but was she cunning enough to best souMalocho?

Gazing up into the hard face of her husband, Cerece thought perhaps she was. If the daughter had any of the brilliance of the father, she was more than capable.

Chapter Sixteen

“Larissalyia! What were you thinking?!”

While her father ranted, Larissalyia kept her expression stony, making a conscious effort to control her eyes. She’d known this interview was bound to go this way. Her glance slid toward the man at her side. If there had been some way to keep Mac out of this she would have, but short of making him stay on the Talon, she could do little else. Her father had taken one look at him and hustled the two of them into his office, shutting the door on any curious servants. How Lazarus Ashanti had known Mac was from Earth, she couldn’t fathom. There was nothing about him to point toward his origins.

“Father—”

Lazarus put his finger to his lips before he circled his desk and reached under it, pressing a button to activate the voice shield. A faint hum sprang to life.

“It is to prevent eavesdropping,” she murmured as an aside to Mac. She linked her fingers through his and urged him forward, until they both stood before her father. Together they presented a united front. The last few days on the Talon had been idyllic, spent making love and enjoying each other’s company. She’d rarely experienced such a relaxing period in her life. Now all of that had ended.

Her father dropped into his chair and ran his hands through his hair. She’d never seen him look so tired. There were new lines in his face that hadn’t been there the last time she’d seen him, as well as dark circles under his eyes. A little more gray in his pale blond hair. With the sun shining through the windows, the silver strands stood out. The rest of his appearance was immaculate, the dark trousers tucked into knee-high

boots polished to a gleam. The blue tunic he wore was crisp, spotless, while the gold torque of his station gleamed around his neck

But his weariness wrung her heart and made her aware that, despite what she'd always believed, her father was not invincible. What had he been going through these past few peri-cycles?

Lazarus dropped his hands. There was nothing tired about the dark gray eyes he turned on her. They were sharp, piercing.

"You brought an unsanctioned barbarian to Kador," he continued, ignoring Mac. "If he is discovered, the consequences will be immeasurable."

"The name is Victor MacNaught. Not barbarian."

Larissalyia glanced at Mac. He stood tall and proud and she felt her heart swell with pride. There was nothing primitive about him. He spoke U.B. without an accent. Nothing in his command of the language betrayed the fact that he'd only learned it within the last few weeks.

"I am really getting tired of being referred to as a barbarian."

"He will not be discovered, Father," she put in quickly to forestall further argument. "No one knows we are here."

"What of that Struturian you had with you?"

"Sava will say nothing. We have an understanding."

Lazarus leaned his head back, his gaze never leaving Mac. Larissalyia couldn't even guess what was going through his mind. For a moment there was silence, the only sound was the distant hum of the security measures.

"There is no choice, daughter. The—this man must be returned to his world before it is discovered he is here."

"And I'm also getting tired of being talked about as if I weren't here," Mac muttered.

Larissalyia gave him a jab with her elbow even as she fought the sudden stab of pain that came with her father's words. She knew he was right. Mac had to return to Earth. They'd been lucky so far, but that luck couldn't hold. Sava could slip; whether accidental or purposely, who

knew? With one glance, her father had known Mac came from an unsanctioned world. Who else might also realize that fact?

Yet, at the same time, everything within her rebelled at the thought.

"That is something for later discussion, Father," she said. "Right now we have a more pressing problem on our hands."

"Don't worry about me, Lord Ashanti," Mac put in. "I'll lay low. Lacey is right, there are more important matters to take care of."

"Lacey?"

Larissalyia hid a smile over the outrage in her father's voice. She had grown so accustomed to Mac's version of her name, she no longer noticed it.

"Easier to say than Larissalyia."

She stared at Mac with shock. "You said my name correctly!"

His grin was cocky. "I never said I couldn't pronounce it, honey. I just said calling you Lacey was easier."

"You really are irritating."

"I try." Mac's face lost the smile as he returned his attention to Lazarus. "It's more than likely souMalocho has his people planted in your household."

"I have no doubt of that."

"It's only a matter of time before he learns Lacey is here."

"I would be surprised if he doesn't already know."

Mac tilted his head to one side as he regarded Lazarus. She suspected her father found his blue-eyed stare just as disconcerting as she did. When Mac wanted to conceal his thoughts, there was no way to guess what was going through his mind.

"You're aware of his plans." It wasn't a question.

"That he intends to abduct my daughter and force her into marriage, thereby freeing himself of the past? Yes, I know of it."

"How did you know?" Larissalyia was surprised. "I had some suspicions, but no hard evidence."

“It is unimportant how I know. What is important is how do we stop him?” Lazarus stood and began to pace the length of his office. With the windows closed, the room retained a measure of coolness. Thick walls kept the heat at bay, while slow-moving fans circulated the air to offer some relief.

Larissalyia didn’t notice the heat. It felt so good to be home. It wasn’t until now that she realized how much she had missed Kador. The dampness of Seattle had been...irritating. There had been plenty of other, drier, places on Earth she could have hidden, but knew that it was less likely anyone would have thought to seek her there. Yet, someone had.

“Somehow souMalocho knew I was on Earth, Father,” she said. “Nicos came after me. Tutsi had been incapacitated and Mac aided me in my escape.”

Her father stopped long enough to scrutinize Mac. It might have been her imagination, but there seemed to be a bit more respect in her father’s gaze. She hoped so.

“First and foremost we must keep you out of his hands.” Lazarus resumed his pacing. She knew his thought process was clearer when he was in motion. “Unfortunately, the evidence I uncovered to connect souMalocho with the killings and disappearances is moot. Now that he has escaped prison...the Light only knows where he will appear.”

“Or what he will do.”

“I think we can safely assume he won’t give up this crazy plan,” Mac interjected.

“Doubtful.”

“I am of the opinion that we bait the trap.” Larissalyia felt more than saw Mac stiffen beside her. They’d discussed—argued actually—this before and she knew he was against her plan. Though he had initially broached the idea, she knew he hadn’t meant her to dangle herself in front of souMalocho’s nose. He’d been confident that just the knowledge she was on Kador would have been enough to draw their adversary out. She, on the other hand, knew she had to make herself available at some point to trick souMalocho into a premature move.

“Lacey!”

“With what?”

“Me.”

“Forget it!”

“No!”

Both men protested at the same time, their words overlapping. Larissalyia doled out scornful looks at the two of them before she leaned back against the desk. The hardness of the edge bit into her upper thighs. With a nonchalance she was far from feeling, she crossed her arms over her breasts.

“Look. We have something souMalocho wants. Me. There is nothing else that will draw him out. I, for one, do not intend to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder.” Mac was right in that respect, much as she’d resisted admitting it. “So far, Nicos has managed to find me everywhere I’ve fled, and quite frankly, I’m tired of it.”

“No! I forbid it!”

Larissalyia viewed her father with some amazement. “You forbid it?” she repeated in a soft voice. “Father, I am way past the age where you can dictate my actions—”

She broke off when Mac placed himself in her line of vision. He took her shoulders in his hands and gave her a gentle shake. The expression in his eyes robbed her of speech. It was so gentle, so loving. He’d never looked at her like that before.

“How can we take a chance of that lowlife actually getting his hands on you, Lacey?” His voice was low, intense. “It doesn’t take much intelligence to know why that stupid law of yours put a time period of one cycle. That’s about how long it would take to guarantee that the kidnapped woman was either pregnant or had already bore her abductor’s child. I get the feeling souMalocho would not hesitate at rape.”

Larissalyia forced herself to meet his stare. Despite her best efforts, she knew her eyes were bleeding into the pale jade of fear. Mac had gotten far too astute at reading her moods. It was an unfair advantage that she was beginning to resent.

“How can we not take advantage of this opportunity?”

“Do you honestly think souMalocho isn’t going to see the trap? The man has spent his entire life evading the law. He’s not going to fall for this.”

“I—”

Larissalyia broke off when a soft tap came from the door behind her. Before anyone could move, it opened and her stepmother slipped inside, shutting the door behind her without a sound. The opening of the door affected the nullifier. After a brief interruption, it settled back to its monotonous drone.

Her unexpected appearance surprised Larissalyia. To her knowledge Cerese never invaded the inner sanctum of her father’s office. She’d shown little interest in Lazarus’s career, although she apparently enjoyed the luxuries he provided.

And, as always, Larissalyia noticed a little sourly, her stepmother looked beautiful. The jewels encircling her neck were mute testimony of the wealth generated from the bowels of Kador. The gems piercing her right ear only climbed halfway up the outer shell. An indication she married into nobility rather than being born to it.

But something wasn’t right.

Larissalyia looked at her father’s wife a little closer as she realized that Cerese wasn’t quite as serene as usual. There were telltale signs of weeping about her eyes and she moved with a hesitancy Larissalyia was unaccustomed to seeing in the woman. Cerese was one of the most self-assured women she’d ever met.

“Lazarus? May I interrupt?”

“Come in, Cerese.” The glance her father sent toward Mac was laced with warning. Larissalyia also noticed the lack of warmth in her father’s normally indulgent manner when he turned back to his wife. “Let me introduce you to Larissalyia’s friend...uh...Mac. Mac, this is my wife, Cerese.”

“A pleasure, Lady Ashanti.” Mac made a credible bow from the waist.

Cerese acknowledged him with a regal nod of her head before she turned immediately back to Lazarus. Again there was self-doubt as she licked her lips with obvious trepidation. Her glance slid to Larissalyia once more and darted away.

“Did you tell her?”

Even her words were timid. If she didn’t know better, she would say her stepmother looked guilty. A slight frown furrowed her brow. What was going on?

“Tell her what?”

The question came from Mac. There was little expression in his face as he pinned Cerese with his hard gaze. His hands tightened on Larissalyia’s shoulders and menace emanated from the man standing before her. His profile was sculpted, all hard angles and lines. She had seen this side of him several times and was reminded again that on his world, he was a warrior. Trained in the skills of conflict, the art of warfare.

“Cerese, now is not the time—”

“I need to make this right, Lazarus. It is her life I have endangered.” Cerese tore her gaze away from her husband and centered her attention on Larissalyia. “I am the spy within your father’s household.”

For countless seconds, Larissalyia could only stare at her, speechless. Then a burning anger began to rise and she twisted out of Mac’s loosened grip. A furious growl rose in her throat as she advanced on her stepmother.

“You! You dare stand there and admit you have betrayed me? My family? My father?” Her hands fisted at her sides, the urge to lash out almost too great for her to contain. At last she had a target on which to vent her ire.

When she thought of the peri-cycles spent running and hiding, of the constant fear of discovery and the fleeing from planet to planet, her fury shot up to an eruption point.

Cerese managed to stand her ground, her face pale with fear. “I had no choice.”

“Larissalyia.” Her father stepped between her and Cerese.

“You protect her?” Larissalyia didn’t know whether she should be outraged or hurt by his defense. He could not have shown her more clearly that he chose to side with his faithless wife over his daughter.

“Wait, Lacey.” Mac’s voice was quiet, calm. “Obviously there is more here than meets the eye.”

“What?” His wording confused her, yet Mac’s words halted her advance and cleared some of the rage from her mind.

“Let her explain.”

She knew the gaze she turned back on her stepmother was dark with fury, red sparks flashing within the black depths, but didn’t care. She wanted her father’s wife to be frightened. Terrified. At that moment she could have easily done her physical damage.

A tiny voice of reason pointed out that if she hadn’t been forced to seek refuge on Earth, she would never have met Victor MacNaught. She didn’t want to listen to reason. She wanted to unleash her anger. She wanted to lash out.

With a great effort, she contained herself.

“So talk.”

For an instant, Cerese’s glance flickered to Lazarus. She must have drawn a measure of strength from him because she straightened her shoulders and drew herself up to her full height.

“I am the bastard daughter of Audon souMalocho.” It was a simple statement. There was no defense in Cerese’s voice, no attempt to rationalize.

“What!?”

“I did not know the truth of my birth until nearly three peri-cycles ago.” Her bravado lasted only as long as her confession before her shoulders slumped. Lazarus stood at her side, his hands fisted. There was pain in her father’s face, but he did nothing to comfort his wife. “I was visiting with my mother when the Kyrion, Nicos, invaded her home.

He held a *Sinion* blade to her throat and threatened to kill her if I did not cooperate.”

The smaller woman put one hand to her own vulnerable throat. “He enjoyed telling me who my real father was.”

“Alcindor...?”

“Adopted me when I was a child. I’ve always known he was not my true father, but he had treated me as such and I loved him for it. My mother revealed the whole sordid truth rather than allow that filthy Kyrion to relate it. She was a young woman on Zertda when souMalocho made her his mistress. She honestly believed he loved her, but when she informed him she was with child, he turned her out and left her to die.” Anger colored her words as her voice gained in strength. “He managed to keep track of her. Even after she married Alcindor Sabato Adamo and left Zertda. I do not know why he bothered. I can only guess he makes long term plans and thought I would one day be useful.”

She leaned into Lazarus’s strength as her own store depleted with each revelation. Relief was visible in her face when her husband’s arms came around her to offer comfort rather than rebuff her.

“How delighted he must have been when he learned I had married the Chief Magistrate. What a prize I must have become for him then. He had to have known he could one day use me.”

“So he called in his mark.”

Larissalyia wasn’t quite sure what Mac’s slang meant, but she got the gist of it. “He threatened you with...what? Exposure? Scandal? What price were you willing to pay for his silence?”

“My mother’s life.” Her words were quiet, dignified. “The Kyrion said unless I did as I was told and revealed everything I knew about your movements, he would kill my mother. I knew he would do it. No matter how secure one thinks they are, there are always ways.”

Larissalyia felt Mac’s strong hands slide around her waist and draw her back against his body. As if he knew the strength had gone out of her legs and she needed his support. It was all too much to take in. She wanted nothing more than to be alone with him to mull over this turn of

events. But time was a luxury she did not possess. There was still too much to learn, too much to take in. Plans had to be made and implemented.

This had moved beyond her. Now it involved not only her father, but her stepmother and Serita. The long-reaching arm of *souMalocho* had succeeded in both endangering and destroying so many lives. Her hands fisted at her sides. It had to stop.

“Does your...father,” she never knew that word could be distasteful, “...know you’ve confessed to my father?”

“There is no way *souMalocho* could know.” There was an emphasis on his name as a look of repugnance crossed Cerese’s face. “I gave my communicator to your father. I want nothing more to do with him.”

“Good. You will contact him and tell him you know where I am.”

“What?”

“No!”

“Lacey.” Mac murmured into her ear as he pressed his cheek against hers, his breath warm on her skin. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Yes.” She ignored the protests from her father and Cerese, responding only to Mac’s low voice. “I am baiting the trap.”

Chapter Seventeen

“Get me out of here,” Larissalyia whispered to Mac, aware of the note of hysteria in her voice. “I am going into sensory overload.”

They’d been arguing for much of the evening. The dinner hour came and went without any of them noticing or even caring. After his initial protest, Larissalyia was pleased to note Mac was siding with her. It was a testament of his faith in her abilities that he argued in her favor. Either that, or he was saving his arguments for when they were alone. Knowing Mac, the second scenario was entirely possible.

Right now, she wanted nothing more than to be done with this. None of her father’s protests convinced her there was any other way to draw souMalocho out of whatever hole he’d crawled into. She knew her father had her safety in mind, but it also highlighted his belief that she was incapable of taking care of herself.

“Put the call through.” Without another glance in her direction, Mac issued the instructions to Cerece, his voice hard. Larissalyia didn’t need to look at him to know those blue eyes were piercing, commanding. “This argument is fruitless. If you don’t inform souMalocho that Lacey is on Kador, she’ll find a way of doing it herself. I’d rather we were in control of the timetable.”

He turned on Lazarus. “You may wish to protect your daughter, Chief, but it seems to me she’s been doing a pretty damn good job of it for years. Up until your actions endangered her. Unless you want Lacey to spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder, we had best finish this once and for all.”

Larissalyia bit back laughter. If her father disliked the Earthman before, Mac’s words reinforced that regard. No one spoke to Lazarus

Elinnis Ashanti in such a manner. Mac had no idea of how powerful her father was. Or perhaps he did and didn't give a damn.

Mac had heard enough of the penalties imposed on those who brought unsanctioned beings into F.O.W. territory to know he was sacrosanct where she and her family were concerned. They did not dare expose his presence on Kador.

This gave him the upper hand. But then again, as Tutsi had pointed out, it was also in his best interest to conceal his presence given the fact that the F.O.W. would not halt at a partial mind wipe.

To avoid further argument, she caught Mac by the hand and pulled him toward the door. "We'll see you in the morning, Father."

"See here, daughter. Where do you think you are going?"

"To my rooms. Good night."

"Where is the barbarian sleeping?"

"Good night."

Larissalyia shut the door on her father's next words, leaning against it for an instant before she pushed off and hurried down the corridor. She made no attempt to conceal her features from the numerous servants. Many of them exclaimed over her presence but Larissalyia didn't stop to speak. Mac was right. Even if Cerese didn't contact souMaloch and inform him she was back on Kador, it was entirely possible—no, probable—that one of the many servants was in his pay.

She strode a distance down the wide hallway before she realized Mac was not at her side. Coming to a halt, she turned with some impatience, only to find him casually strolling in her wake. His head constantly turned to inspect the many pieces of art that adorned the walls. Then he actually stopped to take a closer look at an impressive tapestry taking up a good portion of one wall.

"Nice," he said when he finally came abreast to her. He linked her arm through his, one hand coming up to cover her fingers as he continued down the hall at a leisurely pace. "Never betray impatience or fear," he murmured in her ear, bending close until his breath tickled her neck.

“Why?” she asked, her voice just as low, but her gaze darted to the two or three servants who still lingered in the corridor. Was it her imagination, or were they listening? Shaking her head, she knew her paranoia was on the rise. Still...

He ignored her question. “If we’re to leave in two risings, we better get the supplies in.” His voice was loud enough to be heard by anyone standing near.

Larissalyia said nothing as she bit her lip. Very clever. Mac just gave a time line to anyone reporting to souMalocho. It would force him to make his move within that span. Now if Cereese were to report their presence, souMalocho would have confirmation through one of his other spies. If he were forced to rush, it might make him careless. Plus it would allow her time to prepare herself.

“We cannot linger here for very long.” Going along with him, she confirmed his words. “Tutsi will need that time to conduct a general diagnostics on the ship and determine if any repairs are necessary.”

“Good.” Mac dropped his voice once more as they passed into a main foyer. The ceiling soared meters into the air to peak at a glass dome. The night stars were visible, gleaming against the velvet background of space. The heels of their boots clicked loudly on the multicolored marble tile, the sound vanishing when they passed onto the thick carpeted stairs. The open stairway curved up to the second level to the private family apartments. The area was large enough to ensure no one could eavesdrop without their being seen.

“Do you really think...what is the word you’ve used—the lowlife?—will fall for this?” Larissalyia whispered once they reached the second level and she led the way toward her suite of rooms. She felt a need for privacy. Time alone with Mac without anyone else looking over their shoulders. Much as she hated to admit it, she was nervous. And frightened. Two emotions she did not willingly acknowledge, nor care for.

“From everything I’ve read and heard about this guy, he’s arrogant beyond reason. He’s careful, meticulous in his planning and dislikes

being rushed. I'm hoping he'll see this opportunity as being too good to pass."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then he will find some way to follow us when we blast off of Kador."

"Which means we'll be left guessing when he will make his next move."

Mac was silent for a moment, walking at her side until they came to a pair of doors. The wood was polished to a high sheen, its surface almost mirror-like. Larissalyia pushed them open and led the way into her suite.

The receiving room was enormous, yet somehow retained a cozy comfort. She had made Kador her main headquarters when she wasn't traveling and furnished this room with the countless bits and pieces she had collected over the cycles.

Unusual modern art vied for space with ancient urns and primitive masks constructed of gold. The bleached skull of an unknown creature sat on the mantle with numerous vases holding enormous feathers. Flowers of every shape and color adorned almost every flat surface. The blossoms had been picked at their most beautiful and frozen forever through a method of freeze-drying without loss of color or quality. An entire wall was taken up with weaponry of every description and size, ranging from modern blasters to ancient swords and knives.

A huge area rug covered much of the hard marbled floor. Its pattern reflected the rainbow of colors scattered throughout the room.

"That's always a possibility," Mac responded to her earlier comment as he looked around. He slowly wandered through the room to inspect each item with interest. He paused by a collection of quartz stones imbedded with rough gems. "But I'm betting he'll be too impatient to get his hands on you."

"So many uncertainties." She whispered the words under her breath, just audible, but they must have reached Mac, because he left his tour and came to her side. Without a word, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her against his hard length.

She snuggled her face into the side of his neck, willing to absorb his comfort, to wallow in uncertainty for just a little while. She knew she'd get over it soon enough. But for now, it just felt—good.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you, honey.” He breathed the words into her hair. Larissalyia felt his fingers slide into the thick strands, using the mass to gently pull her head back until he could gaze into her eyes. He searched them for a moment. She knew he was trying to guess her true feelings.

Rather than allow him to recognize her fear, she grasped his face between her hands and pulled him closer until she could reach his lips. She slanted her head to press kiss after kiss to his mouth, taking her time, enjoying his quick response as his arm tightened around her waist and she was hauled closer against his hard frame.

What had begun as a hug of comfort quickly altered, turning into something sensual, arousing. Larissalyia felt the heat pool in her abdomen and spread outward, threatening to rob her of any remaining good sense. This man always seemed to have this affect on her, scattering her wits until she was reduced to a mass of sensations.

With an effort, Larissalyia kept a tight rein on her pheromones. Did not want him affected by that desire-triggering scent. She wanted to know that Mac desired her for herself rather than any outside aphrodisiac she unconsciously emitted.

His lips were addicting, soft and heated. She couldn’t get enough of his kisses. His scent filled her senses and made her want to forget everything except the man who held her so close.

“Mac...” She sounded so breathless, so wanting. Any other time she would have cringed at the need she heard there, but right now she didn’t give a damn. Tomorrow was so uncertain. She just wanted to forget about it.

“So, does this suite have one of those nullifiers?” His rough voice was muffled as he swept aside the heavy fall of her hair to bury his lips against the side of her throat. Then he kissed his way down the smooth length until he reached her shoulder. A shiver ran through her.

Larissalyia stilled as his words penetrated her passion-soaked brain. How could she be so careless? Anyone with the proper equipment could hear everything they'd been saying.

"No." It was a struggle to form a coherent sentence. "Only in my office. These rooms are not covered."

Mac raised his head to look down at her. To her amazement, a smile of pure male satisfaction spread across those sensuous lips.

"Then anyone listening in on the bedroom is going to get an earful."

Despite herself, Larissalyia felt her own lips stretch into an answering smile. He really was infectious. Outrageous.

"You're very confident you'll find your way to my bedchamber."

"Would you have brought me here otherwise?" It was a statement, not a question.

And one she couldn't deny. How could she when he was right? One way or another, their time was limited. Which meant they should enjoy each other for as long as they had.

A sheen of tears accompanied the thought. To prevent him seeing her lack of control, she slipped from his arms and took his hands in hers. She made sure her smile held a wealth of promise and hoped he didn't notice the moisture in her eyes.

"Come." Moving backwards, she led him toward the door on the far end of the receiving chamber. Like the first set of doors, this pair rose a full three meters to the ceiling and gleamed with a high polish. But where the outer doors were black, these were bright red.

Reaching behind her, Larissalyia released the latch and pushed the doors open with her butt. She was unsurprised when Mac halted just inside the chambers. Knew without turning what captured his attention.

Her bedchamber was pure decadence. Completely out of keeping with the woman she presented to the outside universe. Here, in the privacy of her rooms, she indulged in her femininity, enjoyed the richness of expensive fabrics and sensuous scents.

Indirect lighting came from a dozen sources, yet none were visible. The effect was the softness of candlelight. Indistinct, sensuous. Bright enough to see by, yet dim enough to create a shadowy intimacy.

A bathing pool dominated a small alcove. Steam rose from its surface to heat the air and release the scent of countless flower petals strewn both in the water and on the tiled floor surrounding the pool.

Further evidence that her presence was known to the household servants. During the time she had been with her father, someone had come in to prepare her chambers for her use. Vials of fragrant oils were positioned within easy reach of the pool, several opened to allow their rich scent to mingle with those of the flowers.

An immense bed stood on a low platform, pillows of every size, shape and color heaped onto the flat surface. A throw of fine *Mondovian* fabric draped the foot of the bed and trailed off the edge to the first step.

The setting was pure seduction.

Double glass doors led to the balcony, open to allow the still-warm night air into the chamber and bringing with it the dry, yet fragrant scent of the desert. The distant night music of *sensens* singing to the moon filled the room with their sweetness.

Larissalyia could not have planned a better setting. It was perfect.

Her blood pulsed through her veins, seemingly with the rhythm of the land. No matter where she went, however far she traveled, the deserts of Kador forever called to her.

"I think you've enticed me into your own private fantasy." Mac took in everything with a single glance before he turned to face her. His husky voice sent shivers of reaction up and down her spine. The man could seduce her with his voice alone. The look in his eyes melted her heart a little more.

His eyes reflected the hidden lights, rendered colorless in the shadows, yet there was no mistaking the gleam of desire that burned within them. He watched her, probed the expressions flashing across her face and in her changing eyes, saying nothing.

“Have I?” She knew her smile was provocative. Her hand came up to cup his face. To trace the strong lines and feel the slight roughness of bristly hair.

“I want you,” she whispered, a wealth of desire betrayed in the simple words.

She felt more than heard him suck in his breath before he turned his head to press a scorching kiss to the palm of her hand. His tongue emerged to tease the sensitive skin, and shudders vibrated throughout her body.

A flush of heat ran through her, making the material of her clothing feel coarse. She wanted to shed her garments and feel the smooth strength of his flesh against hers.

Without warning he stepped back, leaving her bereft. “Then you can have me.”

It took her a moment for his words to penetrate. Then she realized what he meant. He was giving her leave to make love to him. Allowing her to do with him as she wished.

It was a heady thought. And a very appealing one.

With rising anticipation, she glided forward. She knew her eyes already burned with gold. Never had her desire ignited so quickly or to such a scorching level.

With an effort she forced herself to slow down, to lightly slide her hands over the whiteness of his shirt, outline the muscles concealed below the material. This was something to savor, to make last.

“I can have you, hmm?” She bent her head just enough to run the tip of her tongue up the center of his throat. She lingered at the pulse, delighting in the way he shuddered at her touch. As she drew in a deep breath she detected the increase of his masculine scent as his rising body temperature released his own brand of pheromones. It was not something she’d noticed before, but now she realized that to a certain extent, Mac possessed the same desire-elevating pheromones she herself did. His release was far more subtle, almost unnoticed, but now that she was conscious of this ability, she reveled in it.

As much as she wanted to take this slow, Larissalyia found it almost impossible. Her fingers fumbled until she found the fastenings of his shirt and pulled them loose, impatient to feel his warm flesh. The breath sighed from her lungs as she finally smoothed her hands over the hard muscles of his chest, lingering on the wiry hair lightly sprinkled over his tanned skin.

Something hard pressed against the rounded softness of her stomach. A smile curved her lips as she dropped one hand to inspect the bulge encased within the blue jeans.

“Have I told you why I do not particularly care for these blue jeans you insist upon wearing?”

“Why is that?” His voice was husky, strangled.

Larissalyia glanced upward to find his eyes closed and a look of near agony on his face. Her laughter was soft, provocative, as she tormented him with her featherlight strokes. Up and down. Over the rounded length of him. Below to cup all of him. This pulled a harsh groan from him, yet his hands remained at his sides, fisted in an effort to control himself.

“They do not allow me enough freedom to touch you.” She went up on her toes to breathe the words in his ear. Her tongue darted out to flick against the soft lobe.

“They’re history.”

“On the other hand, I love the way the material molds to your behind.”

“Then they stay.”

Renewed amusement threatened as Larissalyia pulled away long enough to slide his shirt down, off his shoulders and over his arms. The material pooled around his waist where it was still tucked into those blue jeans. The effect was rakish, piratical. To use one of his Earth phrases...sexier than hell.

Releasing him, she stepped back until her foot touched the bottom step leading to the platform bed. Without taking her eyes from his, she ascended the two shallow steps, then she took a seat on the bed and braced her hands at either side of herself.

“Strip for me,” she commanded as she shook back her hair, feeling the loose strands brush down her back.

The blue of his eyes flared to life and for a moment she thought he was going to refuse. Then his hands went to his belt and he slowly...ever so slowly removed it. The sound of it dropping to the floor was loud in the hushed chamber. Her breath caught in her throat when his hand returned to the fastening of his trousers. He slipped the button from its hole and pulled the zipper down.

His gaze never left hers as he paused to tug the tail of his shirt from his waistband. Firm muscles flexed under tanned skin as he freed the material and let it drop to the floor, pooling at his feet. His motions were slow, deliberate.

Larissalyia’s mouth went dry.

He toed off his boots, the socks vanishing at the same time. Finally he stood before her wearing only those blue jeans. Never would she have thought a man clad in nothing save his trousers could look so inviting, so erotic. Yet Mac made it indescribable. His sleek body was beautiful to behold, golden, evenly muscled. The sprinkling of hair that crossed his chest arrowed down to vanish into the opened waistband of his jeans. It left her a tantalizing glimpse of his hardened flesh.

Unable to deny herself anymore, Larissalyia lifted her hands to the neckline of her flight suit, releasing the fastening to allow it to fall from her shoulders. Mac watched the progress of the material as it slid down her arms and briefly caught on the curve of her breasts.

With a playfulness she wouldn’t have guessed she possessed, she slid her fingers over the tips of her breasts and caressed the hardening peaks through the material. All the while she watched the man before her. She allowed her lids to drop halfway as a low moan seeped from between her lips.

“You’re going to torture me, aren’t you?”

“Only long enough to make you crazy.”

“Too late!” Without warning, Mac mounted the two steps until he loomed over her. He dropped to his knees beside the bed and leaned

forward to cage her between his arms. Lowering his head, he captured her mouth with his, showing no mercy as he kissed her thoroughly, taking his time until she quivered under the onslaught. Any thought of further teasing fled her mind as she drowned in the fiery possession of his lips.

His hands came up to catch her clothing and lower it, fully exposing her breasts. Desire darkened his eyes as he gazed at her, causing her nipples to harden. Larissalyia pulled her arms free of the flight suit and allowed the material to gather around her waist, much as Mac's shirt had earlier.

Talented lips captured the tip of her breast, laving the creamy flesh with his tongue until she thought she'd go mad. Her breath hissed as pleasure shot through her and pooled at the junction between her thighs. When his tongue flicked around the hardened peak, her back arched to press herself more fully to his mouth.

"Mac." She moaned low in her throat even as her body rippled with pleasure. She felt the pull of his mouth all the way down to her womb, a surge of moisture dampening her clothing.

He must have heard the stark need in her voice, because he pulled away long enough to shuck the remainder of his clothing and stand before her gloriously nude. She enjoyed the sight of him, lingering on that part of him that made him wholly male. He was so beautiful, so masculine.

And for now, he was hers.

Without a word she opened her arms to him, but rather than accept her unspoken demand, he caught the material of her clothing and stripped it from her body, pausing only long enough to remove her boots and discard everything in a heap.

To her surprise, rather than return to her arms, he moved to the bed, lying back with his hands linked behind his head. "I said you can have me, honey."

His gaze held hers, dared her to take up the challenge. Despite her spiraling desire, she smiled. Twisting around, she crawled across the

length of the bed, her movements lithe and sinuous. His eyes gleamed with appreciation, dropping to watch the sway of her breasts as she closed the distance between them.

“Touch me, honey.” He reached out and took her hand, guiding it to the hardened length of him. “I need to feel your hands on me.”

As her fingers wrapped around his swollen shaft, he shuddered with desire. A clear droplet of liquid seeped from the blunt head of his erection. Bending her head, she swept her tongue over that essence, tasting him, savoring him.

The harsh groan which rumbled from deep within his chest only encouraged her to try again. Her hair swept over his hips as she took him in her mouth, a curtain to frame the sight of her slowly working her way up and down his length.

“Lacey...”

She ignored him.

“Honey...”

She heard the warning in his voice and raised her head. In a gentle motion, she smoothed the dampness left behind by her mouth into the heated flesh, marveling at his velvety hardness.

“Something wrong?”

“No, but I’m going to lose it if you keep that up.”

“Actually, I am counting on *you* to keep it up.”

Empowered by his torment, she crawled on top of him and straddled his waist. For an instant, she brushed herself against the length of him to further torture them both. Her moist heat met the burning flame of him and threatened to send them both over the edge. Unable to deny herself any longer, Larissalyia eased herself down onto his erection.

Her breath caught at the incredible sensation of him filling her. She didn’t think it was possible, but he actually swelled further within her until she felt faint with the sheer rapture, releasing a gasp at the sensation. This position allowed a deeper intimacy, opened her fully to his heat. It was shattering.

She took all of him, bracing her hands on his chest as she bent her head for a moment to savor the stretched sensation. Slowly, she began to move, working herself up and down his length, feeling him nearly slip free before she dropped back down.

“That’s it, honey,” he said, then caught her hips with his hands, working himself upward to meet her strokes, thrusting into her, deeper, harder. Perspiration coated both of them, the heat of their mating releasing their scent into the warm evening. One hand left her hip to slide into the damp hair where they were joined. His fingers stroked her even as she shuddered toward climax.

“Oh yes,” she cried, arching her body and taking him with her as she convulsed with pleasure, her release explosive. It caught her with an unexpected force and swept her beyond the stars. Color exploded behind her closed lids as her hips bucked to meet his final thrusts, riding him to completion. Seconds later she felt more than heard his groan as he joined her over the edge. His essence bathed her inner muscles and triggered a second orgasm.

Larissalyia dropped to his heaving chest, boneless, and sprawled on top of him as she fought to catch her breath. It was impossible to do anything but rest against his chest. Listen to his beating heart. She felt him press a gentle kiss to her damp temple.

Satisfaction sighed through her as she relished in the pleasant ache in every muscle, the total depletion of energy. His hands stroked down the length of her back, soothing, comforting.

Never had she felt such completion. Such a connection with another human being. There was no doubt in her heart that she had fallen in love with this barbarian.

She wanted to weep.

Chapter Eighteen

Something tickled down the length of his cheek. Without opening his eyes, Mac twisted and captured Larissalyia as she was about to sweep the strand of hair along his cheek once more. He pulled her down and turned until he had her trapped beneath the length of his body.

Her squeak of surprise made him grin. Early morning sunlight streamed through the still open windows, dispersing the shadows of the night before. It also allowed him to appreciate the sight of a morning-rumpled Lacey. Her hair was still mussed from a long night of making love. She'd been insatiable, waking him several times in the most sensual manner.

Her still-golden eyes gleamed as she wound one of her legs around his. The sheer robe she wore fell open to reveal a tantalizing curve of flesh. Unable to resist, he ran one finger along the lapel to linger on that soft mound of flesh.

"This is nice, but you're way too overdressed, honey."

"And you've overslept."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Certainly not mine." It should have been difficult to look haughty in her position, but she managed it. A hint of the ice maiden he first noticed in Joe's Pub. Aware now of how hot she burned in his arms, he could never view her in that same light again.

"I seem to remember at least three occasions when you woke me up." Mac bent his head and ran his tongue over the crest just visible through the folds of her robe. Her shudder of reawakened desire was satisfying.

"And I recall the other two times you awakened me."

“I—”

A soft chime silenced Mac. Lacey glanced toward the door with some annoyance. Then, with a wry smile, she reached up to pull his head down to hers and snatched a quick kiss before she disengaged herself from his embrace.

“Someone has entered the outer room.” She slid off the bed and headed toward the door. The robe was long enough to fall to the ground, revealing far more than it concealed. The iridescent colors of the garment caught and reflected the early morning sun. “Probably the servants with our morning meal.”

“A little early, isn’t it?”

“Not really. I left word to have it delivered early since we have much to do.”

Mac leaned back against the pillows and folded his arms behind his head. That robe really was something, he decided as he watched her sashay across the room. Finer than silk, it molded her body like a second skin, clinging in all the right spots.

With a groan, he turned and buried his face in the pillows. He drew a deep breath, catching her scent. God! Last night had been incredible. Not even in his adolescence had he ever got it up as often as he had during the night. Lacey inspired him to abilities he hadn’t known he possessed.

With only half his attention, he listened to the low murmur of voices in the other room. He couldn’t quite hear what was being said, but from all evidence there was more than one servant present.

His gaze moved over the room, inspecting the furnishings with idle interest, but his mind really wasn’t on the decor. He dwelled on the decision he had subconsciously made during this past week.

He didn’t want to return to Earth.

Despite the constant running, the threat dogging their footsteps, he had no desire to return to his old life. He would miss his family, but with this ability to travel through space, he saw no reason why he couldn’t drop in for a visit every once in awhile. It couldn’t be any worse than if he lived in Europe. Just a greater distance.

But most of all, he didn't want to lose Lacey.

How she became so important to him in so short a time wasn't really a mystery. Everything about her intrigued him. From her beauty, which was unquestionable, to her bravery and her resourcefulness. She was no wilting violet. If she wanted something, she went after it. She could have lived off her family's wealth, but instead chose to go out and create a career for herself.

This business of his being considered "unsanctioned" was disturbing. He certainly didn't want to cause trouble for Lacey or her family. He thought he could learn enough about this universe to blend in so thoroughly his origins would never be questioned. Although Lazarus Ashanti had known on sight he was from Earth.

Mac frowned slightly. How *had* he known? That was baffling. Although most of the other beings he had seen since leaving Earth all had some sort of difference from your run-of-the-mill Homo sapiens, he had come across enough who could easily have come from Earth. He had seen nothing in their physical make up to mark them as different. At least, nothing visible.

Yet, somehow Ashanti had known.

He glanced at the door when he heard the sound of voices and the soft clink of cutlery and china. There was soft laughter just before Lacey reappeared carrying a bundle in her arms. The glint in her eyes did not bode well for him.

"What's that?"

"Evidently my father felt you should dress to blend in." She dropped the pile of clothing on the bed. Bending one leg under her, she sat on the edge and lifted a blue tunic trimmed with gold. The trim was elaborate to the point of being garish and the material the exact color of his eyes. She set it aside and picked up a pair of trousers. They looked more like black leggings to Mac. Something reminiscent to what could have been found during Earth's middle ages. High black boots, also trimmed in gold, were visible under a cape-like garment.

"Your father hates me, doesn't he?"

“What do you mean? This is very stylish.”

“Uh-huh.” He picked up the edge of the cape with two fingers. It was even worse than the tunic. All he needed was someone trying to put curls in his hair and he’d look like a total moron. “Ain’t no way I’m going to wear a cape.”

“I assure you, this is the height of fashion on Kador.” Lacey stood, the folds of her robe falling about her feet. She headed toward the door.

“In case you are interested, the morning meal has arrived.” She threw him a final saucy glance before she vanished from sight, pulling the door nearly shut behind her. “I don’t know about you, but I built up quite an appetite during the night.” Her voice floated to him from the other room.

Now that she mentioned it, something savory filtered in through the partially open doorway. His stomach growled, a reminder that he hadn’t eaten since lunch yesterday.

He threw back the sheets and stood. Indulging in a luxurious stretch, he gaze fell on the clothing. A grimace twisted his mouth. He supposed he should put them on. The more he blended in, the better. Besides... He cocked his head to one side. He could hear the murmur of voices again. The servants were probably still out in the other room. Appearing naked wouldn’t earn him any points with Lacey or her family.

Besides, there was still that crippling fine business of his being a barbarian. No time like the present to prove to Lord Ashanti that he could behave as civilized as any *sanctioned* being. With a sigh, he picked up the trousers and held them out. For Lacey’s sake, he’d play dress up.

He was pulling on the boots when he heard Lacey give a wordless exclamation and what sounded like breaking glass.

“Lacey?”

All was silent.

Clad only in the skintight trousers and boots, he headed for the door. Even then, he fought the need to charge in. Some instinct warned him something was wrong. He hesitated an instant at the door, listening. There was nothing. Carefully he eased himself around the corner, his gaze sweeping the room.

Everything was the same as the evening before. The beautiful furnishings, the collection of curiosities, the open glass doors through which the sunlight streamed in. A partially covered tray now occupied one table. A steaming pitcher gave off a delicious smell.

Near the windows, he saw the broken crockery on the tiled floor. The liquid was still spreading, cooling. A breeze billowed the coverings over the glass doors.

Lacey was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

“How could he have gotten in?” Lazarus Ashanti demanded as he ran agitated fingers through his hair and glared at Mac. His eyes flashed black with red sparks flaring and fading. “I had guards at every entrance, on every floor. They were scattered throughout the palace.”

“Were they on the roof?”

“The roof? No.”

“That’s the only way they could have taken her. The balcony windows were wide open.”

“There is no way to gain the balconies from the outside.”

“This palace isn’t that many stories. It would not be difficult to scale the walls.” Mac paced the length of the room. They were in Lord Ashanti’s private apartments. This receiving chamber was far more staid than Lacey’s, having little by way of superfluous objects. “The guards at either end of the corridor saw nothing. Lacey was out of my sight only for a moment. It would not have taken them long to lower themselves from the roof to the balcony, grab her and vanish.”

Frustration ate at him even as fear soured his belly. The instant he realized Lacey was missing he headed for the balcony, but there was nothing to be seen. No rope, no scuff on the stonework, no nothing. A quick scan of the surrounding area showed no other way to go but up.

“My daughter would never have been taken without a struggle.”

“Provided she was conscious.”

Ashanti muttered something vicious under his breath.

The door opened and Tutsi entered the room. He wore the black leather Mac had first seen him in while on Earth. Not quite the same, but close. His face was hard, angry.

“I just investigated the roof. There are signs that a small transport had been up there recently.” The look he directed at Mac was malevolent, leaving little doubt he blamed him for his lady’s disappearance.

Hell, Mac blamed himself. He should never have left her alone for an instant. Yet, they had no way of knowing souMalocho had already been in position to act so quickly. But then, given the fact the man appeared meticulous in his planning, they should have prepared for this possibility.

“The good news is one of the early chambermaids recalls seeing a transport fly overhead, going North.”

“What’s North?”

“*No’lakah modren.*” The words were whispered by Lazarus Ashanti. There was a wealth of fear in his voice. It was in his face.

“Which is...?”

It was Tutsi who answered. “The Endless Caverns.”

Chapter Nineteen

Consciousness was slow in coming. Black dissolved into gray, gray into shadows, shadows into shapes.

Larissalyia ached in every muscle while dizziness threatened the contents of her stomach. She opened her eyes for only an instant before she shut them again. Dim though the lighting was, it pierced through her head and set off a series of sickening somersaults in her guts.

Despite the pain in her head, she tried to use her other senses to figure out where she was and what she was doing here. She was lying on her side, the ground underneath her hard stone. Damned uncomfortable.

She remembered only bits and pieces of what had happened. She recalled playing with Mac for a brief moment before she returned to the receiving chamber to pour herself a much needed morning drink. The lighting behind her had dimmed for an instant and she was about to turn when someone grabbed her from behind and clapped something over her mouth.

A faint frown furrowed her brow as another memory emerged. A nasty, sweet smell had flooded her senses and then everything went black.

Drugged! She'd been drugged!

It didn't take a brilliant mind to guess who was behind it.

The realization went a long way to clearing her mind, but she was still lightheaded, dizzy. Without moving, she tried to drag deep breaths of fresh air into her lungs, hoping to clear her head.

It was hard to think clearly when fear threatened to paralyze her, but she fought down the natural reaction and tried to replace it with rage.

That more than anything helped in clearing the remainder of the drug from her mind.

Next she had to control her anger. She needed to be calm and analytical in order to gather information.

Another careful breath through her nose told her much. The atmosphere was dry, fragrant. Not canned. She wasn't on a transport.

She was still on Kador.

There was no heat of the sun on her, but there was a sense of closure. Somewhere in the distance she heard water dripping. The sound echoed all around her. Yet despite the presence of water, the feel of the desert was prevalent.

She was in the Endless Caverns.

A sigh filtered through her. She felt relief. She hadn't been taken off planet. Not yet anyway.

"You may as well open your eyes, my dear."

Shock held her immobile for an instant, then her eyes popped open. She hadn't sensed someone standing so close, watching her while she lay there.

A pair of shiny boots appeared directly in front of her. She saw a scuff of dirt up the side of the left one. Why this blemish should capture and hold her attention when more dire matters were on hand was a mystery. Yet it did. Her gaze lingered on that mark before climbing up the length of red-clad legs. The material molded muscular legs and stretched across narrow hips.

He crouched down in front of her. A glimmering cape covered his upper torso, the high neck snug against a pale throat. The face which came into her line of vision was older, lined, yet still compelling. It was a satirical face, long and narrow, topped by thick dark hair cut short enough to form a mass of tight curls. Dark eyes gazed at her, mild with idle curiosity.

Larissalyia had to work moisture into her mouth before she could speak. Even then it took her two tries before she could form coherent speech. There was no mistaking that face. It had haunted her.

“Hello, souMalochó. Long time no see.” To cover her fear she fell back into the easy slang she’d learned while on Earth.

“It has, hasn’t it, my dear.”

He appeared genuinely pleased. His smile lit his dark eyes and gave them a life that had been missing only seconds before. He cocked his head to one side. “And you are well?”

Larissalyia said nothing, concentrating on making certain her muscles were in working order. She flexed them one at a time, careful to conceal her actions from the man watching her. The stiffness she experienced told her she’d been lying on the hard ground for quite some time.

“It is a pleasure to finally have you with me.”

While thoughts flashed through her mind with increased clarity, Larissalyia stared at him with open wonder. He made this meeting sound like a social encounter.

“I’m afraid I cannot say the same about you.”

She went back to testing her muscles. Although it wasn’t easy, the only way to remain calm was to ignore the man. If she had to look into those flat, dark eyes, her fear would swallow her. How this sadistic criminal managed to look so benign was beyond her. She guessed he was counting on her not knowing why he was determined to acquire her.

“Come.” He held his hands out to her. “You cannot be comfortable lying on the ground.”

Larissalyia stared at those long fingers with revulsion. Did he really think she would meekly accept his help?

“Stuff it,” she muttered under her breath. Ignoring his hands, she pushed herself up onto her arms. A wave of dizziness washed over her, bringing with it the renewed threat of nausea. She fought it down, refusing to vomit in front of this creep. With a sense of triumph, she gained her knees. Only then did she allow herself a chance to look around.

As she suspected, she was in the caves. As a child, she played in the more accessible warrens near the city. She suspected these were part of

the far reaches. There was a feel of emptiness to this cavern. As if no human had set foot in them in generations.

The smooth walls glittered. The minerals imbedded in them picked up and reflected souMalocho's artificial lighting. She knew in some portions of these caves a naturally growing lichen provided its own illumination. Apparently this wasn't one of them.

Glancing around, she saw a vast grotto. The ceiling soared overhead to dissolve into the shadows. Their voices had echoed although neither had spoken loud. Several entrances dotted the cavern walls, some half her height, many rising into the shadows. She made careful note of each entrance.

Other than the steady dripping, she heard little else. If souMalocho's people were nearby, they weren't speaking. It was best to assume they were in the vicinity. With his sense of caution, it was unlikely he was alone.

A few crates were scattered nearby, as well as several bedrolls. She counted five. So much for being a gentleman. He could have at least dumped her on one of them. The amount of supplies she noticed also pointed toward an extended stay.

Now that was worrisome. Obviously souMalocho had been unable to leave Kador without risk of detection. Her father, and, she hoped, Mac would be searching for her. But these caves weren't called the Endless Caverns for nothing. They went on forever, penetrating deep into Kador to eventually link into the main mining system. One could wander for cycles without finding an outlet. Once, long ago, someone attempted to map out some of the more inaccessible parts of the Endless Caverns, but he died before he could explore even a portion of them. No one had bothered since.

Larissalyia sat back on her heels, waiting for the latest wave of dizziness to pass. The drug they'd given her had been unpleasant. A nasty taste coated her tongue, making her long for a drink of water. But did she dare request one? If she were drugged again, the next time she regained consciousness she might find herself loaded up on a transport

and traveling to parts unknown. At least conscious, she had a chance of escape.

“How did you find me so quickly?”

“Our mutual little friend.”

“Sava? That little...”

“Oh, do not blame the Strut. He is unaware of the tracking device I arranged to have planted on him.” Once again the pleasant smile appeared. This time it did not reach his eyes. They remained dead. “I knew you would have no choice but to take him with you when my men converged on your ship. That was some very nice flying, by the way.”

“Bite me,” she muttered in English. The puzzled look which flashed over his face was satisfying in a childish way. SouMalocho had no knowledge of the Earth language much less the slang she’d picked up during her stay there and what she’d learned from Mac.

Mac! She hoped that he was all right. Until now she didn’t think to wonder if her kidnapers had injured him. Or worse. If he was okay, he must be going crazy by now.

“Crud!” These Earth words really were very descriptive. Her glance returned to souMalocho. Much as she hated to reveal her worry, she had no choice but to ask. “What of my companion?”

“The Earthman?”

Larissalyia was unsurprised at his knowledge of Mac. The Zertda stood to his full height and paced over to one of the crates. He took a seat and cocked his head to one side with mild curiosity. Larissalyia watched his eyes. His expression was closed, but his eyes betrayed some of his true feelings. From Mac she had learned to read expressions rather than rely on the nuances of shades.

“He is fine. No harm has come to him. Yet.” His voice vibrated with warning.

Even from his seated position, he towered over her. Nope—this looming business was not going to do. Too much of a disadvantage there. She ignored any lingering dizziness and scrambled to her feet, still clad

in her flimsy robe. It was crushed and stained, but still covered everything vital.

SouMalocho reached out and ran his fingers along the lapel. His touch was a parody of the gesture Mac had made this morning. The back of his hand deliberately brushed her breast. Revulsion shuddered through her before she stepped out of his reach.

"I am a little perplexed you bothered to take him with you, my dear. Such a dangerous chance you took."

"He had his uses." Her words started out careless, but then an idea occurred to her.

With a smile of reflective passion, she deliberately allowed her eyes to bleed into a hint of metallic gold. "In fact, he had a great many uses."

Slowly, souMalocho's hands clenched at his sides as his face darkened. In a move faster than she anticipated, he was on his feet and in front of her. He was taller than she recalled, a full half head over her. Menace replaced his passive expression.

A resurgence of fear sparked a reckless sense of mockery. "You do realize that since I was hiding out on Earth, my anti-birth injection had expired. There is a distinct possibility that I could be pregnant."

"No!"

"Yeah, well—the Earthman and I certainly had been doing nothing to prevent such an occurrence. Hmm, I wonder..."

"You bitch!"

Without warning, he backhanded her. Out of the corner of her eye, Larissalyia saw it coming and was already turning with the blow. Still, the force of it knocked her off her feet. Pain exploded across the right side of her face as she stared up at him from the ground. Her hand was shaking as she raised it to her cheek.

Not the hardest blow she'd even taken, but it certainly ranked up there.

"The laws of Diacommo are invalid if I am pregnant with another man's child," she said with a sneer. Actually, she wasn't sure if that was strictly

true, but it sounded good. She counted on souMalocho not knowing the full scope of the law. Besides, she wasn't sure if her injection had expired. If it hadn't, it must be close to that time. No need to let this creep know that.

The look that came over his face was unnerving, evil.

Larissalyia pulled herself back to her feet. The world swayed slightly before she steadied herself through sheer determination. Her cheek throbbed with pain, keeping time with her heartbeat. No doubt she would soon be sporting an impressive bruise.

Before SouMalocho could speak, a disturbance brought their attention to one of the many corridors. The sound of running feet echoed inside the immense chamber, making it difficult to guess from which direction they were coming. Despite the urge to turn and see who was coming, Larissalyia kept her gaze on the man in front of her. He was unstable, volatile. She wasn't about to turn her back on him. Besides, souMalocho showed no alarm. It had to be his men approaching.

"There are transports leaving the city!"

Out of her peripheral vision Larissalyia saw three Kyrions stumble into the cavern. A stab of hope rose within her. If his men could spot activity from the city, they couldn't be too far away from it. With careful movement she turned her head far enough to see what one Kyrion was holding. Damn! They were in touch via communicator. Still, they couldn't be very deep underground. A transmitter wouldn't work too far down. SouMalocho must have some method of mapping out his position to keep from getting lost in *No'lakah Modren*.

Keeping her motions slow, she edged closer to the crate souMalocho had been using. When she'd fallen, she had spied a knapsack propped next to it. She hoped it held supplies.

"Which way are they going?" SouMalocho appeared to forget about her as he rounded on his men.

"They are coming this way!"

"Fools! You were seen leaving the city."

Larissalyia scooped up the knapsack. Moving with lightning fast reflexes, she ducked into one of the low entrances she noted earlier. She heard an exclamation of alarm from one of the Kyrions but didn't stop. The light vanished. For a heartbeat she hesitated in the near darkness. The ceiling was near to the ground, more a tunnel than anything. What she would do if it dead-ended, she didn't want to think about.

Dropping to her hands and knees she crawled. Unsure how high the ceiling was, she wasn't about to take a chance of knocking herself senseless if it proved to be shallow.

"After her!"

SouMalocho's furious voice spurred her on. Ahead, she saw a faint glow and aimed for it. The knapsack she clutched made the going awkward, but she didn't dare let go. Its weight promised the possibility of necessary supplies.

As she crawled, her robe caught on her knees and she heard it tear. With impatient hands she yanked it up around her waist to keep it out of the way.

The ground bruised her knees, tearing at her skin. Soon she'd be leaving a trail of blood, but she couldn't allow herself to think about that. The corridor curved before opening into another cavern, this one lit by glowing lichen. The voices behind her were too close for her liking. Kyrions were at home in narrow places. If this passage continued much longer, there would be no doubt they'd overtake her.

The cavern rose high enough to allow her to get to her feet. Ignoring the needles of pain stabbing at her legs she took a precious second to gaze around herself in wonder. Here the moss grew in abundance, lighting the cave to near daylight brilliance. This grotto was a maze of stalagmites and stalactites, many meeting in the center to form a pillar. Several were wider than she was tall.

After that one encompassing glance, she began weaving her way around them in search of escape. She avoided patches of sand, even though they would be a relief to her feet. The tracts of sand occasionally

concealed a sinkhole of quicksand. Sometimes shallow, often times lethal.

Again, several openings dotted the cavern, some lit, some black holes that may or may not end in a hollowed-out cave. It was impossible to tell.

Her thin slippers were little or no protection against the conditions as she scrambled over rocks and boulders, some so large she wasted precious seconds searching for a way around them.

She had just squeezed between two pillars when she heard the echo of voices. Like a *senna* she froze. SouMalocho's men had just entered the far end of the cavern.

With luck she had put enough stone between them that they'd be unable to catch a glimpse of her. Still...

"Spread out. I want her found!"

Ahead of her a narrow opening beckoned. Without hesitation she darted into it. Darkness closed around her and forced her to a halt. For a moment she was blind until her eyes adjusted. It wasn't much of an improvement. Solid rock closed around her, almost brushing either side of her as she inched her way forward.

If she was claustrophobic, she would have been a gibbering wreck in short order. It was impossible to determine the ceiling height, but she suspected it was less than a meter over her head. The sense of closure pressed down on her.

Behind her, she still heard the echo of voices, but as far as she could tell, none came any closer to her fissure. The passage ahead was darker, no evidence of the glowing lichen clinging to the walls. For a moment she hesitated, but there was no choice. She had to continue. Going back, she risked exposure and capture.

Determination steeled her jaw and she slung the knapsack over her shoulder. She shuffled forward, one hand sliding along the smooth wall while she used the other to avoid any protrusions. Despite her care, she stubbed her toes against rocks, once with a force which nearly brought a cry to her lips.

With a suddenness which had her blinking in surprise, the passage opened into another cavern. Here the lichen grew with abundance. The moss ran up and down the walls of the vast grotto, covering the ceiling and, in places, trailing down the stalagmites and stalactites which also adorned this cave.

Instead of the dry deadness of the last cavern, this one gleamed with moisture, the water plunging into vast pools that dotted the floor and filled the air with the incessant harmony of music. Every color of the rainbow was reflected in the moisture coating the formations, iridescent with a breath-taking beauty.

For a long moment, Larissalyia stared, mesmerized by the grandeur of this grotto. On a planet where water was scarce, this was a priceless find. Everywhere she looked she found another stunning feature of natural structure, each more beautiful than the last.

She gazed with wonder as she slowly entered the cavern, trying to take everything in at once. Never had she seen anything so enchanting.

It wasn't until she walked into a small pool of water that she returned to her senses. The cold soaking penetrated her slippers and sent a shiver up her spine. A drop of water fell on the top of her head, causing her to look upward. Another drip hit her square in the forehead. Lovely as this was, it wouldn't be long before she'd be soaked.

Larissalyia unstuck her feet and moved forward, still gazing with wonder at the towering beauty. But now she kept a portion of her attention on her surroundings, looking for a way out. If souMalocho or his men found that little fissure it wouldn't take them long to reach this cave.

Despite that threat, she leaned against a portion of relatively dry rock to rest for a moment. Running was all fine and good, but she didn't want to exhaust herself to the point of being unable to move when she needed speed the most. Besides, she had to form a plan.

The knapsack bumped against her spine. Calling herself every type of idiot for forgetting it, she swung the bag from her shoulders and

crouched over it. After a quick glance around, she opened the flap and rummaged through the sack.

It contained the basic necessities for survival. Granted, the pre-packaged foods were in short supply, but the little hand-lamp was welcome as were the two bottles of drinking water. Although water was all around her in this cavern, the mineral content might render it undrinkable. So this meager supply was to be treasured.

Now that she was assured a little breathing room, Larissalyia turned her attention to the most pressing problem. To make it out of *No'lakah Modren* alive, she needed to locate a passage to the surface. Otherwise she could wander these caverns until she ran out of supplies and slowly starved to death. Not a fate she welcomed.

She looked at the exits again. Besides the one she'd used, she saw three other corridors. Two of them showed the glow of lichen, but the third revealed only darkness within its depths. Common sense dictated she take one of the two lichen-lit passages, but instinct made her hesitate before the dark one. She had the hand-lamp, but how much power remained in it and how long was the corridor?

Chewing on the inside of her lip, Larissalyia tried to decide. Go with the light or succumb to the darkness?

A furtive sound behind her decided her. Whether it was a natural sound or manmade, she didn't know, but she wasn't about to take any chances. Without stopping to think, she plunged into the darkness.

Chapter Twenty

How could something that moved so fast take so long to get somewhere?

Mac tried to relax against the cushioned seat of the transport, but his jaw was rigid, muscles tense. All he wanted was to get to Lacey. They'd wasted hours gathering intelligence and verifying information.

Lazarus ordered a complete lockdown of all interplanetary travel and assured him no ship was going to be allowed to lift off from Kador. He wanted to make certain his daughter had been taken to the Endless Caves. Kador's great wealth ensured it possessed the best security and defense available. Without the express authorization of the Chief Magistrate no space travel was going to happen.

A quick glance at Tutsi revealed the no-neck gorilla looked utterly calm. Until Mac noticed his hands. They clenched and unclenched with slow deliberation. Worry? Or perhaps, anticipation. Hard to tell.

By his reckoning, they left the city less than an hour ago, but the mountain range housing the *No'lakah Modren* appeared no closer. The peaks rose like jagged teeth against the horizon. From this distance they looked purple against the golden hue of the sky. Probably due to the lack of moisture on this arid world, he noticed Kador had little cloud cover. Vegetation was scarce, mostly scrub. With the red soil, it reminded him of the Australian outback. This land possessed a harsh beauty. Something that could easily sink into your soul.

"Barbarian."

The low growl snapped him out of his musing and Mac glanced across the aisle to where the *Mandujano* sat. Loosening the seat harness,

Tutsi unbuckled a belt he wore. He rolled the leather around the holster and tossed it to him. Mac automatically caught it and opened it to inspect the weapon held snug in the holster. It was shaped much like a Magnum, the grip larger than he was accustomed to and the barrel slightly thicker. Its light weight surprised him, yet it felt comfortable in his hands.

"It is not dissimilar from your handgun." Tutsi watched him turn it over. He nodded toward each feature. "Safety is on, you sight it down the barrel and slowly squeeze the trigger. There is no rebound since a blaster sends out a laser shot rather than bullets. The degrees of force range from a mild stun to a killing force."

His dark eyes were fierce when they met Mac's. "At present, it is set on kill."

Mac nodded. His fingers clenched around the hand grip of the blaster, then he loosened his harness long enough to belt the weapon around his waist. He was taking no chances with Lacey's safety. If that animal touched her, he was dead. Simple as that.

"Thanks, Toots."

Although Mac had never met the man, he had few illusions about souMalocho's intentions where Lacey was concerned. Everything he'd heard showed the escaped criminal to be an egotistic creature with delusions of grandeur. He would not hesitate to use Larissalyia Sarisekko Ashanti to achieve them.

"We will reach the mountains in approximately thirty of your minutes."

The *Mandujano* warrior leaned his head back and closed his eyes. His hands continued to clench and unclench.

* * *

Larissalyia stumbled for the hundredth time. Her hand lamp wobbled and nearly dropped from her fingers. The tunnel had narrowed until she was forced to slide sideways to squeeze through. When she finally came

to a bubble in the passage, she paused to catch her breath. She had a nasty feeling she had made the wrong choice.

Pausing, she swung her lamp first behind her, then in front. The light did not penetrate far and all she could see was more tunnel. But beyond this slight chamber, it didn't appear to be any narrower. Hope unfurled in her chest that she'd be able to continue.

Behind her she heard silence. Nothing. As much as she wanted to believe she was safe, given souMaloch's determination, she wasn't holding her breath. The cavern had only a few exits and he just might have enough men to investigate them all.

But the lack of sound allowed her to take a moment and rummage through the knapsack for one of the water bottles. Giving it a jiggle, she grimaced. Less than half full. Although she still had one full bottle, she'd already drank too much. Who knew how long she'd be trapped underground?

She replaced the bottle even though her mouth felt drier than ever. Most likely her imagination, but she thought longingly of the bottle for another moment before she firmly turned her mind from it and forced herself to continue.

It seemed hours that she'd been following this tunnel, but she couldn't be sure. Her thin slippers were now nearly useless but she didn't discard them. They provided her feet with some semblance of protection. She could feel the effects of the hard ground on the soles of her feet.

With a sigh, she went on. The stone scraped against her back and caught at her loose hair. She didn't want to think what her robe looked like. Not that it mattered. She had more pressing matters to consider.

The tunnel curved slightly to the right and widened. Her spirits lifted. Until her light bounced off a solid wall of stone.

Larissalyia stumbled to a halt as dismay ripped through her.

A dead end.

Damn, damn, damn. She'd been so afraid of this. She gambled and lost. Now what?

After everything she'd been through, it was so tempting to sit down and cry. She wasn't sure if she could make herself turn around and find her way back through that narrow crevice in order to find another route. Especially since she might meet her pursuers on the way through.

Disheartened, she backed up until she bumped into the wall. Allowing her legs to fold, she sank down onto the hard ground to rest her head on her knees. She ached in every muscle, had more scrapes and cuts than she cared to count and was thirstier than she'd ever been before. That wasn't even taking into consideration her stomach. Just the thought set it rumbling with the memory of her last meal.

With an effort she raised her head to rest it back against the stone wall. There was no sound anywhere. The silence was heavy as it pressed down on her. Never had she been more conscious of being deep underground. At least she thought she was deep underground. Who knew how far from the surface she actually was?

A small sound came from her throat, shocking her. It was a sound she'd never made before and one she never wanted to hear again.

That more than anything steeled her resolve. Giving up was not an option. She was an Ashanti. What she needed was a new plan. Something to give herself a reason to stand up and keep moving.

Opening her eyes, she lifted her light to shine it over the little rounded-out cavern. The ceiling wasn't very high, only a meter or so out of reach. Smooth. She knew these caverns had been formed by great underground seas that had long since vanished to leave Kador the desert planet it now was. The water had to come from somewhere to form this corridor.

Her light continued to travel over her prison. Something was odd. It took her a moment longer to realize what it was.

Fresh air!

The light glanced off a hole and swung back. She stared at it. Small, it was barely large enough for her to crawl through. Larissalyia nibbled at her lower lip, feeling the dryness of her skin. How likely was it that this

little crawlspace would open into an exit to the surface? Chances were good it would just end in a tiny crevice through which air seeped in.

What choice did she have? She couldn't go back and she couldn't stay here until her water ran out.

That last thought decided her. With renewed purpose, she stood and moved closer to the little hole. Damn, it was small.

Once again she caught up the ends of her tattered robe and tied it around her waist to keep it out of her way. What did it matter if she was bare-assed? There was no one around to see. Still, she couldn't keep herself from glancing around once more. When she realized what she did, she snorted with self-derision.

Looping the knapsack around one wrist, she decisively dropped to her hands and knees and grasped the handle of the lamp between her teeth. Not the most comfortable position but it freed up her hands so she could crawl with some degree of speed.

"Here goes," she mumbled around the handle as she started forward. The burrow swallowed her up. The rough walls brushed against her shoulders. The hard ground scraped new grooves into her knees.

Time lost all meaning. The tunnel widened and narrowed at intervals. Each time it shrank she stifled a sense of panic. She tried not to think about how this crevice could become her tomb. The earth above her pressed down, suffocating her until she was panting to draw a deep breath. Only the promise of fresh air kept her moving forward.

One thought moved to another and she found herself thinking about Mac. Was he okay? SouMalocho had said he hadn't harmed him, but could she believe him? She had to hope he was alive and well. The alternative didn't bear thinking of.

Was he searching for her? She had no reason to believe he'd even know where to begin. Would he know if she was still on-planet or was her father conducting a search using projected destinations?

At this moment she would give almost anything to see Mac again. Touch him. Hold him. The Earthman had somehow crawled into her heart and taken up residence there.

Finally, she admitted to herself she couldn't give him up.

"The F.O.W. be damned!" she muttered around the handle of the light. There had to be a way. If not, she would return with him to Earth. If he would have her and if she managed to get out of here alive.

These thoughts renewed her effort even as her muscles screamed with strain. After what seemed an interminable time span the current of air on her face strengthened. Just a brush of fresh air, but it heartened her and generated a new burst of energy.

There was definitely an opening ahead. She prayed it wasn't a crack too narrow for her to squeeze through.

When she came to the end of the tunnel she almost crawled off an edge opening into a vast cavern. She caught herself in time to avoid a tumble down a steep incline of shale. Her startled gasp caused her to lose her hold on the hand lamp and it fell from her jaws to drop over the edge. She heard it slide down the incline, loose stones tumbling with it until it hit the bottom with an ominous crack of glass. The light, meager though it was, went out.

Larissalyia barely noticed, too busy staring around with openmouthed amazement. The cavern was enormous. She couldn't see the other side. The lichen growth was sporadic, but the lighting was unnecessary when she spied an entrance leading to the outside.

Never had the pale violet of sky been more welcome. Dizzy relief flooded her and she sagged to the hard ground, the strength going out of her. She had made it! Somehow she actually made it through the caverns.

Gathering her strength, Larissalyia was about to stand when the distant sound of shouts stilled her. Her head swung left but she found her view blocked by a huge boulder. With care, she crawled to the rock edge and peered around, but was unable to get a clear view. Getting to her feet, she untied and brushed down what remained of her robe. Flattening herself against the rock, she inched forward.

Hidden by the rock, she saw a second entrance leading to the outside. The distance made it difficult to get a clear look at the activity

below, but as she watched, tiny beings raced into the cavern, pausing to shoot at intruders swarming into the entrance. She was dismayed to realize the fleeing creatures were Kyrions.

Damn. She had escaped souMalocho just to walk right into a nest of his minions. There had to be at least six of them down there. As she watched, one of the Kyrions went down, hit by a bolt of light which could only have come from a blaster. Her elation rose. Someone was routing souMalocho's men. That could only mean a rescue team.

Even though she was too far for anyone to notice her, she kept to the cover of her rock as she watched a dozen or so Kadorians swarm into the cavern. Their shouts echoed off the walls and mingled until it sounded like there were a hundred people below.

A thrill shot through her when she spied the man who led the charge. Despite the distance, she recognized the tall figure of Victor MacNaught. To her astonishment, he seemed to vanish each time he halted. It took her a moment to realize he wore muted shades that blended in with the colors of the cavern. He even had a desert headdress draped around his shoulders. As she watched, he pulled it over his head and wrapped the scarf over his face before he dove for the cover of a cluster of boulders. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Kyrions were returning fire with desperation.

Larissalyia bit back a cheer when she saw her father's forces swarm in behind Mac. The enormous bulk of Tutsi was easy to pick out. For a man so large, he moved with a graceful swiftness as he took up a position behind a rock opposite Mac and returned the fire of the Kyrions. Another of souMalocho's men went down screaming.

A glance over her shoulder revealed her only way down was the shale incline. It veered off behind her and was concealed by the boulder she now crouched behind.

With care she eased back from her concealment. Risking another glance toward the fighting she was reassured she was still hidden from those below. The battle echoed off the cavern walls.

She allowed herself a minute to worry about Mac before she drew a deep breath and reminded herself on his world he was a trained warrior. He could take care of himself. He would be fine.

But when she stood at the edge and looked out over the incline she almost reconsidered her route. Damn, it looked worse than she first thought. The loose shale was sure to make a dreadful noise, but with the action going on below, how noticeable would it be? Her other concern was controlling her descent. Indecisive, she hesitated.

A closer inspection of the route showed large rocks imbedded along the way. She had no idea how stable these were. If they slipped, she was sure to end up buried under an avalanche of stone.

Her only other alternative was to crawl back into her little hidey hole, which really wasn't an option at all. No way was she voluntarily going back into that tomb.

Which left this her only choice.

She eased herself over the lip of the ledge and placed her feet on the first solid-looking rock. It held. The next rock was about a meter away. She gave a little leap and landed on its flat surface. A glance down the incline showed she only had about another twenty or so meters to the bottom. She prayed to the Light her rocky path was going to hold.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mac took careful aim and squeezed off another shot. The beam of light struck a boulder, blasting a chip out of it. The Kyrion crouching behind it returned fire before ducking down once more.

Mac and the rest of Ashanti's security force were scattered throughout the cavern. Out of the corner of his eye he saw several soldiers fanning out to prevent any of the Kyrions from escaping deeper into the caves.

In the midst of the firefight, it crossed his mind this was similar to an old West gunfight. The dim lighting of the cavern made targeting difficult, but he had no doubt souMalocho's men were pinned down.

They had flown over numerous cave openings before the ship's instruments detected signs of life in this one. Landing had been tricky, but the pilot was a veteran of rough terrain and had them on the ground with a minimum of trouble.

"Hey, Toots!" he shouted in English across the distance separating him from the *Mandajano* warrior. "We're gonna need one of them alive."

Tutsi nodded to show he'd heard. Mac found the lever that regulated the force of the blast and switched it to stun. He needed a Kyrion to locate Lacey in this warren of rabbit holes. When they called these caverns the Endless Caves, they weren't kidding. Just the flyover had been mind-boggling and he'd only seen a fraction of them. How they hoped to find Lacey...

The thought trailed off as he shut down that avenue. Of course they'd find her. Giving up was not an option.

Movement to his left caught his eye. He turned to see a Kyrion raise his head to peer above his rocky cover. Even as it registered that he knew this one, Mac took aim and fired. The blast caught the creature a glancing blow to the head and flung him back. He lay still, his weapon a meter or so from his outstretched hand. His face was turned just enough for Mac to recognize Nicos. Satisfaction swept through him.

“That one will do for questioning,” Tutsi shouted.

Mac switched his blaster back to kill before he continued to pick out his targets. In a few minutes the remaining Kyrions were either dead or unconscious.

Silence descended on the cavern.

Mac glanced around as the security force emerged from cover. They had started with a dozen men. Around the vast cavern, he could see both the wounded and the dead. The able-bodied men hurried to aid their comrades. Their side had been lucky. It looked like only two were either dead or unconscious and another five had taken what looked like minor wounds.

“You are uninjured, barbarian?”

Mac’s attention veered over to Tutsi, standing with his blaster still held ready. The man’s gaze never left his surroundings as he tracked the shadows for any movement.

“Yeah. You?”

That dark gaze flickered to him for a brief instant before he gave a short nod and continued his survey. Mac was sure he saw a flash of amusement on the man’s face and gave his own snort of derision. It would probably take more than a blast full in the chest to drop the gorilla.

As one, they started forward and approached the Kyrion still stretched out where he’d fallen. Yep, it was Nicos all right. The blue scaled face was turned upward, the dim lighting making identification certain.

Tutsi knelt beside him and reached into a little pack attached to his belt. He extracted a narrow tube similar to the one that Lacey had used to knock him out. Was it only two weeks ago? It seemed like forever.

“Cover him.” The *Mandujano* waited for Mac to level his weapon on the creature before he pressed the tube to the Kyrion’s neck. There was a flutter of eyelids as Nicos’s eyes opened to stare up at the two men. His dazed confusion lasted only a second before he went completely still. His gaze never left the blaster Mac held trained on him.

Mac found reading expressions on Kyrion faces difficult, but with Nicos it was impossible. He gave nothing away.

“Hi, Nicos. Where’s Lacey?”

The creature said nothing.

“Try Lady Ashanti, barbarian,” Tutsi murmured as he got to his feet and towered over the Kyrion in a deliberate show of intimidation. He fingered his holstered weapon as a smile of anticipation appeared on his dark face. It was not a pretty sight.

Still Nicos said nothing.

Without taking his eyes from the creature on the ground, Mac posed a casual question to his companion. “What do you think, Toots? Should I start blasting pieces off of him?”

“Do you think it will help?”

“Can’t hurt.” Mac pretended to consider for a moment longer before he gave a decisive shrug and switched the lever of his weapon to a higher force. “Or I should say...it can’t hurt us. Don’t know what it’ll do to a Kyrion.”

“Let’s find out.”

Again Mac hesitated. “How much of a threshold of pain do Kyrions have?”

“Fairly high. You may wish to start with blowing off his leg, barbarian. Make sure the force is high enough so the stump is cauterized. We do not want him to die from loss of blood. Not yet, anyway”

“Good point.”

Mac raised the lever further before he took aim on Nicos, just above the right knee. He had started out with a bluff, but now he wanted to blow off the guy’s leg. After everything the Kyrion had put Lacey through, what he’d put her family through, Mac was feeling more than a little bloodthirsty just now. His finger began to squeeze the trigger.

“You will never find her.” Even though the creature was a hair away from losing his leg, there was no fear in his eyes. “You dare not kill me. Without me you will wander these caves until you die.”

“Do you think so?” Mac pretended to think about it. Time to roll the dice. He allowed a smile to form on his lips even as he made his eyes go dead. “You realize they do not call us barbarians for nothing.”

Deliberately he gave a chuckle which sounded more than a little deranged. It was a perfect imitation of Mel Gibson’s character in the second *Lethal Weapon* movie. “It’s been awhile since I’ve actually had a bloodbath. Did you know drinking the blood of your enemy makes you stronger?”

His voice was low, taut as he licked his lips. It was easy to make a maniacal light come to his eyes. All he had to do was think of Lacey being kidnapped and forced to marry a murderous criminal.

Nicos swallowed, his face betraying fear for the first time. Even Tutsi looked at him askance.

Without another word, Mac holstered his weapon and drew out a long blade he had liberated from Lacey’s collection of artifacts. He caressed it before he raised it to his lips and deliberately licked the tip, all the while watching the Kyrion with anticipation. Real panic appeared on Nicos’s face as he cringed backward, his hands scrabbling for purchase.

“Wait! The Master moves her continually. They are rarely in the same cavern for more than a few clicks.”

Mac glanced at Tutsi. “How long is a click?”

“About two of your hours.”

“Did souMalocho map out his moves?”

“No! We track him using the communicator.” His hand went to his waist.

“Don’t move!”

The Kyrion froze. Mac bent over him and yanked a small communicator from his belt. It was about the size of a cell phone. Without looking at Tutsi, he tossed it over to him before he allowed another, different sort of smile curve his lips.

“In that case, what do we need you for?” In one smooth motion, Mac pulled his weapon from the holster and shot the Kyrion. Nicos fell backward and lay still.

Tutsi stared at the Kyrion for a moment before he switched his attention to Mac. There was a new wariness in his dark eyes and perhaps some respect.

“You truly are a barbarian.”

“Relax. It was set on stun. He was too busy watching my little knife act to notice I had lowered the level. He’ll be napping for awhile.”

“Nice bluff. Even I believed you would do it, barbarian.”

“Who was bluffing?” That should give the gorilla something to think about. “You know how to use that?”

Without a word, Tutsi turned it over and pressed a series of buttons. It looked tiny in his hands. A small beep chirped from it. The *Mandujano* warrior looked up in the direction of the back of the cavern. There were two entrances against the far wall.

“This is set to track a second communicator. If Nicos is to be believed, it will most likely be the one held by souMalochó. Verbal communications in these caves are uncertain, so a tracking signal would be more effective.”

He started toward the direction of the signal, waving to the nearest guard to gather up reinforcements to follow. “He cannot be too deep in the caverns. The signal can still fail if there is too much rock interference. Stay off the patches of sand, barbarian,” he said without looking up. “Most are shallow, but some will swallow you whole.”

Good advice, Mac decided as he skirted a large sandy area. He probably would have stepped into it without a second thought.

Mac paused long enough to snag a backpack with supplies. With luck they wouldn't be underground for too long, but his desert training kicked in. Better to be prepared. He checked one of his inner pockets for the piece of chalk he had scrounged up. Although each member of the search party was equipped with a tracking beacon, he felt more comfortable having a backup contingency.

He noticed most of the remaining security forces were attending the wounded and seeing to the removal of any bodies. He signaled one of the men who wore a gold braid over one shoulder.

"Take him into custody." He gestured toward Nicos. "He's one of the ringleaders." At the man's look of confusion, he elaborated. "He's souMalocho's second in command."

"Understood, sir." The officer saluted and shouted out orders for someone to place the Kyrion in bindings. Mac didn't bother to watch the procedure as he turned to follow Tutsi. The big man gathered up several soldiers and was leading the way toward the second cavern, his attention fixed on the communicator as it tracked souMalocho.

A clatter of stones deeper in the cavern caught Mac's attention for a second, but he dismissed the sound as he slung the knapsack onto his shoulders. The way this place echoed, it could have come from the security forces loading the wounded onto the transport.

Tutsi and his men had already vanished through the entrance that led off the main cavern. As he moved to follow, Mac's step slowed to a halt as his gaze fell on the second passage. Something made him hesitate. Some primeval instinct which made him ignore the entrance Tutsi had disappeared through.

This opening was smaller, the top less than a foot or two above his head, but when he passed through, it opened into a wondrous cave spiked with columns of stone. The moisture that formed the stalactites and stalagmites had long vanished, but they gleamed with the elements imbedded in the stone. The formations were impressive, the work of

eons. Any other time he would have enjoyed exploring the caverns, but right now his only interest was in finding Lacey and getting her out of here.

He allowed himself one last glance over his shoulder toward the first archway before he entered the vast cave. There wasn't much of path, but with a minimum of trouble, he negotiated around the formations. They opened up to a wide plateau of stone dotted with those patches of sand.

When he came to the first wide pool of sand, he gazed at it for a long moment. It looked solid enough, completely innocuous. Mac kicked a rock into the center. It sat there for all of two seconds before it abruptly sank out of sight. Only a dimple remained to show where the rock had been.

Shit. It was quicksand.

He gave the patch a wide berth and continued. The cavern was almost as bright as daylight. It took him a moment to realize the illumination was coming from the lichen which clung to the stone walls. It appeared to be a natural growth, heavier in some areas than others, glowing blue-white against the sandcolored stone.

Handy. Beat the hell out of using a flashlight.

As he traveled deeper into the cavern, he used his chalk to mark a stone formation whenever he made a twist or turn.

He wasn't sure how far he had gone when a slight sound, what could have been the scrape of boots on stone, caught his ear. He stopped, listening for a long moment, but heard nothing. He was about to continue when he heard the stealthy sound once again.

Immediately he slipped behind a thick stalagmite. As he flattened himself against the stone, he reached down and carefully drew his weapon. In a couple minutes he heard the sound of footsteps. For an instant he thought it was Lacey, but the sound was heavy, made by someone of greater weight. Someone wearing boots. When Lacey had been taken, she'd been wearing thin slippers.

Mac inched forward and peered around the edge of his concealment. A man was approaching.

He was tall with an athletic build. There was an impression of dark hair and dark eyes, a narrow, satirical face which reminded him of a younger version of Tommy Lee Jones.

SouMalocho.

The brief glimpse revealed he carried a weapon, but it was held carelessly, not trained in any one direction. Mac's quick glance determined that Lacey wasn't with him.

Mac pulled back before he was spotted.

He waited until souMalocho's footsteps were close, just beyond his concealment, before he stepped out into the open. He got a glimpse of the surprise that flashed across the man's face before he fired.

Much as he was tempted to just blast the guy into little pieces, he aimed for the blaster souMalocho held. The thin beam of light caught it just right. The weapon immediately heated to the point where the man was forced to drop it or burn his hand. It fell to the ground where it melted into a puddle of metal and polymers. In seconds it was reduced to a white blob.

Mac stared at the man, who went perfectly still. So this was the big, bad, boogeyman. He didn't look much like an intergalactic master criminal, but then, appearances were deceptive.

Mac didn't make the mistake of taking his gaze off him for an instant. This was someone who prepared for every contingency. Who, years before a prison break, had the foresight to plant his own people within every prison he was likely to be sent to should he ever get caught. Mac was willing to bet the guy had another weapon, or two or three, secreted on his person as well as more than one escape plan.

Expressionless black eyes gave him an equally thorough inspection, no doubt looking for some sign of weakness. That scrutiny tracked down the length of his body and back, a half smile on souMalocho's lips when he finally met Mac's gaze. A smile that never entered his eyes.

"So. You are the barbarian the Lady Ashanti is captivated with. She was quite concerned about your safety when she finally woke. She had the gall to threaten me with bodily harm if you were hurt."

“Everyone is fond of that word ‘barbarian’. It’s really getting annoying.” Mac shook his head but held his aim steady. “Where is she?”

SouMalocho raised one brow in a show of innocent query. Although he showed no sign of it, his hand had to hurt like hell. The destruction of his weapon must have raised a couple of burn blisters in his palm before he had a chance of releasing it.

“The Lady Ashanti? Why—I have no idea.”

Something in his adversary’s manner didn’t ring true. If he had Lacey stashed away somewhere, he wouldn’t have been trying to escape. Not alone anyway. He’d be using her as a hostage to buy his freedom off Kador.

Then it clicked.

“She got away from you, didn’t she?” Mac felt a grin stretch across his face before he barked out a laugh. “Oh yeah, that’s my girl.”

“I would not gloat too much over her ingenuity, barbarian. She fled into uncharted caves with few, if any, supplies. I would lay odds against her finding her way out. These are not called the Endless Caves for nothing.”

Shit. The guy had a good point. How could Mac have forgotten that? How in the hell was he supposed to find her in a warren of caves that had never even been mapped out?

“It was a perfect plan,” souMalocho continued in a casual manner. He started to cross his arms.

“Keep your hands where I can see them.”

SouMalocho gave him a look usually reserved for small children or rude interruptions, but he dropped his arms. “With the use of an archaic law, I would have achieved all of my objectives,” he continued. “I’d be exonerated from all criminal charges, and I’d have my revenge against the man most instrumental in placing me on that prison rock. With my marriage to Larissalyia Sarisekko Ashanti I would be a Prince of Kador with noble standing and unlimited resources. And no past.”

His lips compressed, he appeared to give that notion some consideration. “Granted, the wealth isn’t quite as important since my

holdings are vast. It is my new identity that is most attractive.” A light came to his dark eyes. “Plus, to have the beautiful Lady Ashanti warming my bed—well—that would have been an added bonus.”

SouMalocho was deliberately needling him. Mac’s fingers tightened around the grip of his weapon. What did he need this guy for? If he was to be believed, Lacey had already escaped from him. So his use was at an end. Mac would be doing the universe a favor by blasting him to hell and back.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t in Mac’s nature to kill in cold blood. For service of his country? Yes. In self-defense? Sure. But not an unarmed man who had yet to make any threatening moves against him. Plus something didn’t ring true. Mac had trained for too long to allow his emotions to rule his actions.

“How did you manage to track us every step of the way?” he asked, his aim never wavering.

“A series of events, actually. Nicos can be quite ingenious when he puts a mind to it. Tracking you to Chaos wasn’t difficult. There were only so many places Lady Ashanti could have gone and I had eyes and ears at every one of them. I knew Chaos was only a stopover. Once I ascertained your business was with Sava, it was simple for my men to rough him up and plant a tracking device on the Strut without his awareness.”

“I see.”

“Then, there is my daughter, of course.”

“Cerease Ashanti?”

“Ah, she told you. I thought she might break and confess everything to Ashanti. A weak woman. Useful, but unreliable. That was the most priceless joke of all. Imagine my surprise and delight when Cerise actually married Lazarus Ashanti. What could be more perfect?” The man threw back his head and laughed with real enjoyment. “Granted, she wasn’t happy to learn she was my daughter, nor that I intended to blackmail her into keeping tabs on my bride-to-be.”

“So you used her to keep track of Ashanti’s household.” This wasn’t news, but it was good to have Cerease’s confession confirmed.

“Perfect, wasn’t it?”

At least they could be reasonably sure Cerese had been the sole spy within Ashanti’s palace.

“Cerise wasn’t about to jeopardize her exalted position with the universe discovering she was the illegitimate daughter of a—shall we say—an entrepreneur of questionable practices.”

Mac stared at the man before him. What a piece of shit! And every minute Mac was wasting on him was time Lacey remained lost within these warrens.

“She was—delicious, you know. Very responsive.” SouMalocho cocked his head to one side. “The Lady Ashanti. But then you know that, don’t you, barbarian?”

Anger surged through Mac but he fought it down. Cool, collected, levelheaded. He had to stay in control. But the thought of this animal touching Lacey sparked something within him that threatened to flare into a conflagration.

“Move!” Mastering his rage, he waved his weapon in the direction he wanted this intergalactic scum to take. The sooner he handed him off to the security force, the better. No doubt Tutsi was off chasing a decoy.

Dark eyes regarded him for a moment longer before the man started in the direction he indicated. Mac waited for him to pass before taking up a position behind him.

Worry for Lacey threatened to distract him in a way anger had been unable to do. Where was she? It wasn’t likely all the caverns had the light-generating lichen growing in them, was it? Many of them had to be as dark as hell. Did she have light? Supplies? What about water?

The questions tormented him.

She was alive, she had to be. No other option bore thinking about.

He fought the urge to run his hand through his hair, aware he had somehow failed her. He should have never left her alone for an instant. Here on Kador, within her father’s household, they both thought themselves relatively safe. They couldn’t have been more wrong. How he could have allowed her to be taken, the only woman who—what?

What did he feel for her? In the short time he had known her, Lacey had become everything to him. The thought of a life without her was meaningless. He would get her back. He *had* to get her back.

SouMalocho stumbled when one foot slid into a patch of sand. He went down on his knees as he pulled free. Instinct had Mac lunging for him just as the man managed to regain his balance. Too late Mac saw the flash of blue as a blade sliced across the back of his right hand.

Pain immediately blossomed over his hand and the blaster dropped from his nerveless fingers. When souMalocho would have dove for it, Mac managed to kick it out from under his fingers. Unfortunately, or fortunately, it landed in the sand where it was immediately swallowed.

Mac danced out of reach from the glowing blade, his hand already going numb. Fuck! He had allowed himself to be distracted for one fatal instant. That's all it took. He watched as souMalocho smiled with malicious intent.

"Let's see. Shall we wait for the poison of the *Sinion* blade to take effect? Or shall we finish this now?"

Mac dropped into a half crouch, watching those dead eyes rather than the blade. His hand hurt like hell and he could already feel a tingling creeping up over his wrist. From his one past experience with a *Sinion* blade, he knew it wouldn't take long before his arm was useless.

They began to circle each other, both half crouched in a defensive stance. SouMalocho feigned a jab with the knife and Mac leapt back to avoid another slash across his stomach. Bastard.

Without giving warning, he twisted in a lithe movement and swung his leg behind to catch the hand holding the blade. The knife flew from souMalocho's grip to skitter to the edge of the sand pool. Mac continued his momentum to bring his elbow around in an attempt to connect with souMalocho's jaw, but the other man lunged backward, his mouth taking the brunt of the hit.

SouMalocho pulled away with a split lip. Rage twisted his face as he wiped the blood from his mouth.

Mac knew he needed to finish this fast. He couldn't feel his fingers anymore and the increased activity dispersed the poison through his bloodstream all the faster.

They continued to circle each other, looking for an opening, a weakness. Blood seeped from souMalocho's lip. With a suddenness that caught Mac unprepared, souMalocho snarled and charged him. His arms caught Mac around the waist and bore him to the ground. Mac tried to twist his body, but rather than hitting the hard stone, they plunged into a wide patch of sand. There was an instant of floundering before they began to sink.

Mac flung his arms out, catching the stone lip surrounding the pit. His numb fingers scrabbled uselessly before he hooked his elbow over a rocky protrusion. SouMalocho screamed and grabbed him around the waist with both arms, holding tight. His weight threatened to drag Mac backward. A second outcrop of rock was inches from his good hand and he grasped it in desperation.

The sand sucked at him. SouMalocho's grip tightened as the sand buried him up to the shoulders. Mac risked a quick glance behind him. The man's face was wreathed in panic as he struggled against the pull of the quicksand.

"Help me, barbarian!"

Mac's grip slipped. He tried to secure his hold with his other hand but he couldn't make his fingers work. They slid along the stone as he tried to find some purchase. Pain burned up and down his arms. He tried to kick his legs in an attempt to dislodge souMalocho. The man was dragging him down with him. He couldn't hold on much longer.

"Mac!"

He looked up to see Lacey racing toward him. For a second he thought he was hallucinating, then relief washed over him as he realized she was real. Never had a sight been more welcome. She was safe.

Crouching, she grasped his useless hand. Pain shot through to his shoulder as she pulled and he gave a muffled scream. New sweat poured down his face. He clenched his teeth and endured the agony when he felt

himself slide further into the sucking sand until he was buried to his armpits.

The grip at his waist loosened and he chanced another backward glance. SouMalocho was submerged in the sand. Abruptly, the weight was gone.

The sand had swallowed him.

"Take my hand, Mac. You have to help me." The desperation in Lacey's voice claimed his attention.

"Honey, I don't think I can."

"Dammit, barbarian! This isn't a choice. You *will* take my hand, and you *will* get out of this," she shouted, her face taut with determination and anger. The pale jade of her eyes betrayed her fear. Fear for him.

Mac would have laughed if he had the strength. He was feeling lightheaded and knew his exertions had accelerated the effects of the *Sinion* blade. He didn't think the effects had progressed this fast the last time. But then, this wound was deeper than the last one.

He stared into her beautiful face, saw the fear, the strain. Her eyes were bleeding into a near black, her face twisted with desperation.

With a supreme effort, he loosened his grip on the rock and felt Lacey grasp his hand. She dug in her heels and pulled with all her might. Her foot slipped once and she nearly lost her grip on him, but clenched her teeth and renewed her hold.

Mac felt himself slowly pulled forward. The sand clung to him for endless seconds before it loosened its hold and released him. When he felt his knees scrape against the rocky wall of the sand pit, he scrambled the rest of the way to safety.

They lay on the hard ground, their panting breaths harsh in the silence. For the moment it was just a relief to lay there and luxuriate in the knowledge he was alive.

That Lacey was here and she was safe.

"Mac?"

Her voice came from a long distance, hollow. His head swam as unconsciousness edged his peripheral vision. A buzzing started up in his ears to drown out much of her voice. Were his eyes open? He was no longer sure. Blackness descended.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Larissalyia levered herself up onto her elbow and stared down at the motionless man with horror. He was so pale! In the muted light, a sheen of sweat gleamed on his face.

Frantic, she leaned over to press her fingers against his throat, relieved beyond words to find a weak pulse beating there. It was faint and thready.

What was wrong with him?

Her gaze traveled over him as she searched for some wound. Something. Anything.

Nothing was visible. He was still dressed in the same camouflage she'd seen him in earlier, covered now with the clinging sand and dust. His face was white and dusted with sand as well.

She would have been here sooner but it had been a difficult descent where twice she nearly buried herself in the shale. By the time she had finally scrambled down the incline to the floor of the cavern it was to find that nearly everyone had vanished. The battle was over and only a few of her father's security force remained within the cavern. The rest were already outside in the transport, either tending the wounded or gearing up to begin a search party. At any other time, she would have enjoyed the look of stunned stupefaction on the captain's face when she appeared, but she was far more interested in finding Mac to let him know she was safe.

To hold him and tell him how important he was to her. It was during that interminable voyage through the tunnels that she finally admitted to herself she was in love with him. She hadn't even recognized what had

been happening under her own nose. It was impossible to know at what point he had gone from hostage, to comrade, to lover.

The captain had stuttered out the news that the Kyrions had been either captured or routed and that the *Mandujano* warrior and his companion had procured a communicator off one of the prisoners with which to track her abductor.

She was about to order the captain to recall the search team when one of his men reported seeing the tall stranger enter the second cavern less than a demi-click ago rather than accompany Tutsi. Without further delay, Larissalyia obtained a blaster and headed out, ignoring the captain's suggestion that she take men with her. Mac couldn't have gotten far. She left orders to recall the search team as she tried to raise Mac on his communicator. The last thing they needed was the search parties wandering uselessly through these caves.

Now, she ran her hands over his chest in an effort to find a wound which would have rendered him unconscious. She grabbed his hands and when she turned the right one over, she found the deep slice over the back.

No! She recognized the trailing of poison which was working its way from that point of entry. Her fingers found his sleeve and she tore it from wrist to shoulder. His arm was swollen, inflamed as far as his elbow. She had to stop the progress. Quickly she tore a strip of material from the hem of her robe and tied it around his biceps just above the elbow before she glanced around, frantic. She had to get him medical care immediately.

"My lady? Lady Ashanti?"

The disembodied voice sounded loud over her panicked gasps. It took a moment of frantic scrabbling to locate the communicator. It was still attached to Mac's belt. Somehow it hadn't been lost in the struggle. With shaking fingers she managed to free it.

"Tutsi? Get in here! Mac's hurt."

"Keep this channel open, my lady. I will follow the signal." He didn't waste time with questions.

Impatience ate at Larissalyia while she waited for her bodyguard to arrive. Her fingers shook as she smoothed the cinnamon hair away from Mac's forehead, trying not to notice how hot his skin felt, how flushed he was. His breathing was so shallow, so erratic.

"You are not going to die on me, Mac," she murmured over and over again. "I will not allow it."

To distract herself, she glanced over at the pool of sand which had so nearly been his grave. The knowledge that souMalocho was buried under its smooth surface didn't bother her a bit. The only thing she felt for his fate was satisfaction. As far as she was concerned, the man had gotten what he deserved. Trying to tell herself that such an emotion was sinful made no difference.

Voices echoed off the walls as the rescue party entered the cavern.

"Over here!" she shouted.

A glance over her shoulder showed a half dozen of her father's men led by Tutsi closing the distance.

"My lady! You are well?"

"Yes, get Mac to the ship. He needs immediate attention."

Tutsi bent and lifted Mac as easily as he might a child. He slung him over one broad shoulder and without another word set off on a quick pace back the way he came. Larissalyia had to run to keep up, her gaze never leaving the figure of Mac draped over the Mandujano's back.

"Where is souMalocho?"

"In the bottom of a sand pit."

Tutsi merely grunted. Evidently his opinion of the criminal's fate was much the same as hers. "What happened?"

"Mac was sliced with a *Sinion* blade. His right hand." She panted as she kept pace. "I've made a tourniquet for his arm, but it may have progressed beyond."

Something in her voice made Tutsi glance around at her, but he didn't slow his pace. If anything, it increased and Larissalyia was hard

pressed to keep up. Between breaths, she managed to relate the entire story to the bodyguard. At least as much as she knew.

“Call in and have the medic standing by,” Tutsi ordered one of the men who had accompanied him. “Tell him to have a suction patch ready.”

The man nodded and relayed the command.

“With luck the patch will stabilize the barbarian until we can get him proper care.”

Although she knew he couldn’t see her gesture, Larissalyia nodded. Mac was still breathing, wasn’t he? Worry ate at her and twisted her guts until she felt physically ill. She couldn’t lose him now. Not after everything they’d gone through.

They wound their way around the columns and through the shallow entrance into the outside cavern. Tutsi was already bellowing orders to the security force who lingered. A man wearing a pale blue tunic hurried forward. He ignored everyone except the man still slung over Tutsi’s shoulder.

“Put him down!”

Tutsi merely turned until the medic was faced with the unconscious man.

“His right hand. Put the patch on the wound. We do not have the necessary equipment to treat *Sinion* poisoning. We must get him back to the infirmary in the city.”

The medic grasped a handful of Mac’s hair and pulled his head back. He took one look at his face before he hurriedly dropped his hold and slapped the suction patch on the wound, making sure the edges sealed before he waved Tutsi on.

“Bring him.”

In record time they had everyone strapped in and were heading back toward Amber City. Larissalyia parked herself beside the pallet which held Mac and refused to move. Not even to strap in. The vessel made the trip back to the city in record time.

She couldn't take her eyes off his face. The medic had loosened the tourniquet she'd made and informed her the suction patch should prevent the poison from further infiltrating his system.

With gentle fingers she smoothed Mac's hair back, alarmed anew by how hot his face was. His skin was dry and pale except for the patches of red where fever burned into his cheeks.

Halfway through the journey he began to stir, moving his head back and forth. A low moan issued from between his lips, making Larissalyia clench her teeth as worry flared.

"Can't this thing move any faster?" she snapped at the pilot.

"We are at top speed, my lady," Tutsi answered after a quick consultation with the pilot.

Railing at the pilot was useless, so Larissalyia kept silent. Despite her exhaustion, she refused to leave Mac's side

At one point during the interminable trip, Mac opened his eyes slightly. Larissalyia held her breath when he appeared to focus on her face.

"Hi, baby."

"Hi, yourself." Her voice was only a whisper of sound. He sounded so weak! "Hang in there, Victor MacNaught. We'll get you treatment in a little bit."

He said nothing, but closed his eyes once more. A new dread settled in the pit of her stomach. More to comfort herself than any possibility of his awareness of her, Larissalyia took his uninjured hand in hers. She held it to her breast as if she could somehow infuse him with her own strength. She could almost feel him fading and wanted to weep, but that was a luxury she did not have.

With shaking fingers she retrieved a damp cloth and bathed his forehead once more. His fever evaporated the moisture almost immediately. Emotion squeezed her chest tight as guilt plunged her toward despair.

She'd had no right to kidnap Mac, to take him from everything he'd ever known and drop him into a situation he had no role in. She had felt

so justified, so smug in her decision, but she had never once considered his feelings. Now she saw how unfair that had been. How careless with another person's life. Her behavior had been criminal and if Mac were to die...

A sob caught in her throat. No! That wasn't going to happen. He was going to get better and she was going to confess her love for him. If he laughed in her face and refused her—well, she wouldn't be able to blame him. However, she would do everything within her power to change his mind. She wasn't going to give up on this without a fight!

Their arrival at the port was met with fanfare. There was a team of medics standing by as they unloaded not only Mac, but the other wounded from the ship. Three of the personnel immediately took control of Mac and whisked him away.

When Larissalyia would have followed, she heard her name called. She turned to see her father approaching at a run with her stepmother only a step behind.

"Larissalyia, my dear child. You're safe!" Lazarus's embrace smothered her, both his relief and worry revealed in that one hug. Cerise hung back from the reunion. "You must tell us what happened." He looked past her shoulder. "I want a full report."

Larissalyia glanced back to find Tutsi just behind her. The pad was empty of the wounded. Besides Tutsi, the captain was present and a dozen or so of the security force. Of Mac there was no sign. "Father, I'm fine, but I must go..."

"Come, child. You must change and rest. At last this nightmare is over. What happened to souMalocho?"

"He's dead."

There was soft cry from behind her father and Larissalyia glanced over to see her stepmother close her eyes in relief. Although she didn't know if she could ever forgive the woman for what she did, a part—a very small part of her—understood her actions.

"Father, Mac was injured, I have to—"

“The barbarian will be fine, Larissalyia.” Lazarus urged her toward one of the portals which led to transportation back to his palace. “You are exhausted.”

Larissalyia dug her heels in and pulled free. Despite her fatigue, her worry and relief at being safe, she refused to accompany him. “No! My first concern is Mac. He was injured because of me. I will not leave his side.”

“Larissalyia—”

All at once, something broke from within. Larissalyia raised her chin in a regal manner and stared down her nose at her father, her fists clenched. He was delaying her! There had to be a reason for his actions.

“Call me Lacey! I will return and give you a full report once I’ve assured myself that Mac is going to be okay.”

“Lacey! But, what—” Her father was nearly sputtering.

“Later, Father.” Without a backward glance and ignoring the fact that she was still wearing the torn and filthy robe, she marched away from her father and stepmother. She paid little attention to the open-mouthed amazement visible on the faces of several of the security guards, and passed through the portal toward the transportation tram which would take her to the medical center.

She knew she had been inexcusably rude to her father, but by the same token she knew he would have her safely ensconced in his palace where she’d learn nothing about what was happening with Mac. Somehow, deep within her heart, she sensed her father was going to do his best to separate her from the Earthman. So far they’d been lucky in concealing his origins, but now that the danger was over, her father would see little reason to continue his protection. Lacey was going to make sure that nothing untoward happened to him in the infirmary.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mac swam in and out of consciousness, muffled by an odd sensation of floating. Nothing hurt. But then, he couldn't feel much of anything. Had he been more cognizant, he might have worried about the numbness which pervaded his body. Right now the absence of pain just felt good.

Several times he struggled against the current of darkness to hear voices over his head, mostly discussing his condition, he thought. Each time he felt the soothing touch of gentle fingers on his face. Instinctively he knew it was Lacey. At these times, he leaned his face into her caress and was more than once rewarded with the soft press of her lips against his.

There was no sense of time, so he had no idea how long he lingered in that half conscious state. It could have been hours or days. Impossible to tell.

"Even if I had not taken an oath on a blood blade, I gave my word, Father. I cannot—I will not—go back on my promise."

The sound of an argument woke him. Lacey's voice was loud, almost startling him. She had to be standing right over his bed—pallet—whatever it was. In any event, it was comfortable. It was also then that he realized he no longer felt numb. There was still no discomfort, but he could feel his arms and legs.

His mind was perfectly clear and it took him seconds to remember everything. The battle with souMalocho, taking a wound from the *Sinion* blade and his near burial in a sandy grave. After that, everything was a little fuzzy.

“Larissalyia—” Lazarus Ashanti’s voice came from the other side of his bed. From the sounds of it, they had been arguing for some time.

“I told you, Father. You will call me Lacey!” Her voice dropped to an intense hiss.

“I will not call you by that ridiculous name!”

“It is my decision to accept Lacey as my name.”

Mac heard her draw a deep breath. For some absurd reason, a part of him leapt with joy at her defense of the nickname he’d given her. It showed an acceptance to have him as part of her life.

Her next words froze him.

“I do not wish him to forget me, Father.”

“His memory of us must be removed.”

Shit! How long had they been arguing this? Right now he was completely helpless and unable to prevent a memory erasure if Lazarus had his way. He’d never even know that it was done. And to forget Lacey...!

A part of him struggled to lift weighted eyelids. Despite being able to feel his arms and legs, he couldn’t move!

“Every day his presence here is a danger to us. If the Council should discover that we have an unsanctioned barbarian among us—”

“They will not know. Mac has learned enough to blend in. And don’t call him a barbarian! He is no more a barbarian than you and I!”

“It makes no difference, Laris—Lacey! His being here will ruin us all!”

Lacey fell silent for a moment. Mac strained to move, to do anything to let her know that he was awake and aware of everything going on around him. To add his arguments to hers.

“What if I were to petition the Council to open trade negotiations with Earth?”

“No!”

“Earth has so many tradable products, Father. Their chocolate alone would make it worthwhile...”

“You are being foolish, girl! They would never agree.”

“...and why are you so against it?” She switched directions without missing a beat. Her voice was hard with suspicion.

Her unexpected question appeared to render Lazarus speechless for a moment. Mac could hear both of their breathing, the slide of cloth when one or the other shifted. All of these little sounds seemed magnified to his paralyzed body.

“Leave us.” Lazarus’s voice was quiet, directed away from Lacey.

“Yes, sir.”

Mac hadn’t realized Tutsi was in the room. The big guy had stood so quietly, not even the sound of his breathing betrayed his presence. There was a sense of movement and then the closing of a door.

Silence descended once more. Nothing penetrated the closed door.

“I did not want to tell you this, Larissalyia. It is not something I am proud of and a secret I never wanted you to know.”

“What is it?” Now there was a hint of worry in Lacey’s voice.

There was a sense of hesitation. “Your mother was of Earth.”

“What!?”

Within his head, Mac’s exclamation echoed Lacey’s. He was so startled he almost missed the next part of the conversation.

“I was young and foolish, determined to experience life to its fullest before I settled down and began my career in law as my father wished.” The sound of footsteps moved away from the bed. When he continued, Lazarus’ voice came from some distance away. “I didn’t want to be tied down to a profession which sucked the life out of me before I had a chance to actually live.” His voice grew stronger. A note of pride entered it. “I wasn’t much older than you were when you set out to make a name for yourself in trade.”

“Both my friend Dak and I traveled throughout the universe, experienced and saw so much. Finally, on a dare from Dak, I entered the unsanctioned territory. I had monitored the transmissions for a number of Earth’s rotations and discovered it was a primitive time with unfounded superstitions and paranoia. I finally learned enough where I

was able to slide in under their radar and land in an area they called Texas.” His voice took on a faraway tone as he reminisced about a time which had to have occurred over thirty years ago. “The plan was to slip in and out without anyone being the wiser. I was to come back with something Dak would accept as proof of my landing. I was gathering various objects when I saw her...”

“Saw who?”

“Your mother.”

“What happened?” Lacey’s voice was soft, reverent.

“I fell in love.” A sigh came from the far end of the room. “Muriel was beautiful. Pale hair, eyes the color of the Kadorian sky. She took my breath away.”

He gave a self-deprecating laugh. “Unfortunately she was a product of her time. Earth had not long been out of what they called their Cold War and suspicions of anything unusual ran high. I concealed what I was—an alien, and managed to establish myself as a respectable merchant. I lied, I cheated, I did anything within my power to make Muriel fall in love with me. I did everything—except tell her the truth.”

For a long moment Lazarus was silent, lost in his thoughts, his memories. Mac heard Lacey move to stand next to him. “She did fall in love with you.”

“Yes, she did. I knew she’d never accept what I was and was prepared to spend my life with her on Earth. I’d gotten quite skilled at holding my eye color and when I could not, I wore sunglasses. A common adornment in Texas. We were wed and I went to work for her father in his law firm outside of Houston. Forging the necessary papers had been a simple matter for me.” A smile entered his voice. “We were very happy for two of Earth’s cycles—years. I was overjoyed when Muriel gave birth to a daughter—you. You were named for her mother. Larissa.” Again his voice changed. “However, my family was very powerful and had a great many resources. Somehow, through my ship, they managed to trace me to Earth. I was taken and because my daughter possessed Kadorian

characteristics, you were also taken back to Kador. My mother's name was added to yours and you became Larissalyia."

"What happened to my mother?"

"Her memory of us was altered."

A soft cry came from Lacey. The distress in her voice ripped through Mac.

"Rather than erase her experiences with us, she believed we had both died in an accident. My father tampered with the minds of her entire family so that we were dead to them. Cycles later, I went back and found out Muriel had died shortly after we were taken. According to one of her friends, after we were declared dead, she—stopped living. She died of a broken heart."

After another immense effort Mac managed to pry his eyes open. With that small victory, his muscle control began returning and he turned his head far enough to see Lazarus take Lacey in his arms and hug her close. His face was turned toward Mac, the tears visible on his cheeks.

"I never should have left her, Larissalyia. I should have fought for her—insisted that she be taken with us, but I was not given a choice. After that day, I never again spoke to my father. I threw myself into my career and into raising you. I thought perhaps I could somehow make it up to Muriel if you were to grow up happy and content."

Lacey pulled back far enough to stare into his face. Her own eyes were awash with tears. "Why didn't you ever tell me this before?"

"I couldn't. I could not bear to share my pain with you."

"But don't you see that you are sentencing me to the same agony?"

"Larissalyia—"

"I know Mac has a life back on Earth, Father, but I'm hoping that perhaps he will somehow make a life for himself with me. With care, I'm certain we can bridge the gap between his planet and the F.O.W. They are not the paranoid society you remember. They still have their problems but perhaps with the knowledge that there is a more out there, the people of Earth may be able to put aside their differences and work toward the greater good of intergalactic relations."

Her voice was impassioned, rising with conviction. "I want to ask him to stay with me, Father—"

"—And he would accept," Mac said from his position across the room. Two heads whipped around to stare at him, both eyes silvery with surprise as the object of their discussion broke in.

"Mac!" Lacey left the security of her father's arms and hurried to his bedside. She sat on the edge and brushed back a strand of hair which had fallen over his brow. Her gaze traveled over his face as if to reassure herself of his health. He must have been sicker than he thought if her expression was any indication. "How do you feel?"

"Not bad." Actually, he did feel pretty good. "What happened?"

"Do you remember anything?"

"You mean beyond getting sliced up by souMalocho and almost becoming a permanent resident of a sand pit? No, not much after that."

"You've been in the infirmary for nearly three days. The medics kept you unconscious for much of the time to facilitate the healing." Her smile held a wealth of relief. "We were fortunate that the *Sinion* poisoning had not progressed far before we got you to medical attention."

"That explains a lot." There was a slight stiffness in his limbs as he stretched them to work the kinks out. "I'm a little stiff, but other than that..."

The joy in her face was his reward and he raised his hand to smooth his fingers against her cheek, savoring the softness of her skin. She was close enough to tease his senses with her sweet scent. Damn, she looked good.

"How did you escape from souMalocho?"

"What is your Earth saying? Clean living and fancy footwork?" She gave a little laugh. He could hear the relief in her voice. "No, actually I got lucky. He was distracted for an instant and I took advantage of it."

For a moment, Mac indulged himself with the sight of her seated on the edge of his bed. Here he had been racing to her rescue and she had been busy rescuing herself. Knowing Lacey, that shouldn't surprise him. She's nothing if not resourceful.

“How much did you hear just now?” Lazarus Ashanti appeared in his line of vision. The glance he directed at Mac was not friendly. He was back in his Lord Ashanti persona, the tears gone from his eyes. Nothing in his manner showed the stark emotion he’d betrayed only moments earlier.

“Everything, and I’m telling you now that you’re not going to erase my memory, nor do I intend to return to Earth.”

Mac struggled to sit up. There was a distinct disadvantage being flat on his back. Lacey was quick to help him into a sitting position. “I agree with Lacey that the time might be ripe for Earth to be drawn into the F.O.W. We may be considered backward by your standards, but I’m willing to bet we’d catch up fast. My people are nothing if not quick on the uptake. Most of them, anyway. There’s always those who will be resistant to the idea.”

Ashanti was silent for a long moment, his eyes brown as he considered Mac’s words. It was impossible to guess his thoughts at that moment.

Deciding to take a chance, Mac tossed out one of his aces. “I have an uncle who’s a United States Senator and another who is the ambassador to Great Britain. They’d go a long way toward smoothing negotiations.”

Ashanti continued to stare at him with an air of speculation. Mac kept in mind that these Kadorians were masters at concealing their emotions through misdirection. He also knew he wasn’t exactly in a strong position for negotiations.

“It would take a great deal of work,” Ashanti murmured at last. He spoke half to himself.

“I get the feeling if anyone can achieve open trade, it’s you.”

“Weren’t you telling me before all this began that you were thinking of retiring as Chief Magistrate, Father?” She slanted Mac a smile laced with conspiracy. Her eyes were a cautious green, bleeding into brown, most of her thoughts concealed. “Seems to me this type of negotiation would require your delicate touch. You *know* the instant the ‘Zarians discover this market, they’ll be all over it.”

“Perhaps...”

“And naturally, your daughter—who just so happens to be a master trader—would be first in line to determine which goods would be prime for trade,” Mac added as he captured her fingers in his and raised them to his lips to press a tender kiss to the center of her palm. “Having a native as a member of her crew would be viewed in a positive light.”

“Which brings us to the question of what your intentions toward my daughter are?”

“Father—”

“Honorable, sir.” Without taking his gaze from Lacey, he smiled into her eyes. “I’m in love with your daughter and have every intention of marrying her, if she’ll have me.”

The look on her face took his breath away. Her eyes flashed from a neutral brown to lilac, to violet in the span of heartbeats. For a long moment she said nothing. Emotions crossed her face almost too fast to read.

“Go away, Father. I cannot tell a man I’m in love with him with my father looking on.”

Ashanti gave a soft snort but obediently moved toward the door, his face still set in thoughtful lines as he considered the proposals put to him. Mac spared him only a portion of his attention as he left the room.

The instant the door closed, Mac drew Lacey into his arms, shifting her until she was lying across his chest. He luxuriated in cataloguing each minute change in her eye color with immense satisfaction.

“I would have never let them erase your memory, Victor MacNaught.” Her voice held a breathless note. Her hands rested lightly on his chest, looking down as she smoothed her fingers across the materials of the tunic he wore. “I couldn’t bear the thought of your forgetting me.”

“That’s not going to happen.” He tilted her chin up until she was forced to meet his gaze. “I was serious when I told your father I was in love with you, Lacey.” Somehow it was imperative she know he was not saying this to avoid a memory wash. “Do you believe me?”

"I believe you," she whispered. The joy in her eyes dispelled any lingering doubts he had about whether his love was reciprocated. Unable to deny himself any longer, he drew her closer and tilted her chin up until he could capture her lips with his in a kiss which expressed everything in his heart. Her response was immediate as she parted her lips to allow him greater access to the honeyed interior of her mouth. For a long moment he indulged himself, exploring every inch before he released her lips to gaze deep into her eyes. It was with satisfaction that he studied the glowing gold of her eyes.

"Hard to believe the unexpected turn my life has taken in such a short time."

"Good or bad?"

"Oh, good." He paused to press a trail of kisses over her smooth cheeks to the point just below her ear. A minute shiver ran over her skin when he slid the tip of his tongue over the perfumed flesh of her neck. "Definitely good."

"I never expected this to happen when I kidnapped you."

"Good or bad?" he shot back at her.

"Good beyond a doubt. I do love you, Mac."

Mac continued down the length of her throat, indulging himself before he raised his head to frame her face between his hands. Leaning down, he brushed his mouth across hers, gently, tenderly.

A sense of purpose filled him. A challenge he felt more than capable of and eager to meet. For the first time in a long time, he felt completely alive. It was going to be a long, hard road ahead, but with Lacey at his side he was confident in achieving their goal of drawing their two worlds together.

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Liz Kreger

Coming Soon:

Promise for Tomorrow

Picking the wrong pocket can get a girl in trouble...

Steelflower

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First of the Steelflower Chronicles

Thief, assassin, sellsword—Kaia Steelflower is famous. Well, mostly famous, and mostly for the wrong reasons. She's made a good life for herself, despite being kicked out of her homeland for having no magic. She's saving up for her retirement, when she can settle down, run an inn, and leave the excitement for others.

Then she picks the wrong pocket, wakes up with a hangover, and gets far more than she bargained for. Now she has a huge, furry barbarian to look after, a princeling from her homeland to fend off, and an old debt to fulfill. And for some reason, the God-Emperor's assassins want to kill her.

It's never easy being an elvish sellsword, and this time it just might be fatal...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Steelflower*:

"I have already told you," Darik continued in commontongue, "where you go, I go. The palace means nothing to me. Let them have their halls and hangings. They did not lift a hand to aid me or my mother when I was young. Why should I aid them now?" He shrugged, Kshanti silk moving over his shoulders. "You interest me far more than any empty Throne."

My throat closed. *Gods. Why does he continue with this farce?*

"That is truly wise of you." Kesamine's pale face was thoughtful in the candlelight. "But tell me, my lord prince, why do you follow the Iron Flower?" She was about to add aught else, but the look on my face must have stopped her.

Darik glanced at her, consideringly. "Do you really wish to know?" A slight smile touched his lips.

"Curiosity consumes me." Her blue eyes glimmered through the black traced on her lids. "I have never seen a man chase Kaia for long. Her tongue is so sharp she has no need of a sword to keep them away."

Darik shrugged. "Push your chairs back a little, then. I shall show you."

Kesa and Jettero complied, scraping their seats back along polished wooden floor. I stayed where I was, frozen in place, staring at him. What was he thinking?

If I was truly his *adai*, I would know, would I not?

Without flinching, Darik held his hand out over the table. Directly over the candleflame, an arm's length above.

A spot of warmth bloomed on my left hand. I set my jaw. His eyes locked with mine. "There is a drawback to being *adai*," he said, calmly. "The *adai* feels the wounds of her *s'tarei*. Tis a reminder, not to be careless of her twin." He moved his hand down slightly, and the warm spot in my palm grew hot.

"You cannot be serious." My throat was shuttered, the words were a hoarse croak.

"I am." His hand dropped. The spot on my palm became scorching hot.

I fought to keep my fingers loose and relaxed. "You would cripple your hand to seek to prove a point?"

"I will not be harmed." His tone was intimate, as if we were the only two in the room. "My *adai* would not allow it."

He dropped his palm down into the flame.

Kesa gasped and stood up, her chair squealing along the floor. Jettero let out a curse.

I found myself on my feet, leaning half over the table, my fingers around Darik's wrist. I had shoved his hand out of the candleflame and flung it back at him before I knew what I did. My left palm throbbed,

spikes of agony forcing their way up my wrist. I had not moved quickly enough.

I swept my hair back, away from the flame. Looked at Kesa, looked at Jettero. And finally, I looked at Darik, cradling his left hand in his right. His swords looked up over his shoulder, twin accusers. And his eyes—

I had expected pain, in his black eyes. Shame. Instead, I saw triumph, and a fierce pride. His face was harsh in the soft light, and his jaw was set. The full beauty of the Dragaemir was upon him, and I saw how he would look in twenty winters or so, when time settled on his bones and brought him fully into his prime.

“You see?” He lifted his left hand. There was a red patch in the middle of the palm, but no blister. Perhaps I had been fast enough after all. “My *adai*. Tis not in her nature to allow me to suffer.”

I shook my left hand out once, briskly, snapping my fingers. “I will not have you continue—”

“Kaia,” Kesa snapped. Her eyes sparkled, an overflow of some emotion I could not name. “Sit down. I will have no more of this at my table. You are rude.”

“Oh, Mother’s *tits*—” I began.

“Sit down.” Her tone brooked no disobedience.

I will face sellswords and assassins, I will duel in the ring, but I would not cause Kesamine any shame at her dinner table. I was raised better. And I value her peace.

I dropped meekly into my chair. My hand gave one last livid flare, settling to a dull ache. No real damage, merely pain. “Kesa,” I managed, weakly. “Please.” *You have no idea what this will do to me, when I lose it.*

“We have not had sweetmeats yet.” Her earrings jingled as she raised her chin. “Thank you for that...*illuminating* spectacle, Your Highness. And I *do* mean that. Kaia never speaks of her people.”

He shrugged. His eyes never left me. Dull anger woke in my bones.

I grow weary of being watched so closely, princeling.

Jettero took another gulp of wine. "Amazing," he said, as Kesa drew her chair back up to the table. "If you are wounded, she feels it?"

Darik nodded. "Tis the curse of the gifts we are blessed with. Kaia'li has more than most." He picked up his wineglass, took a sip. Calmly, as if he were at a banquet and not about to ruin my entire life.

"This is mere callousness," I said tonelessly. "When you find your true *adai* I will be left to wander alone again. You should not toy with me so."

"Kaia—" Jett began.

Jett, if you make a snide remark now, I will call you to the dueling circle. I am angry enough. "Leave it be." I made it to my feet again, slowly, like an old woman.

Kesa stared up at me with a strange expression. Thoughtful and curious all at once, and tinted with...what? Regret? Envy?

Sometimes other races envy us. They do not know the heavy price of the twinning, or the pain when it is broken.

I did not dare meet Darik's eyes. He had proved his point. "I will meet you on the dueling ground tomorrow, Dragaemir. Two candlemarks past dawn."

I turned on my heel and paced across Kesa's dining room. Silence thickened, vibrating with tension. The storm, forgotten by us all, stroked the sky with thunder and lashing rain. I could imagine ships at anchor swaying under the force of that wind. Wished I was on a ship, hauling on rigging, battening down, too busy with canvas and hemp and shouted commands to worry for anything but the next moment, and the next.

I put my hand on the doorknob. My palms were slippery. I did not fear him, did I?

No, I did not fear him. I feared what I might become in his eyes; and when he met his true *adai*, it would kill me to give up the dream of being a true G'mai, a daughter of my people.

A daughter of the Blessed. The girl I was before I left the borders of my land and became Kaia Steelflower.

“Do you truly wish to duel me?” Darik’s voice hit the walls like a slap. It was the second time he had raised his voice to me, and I could not feel satisfied that I had provoked him. Chair legs scraped against the wooden floor again. Had he risen? Was he prepared to come after me?

“No, I do not.” My throat felt thick, full of unshed tears. “But you leave me no choice, Tar-Amyirak Adarikaan imr-dr’Emeryn, Dragaemir-hai. You leave me no choice at all.”

With that, I escaped through the door, shutting it quietly but firmly. I had the last word.

I could not feel victorious, though. I only felt emptiness. The dream was over.

I would never be a true G’mal. Best just to end it quickly.

Dreams bring passion, passion births lust, lust feeds violence. Violence brings chaos. Chaos stands against The Order.

Tears of Myhu

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What if the truth is locked inside your dreams?

For years Officer Elite Daniel Barrows has fought for his place in The Order, overcoming the bigotry of being born a tribal. His adoptive father rescued him during a devastating raid, but Daniel cannot forget his childhood and the beautiful, enchanting friend who long ago lost her life.

Now in charge of tribal raids for The Order, Daniel's success is jeopardized when he comes face to face with a mysterious woman. Nya turns his structured world upside down. His draw to her defies all logic, all reason, and goes against everything he was raised to believe.

With Nya's life in danger, Daniel must choose between duty and what he feels to be right. With that choice, he will discover who he is and find his destiny.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Tears of Myhu*:

The girl whimpered again. She gripped her knees and rocked back and forth, attempting to calm herself. She shook uncontrollably.

Daniel reached for her.

"It's all right," he said softly.

She looked so small, so vulnerable. So defenseless.

Daniel touched her shoulder. The girl flinched. Startled, she pressed further against the wall. Her eyes looked as wild and desperate as a wounded animal's.

"I won't hurt you, I promise," he reassured her.

She eyed Daniel for a long moment, assessing the sincerity of his words. Slowly, she reached for the arm on her shoulder and took his

hand in her small one. Daniel watched silently as she brought his hand in front of her face. She turned it wrist-side-up and studied his brand.

She brushed her thumb lightly against his marking. A strange, tingling sensation coursed through Daniel's whole system as her gentle and delicate touch enthralled him.

She cocked her head to the side and continued gazing at the mark in silent reverence. Her eyebrows knitted, as if she was struggling with a thought, searching for something just out of her reach.

Daniel felt his heart slam against his chest. His blood roared and pounded in his ears.

"Same," he finally choked out.

She snapped her head up in surprise.

Daniel took her hand and turned her wrist over, reminding her of the mark on her own delicate skin.

"We have the same brand," Daniel continued. "I didn't know there was anyone left of my tribe. I thought they all had perished."

Daniel stared at her marking, his fingers still encircling her wrist.

"I...I...am sorry I do not remember you. I do not remember much. I know we are close in age. But in truth, I cannot place your face. Are there others left? Did any more of our tribe make it out? I always assumed—"

The girl pulled him toward her. Daniel resisted and tried to pull back, but she grabbed his service suit and yanked him forward. She licked her lips, ducking to capture his mouth with hers.

Daniel's eyes widened in shock as he shook his head and again attempted to step away. The girl did not relinquish her hold. Using his stupor to her advantage, she deepened their kiss. She let go of his service suit long enough to snake her hands around his neck, moaning throatily against his lips.

It was the moan that did it. All logic and reason had already begun to slip from Daniel's conscious thoughts, but when she moaned, he was truly lost. Their tongues danced, taunting, teasing each other's senses,

enchancing Daniel further. He inhaled, taking in her scent. She smelled of the desert, spicy, perfumed and exotic. It reminded him of his childhood, his life before the Order, all the happiness and laughter he'd had when he was young and naive. It made him ache with a pain he had not felt in years.

Something inside him broke and flooded over the walls he'd built up over time. He grabbed the girl by her shoulders and hauled her to her feet. His former disciplined reason helped him pull out of their fevered embrace.

His fists clenched and unclenched reflexively, and his breathing became less frantic as he tried to subdue his rising passion. He could not. She smelled too good, felt too wonderful. She reminded him of everything he had fought so hard to let go of. She was too much like his dreams.

Taking an enormous breath, Daniel began to whisper his mantra.

"Dreams bring passion. Passion births lust. Lust feeds..."

At his muttered words, the girl reached out, her dainty fingers stroking his cheek. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at him questioningly.

"Lust feeds..."

His sight went blurry right before he hauled her into his arms and ravaged her with another all-consuming kiss. Her passion matched his as they both pulled at his service suit and freed Daniel from his garments. The feel of her bare hands on his chest burned his skin. He groaned and pressed her against the wall, wanting to get as close to her as he could. She gasped, tried to catch her breath as the force of his body knocked the wind out of her. Sensing his folly, Daniel pulled away.

"I'm sorry. I...I didn't mean to be so rough."

The girl smiled, rewarding his apology with another hungry, sweet kiss. Daniel felt set ablaze, as if a fever had sent him into a state of delirium. She was panting, her breath hot against his throat as she whimpered.

The girl pulled him closer, using his shoulders to lift herself higher, and latched her legs around his waist. Any rational thoughts Daniel might have had were violently shattered as he rested her hips atop his and impaled his length within her. Daniel gasped at the feel of her, gritting his teeth as she enveloped him tightly.

As he ended that first delicious thrust, something tugged against him, tearing in the wake of his passage. The girl cried out in pain and lowered her head against his shoulder, trying to hide her slight moans.

Daniel blinked in shock.

She was untried, unprepared. When mating occurred in functional society, certain measures were taken to make sure the female would not endure such discomfort. The Order sedated women as the natural barrier was extracted, ensuring no pain would ensue from later attempts to produce children.

But she was not part of functional society. She was a tribal—she held this part of herself sacred. Yet, she had given it to him, freely and willingly.

As if she read his thoughts, she raised her head and smiled softly down at him.

Something shattered within him. Her lips trembled and a single tear rolled down her cheek. Yet, for some reason, she was beaming at him.

He supported her hips with one arm and reached up to her face with the other. Gently, he wiped the tear from her cheek.

“Why?” he quietly asked.

It did not make sense. Why had she allowed this, why did she give him something so precious? He was a stranger, nobody to her. Yet she had given herself without restraint.

Her hips jerked, driving him deeper inside, banishing his thoughts. He was completely sheathed, surrounded by her warmth, her acceptance. She kissed him again, using both hands to lift herself up, then slide slowly back down.

Daniel groaned. He pulled back, biting his lip. He tried in vain to hold onto some of his practiced self-control, anything that would lengthen this

moment, unwilling to let it end. She wrapped her arms around his neck and tightened her grip.

“Why?” Daniel’s voice filled with desperation.

He needed to know before he threw all he knew about himself away. He needed to understand before she shattered him with her warmth, her scent and her tears.

The girl pulled back to look at him. She tugged at the hand that had stroked her cheek and laid a soft kiss on the inside of Daniel’s wrist.

“Same,” she said, with barely a whisper of sound.

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