



THE NINTH ORB

By

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Chapter One

“Houston, we have a problem.”

Captain Sterling’s voice was perfectly level and without any emotional inflection, but there wasn’t a person on the bridge of the U.S.S. Plymouth, including the captain, that looked completely calm, cool, and collected. Reflected in every face turned up to the observation screens along the forward bulkhead on the bridge were shock, anger, resentment, and fear. Somehow it seemed worse because only a few moments before those same faces had projected excitement and joy. The abrupt shift in emotions was almost enough to make one giddy with the sharp drop from euphoria to darkest depression.

After more than a decade of nothing but endless space and the echoing of voices and footsteps against metal bulkheads, they had at last reached their destination, the planet in the ninth orbit of a blue star light years from their home galaxy, and everyone was eager to catch their first glimpse of the world that would be their new home. They had wandered up to the bridge one by one or in pairs to stand quietly near the aft bulkhead of the bridge, staring up at the screens, listening to the sounds of approach as the captain and crew at last maneuvered the great, hulking ship into orbit.

From space, the planet, dubbed Georgia in honor of the President, just as the first colony had been named New Savannah for her home town, was as beautiful as Earth herself. Spirits soared as the colonists studied the bright globe of green growing things, blue sky, and aqua seas.

Armed finally with something that offered serious resistance, the captain had instigated a series of braking orbits, dropping to a slightly lower orbit each time they’d slowed the ship sufficiently to do so. As the ship slowed enough for a closer look, the cameras were activated and they began to search for a visual of the drop zone.

Tension coiled more and more tightly within the waiting group as the ship slowed to what seemed a crawl. At last, the location selected by the computers appeared on the viewing screens, eliciting gasps of wonder from the colonists. Their destination, New Savannah, almost seemed to leap out at them. Backed up to a ridge of purple, ice capped mountains and fronted by a tangled green valley of lush vegetation the stark white, rigidly symmetrical buildings protruded from their natural surroundings almost obscenely.

It was home for all that, and almost as one those who’d intruded on the bridge surged forward for a better look as the cameras magnified the images to bring them closer and closer until details began to emerge.

Just as the excitement of the colonists reached fever pitch, threatening to spill over into noisy jubilation, something completely unexpected came within view. The jolt was universal, immobilizing every soul on deck with shock.

Minutes ticked by while everyone simply stared at the screens, stupefied. After a time, project leader, Eden Chisholm, frozen with shock from the first flutter of movement she’d noticed, felt thaw begin to set in. As it did, a flood of thoughts and emotions washed through her, creating more chaos, not less.

The one thought that seemed to pound through her most viciously was that she'd dedicated almost twenty years of her life already to a project that looked like it was doomed to failure before they'd even started. Abruptly, calm purposefulness settled over her.

"It'll be six months--at least--before we get a response from Houston."

Ship's captain, Major Sterling sent her a sharp glance. "Indisputable, but protocol--."

Eden shook her head fractionally in warning and glanced around the crowded bridge. "Enough gawking, ladies. Back to your stations, if you please. We'll have a first colonist meeting directly after the evening meal tonight."

The women blinked, as if just awakening, exchanged looks with the others around them and finally began to leave. Eden studied their expressions carefully. Some merely looked dazed, others fearful, bewildered, and still others angry. When the hatch had closed behind the last of the colonists, Eden moved closer to the viewing screens.

"This is Captain Sterling of the U.S.S. Plymouth, Houston. I repeat, we have a problem. Colony Alpha has apparently already been claimed."

Eden glanced sharply at the captain. "This is a scenario we considered, Ivy."

Ivy's dark eyes narrowed. "It was only considered a very remote possibility and you know it, Eden. No one, even you, expected to find signs of intelligent life. They could be hostile."

"And they might not be!" Eden retorted.

"I still have to file a report. Houston might want to abort the mission."

A cynical smile curled Eden's lips. "You're not serious? After all the time and money that went into this project? They'll expect us to proceed as planned, and you damn well know it."

Ivy frowned. "I can't authorize a landing until I file a full report with Houston and get a go."

Eden planted her hands on her hips and turned to face the ship's captain. "You're not in charge of the colonization project, only the ship. The decision to proceed, or abort, is mine."

Ivy Sterling's dark complexion grew darker with anger. "You'd willingly take the colonists into harm's way just so you can settle who's in charge?"

Eden released a bark of humorless laughter. "Come off your high horse, Ivy! We've just spent nearly fifteen years traversing uncharted space. There's no more certainty of harm here than there was in the trip itself, and you know as well as I do that this was always intended as a one way trip! There is no going back, only forward. It's up to us to do the best we can with what we've been provided."

Ivy looked as if she was considering further argument, but abruptly glanced around at the other crew members on the bridge. "No decision can be made, one way or the other, by anyone, until we have more data."

"Exactly," Eden agreed. Turning from the captain, she addressed the communications officer, Cpl. Linda Hicks. "Can we get a little more magnification here?"

Cpl. Hicks threw a questioning glance at her commanding officer. At Ivy's nod, she focused on her control panel for several moments. Abruptly, the scenes in the viewing screen blurred. When the images sharpened again, the moving dots they'd seen

had resolved into individual beings.

Someone gasped. Everyone on the bridge stiffened.

The 'aliens' moving purposefully about on the planet below them weren't just humanoid--they looked human--almost. Some of them had wings and all of them, from what they could see, had horns.

"Closer," Eden demanded abruptly, moving closer to the screen nearest her.

When the image cleared again, she found herself standing seemingly face to face with a being that was definitely not human. A strange current went through her when she met his gaze on the screen. It was almost as if he was looking her straight in the eyes.

A shiver went through her.

Behind her, someone released a nervous snicker.

"I guess I've forgotten what men look like," someone else quipped, "because that looks like a man to me. Yum, yum."

He was wearing a uniform that said 'military' to Eden. It covered him from the neck to wrists, and the heavy footwear he wore that looked like military boots, but he was definitely bipedal--otherwise she couldn't tell a lot about his anatomy except that there were a couple of fairly notable differences between these aliens and their human counterparts. The skin tones weren't quite like any human of any race, though fairly close to the 'yellow' race--close enough to give her a sense of kinship when coupled with the basic human form. The eyes were different. Not only was the color, an orange-gold, not one found among humans, but the general shape and size of the eyes and pupils were subtly different. The nose, mouth, and facial structure seemed basically human, but she couldn't tell if the skin texture was. The hands gripping his weapon looked a little longer and more slender than typical human hands, but he seemed to have four fingers and a thumb. Close cropped, blue black hair capped his head.

"You knew men with wings and horns?" Eden quipped dryly without bothering to turn around. She didn't need to know that it was Janine who'd spoken. She recognized the voice, and Janine had always had a problem maintaining formal military protocol.

Janine snickered. "I knew plenty of horny men. Actually, he's kinda cute--a little strange looking, but if his body is nearly as good as it looks, I could live with the weird stuff."

The comment elicited a round of snickers from the other crew members.

"You haven't seen a man in fifteen years. If he looked like a baboon, you'd think he was cute."

Eden repressed a smile with an effort. When her gaze finally moved beyond the male, her amusement died, however. "These creatures are a long way from baboons. The weapon he's holding is obviously advanced technology and take a look at the city below the wall there."

Silence fell as everyone studied the viewing screens critically.

Unlike New Savannah, the alien settlement seemed to blend with its surroundings, almost as if the structures had been hewn from the rocky surface of the world. Eden wasn't certain if the camouflage effect was purposeful or accidental, but it was certainly effective. Right up until their attention had been caught by movement, they hadn't noticed the settlement at all.

"That looks like a well established community. You think they're natives?"

Eden's lips tightened. "There wasn't a sign of them when we dropped the bot pod

the first time we passed---the bots would have reported it--and this looks more like a military base to me than a community.” She glanced at Captain Sterling again. “Forward a copy of the data you’re collecting to my personal system, will you? I’m going to my cabin to look through the colony manuals.”

Ignoring the look Ivy sent her, Eden left the bridge and headed down the corridor toward her quarters. She’d had years to study the manuals. She’d memorized them from start to finish and Ivy probably suspected as much.

She didn’t care if Ivy knew it was just a pretense. She needed some time--away from observation--to think, and she wanted to study the data stream coming in when there wasn’t anyone around to gauge her reaction to it.

It was hard enough to deal with the shock without having to worry about hiding her anxieties from the others to keep from adding to their fears.

As she stepped into the lift and punched the level where her cabin lay, Eden folded her arms and leaned back against the cubicle wall.

The stance might have appeared relaxed to the video surveillance, but Eden was a long way from tranquility. As much as she would’ve hated to admit it, she hadn’t felt completely immune to the male herself. It was damned inconvenient to have her hormones raging, even though she realized it was almost inevitable given the circumstances that primal urges would kick in the first time she had any sort of ‘contact’ with a male after so long.

Reaching level four, Eden stepped from the cubicle and strode briskly down the corridor, ignoring the women who stared at her questioningly from the open doors of the cabins she passed.

From a completely logical, economic, and scientific standpoint, the decision to send an all female group of colonists made sense. Two hundred women weighed less than a split crew would have. They consumed less. They weren’t as prone to violence as the testosterone made the male of the species, and finally, two hundred women and an equal number of male donors of sperm were all that was needed to ensure a healthy gene pool. It just plain made sense to send two hundred females and an equal variety of male donations, rather than the males themselves.

From the viewpoint of humanity, however, it was rough to leave behind everything you’d ever known, knowing you would never go back, and then to also accept that you absolutely were giving up male companionship forever. There probably wasn’t a single female in the group, including her, that hadn’t had at least one bad relationship. Maybe even a good portion of the group had considered giving up on men a good thing, in the beginning at least, but there was no getting around the fact that everyone missed being around their male counterparts, however aggravating they might be.

The sex droids that had been provided for comfort and entertainment just didn’t ease that particular ache. Even Eden, who did not consider herself a touchy kind of gal and had never cared for cuddling, found herself missing the warmth of a man’s body spooning with hers through the long nights and yearning for the sound of the deep timber of a man’s voice in her ears.

Reaching her cabin at last, Eden tilted her head toward the security monitor. A split second passed as the monitor read and identified her by her retina and opened the door. She simply stood in the center of the room once she was inside, though, staring around at the cabin’s appointments as if she’d never seen it before.

As much concession as possible had been allowed for the fact that the colonists would occupy their cabins, and little else, for the fifteen years it would take to make the trek from Earth to the target colony planet, Georgia. It was still cramped, and still painfully utilitarian. She'd brought as many personal items as she'd been allowed, but neatness wasn't actually an option in such a confined space. Neatness was necessary if one didn't want to trip and break something--like your neck. Very few of her personal items were within view, therefore. The chest at the foot of her bunk held most of it, the things she'd planned to use to 'decorate' her abode at the colony to give it a feel of 'home'. Her clothing was tucked neatly away in the locker across from the bed, mostly because she hardly ever wore anything from her wardrobe.

Like most of the other women, she rarely bothered dressing anymore in anything but briefs, occasionally topping off with one of the knit undershirts that had replaced bras when it was discovered that the restricting garments designed in the previous century had contributed to the rise in breast cancer. She'd worn little more than that since the second year out. There seemed little point in it. The temperature inside the ship barely fluctuated more than a degree or two--ever. Modesty wasn't something any of them needed to worry about when there wasn't a man of any description within light-years of them and there certainly wasn't anyone to impress by dressing up. Even the militia attached to their group rarely followed their dress codes strictly anymore. Off duty, the soldiers went around in pretty much nothing just the same as the colonists did.

Thus, very little laundry, very little discards around the room to make it messy.

Sighing, Eden moved to her bunk and sprawled on top of it calling up the colony manuals. The hologram promptly appeared just above her belly within a comfortable viewing range and Eden began at the beginning for the umpteenth time.

The colonization plan was deceptively simple. In point of fact the greatest minds of the world had spent the decade it had taken to build the ships ironing out everything to the smallest detail.

The colony ships would transport two hundred colonists and everything they could conceivably need to establish a thriving colony to the pre-selected target planets. The colonists themselves included personnel with every skill needed to insure success, including a trained army, although even the colonists not military were trained in weaponry and self-defense.

Every race was carefully represented even though everyone admitted that the effort to find the purest of each representative race was probably a waste of time--Within a few generations they were bound to mix just as they had on Earth, with the same results--lovely hybrids with mixed genetic traits--but it was one more safe guard to insure a good gene pool for future generations.

They'd attained full acceleration by the second year out--twice the speed of light--and begun deceleration four years before their arrival. Stopping wasn't something the ship could do on a dime, however. They'd bypassed the target planet and slingshotted around the furthest in the system before they'd slowed enough to return and land. As they made the first pass, the bot pod had been dropped.

It was a risky maneuver, but one everyone had finally decided was worth the gamble. The robots had been specifically designed to withstand the G's the pod would be pulling at drop and the bot pod, as well as the timing of the drop, was key to the survival of the colony. Containing building materials and construction bots, this pod was

programmed to locate the most ideal construction site and erect the colony city of New Savannah so that it was ready for them to occupy when they made it back to the drop site.

The bots had done their job as far as Eden could see. The city was there, waiting for them, complete according to the communications with the computers on the ground.

The problem was the site chosen was less than three miles from a site chosen by another race/species of colonists.

Eden frowned. They might actually be natives but she wasn't certain if there was any reason to quibble over that point. Either way, the city was well established enough that it could hardly be argued that they had squatter's rights. The only question was, were they as aggressive as humans?

More importantly, she supposed, were they the technological equal of humans? Or could she and her colonists kick their asses back to where ever they'd come from?

It was all very delightful that the anti-aging drugs that had been discovered that had enabled colonization meant that she would look and feel twenty five for the next couple of hundred years. She'd already invested twenty years of her life in this project, though, and she had no desire to spend another fifteen years on this fucking ship, headed back the way she'd just come.

Chapter Two

Eden looked out over the group of colonists that had assembled for the meeting. “It could be many months before we have a really clear picture of the situation, but as far as we can ascertain at this point, the alien installation that is encroaching on our colonial territory is military in nature. It also seems certain that they hail from a male dominated society.”

Near the back of the room, a timid hand was raised. Eden frowned. She wasn’t ready for questions yet but she sensed that a little less formality might allay everyone’s fears and elevate morale. “What is it, Becky?”

Becky blushed when half the women in the audience turned around to look at her. “Uh--I was just wondering how you arrived at that?”

“The military aspect?”

“The reference to their society. Surely we haven’t had the opportunity to study them enough to know whether it’s patriarchal or matriarchal?”

“True, but it seems indisputable at this point. We’ve been observing them ever since we discovered their presence earlier, and there have been no females sighted--at all, unless they look like the males, or it turns out that the males aren’t actually males, but some sort of creature that reproduces asexually. Assuming our first impression is correct, though, and these are actually males, the fact that no females have been observed certainly seems to support both of the observations I’ve made. If they were here to establish a colony, as we are, there would be females. The fact that there aren’t, as far as we can tell, seems indicative.”

“Yes, but--we’re all females. Wouldn’t someone else, studying us, come to the erroneous conclusion that we’re from a matriarchal society? Or they could even jump to the conclusion that we’re asexual--both of which conclusions would be wrong.”

Irritation flickered through Eden, but she knew the woman had a point.

“Obviously we’re not going to know anything for certain for a while. I’m only pointing out what it looks like we’re up against.”

“So--we’re still planning to go ahead and land?”

“What about their language? We’d learn a lot more about them a lot faster if the computers had deciphered that.”

Eden held up a hand to stem an avalanche of questions. “We’re going to have to keep some order to this meeting. One question at the time, please.” She waited until the muttering had subsided before she spoke again. “I’ve spent the past several hours going over the colony plans again. There is absolutely nothing in there to suggest that we simply throw up our hands and give up if we arrive and find the planet occupied. In point of fact, the plans clearly call for colonization whatever we encounter so long as the planet itself is habitable. We all accepted when we signed on that this wasn’t going to be a walk in the park. I don’t think anyone, including me, actually believed we’d come up against another intelligent species, but that bit of human arrogance is beside the point. We’re here. Most of us have already invested twenty years into this project, five in pre-training,

fifteen in the trek itself.”

There was absolute silence when she paused again. “This isn’t a democracy, but I am interested in hearing your thoughts on this. Morale is important to success. So let’s take a poll. Those in favor of tucking their tails between their legs and running back to Earth--let’s have a show of hands.”

Relief flooded through Eden when she saw only around a dozen hands. She knew there were others who probably agreed and just didn’t want to look like cowards by raising their hands, but it seemed the majority were either ready to stand their ground and take what they’d come for, or at least weren’t ready to run yet.

“We’ll know more, of course, when the computer does crack the language, but--.” She shrugged. “They don’t seem to talk much. This has made it a little difficult to decipher the language.”

“Telepathy?” someone guessed.

“Possibly. But it’s also possible they’re just a well oiled military machine.” She called up the images she’d selected for the colonist’s viewing. “Notice these males working here. We watched them for over an hour and they continued without pause, no stopping to chat, no breaks to rest--just unhurried but constant movement.”

Silence reigned for almost ten minutes while the colonists studied the images.

“They remind me of ants--actually there are several insect societies that behave a lot like this.”

Eden glanced toward the voice sharply, but she wasn’t certain who had spoken. Returning her attention to the images, she considered the observation critically. “You mean in the sense that the jobs seem clearly delineated?”

“They sure as hell don’t look like bugs to me. I know there’s nothing to get a fix on the size, but they look huge--and definitely not bug like. Look at the chest and arms on that one! He’s cute enough to make my--uh--heart flutter!”

“Thank you for that scientific observation!” Eden said dryly. “You’re right, though, computer averages them at between six and half and seven feet. And they’re just too human-like to grasp the possibility that they could be anything other than mammals like us. That doesn’t mean they are, though. No matter how much they appear to be like us, they could be very, very different.”

“Look,” Cpl Hicks said, striding quickly toward the front of the room where Eden stood. “This is what I was talking about. Notice these here--the ones holding weapons? They’ve got wings and horns. Those there, the ‘workers’, they don’t have the wings, just horns and their horns are smaller than the ones these guys have. The fact that there’s so little verbal communication could mean they’re a well oiled military machine, like you suggested, but it could also be a matter of--well, jobs designated from birth, like the ant colonies.”

Eden shrugged. “Maybe. As far as I can see there’s just as much resemblance between them and feudal Europe during the dark ages. These workers could be something like serfs. Notice the fortifications here ... along the outer edge of the city. This is strongly reminiscent of the defensive walls built around ancient castles, even though their technology seems to suggest they are well beyond that level of advancement. We won’t know much for certain about them until we can listen to them.”

“So it’s been decided already? We’re staying? Sticking to the plan?”

Eden followed the sound of the voice and found Captain Ivy Sterling without

much surprise. “We have spanned light-years to get here. I’m sure as hell not going to turn around and head back until we know there’s no possibility of establishing the colony we came to create here.”

“We don’t have the man power or the weapons to launch a war.”

The comment sent a flutter of alarm through the colonists, though Eden found it difficult to believe the thought hadn’t occurred to any of them. “There is no sign that they’ll be antagonistic. The colony is intact. The bots have been working on it for a year and I can’t see that there was any attempt made to halt their progress or to interfere in any way at all. I think that’s a good sign.” She paused long enough for that to sink in. “The protective shields are fully operational and I also haven’t seen any indication that they have the technological capabilities of punching a hole through them.

“At the very least, we’re all long overdue for some R and R--off ship. We’ll begin testing the transporters in the morning. If everything checks out, we’ll begin off loading tomorrow after the noon meal. Colonists interested in going should put in requests as soon as possible. We’ll be drawing names for the first group in the morning. For now, you’re dismissed.”

After several moments hesitation while that last comment sank in, the women finally rose from their seats and began to file out of the dining hall/meeting hall.

“If we’re going to be living here, we’re going to have to get used to a new time zone,” someone commented as they began to file out of the room.

“Oh! My God, I miss sunrise and sunsets--daylight--rain! I hope we can stay. I don’t think I could stand having to face another fifteen years of space!” another colonist muttered to her friends, her comments filtering out over the assemblage and drawing glances and thoughtful expressions all around.

Eden could’ve kissed the woman. If she’d made the comment herself it would probably have been received with skepticism. Coming from a peer, it didn’t seem like propaganda designed to influence their viewpoint.

Ivy Sterling approached her, settling a hip on one of the tables nearby. “I have to agree with what’s her name. I’m pretty sick of the ship myself. I’m still not comfortable with making such a decision without consulting with my superiors.”

Eden studied the woman with a mixture of emotions. Ivy wasn’t just a beautiful representative of her race, she was intelligent and strong. She was also, unfortunately, a by-the-book soldier and Eden could see her personal desires were at war with her training, which was the driving force behind her objections. “It’ll be a good thing, then, when we get the go ahead from mission control,” she replied non-committally.

Ivy’s full lips thinned with annoyance. “Say what you like, they weren’t expecting us to encounter resistance. As you pointed out, a lot of time and money was poured into this project. They won’t be happy about risking it. I’m not happy about the potential for disaster or loss of life.”

Eden shook her head irritably. “Granted, but we haven’t encountered resistance--yet. I wasn’t expecting that we’d meet up with intelligent life--not on this level--either. But the world is teeming with life. We knew that before we even set out. We wouldn’t have chosen this planet if not for that. It’s nothing but pure arrogance that left us unprepared for the possibility that there would be intelligent creatures here on a par with humans.

“Besides, we did know we would have all sorts of things to contend with--plants

and animals and insects and micro-organisms we were completely unfamiliar with, all of which carried a potential threat--weather conditions, natural disasters. There was a lot more unknown we knew we'd have to contend with than known, all of which could be dangerous and life threatening to say nothing of the trip itself. It's nothing short of miraculous that we made the trip without losing any colonists.

"The project designers knew all of this, too, knew that there would be a great deal of risk to life, and a lot of hardship to endure. They aren't going to call it off, Ivy, whatever you think. This may be something we hadn't anticipated, but we're still going to have to deal with it."

Ivy still looked skeptical. "So--what are your thoughts on dealing with it?"

"I'm sure as hell not planning to go in with guns blazing!" Eden retorted. "We'll see if landing provokes any sort of violent reaction from the natives. If it doesn't, then as soon as we have some capability of communicating with them, I'll instigate peaceful relations and try to come to an agreement to co-exist with them. If politics fail--well, we'll face that when and if we come to it. In the meanwhile, we'll keep the ship on alert and keep it in orbit in case we have to retreat."

* * * *

As project leader, Eden was among the first to disembark. Ship's captain, Ivy Sterling left the bridge in the hands of her second in command, formed up a squad and accompanied Eden and the six sector leaders that stepped into the particle transporters and beamed plantward.

Their arrival did not go unnoticed. They generated a surprising amount of excitement among the defenders of the installation across the valley from New Savannah when they regenerated on the transporter platform on the roof of the municipal building. Ivy, who'd moved to the low wall that surrounded the platform as soon as she'd materialized and lifted her field glasses to study the fortifications looked grim as she lowered them at last and turned to Eden. "They might not have looked that interested in the colony, but they've been watching it pretty closely. They noticed our arrival."

Eden snatched the field glasses from Ivy and lifted them to her eyes. As her vision focused a jolt went through her. One of the soldiers on the distant wall held something very like the field glasses she had, and he was looking directly at her. As she watched, he lowered them. His expression was unreadable, making it impossible for Eden to determine the gravity of the situation, but she recognized the face--or thought she did, anyway. It looked like the same male she'd had such a close encounter with before on the bridge of the ship.

On the other hand, she hadn't really seen any of the others very closely. There might not be enough difference in their appearance to tell them apart.

She shrugged. "It might just be coincidence that the male decided to look at about the time we arrived. He didn't look particularly disturbed."

"Then why did he sound an alarm?" Ivy demanded tightly.

Eden blinked. "Sound an alarm?" she repeated.

Ivy lifted her arm, pointing to the wall. When Eden raised the field glasses to her eyes again, she saw that Ivy was right. All along the wall facing them soldiers were taking up defensive positions.

Frowning thoughtfully, Eden lowered the glasses again. "That's a defensive maneuver," she said finally. "They don't know what to expect, so they're preparing--just

in case. Why don't we try ignoring them and see if they get the message that we're not interested in tangling with them?"

"They might take it as contempt--which could totally piss them off."

Eden looked up worriedly. "Check the fields. If they're operating at a hundred percent, then I don't think we have anything to worry about."

One of the soldiers that had accompanied them plugged into her system and called up the information. "Computer verifies that all defensive systems are at one hundred percent," she responded after a few moments.

Still frowning thoughtfully, Eden nodded. "We're just going to have to risk them taking exception at this point. We still haven't cracked their language and I couldn't communicate with them if I tried. If our presence seems to stir them up too much, we'll return to the ship and wait until they settle down a bit to try again."

Resisting the temptation to try to communicate with gestures, which could easily be misinterpreted, Eden focused her attention on the city itself with an effort, gazing out at the sprawl below them. In a sense, New Savannah was as cold, boring, and unimaginative as the ship. There was actually pleasure to be derived from the rigidly square, level, totally symmetrical buildings and roadways, however, primarily because of the contrast between the city and the backdrop of cerulean sky, craggy purple mountains, and the view of the valley that lay before the city.

Heartened, Eden turned after a time and led the group across the roof to the roof access door. It opened readily to her identification and the group filed into the lift. As curious as she was about the administrative offices, they weren't really high in order of importance. Ignoring the temptation to check them out, she ordered the elevator to the ground level. The heels of their boots echoed hollowly on the stone flooring as they exited the empty building and paused outside to examine the city that bots had built.

Beyond those that had been built for specific tasks like the municipal building, the hospital, and the police department, none of the buildings had been claimed or assigned and there was nothing to greatly separate any one from another beyond the dimensions. But there was a variation in the sizes and heights that added interest to the otherwise bland cityscape and Eden could easily see that the colonists, once they'd had the chance to settle, could personalize their space to give the city the warmth it was lacking.

Crossing the walk outside the municipal building, she stepped down onto the main roadway. At once the road began to move smoothly. Bracing herself for balance, Eden studied the outer façade of the buildings that would make up the city's marketing center as she moved past. Behind her, she could hear the sector chiefs discussing the merits of the buildings and the faint creak of armor and weaponry as the soldiers shifted uneasily, obviously having found no comfort in the computer's assurance that the security systems were fully functional.

As their uneasiness filtered through to her, Eden found her thoughts wandering from the city she was supposed to be inspecting to the aliens across the way.

More specifically, her thoughts were on one in particular. She could lie to herself all she wanted, but she knew the alien she'd seen in the field glasses was the same one that had jump started her hormones when she'd first seen him in the viewing screen on the bridge.

How close, she wondered, were they to human males? Close enough that companionship might be an option? Recreation if not procreation? They had their frozen

pops to insure the continuation and purity of their species. If by chance there was a possibility of compatibility, she couldn't help but think that, politically speaking, it would be a very good gesture that could help make peace between the two camps.

Upon consideration, she decided she probably should amend that to 'a sort of peace' because if they were human-like at all, the difference in their cultures wasn't going to be the only thing the colonists would find to disagree with them about.

Chapter Three

When they had thoroughly inspected the colony, Eden and the others beamed up to the ship once more to begin the battle over territory, leaving the squad on the ground to hold the city. The structures weren't all completed, but they wouldn't need all of them at this point and certainly not for a council meeting. The main thing was that there was no comfort to be found. None of the buildings were furnished and she wasn't ready, yet, to give the go ahead on offloading such things.

They were met by curious colonists on their return.

Eden wasn't surprised. Even the more fearful among them were anxious to get off the ship for a little while if it was safe enough to do so. After dividing the colonists into lots of twenty five, she allowed the first group to descend to explore the city and enjoy the openness of being beyond the metal bulkheads of the ship and walking in real gravity and atmosphere rather than artificial.

They began the meeting with the caveat that the plans they were making might not actually be implemented, but it seemed everyone was now willing to agree that there were only two choices--stay or return. They certainly weren't equipped to try an alternate planet for colonization. The construction materials they'd brought had been expended on building New Savannah and they would be reduced to living in mud and stick huts if they tried to colonize another planet.

That being the case, everyone had begun to feel very possessive about the planet they'd staked out to claim as their own.

Eden had a pounding headache long before they'd managed to settle much more than a quarter of the territory among the sects. Deciding finally that it was enough to agree on the buildings that would be used for specific work, Eden adjourned the meeting.

"If we do decide to stay, we can settle disputes over living quarters as they arise. I'm sure there will be some--there always are. But everyone has options and we should be able to settle things agreeably enough."

The sector leaders didn't seem completely satisfied with that ruling, but they accepted it and departed to discuss the proceedings with the colonists in their sectors.

Eden merely sat gazing absently at the far bulkhead for a while, rubbing her temples to ease the tension.

The trek had seemed endless. She supposed, in the back of her mind, she'd always known that when they arrived she was going to have her hands full, but it had seemed like such a distant possibility that it hadn't actually seemed real to her. They hadn't even been orbiting a full day yet and already she was beginning to feel the weight of her office.

Abruptly, she pushed herself away from the conference table and rose. She couldn't presently deal with the root of the problem and until she could she wasn't going to borrow worries. Striding from the council chambers she paused in the corridor for several moments and finally headed toward the bridge. Without surprise, she discovered that the viewing screens were on and the crew was studying the alien installation.

Ivy's second in command, Lt. Sarah Carter, glanced up as Eden stepped from the lift. "I didn't expect to see you back so soon."

Eden smiled faintly. "As tempting as it was to stay a while," she responded wryly, "it's damned uncomfortable and I thought it best to settle the territory as soon as possible."

Sarah's dark red brows rose. "You're going forward?"

"Any word from Houston?" Eden countered.

"Dead air so far, but I don't expect a response for a few hours yet."

Nodding, Eden crossed to stand closer to the viewing screens, studying them. "You've been transmitting the images to them?"

"I haven't been screening them, if that's what you're asking."

Eden glanced at her. "It didn't occur to me that you would. What did you make of the activity when we arrived?"

Sarah frowned. "Honestly?"

Eden smiled thinly. "I'd like an honest evaluation, yes. Sugar coating isn't going to be very helpful."

"They looked hopeful and horrified at the same time, if you ask me--assuming I correctly interpreted the expressions I saw."

Eden frowned. "That sort of described our own feelings on the matter, but I doubt it was for the same reasons. Hopefulness to see some action, you think?"

Sarah grinned. "My guess would be not military action."

Eden's reaction was purely feminine. It embarrassed her. She felt her cheeks redden. "I think that's just wishful thinking on your part," she retorted.

Sarah chuckled. "Maybe, but it hasn't been so long that I've forgotten what a man looks like when he has fucking on his mind." She got up from her seat and crossed the deck to stand next to Eden, pointing. "These here, along the walls--the soldiers didn't really give much away about what they were thinking one way or the other. The workers, that's a different matter altogether. Hardly a peep out of them the entire time we've been studying them, then your group arrived and all of a sudden they were chattering like magpies. The computer collected a good bit of the speech patterns."

Pausing, she turned to the communications officer. "Give us a playback, Rheames."

Eden frowned as she listened. It was a relief to discover that the aliens seemed to have vocal chords similar to humans. The words were just so much gibberish to her ears, and yet the patterns and tones were enough like human speech that it might almost have been an Earth language she was hearing. "Any clue yet what they might have been talking about?"

"The computer hasn't finished collating the data yet, but it seems certain they realized you were all females. What isn't clear to me is what they made of it. As I said, they looked hopeful and at the same time horrified."

"Maybe because we're not the same species?"

Sarah frowned. "Maybe. I got the feeling they felt threatened because it was females--which wasn't something I would've expected. I don't know why and I'm probably wrong, but I still sensed that."

Eden digested Sarah's comments, trying to decide whether she could place any faith in the woman's intuition. Finally, she dismissed it. Even if there was something to

Sarah's assessment, neither of them had a clue of why the aliens might feel threatened by them and if they did they were being surprisingly non-aggressive about it. "I assume from that that there's still been no sign of females among the aliens?"

Sarah shook her head. "The computer did a count. What you see is all there is--about six hundred altogether--which means they outnumber us about three to one, they're a hell of a lot bigger physically besides which they seem to be, on average, a good bit stronger than human males, and from what I can see they aren't far enough behind us technologically to give us a big advantage either. Let's hope they remain as non-aggressive as they appear to be at this point because I'm not sure the shields would hold against a determined assault from an army like that."

Eden merely nodded, trying to keep her grim thoughts to herself. As she watched, the aliens seem to pause almost as one. Excitement rippled through them after a moment and she could see their mouths moving in speech, could see them straining to stare toward New Savannah in the distance, though she doubted they had the capability of seeing so far when she'd already noticed the one with the field glasses.

She assumed they were field glasses, or something like that anyway.

"The new group just arrived," Sarah pointed out, drawing Eden's attention toward another screen.

Eden studied the group that appeared on the pad and then turned her attention to the aliens again. "Maybe it's the particle transporter that unnerves them? I mean, if they aren't as advanced as we are they might never have seen anything like it. Watching us appear and disappear would be enough to scare them if they don't understand it."

Sarah shrugged. "Maybe. You see what I meant, though?"

"I do. Again, though, their reaction is strongly reminiscent of our own--excitement to be here, disturbed to discover we aren't alone, and that the company is strange. I doubt they're any more accustomed to seeing aliens than we are--and I don't think I would've been less unnerved if the colony had turned out to be all females."

Feeling vaguely disappointed that she hadn't managed to catch a glimpse of that intriguing male with the dark thatch of hair, Eden turned at last to leave. "When the computer breaks the language down, let me know? I'll be in my quarters."

"Will do."

* * * *

By the time the computer had cracked the language barrier, Eden had come to an immutable conclusion. They could not go forward until they knew where they stood with the aliens on the other side of the valley.

As predicted, Houston gave the project a green light, suggesting she negotiate a treaty with the 'other colony'. She would've been lying if she'd tried to say she wasn't the least bit unnerved at the prospect, but she knew her duty as the leader of the colony included risking her neck if necessary to barter for peace. Accepting the inevitability of it, she put the electronic technicians to work developing a light weight translator.

It took almost a week, New Georgia time, to perfect the device to something useable, but the finished product was worth the wait. Lightweight, it had a piece that fit firmly across the head of the wearer, an earpiece to translate alien to English, and a mouth piece that translated English to alien.

Ivy volunteered to accompany her.

As grateful as she was to have Ivy's backing, Eden wasn't certain that it was best

for the colony to risk both their political/administrative and military leader at the same time. Ivy smiled thinly. "I don't know about you, but I'm planning on making it back in one piece even if they do open fire and you'll have a better chance of doing so if I'm there to back you up."

After a rather long winded and occasionally heated discussion among the council members, it was finally decided that three sector leaders would accompany Eden and Ivy--Deb Pugh, Med Techs, Stacy Sessions, Engineers, and Liz Chin, Investigative Sciences--and a squad would go for a show of military strength--just enough fire power to protect the politicians without seeming aggressive--they hoped.

A shuttle was detached from the U.S.S. Plymouth to carry the emissaries to a position close enough to try to begin negotiations in a clearing near the stream that almost perfectly bisected the valley.

Eden's stomach was in knots long before they reached the agreed upon 'neutral' ground. It was a jolt to step from the shuttle into the unprotected climate of the planet, for the city was climate controlled.

Here, nature reigned. Eden hadn't breathed anything except conditioned air in many years, and never anything quite like the natural air of New Georgia. It had been many, many years since she had felt the heat of a sun, the brush of natural breezes along her skin or the unevenness and yielding of soil and vegetation and natural stones beneath the soles of her feet.

The myriad of sensations that pelted her as she made her way down the gangplank and trod the new world for the first time distracted her momentarily from her anxiety.

After years of strolling around a ship the next thing to naked, the jumpsuit she'd chosen to wear felt as uncomfortably restrictive to her movements as the elements around her and she moved stiffly to stand at the edge of the clearing and lift her head toward the walls of the alien fortress. When the others had assembled behind her, she tested her translator, setting it to a volume she thought they would be able to hear in the alien compound.

"I am Eden Chisholm, leader of the colonists of Earth who have come to settle here. We hope to negotiate a peaceful co-existence with your own colony."

She saw a long row of faces turned down at her, but none moved, either aggressively or otherwise. "We have come to speak with your leader."

That comment caused a ripple. The men along the top wall exchanged confused glances. After a few minutes the faces disappeared one by one.

Uneasy, Eden glanced behind her at the other women. "What do you think?"

Ivy was studying the wall, her face impassive, but the tension in her stance was unmistakable. "They haven't fired. That's always a good sign."

A minute passed, then more minutes. Eden shifted uncomfortably, almost sorry she'd bothered to dress for the occasion. As accustomed as she was to the ease of movements without the restriction of clothing, she had to wonder if she could flee weighed down with boots and draped with heavy cloth. She felt moisture pop from her pores, as well, as the minutes dragged past. The cloth began to stick to her.

She had almost reached the point of ordering everyone back into the shuttle when a creak of metal drew her attention. An opening appeared at the base of the wall.

"Ready ladies," Ivy said quietly.

At her command, the squad took up defensive positions, lifting their weapons.

“Don’t get trigger happy. This is still a truce until I say otherwise,” Ivy reminded them just as Eden was about to comment on their stance.

Almost another minute passed before a handful of soldiers emerged through the opening. Without hesitation, they marched smartly across the clearing, halting when they reached the banks on the opposite side of the stream.

Eden’s heart was beating unpleasantly fast. It leapt into overtime when she saw that the soldier in the forefront was the one that she’d studied so curiously before.

“I am Baen.”

It was silly, and poor timing at that, but a thrill went through Eden that was totally feminine and wholly appreciative as his deep voice rolled over her. She felt a blush rising. “You are the leader?”

He looked disconcerted. “We have no leader.”

The comment stunned Eden to silence. She exchanged a questioning look with Ivy. When she returned her attention to the soldiers, she saw that they were staring with unabashed curiosity at her and the women around her. There was something in their eyes that gave her pause--fear and hopefulness. “I don’t understand,” Eden said finally. “This is a colony?” she asked, gesturing toward the walled community behind the soldiers.

Again, the leader looked disconcerted. “It is not. We have no queens.”

Eden felt her jaw sag. No women? Or did he mean no leaders? Obviously, it was going to take more than a language translator to make communications possible. “This is ... a military installation?”

Baen frowned and glanced at the others as if he was seeking help. “No,” he responded finally. “We are kzatha.”

The word failed to translate and Eden hadn’t a clue of what it might mean. “What position do you hold?” she asked finally.

“I am dominant soldier.”

That sounded like leader to Eden, but he obviously didn’t interpret it that way. She glanced at the other council members, wishing she dared discuss the matter with them, but she didn’t want to invite the aliens to understand the discussion and she didn’t think it would be a good idea to turn off the translators.

“You are without males?”

The question caught Eden by surprise. Her head whipped around so quickly in response that she felt a bone crack in her neck. “What?”

Baen frowned. His gaze flickered from Eden to Ivy and then to the squad members. “These are female soldiers.”

The concept was obviously boggling his mind. She wasn’t about to tell him anything one way or the other, however. The aliens might decide that the colony would be easy to take if their doubts were removed about the presence of any males.

“We came to negotiate peace,” she said, tightness creeping into her voice. “Our bots have built our city. We do not wish to fight with our neighbors over territory.”

Baen and the others exchanged glances. “Very well,” Baen responded. With that, he turned abruptly and strode toward the fortress once more.

Eden stared after him and the others slack jawed.

“What the hell was that?” Ivy demanded, equally stunned.

Eden dragged her gaze from the retreating backs of the alien soldiers. “I don’t know. Did he say ‘ok, fine?’ or was it just my imagination?”

Med Tech Deborah Pugh spoke. "He seemed to think the discussion has been concluded."

"Let's go back. I don't see any point in standing around here melting," Stacy Sessions commented.

"Sweating," Ivy corrected, smiling faintly.

"Whatever. It feels like melting."

Feeling strangely let down, Eden followed as the other council members filed up the gangplank once more. She paused at the top, studying the aliens along the fortress wall.

Baen was among them again. Even at this distance, Eden recognized him.

Shaking her head, she stepped inside and settled in her seat for the trip back to New Savannah, wondering what they had accomplished in their attempt to form a treaty with the other colonists.

* * * *

"Was the meeting a success?"

Eden exchanged a glance with the women who'd accompanied her. "It was not a failure," she responded cautiously. "Liz, you're in behavioral sciences--what did you make of it?"

Liz's finely arched black brows rose almost to her hairline. "I'm supposed to make an educated evaluation based on that?"

Eden scowled at her. "Take a wild guess then," she snapped.

Liz considered it and finally shrugged. "Everything about them indicates a civilization that's fairly advanced--maybe not as advanced technologically as we are, but certainly well beyond a primitive or simple social structure. This is a society that doesn't seem to correlate with anything I've seen before, though, or studied. Their spokesman said they had no leader, but also that the colony they'd established wasn't military in nature.

"By our standards, it would seem to be just that, though. If he wasn't lying, and I saw nothing to indicate that he was intentionally doing so, then I'd have to guess that their entire social structure is basically military. And, if they're not here to make or prevent war, then the colony was constructed as it is merely for security purposes.

"That seems to suggest they're as alien to this world as we are and aren't certain what they might come up against--and I'm still confused about his assertion that they have no leader and they're not here to establish a colony."

Eden, seated at the head of the council table, leaned back in her seat, tapping her fingers impatiently on the surface of the table. "I'm more interested in a threat assessment at this point."

Liz studied her for several moments in silence. It was obvious she didn't like being placed in the position of having to make such an important evaluation on so little. "They don't appear to represent a threat to our colony. There was nothing overtly hostile in their behavior--as we all saw--nothing that I saw that was sly, or furtive. They seemed more ... disconcerted by us than alarmed and I think that's because our social structure confused them.

"Remember the comment about the female soldiers? I don't think he was trying to gauge our strength or the threat to them. I think he was just stunned that females would hold such a position in our society."

“So--theirs would undoubtedly be a male dominated society?”

Liz glanced at Deborah Pugh, but shook her head slowly. “I don’t think so. As I said, from what I’ve seen so far their society doesn’t follow any recognizable patterns, but he was respectful of us. If he hailed from a patriarchal society, I don’t think that would’ve been the case at all even if he was intelligent enough to know we had much more powerful weapons.”

Eden sat up decisively. “Houston’s given us a go. My own instincts tell me these aliens, whatever their reason for being here, have no interest in us. I’m giving the project a green light. We’ll start offloading tomorrow.”

Chapter Four

It was hard to contain the air of jubilation that filled every heart as the colonists began the long and difficult task of offloading the tons of equipment and supplies necessary to establish a successful colony. Eden was no exception, though her position demanded that she leaven her enthusiasm with a healthy dose of caution.

On Major Ivy Sterling's advice, four squads were dispatched to the colony before the first crates were offloaded. Positioning three of the squads along the valley perimeter of the city, Ivy ordered the final squad to patrol the area of the city along the foot of the mountain range. It seemed unlikely they needed to concern themselves with a threat from that direction, but she saw no sense in tempting fate by leaving the backdoor unwatched.

Some of the smaller crates of equipment and supplies were beamed down via the particle transporters, but they'd brought with them the machinery necessary to produce all the things they would need and want for a reasonably comfortable existence and much of this was beyond the capacity of the transporters. The construction bots, having completed that assignment, were reprogrammed to lift and carry the equipment from ship to shuttle and unload the shuttles once they'd landed.

Although the thrill of finding a new home kept spirits high and the colonists amiably occupied and cooperative throughout much of the first few weeks, squabbles broke out the moment the colonists were allowed to begin the search for their own private 'nest'. After breaking up a dozen disagreements that ranged from verbal abuse to physical violence, Eden had Ivy round up the colonists and march them to the municipal building. There they drew lots and were assigned housing. No one was particularly happy about the solution, but it ended the fights, temporarily at least.

"You'd think they had enough to do to keep peace," Eden muttered as she watched the colonists file out of the auditorium again.

Liz sent her a speculative glance. "They're on edge. As happy as we all are to finally have a place to settle, everyone's deep down scared. This is all new. We don't know what's out there, or what to expect. It'll take a while to grow accustomed, to feel safe and secure in this world."

"Umm," Eden responded non-committally. "We'll never get settled if we spend this much time squabbling over everything. For christsake, there isn't a modicum of difference between one domicile and another!"

Liz shrugged. "Location," she pointed out succinctly.

"Plllease!" Eden snapped. "Everything is handy enough! At the most nobody is going to be more than fifteen minutes from any place they would need to go--work, home, market, hospital--entertainment center! And we have the automated roadways. It isn't like they'd have to walk!"

"But some of the domiciles have better views--some of the colonists want different neighbors."

Eden sighed irritably. "I'm not crazy about being next door to you, but do you

see me complaining!”

Liz was taken aback until she noticed the gleam of humor in Eden’s eyes. “Funny! You know what I mean.”

“I’m thinking they need to get laid,” Deb put in her two cents worth.

Eden gaped at the woman. “You’re joking, right?”

Deb glanced around at the other sectors leaders. “I’m not, and I’m not saying anything that hasn’t crossed anybody else’s mind. It’s the males over there. Everyone knows they’re there. If they weren’t maybe nobody would’ve thought about the fact that we haven’t been near a man in fifteen years and we’re unlikely ever to see one until the first crop of babies reach adulthood--another twenty years at least.

“But their being there changes everything. Now everybody’s acutely conscious of the lack of companionship.”

After examining the expressions of the other women assessingly for several moments, Eden returned her attention to Deborah. “So, what are you suggesting?”

Deb’s jaw dropped in dismay. “I’m not suggesting anything! Cripe! We don’t know anything about them. I’m just pointing out that we are all affected by their presence and that’s probably got more to do with putting everyone on edge than anything else. And it isn’t going to resolve itself. And it isn’t going to go away, not unless they do--Or unless we discover that we really don’t want to get to know them for some reason.”

“Their being alien isn’t reason enough? Their strange society doesn’t seem unnerving enough to be a turn off? They look alien! It’s not like they could pass for human.”

Stacy frowned at her folded hands. “They’re close enough in my book--assuming, of course, that the plumbing’s close.”

Eden couldn’t help it, the comment provoked a snicker. She thought it was more hysteria than humor, but it was out before she could stop it. “This is--this isn’t an appropriate council topic,” she managed finally.

“Why not?” Liz demanded. “It pertains to the health and well being of the entire colony.”

“Et tu, brute!” Eden snapped. “We don’t need men. We have everything we need to build this colony and produce future generations.”

“Speak for yourself! Ok, so maybe I don’t need, but I still want, damn it!” Joy snapped, shoving her chair out and jumping to her feet to pace around the room agitatedly. “If we’re going to be living this close it seems stupid to keep our distance.”

“The safety of the colony could be jeopardized! And, if you’re talking companionship here, it’s my opinion you’re barking up the wrong tree. I hardly got five words out of the talkative one!” Eden snapped.

Lynn shrugged. “My last companion spent most of his time on the couch watching the vid. It irritated the piss out of me, but I have to say that right now I’d settle for a ‘presence’. I could talk at one anyway and it would beat the hell out of talking to myself.”

Eden studied the faces of each of the council women carefully. “Is this something the council has been discussing that I haven’t been privy to?” she asked finally.

“Nobody’s discussed it, Eden!” Liz said quickly. “I didn’t realize they were even thinking along these lines before, and I’m sure none of them did, but I’m not going to say

it hadn't occurred to me that it might be something to consider."

Eden frowned thoughtfully and finally shrugged. "I'm not going to veto the suggestion--or support it. We need to know more about them before we make any sort of decision. Liz, this is really your area of expertise. You'll need to do some studies. Maybe we could invite a small group for some sort of celebration so that we could observe them a little better?"

The suggestion was met with enthusiasm. "Thanksgiving? That's seems appropriate considering we made the journey in one piece and we've got the colony started," Lynn said.

"We should at least wait on any kind of celebration until we've finished offloading the ship," Eden pointed out.

"Two weeks?"

"We'll be done in two weeks?" Eden asked in surprise.

"Less once the others get wind of what we've planned," Deb retorted with amusement.

"I'm not certain we should make any kind of announcement until we know if the aliens will consent to be our guests."

"I'm willing to go out and talk with them," Liz volunteered immediately.

Reluctantly, Eden vetoed that. "In the scheme of things, you're a lot more necessary to this enterprise than I am. If it's your considered opinion as section leaders that the majority wants us to attempt relations with the alien outpost, then I will go and speak for us. If they agree to send representatives to celebrate with us, it'll give us a chance to observe them more closely and make a more educated decision.

"This isn't going to be easy, whatever you seem to think. Their society is very different from ours. The more we interact with them before we understand their customs, the greater the risk that we'll offend them and end up causing problems we don't want."

A brisk tap on the door panel interrupted the meeting. Surprised, Eden summoned the visitor, but a touch of alarm went through her when Major Sterling strode purposefully into the room. "That big fellow you spoke to, the one that called himself Baen, is outside."

Eden blinked in stunned surprise, trying to ignore the uncomfortable jerk her heart executed at the name. "Here? In the municipal building?"

Ivy's lips flattened. "I wasn't about to invite him in. He's just beyond the outer force field. He stopped before he hit it," she added grimly. "They've been here examining the colony, however disinterested they pretend to be, or he wouldn't have known where it was."

Eden found her thoughts in complete disorder. Pushing her chair back, she rose with as much composure as she could muster. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"To speak to our queen, Eden."

Eden's jaw dropped several notches. She glanced at the other council members self-consciously. "I didn't say that. I give you my word!"

"She didn't," Liz confirmed, frowning. "They don't understand our societal structure anymore than we do theirs. He's trying to extrapolate known to unknown, that's all."

"I'll go see what he wants. This may be a good time to extend the invitation--or maybe not."

He'd come alone. Eden saw that the moment she reached the defensive corridor at the city gates. As invisible to the naked eye as the other fields that protected the city, this was marked by flagstones and arches that allowed a dead zone to be created for passage through the fields.

It was a little unnerving to see that he'd taken up a stance at the other end, as if he knew exactly what it was and the position of it.

Dismissing the anxiety, Eden stiffened her shoulders and marched toward him without any appearance, she hoped, of the nerves plaguing her. It wasn't until she was face to face with him and she saw his gaze flicker over her curiously that she realized she was the next thing to naked having discarded her attire and returned to old habits as soon as she'd returned from the first meeting. Abruptly excruciatingly self-conscious over the fact that she'd greeted him in t-shirt and briefs, Eden folded her arms over her chest and looked down her nose at him--a difficult feat considering he was more than a head taller than she was.

"You wanted to speak?"

He stared at her blankly.

"You aren't wearing your translator," Ivy, who'd accompanied her, pointed out in a low voice.

"Shit! Give me yours."

Rolling her eyes, Ivy removed the headset and handed it over. Eden felt her face grow redder and redder as she fumbled to get the translator situated. "What is your purpose in requesting to speak with me?" she asked finally.

"My queen wishes to speak with you."

Surprise went through Eden. She glanced at Ivy uneasily.

"What did he say?"

Covering the mouthpiece, Eden repeated the message.

Ivy looked him over suspiciously. "He said they didn't have any queens."

"Maybe we misunderstood?"

"I don't think so."

Eden frowned. "Maybe I didn't hear him correctly, then." She turned, giving him an assessing glance. "You said you had no queen."

Something flickered in his eyes. "Not my own. Mother queen."

"Ok, now I'm really confused. She's there?" Eden added, pointing across the valley.

He looked frustrated. "On home world, Xtania."

Excitement went through Eden. She covered the mouthpiece again. "He's talking about a home world. We were right. They're colonists, not natives."

Ivy's head jerked upward abruptly, as if she could see the U.S.S. Plymouth from where she stood. Stepping away, she touched her communication device. "Lt. Carter?"

"Major?"

Ivy's shoulders seemed to slump with relief. "Any boggies in sight?"

"Bogies?" Carter repeated incredulously. "It's quiet. We haven't seen anything."

"Consider this a heads up, then. The aliens have interplanetary capabilities. Keep your eyes open. Put the ship on alert."

Baen had watched the exchange between Ivy and the ship. He turned to Eden again, pointing at the communicator on Ivy's wrist. "Speak that way."

“Fucking useless translators,” Eden muttered, glancing at Ivy. “He can’t understand half of what I’m saying--or vice versa. I’m going with him to attempt it anyway. Tell the techs to work on this damned thing.”

“You’re not serious!” Ivy demanded incredulously. “Into the installation? If they mean you any harm”

“If they meant harm, we would’ve had a taste of it already. I asked to speak to the leader. Obviously, he’s gone to great effort to give me the chance to do so and I’ve no intention of missing the opportunity to get a better perspective of this situation.” She looked Baen over speculatively. “If I’m not back in a few hours, Liz is in charge until an election can be held.”

“You’re just going to walk right in to that place like a lamb to the slaughter?”

“I hope to hell not. If I thought that, I wouldn’t consider it.”

“You’re a lot ballsier than I would’ve given you credit for.”

“If I was a spineless twit, I’d still be on Earth,” Eden retorted. She turned to Baen again. “Wait here. I’ll return in a few minutes and go with you.”

After giving the alien a speculative once over, Ivy turned and followed Eden. “I should go with you.”

Eden shook her head. “You wouldn’t be able to do either one of us much good considering the odds, and you’re needed here--will be very important if this is a trick.”

Ivy frowned, but she didn’t argue the point. “Returning for a weapon?” she asked after a moment.

“Clothes,” Eden said tartly.

Ivy burst out laughing. “I didn’t even notice.”

“Unfortunately, I didn’t either,” Eden said wryly, “otherwise I would’ve dressed first.” She thought it over and frowned. “Is it just me, or did he not look impressed?”

* * * *

Baen watched the alien queen and her soldier until they disappeared once more, mesmerized by the sway of their hips as they walked. They were as different as night from day, almost literally, and yet except for the coloring he could see little difference between them in physical characteristics beyond their individuality. They had said they were all from the same world, also, which further supported the assumption that they were of the same meznook.

It seemed odd that they came in so many colors, almost as odd as the fact that all were female, but perhaps the colors denoted their stations since they were all the same otherwise--he had seen none with either wings or horns.

The entire kzatha had been horrendously disappointed when they realized the aliens were one sex and needed no males.

For his part, he thought it was just as well. From what he’d seen they were fragile creatures. They would have produced poor offspring even if they had been suitable in other ways. Better to do without than breed an inferior colony.

Inwardly, he sighed his own disappointment, trying to ignore the moisture beading his skin and trickling down his back from the heat of the life star as he stood waiting for the queen of queens to return.

He was almost sorry now that he’d petitioned mother queen for an audience. He hadn’t felt comfortable ignoring the request of a queen, though, even an alien one.

Regardless, he had a very bad feeling about this. The mother queen had been

disturbed by the news. They had believed this world unoccupied and now feared they had offended. It seemed likely the kzatha would be expected to make restitution or find another place for themselves. Neither possibility was particularly appealing.

Anger and frustration flickered through him briefly, but he sought atha and disposed of the unacceptable emotions. There was no choice, really. The queens would decide. They always did and even if he were not kzatha, that would be no different.

Chapter Five

Surprise flickered through Baen when the queen of queens returned, and then anxiety. She had covered herself. She had noticed that he had looked and it was obvious that that was as forbidden among her kind as it was his own. He didn't know what had come over him--except that he had been so long away from Xtanía and the meznook that he had forgotten his manners.

A coldness swept through him when he realized the potential magnitude of his transgression. It didn't help his feelings at all that she had said nothing--yet.

He knelt at once, bowing his head. The skin along the back of his neck prickled as if he could already feel the pinchers. "Most humble apologies."

"What?" Eden asked blankly.

"I should guard my eyes."

The comment confused her more, not less. "Uh--I guess so," she responded doubtfully.

"Will you require restitution?"

Eden stared down at the soldier, completely at a loss. Finally, realizing that he was waiting anxiously for a response, she managed a faintly apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. I don't understand what you're talking about."

Surprised, he glanced up at her, his own expression confused. "I am allowed to look upon you?"

Eden felt her face redden. "Our customs obviously differ a great deal, and the translator is only a little helpful. We will share knowledge and learn each other's customs, yes?"

She could tell by his puzzled expression that the translation had only been partially successful, but he seemed to relax. Straightening, he glanced around as if looking for something. "You go without soldier guards?"

Eden's brows rose. "Do I need them?"

The concept seemed to be enough to throw him into complete disorder. It strengthened her certainty that the males dominated in their society. Females, apparently, were not allowed to roam without guards.

"I offer service," he said finally, as if he needed to do something to correct the 'problem'.

"Thank you. Shall we go?"

The question sent him into disorder again. Apparently, these aliens were extremely formal. "On feet?"

"Didn't you walk over?"

He gaped at her. "Yes. But I am soldier," he responded, recovering himself. "You are queen."

Eden studied him for several moments. "I have no desire to distress you or flout your customs, but we're going to have to agree that you have yours and we have ours."

He went rigid. After a few moments it dawned on Eden that it was something in

the nature of a salute.

She thought.

Shrugging mentally, she struck off toward the alien encampment. After a few moments, he fell into step behind her, following, she supposed, at a respectful distance.

Her head ached after a few moments of trying to untangle the logic behind his behavior patterns. He didn't behave in a manner that she thought of as subservient. Nor could she see that he considered himself above her. But he didn't behave as an equal either. Maybe it was more like a class thing?

Dimly, she recalled that in Earth history there had been cultures that had very rigid, distinct classes. There was a hierarchy, naturally, and the other classes trailed like steps downward to one that was purely a servant class.

It almost seemed to fit. The aliens they'd observed certainly seemed definitively separated by stations--a worker class and soldier class. Maybe what he kept referring to as queens was actually the ruling class, not necessarily female? Maybe that was just the closest word the computer could come up with to match their word?

If she was right, then it could make trying to interact with them prickly, to say the least. She wasn't much of a historian, but she did recall that the classes could become rather violent about crossing the line of what was considered acceptable.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea inviting them to take part in a celebration when they understood so little about these aliens?

She was missing a very good opportunity to learn more about him ... and his people, of course. She stopped, turning to address him. He stopped, eyeing her questioningly.

"We could talk if you would walk beside me."

He merely stared at her. She could see his mind turning that over, however. He seemed to view the request with suspicion. "This is test?"

Surprise and puzzlement flickered through her. It occurred to her after a few moments, though, that his suspicions/anxieties must be custom oriented. Was he forbidden to speak with the queens because he was a soldier? Speak unless spoken to? Or maybe, although she'd thought it was merely to take up a guard position, he wasn't supposed to walk beside her as if he were a social equal? "I would like to learn more about you--uh--your people." She tapped the headset. "And this can not be relied upon to correctly and efficiently translate for us until the computer has assimilated a broader vocabulary in your language."

His brows rose and for a moment a sense of disorientation swept through her. It was such a human expression she wondered for the first time just how different they could really be. When all was said and done, human emotions, and human personality traits were actually very limited. Excepting the social customs, which obviously differed a good deal and would certainly effect how his brain translated these personality traits, and his emotions, wasn't it fairly safe to suppose they were as similar in that way to humans as they were physically?

A faint smile followed his look of surprise. "I am not accustomed to speaking much. It is not encouraged among soldiers for obvious reasons and it is not really necessary much of the time. I know what I must do. The others also. I will make a special effort to please you."

Eden couldn't help it. She blushed. He was certainly not trying to flirt with her,

she was sure, but the smile and the comment together set all of her receptors to clamoring and she found herself smiling back at him.

He looked away after a moment, reddening uncomfortably, and Eden felt a welling of amusement. He was shy? This great, hulking warrior who looked so unnervingly fierce?

The suspicion charmed her, prompting the contrary side of her nature to tease him. "That was three or four whole sentences, at least. I think you're getting the hang of it."

He sent her a puzzled look and she sighed. Apparently, the tease didn't translate that well. Turning away again, she began walking. He shortened the distance between them, but it was impossible to ignore the fact that he remained at least a pace behind her at all times. Habit, she supposed. "Did you and your people clear this area of vegetation? Or is this a natural meadow?"

He was studying the area when she glanced back at him. "The workers. I am a soldier."

Since that conversational gambit obviously wasn't going any where, she changed the subject. "Where is your world?"

"Here."

She glanced back at him with a frown. "The place you called Xania."

"Xtania," he corrected her, lifting his head skyward as if searching for it. "It can not be seen now. At night, it appears there."

A shock wave went through Eden. "The moon?"

He frowned. The word had not translated at all, she realized. "The body that revolves around this one?" she persisted.

"Yes."

A chill swept through her. Right in their backyard! Sweat popped from her pores directly behind the wave of cold. It took an effort to try to pretend to be unconcerned, but her thoughts were so chaotic she had no idea if she was even faintly successful. The urge to contact Ivy immediately and alert her to the possible threat was so strong she felt almost dizzy with it, but she couldn't allow him to see how much his announcement had alarmed her. A little frantically she searched her mind for something to say to keep from leaving him with the impression that his announcement had sent her into panic--which it had.

"The colonists have been working very hard," she said finally. "We've decided to celebrate" She broke off when she realized that word hadn't translated either. Besides, she wasn't sure it would be a good idea to tell him what they were celebrating. Abruptly, it didn't seem like a good idea to tell him anything at all about them, and certainly not to allow him, or any of the others, to see the colony. They might already have guessed that there were only two hundred colonists between them and complete possession, but there was certainly no sense in relieving all doubts.

He repeated the word and her head jerked toward him of its own accord. "What means this?"

She managed a smile, though it felt a little sickly even to her. "Not translatable until my computer has more of your vocabulary."

He frowned. "Describe."

Her smile stiffened. "I'm not sure I can." They'd reached the stream she

discovered with a mixture of relief at the distraction and alarm at the realization that the moment she crossed it she would be closer to the alien colony than her own. "Is this deep?"

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when he caught her, swinging her up into his arms. She uttered a garbled squeak of fright as he plunged into the water and waded across. Her heart was still hammering so hard in her chest when he set her on her feet again that the pulse in her head made it feel as if her skull would explode. She glanced longingly toward the safety of New Savannah--or the façade of safety it represented, anyway.

As confident as they all had been about the security fields that protected them, they began to seem woefully inadequate in light of the fact that they had an entire world of aliens hovering above their heads.

"We must hurry. Mother queen will communicate soon."

And we certainly wouldn't want to keep mother waiting, Eden thought with a mixture of anger and fear. She was heartily sorry now that she'd leapt into the attempt to form a peace treaty. If she'd been better informed beforehand--or less well informed now, she would be calm, or have had time to carefully deliberate what to say.

She certainly couldn't whirl around at this point and race back. Baen probably wouldn't even need his wings to catch her with his stride--not that she knew if they actually worked. They could be some sort of left over, now useless, genetic trait for all she knew, like the flightless birds of Earth, but they looked large enough and substantial enough to be functioning wings.

Tamping the urge to give in to hysteria, Eden collected herself the best she could as Baen hurried her toward the yawning gate in the wall of the alien fortress.

She needed to observe everything she could about the installation, she realized, assuming she would get the chance to report back.

Dismissing that wayward thought, Eden glanced around curiously as they stepped through the gate. It was dark and it took several seconds for her vision to adjust from the sunlit meadow to the dimness. She had a brief impression of precisely cut stonework before they stepped out on the other side. Glancing back, and then upward at the walls above them, she gauged the thickness of the outer wall at fifteen to twenty feet at the base. The walls rose almost pyramid-like to a narrow walkway at the top. As she examined that, trying to decide how many soldiers stood watch above them, one detached himself from a group marching in formation and dove from the parapet. Her heart skipped several beats. She realized almost immediately, however, that he'd spread his wings.

He glided to the ground in a gentle, spiraling incline, landing less than twenty feet away.

They certainly had gliding capabilities, then. It remained to be seen whether they could actually fly with the wings. Wresting her fascinated gaze from the flying man, Eden focused on the city itself. It was laid out with military precision, as precise a grid work as New Savannah, which had been designed by computers.

There were telltale signs that neither computers nor robots had constructed this structure--slight imperfections that made the certainty grow in her that the aliens had carved this place out and built it, block by block, with their own hands.

Everything was stone, the natural stone of the area, not something that looked like

a manufactured amalgamation of raw materials like concrete. All of the structures were single story and none looked to be much more than ten or twelve feet squared.

The workers did not stop to gawk as she passed them, directed by Baen, who still walked several paces behind, toward the center of the city. She couldn't help but notice, however, that their gazes followed her. Her skin prickled at the touch of so many gazes. She wasn't certain if it was worse because they were alien, but their curiosity certainly increased her tension considerably.

At last they reached a structure near the center of the city. Eden could see nothing about it to make it remarkable from any of the others around it and wondered that Baen had directed her unerringly toward it. For herself, she thought she would have had to count the structures to single it out, but perhaps he had done so and she simply hadn't noticed?

The door didn't open. She stared at it blankly, wondering why, if it required Baen's identification to open, he hadn't come forward to do so. Even as she turned to look at him questioningly, he stepped forward with his hand outstretched, grasped a lever device and then pushed on the thick wood that barred her entrance. To her surprise, it swung inward. Puzzled, she looked the panel over as she stepped inside and saw that it was hanging from the frame that formed the opening.

It was a one room structure she saw without much surprise. Two windows had been set into the walls, one facing the rising sun, the other the setting--to maximize the natural light, she supposed. There was something transparent covering the window, similar to the materials they used for that purpose, possibly even the same material.

It was cool inside, but she saw no ductwork. The materials used to construct the structure must insulate it from the environment, she decided.

Like the cabin she'd lived in for the past fifteen years aboard the U.S.S. Plymouth, the place was almost painfully sparse, except this was worse even than her cubicle. The 'furnishings' were nothing more than slabs of stone of varying heights and uses, one which formed what looked like a miserably uncomfortable sleeping platform covered with moss for 'softness'. Another formed a 'desk' or table and still another a seat.

No care had been taken for comfort, she saw.

On top of the desk was a bulky electronic device that began to squawk almost the moment they walked through the door.

Baen crossed the floor in two strides and snatched up a palm sized object connected to the main device by some sort of cord. "Baen."

Eden jumped when a voice responded, startled more by the crackling background noise than the voice--whose tone and pitch were such that it could have been either male or female vocal chords producing it. Worse, the voice spoke so rapidly her translator spewed a corresponding torrent that was more than half gibberish. About half way through the dialogue, Eden noticed a rectangle on top of the device began to glow. Nearly microscopic dots winked across the panel. As she moved closer, she discovered the dots formed an image.

The face was almost as androgenous as the voice, but the body wasn't. Elongated globes hung almost to the female's waist, which might at some time have been curved in a feminine indentation but now formed a roll beneath the breast roll and just above the belly bulge. The hips were enormous as were the creature's thighs and every pound of

flesh giggled as she spoke, breathed, made infinitesimal movements on the long chaise upon which she was settled.

She didn't look like she could've moved from the chaise without assistance.

The size wasn't deceptive. Behind the female, Eden saw workers much like those she had already seen, moving back and forth industriously. Beyond the workers, three soldiers stood near the wall, stiffly erect, staring straight ahead.

The female looked to be at least a foot taller than any male in the room and probably twice as heavy.

Eden was revolted. She did her best not to, not to make a judgment on the creature when she knew nothing about her, or at least to keep from showing it, but it seemed fairly obvious that she did little beyond lay upon the lounge while the males scurried around her attending her needs and wants.

She discovered Baen had turned to her. He was holding out the rounded object he'd spoken in to. Blinking as if coming out of a trance, Eden took it.

The creature smiled at her thinly. "I am Sademeen. Most humble apologies tendered for encroaching upon your territory. We wish no conflict also."

For several moments Eden wondered if the translator had completely malfunctioned. She smiled a little mechanically, searching her mind frantically for a response. It appeared, though, that Sademeen--indeed the aliens as a whole, were laboring under the impression that this world belonged to them, the interlopers from Earth. Her next words seemed to confirm it.

"We did not know the world below us was claimed."

Eden reddened in spite of all she could do, uncomfortable about claiming the territory under the circumstances. She wasn't about to admit that the world didn't belong to them either, or that they were late comers when it came to staking a claim to it. "The facility here is merely a misunderstanding, then?" she managed to say finally.

Sademeen bowed her head slightly. "The young males discharged there are kzatha--creating problems with the mature males. We none wished to destroy our kzatha off spring, however, and sought to make peace among our males by separating two."

Eden sent Baen a horrified glance before she could prevent it. Frowning faintly, she returned her attention to the female. "My device has not fully assimilated your tongue and fails to translate all of your words for my understanding. Baen is your off-spring?"

"One. I, myself, kzatha a small number there."

"Discarded or possibly banished."

A jolt went through her when the translator abruptly produced the meaning for the word, kzatha.

"You must send them away if they are a nuisance. We have not the capability to retrieve them. Or, if you must, we will understand if you destroy."

Eden sent another horrified glance in Baen's direction, feeling a shiver travel down her spine. Baen's expression was very carefully neutral, but she could well imagine what thoughts must be going through his mind when his mother had just suggested he be destroyed if he was a nuisance. "We would not be comfortable with such a solution," she said firmly. "It is not our custom to destroy to make peace."

That wasn't strictly true, of course. The bloody history of humanity was a testament to that particular solution for problems, but the aliens couldn't know that and

she hoped they wouldn't learn, or have to be taught, the worst about humans.

Sademeen looked both relieved and pleased. "Baen has said that you have no males?"

Eden felt her color fluctuate again. "Not here," she responded a little stiffly.

She sensed rather than saw the surprised jolt that went through Baen at her response. Sademeen's smile broadened. "I knew it could not be as Baen had reported. The kzatha are strong and without defect. It was with regret that we sent them there, and only to make peace among our pazaan, for the older males disliked the young cubs. You may claim them if you have need. As kzatha they have no queens. It distresses me to see them without a future or hope of offspring."

It was almost one shock too many. "I--uh--I would have to discuss this with the --uh--the other queens," she stammered, sparing for wind and trying a little frantically to assimilate the fact that she--they--had just been offered their choice of males.

Did the males have no choice in the matter?

So much for her certainty that this was a male dominated society!

"In any case, we have the seed of our males. We have no need for--uh--mates," she added after a moment.

Sademeen looked saddened but not surprised. "I thought as much. They would still be useful to you. There are enough to form new pazaans for yourselves."

"Harems/family structure."

Eden blinked several times and finally tapped the translator. "Excuse me," she said apologetically, removing the headset and checking it for malfunction. She could see no sign that it was broken and finally returned it to her head. "I thank you for meeting with me, but my device is malfunctioning. In any case, I must return now and consider what you have said and discuss it with the others. We are all pleased, though, that we have established peaceful relations between our two peoples."

Chapter Six

Eden didn't prod Baen to talk as she headed back. In truth, she was so caught up in her tumultuous thoughts that she wasn't completely certain of whether he'd accompanied her back. She found herself in her quarters--home, she mentally amended--with surprise and no clear memory of getting there.

She thought it was her home. After a brief search that turned up personal items that she recognized, she sagged with relief. No one, including her, had had the time since their arrival to devote to making their personal space comfortable. The focus had been on setting up the factories to begin producing their own goods. On the schedule directly after that was the search for useable raw materials. Naturally, there had been very limited space for bringing such things. They had enough to start and that was all.

Dismissing that for the moment, she looked around for a place to sit. One not-terribly-comfortable chair sat in one corner of her living area. She dropped into it for, despite her nervous energy, she was tired from the trek to and from the alien compound.

From out of no where a sense of pity swamped her.

They had been abandoned on an alien world to get along the best they could and, from the way Sademeen had spoken, they were little more than babies, only just matured to adulthood!

She supposed she and the other colonists were in pretty much the same boat, but they had chosen to come, after all. And everything had been planned out and provided for them to the best of the project's abilities.

They hadn't simply been taken off and dumped--like an unwanted pet!

Frowning, she summoned a mental image of Baen's face. It hadn't occurred to her that he must be very young. He looked young, of course, but she was so used to the life spans afforded by their anti-aging drugs it hadn't occurred to her that Baen--all of the aliens really were young!

She dismissed that for the moment. She couldn't afford to expend a good deal of sympathy on the aliens. She had her own people to consider.

She could not tell them what Sademeen had suggested, not yet, anyway. They were liable to demand to take the mother queen up on her offer without considering the long term possibility for repercussions.

Guilt almost immediately swamped her at that thought. The aliens were probably over there right now wondering what their fate was to be.

The decision wasn't hers alone. She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry that that was the case, but she also knew that the others would most likely take their lead from her.

She thought they would, anyway.

She hoped they would. She didn't know what would become of them if the colonists stampeded the alien colony and began looking the males over to claim. They'd had several physical disagreements over space. They were liable to resort to real violence if they got into a dispute over the males!

Regardless, she needed time to recover from the shock of her discoveries and

Her eyes widened abruptly. She'd been in so much turmoil, she had completely forgotten the potential threat. Getting to her feet abruptly, she moved to the communicator near the doorway. "Major Sterling?"

Ivy answered immediately. "What the hell's going on, Chisholm? You walked right past me like you were in a trance or something!"

"We need to talk."

Almost on the heels of her comment, the chime rang at the door, alerting Eden to a visitor. Impatiently, she stalked to the door and commanded it to open. A shockwave of surprise washed over her when she saw Ivy was standing on the other side of the panel.

Briefly, amusement glinted in Ivy's dark eyes. It vanished almost immediately, however. "Something happened," she said, taking the open door as an invitation to enter.

Eden wrestled with her disordered thoughts, trying to think of some way to relay her news without sounding overly alarming. Nothing came to her. "We were right. The aliens aren't from here."

"I didn't think so. I've gone over the computer logs. There was no malfunction. That--whatever they want to call it--wasn't there when we dropped the bot pod."

Eden chewed her bottom lip nervously. "They're from this world's moon."

Ivy's eyes grew so wide Eden could see the white's all the way around her dark irises. She could also see the dawning horror in them.

"I don't think they represent a threat to us," she added hurriedly.

Ivy gave her a look, depressing her wrist communicator. "I'd rather be safe than sorry ... Lt. Carter?"

"Affirmative."

"Be advised, we have learned that the aliens inhabit this planet's satellite. Copy?"

There was a faint pause. "Affirmative. What do you want me to do, Major?"

Ivy studied Eden a moment. "Do you have a visual?"

"Negative. It's currently on the dark side."

"For now I want you to settle into an orbit that keeps you in a position opposite the moon. Copy?"

"Affirmative. Will calculate the speed of its orbit and adjust ours."

She paced to the window of the living area and stared into the distance when she had broken off communications. "Why didn't you tell me at once?"

Eden was embarrassed. "The meeting was--uh--nothing like I'd expected. To be honest I was just plain thrown for a loop."

Ivy was frowning when she turned to look at Eden questioningly. "You said you didn't feel like they posed a threat."

Eden rubbed her head. "The mother queen was very apologetic. They seem to think that this is our world."

"It is."

"I mean, they obviously haven't been here before and thought it was unoccupied when they sent the others down, the kzatha, they call them."

A thoughtful expression crossed Ivy's features. "So they're just beginning space exploration, you think?"

"It seems that way."

Ivy was silent for some time. "What did she have to say that threw you into such

a state of disorder then?”

Eden shrugged. “She said we could have them.”

Ivy commenced to blinking. “Excuse me?”

“That’s what I thought. I checked the translator, though, and it seemed to be functioning properly. Besides, she didn’t leave me in any doubt. She made it clear we could have them if we wanted them--or we could send them away if we didn’t, or wipe them out if we felt it was necessary.”

Ivy laughed, but it was a sound of disbelief. “That isn’t funny, Eden.”

“I’m not joking. The females have harems. The one I spoke with, Sademeen, seemed to think we were the same as they are, and that we’d ... misplaced our men, or something. I told her we didn’t need them for ... uh ... breeding, but she said they would be useful anyway. I’m telling you, she was trying to give them to me--us.”

Ivy commenced to pacing. Abruptly, she stopped and turned to stare at Eden again. “The Trojan horse!”

“What?” Eden asked blankly.

Ivy shook her head. “This is ancient military lore. An army came up against a city they couldn’t breach. So they built a great wooden horse and left it as a ‘gift’. When the people of the city dragged the ‘gift’ inside, the soldiers came out and destroyed the city from the inside.”

“You’re saying you think that’s what this gift is? An attempt to get inside to attack us?”

“It seems just as obvious that they are aware of our force fields as it is that they don’t have the technology to breach them, so, yes, that’s what I’m suggesting.”

Eden realized that, deep down, she’d harbored the same fear in spite of her sympathy for the aliens who’d apparently been discarded for no other reason than because the older males felt threatened by them. “There is absolutely nothing to support a suggestion that they mean us any harm, however--except the human capacity for deception and treachery and we don’t know that they’re as bad as we are.”

“From a military standpoint, from a security standpoint--it would still be better to destroy them,” Ivy said forcefully.

Eden merely gaped at her while that slowly sank in. As it settled in her mind and then the pit of her stomach like something completely loathsome and indigestible, Baen’s image rose before her mind’s eye, and then the faces of the others she’d passed when she’d visited their city. “You can not be serious,” Eden managed faintly.

Ivy’s expression was impatient. “You can’t allow emotion to color your judgment, Eden! Our future--the future of everyone here--is at stake. From a purely logical standpoint, you know as well as I do that there will be trouble down the line even if we could get relations off to an agreeable start now. We are seriously, scarily, out numbered here, even if our technology does give us an advantage at this point. We could and should destroy them now, while we can, to preserve our future.”

A wave of nausea washed over Eden. Anger was the backwash. “You’re not just suggesting we annihilate the colony that’s here. You’re talking about attacking their home world, aren’t you? I will not sanction such a thing! I won’t even consider it! They haven’t threatened us in any way. If they had, I might agree with you. If I’d seen anything to suggest they were being less than honest, I might consider it. From everything I’ve seen and heard, they are completely focused on their own concerns and

have no real interest in us at all, however. Moreover, we're not talking about a damned rodent infestation. We're talking about intelligent beings!"

"Who have a standing army at least twice the size of ours! If they were a completely peaceful people, they wouldn't have an army! For all we know the group they banished here is a prison full of miscreants!"

"In any case, I'm head of the army and security. The decision should be a military one, based on logic and threat assessment, not emotions!"

"I am the designated head of this colony!" Eden shot back at her. "You answer to me and the council. And I can tell you right now the council would never agree with what you're planning, certainly not before we've had time to fully evaluate the situation."

Ivy stalked toward the door. "Then call a meeting. We can discuss this in council and see where the others stand," she said grimly.

* * * *

Eden would have far preferred more time to compose herself and wrap her mind around the things that she'd seen and heard before she spoke before the council, but it was obvious this was not something that could be delayed.

To a degree, she could understand and agree with Ivy's stance. They still didn't really know what they were dealing with. The aliens could prove to be a threat, if not immediately, then at some point in the future, but they could not consider such a measure as Ivy was suggesting just on the chance that they might pose a threat.

Fury went through her, however, directed completely at Ivy when she arrived at the meeting and discovered that Ivy had been 'campaigning' outside chambers while the members were gathering. Before the meeting was even called, the other council members were arguing among themselves.

It took Eden almost twenty minutes to establish even a semblance of order. When the sector leaders had quieted sufficiently for a discussion, Eden related her experience and the observations she'd made prior to that. The message stunned the council members as much as it had her.

"It must have been a malfunction of the translator!" Stacy Sessions exclaimed. "Or the computer just hadn't assimilated sufficient data to properly translate."

Eden shrugged. "I thought so, too. I am completely certain that the computer hasn't had nearly enough input yet to clarify everything that is said, but I'm also reasonably certain that Sademeen meant what I thought she did. She was clearly anxious to make amends for encroaching and just as obviously petitioning for the sake of the kzatha."

"You didn't find that suspicious, at all?" Ivy demanded.

Eden gave her a look. "I know there is a lot we don't understand about these aliens, and I also know that I pointed out that we couldn't judge them by ourselves, but I was speaking to her face to face. I could see her eyes and her expressions. She seemed completely sincere." She turned to Liz. "What do you make of all this?"

Liz looked almost as stunned as the others. She collected herself with an effort. "Frankly, I don't even like the idea of taking a wild guess at this point, not when Major Sterling is advocating war with the natives."

"They aren't natives," Ivy pointed out tightly.

"They're a hell of a lot closer than we are," Deborah Pugh snapped. "I can't believe you would even consider such a An unconscionable act of aggression!"

“Remind me of that when they’re trying to blow your ass away!”

“Order!” Eden growled, slamming her gavel into the table until everyone finally fell silent. “We’re going to have to find a middle ground! Ivy’s at least partially right. For our own safety, we can’t afford to just welcome them with open arms. We have to keep our guard up and we need to learn as much about them as possible, as quickly as we can so that we can make an informed decision one way or the other.” She turned to Liz again. “I’d still like for you to take a stab at assessing the situation, Liz. Is it too dangerous, to your mind, to even consider fostering relations with them?”

“I don’t like this,” Liz said crossly. “I need the chance to gather data and observe them myself to make any sort of recommendation.”

“We’re liable to have mutiny on our hands if ... when the other colonists learn about this if we refuse to even consider Sademeen’s offer,” Brenda Coleman, chief of agriculture put in.

“Oh! Well forgive me all to hell and gone for pointing out the possibility of waking up with your throats cut!” Ivy growled, surging to her feet abruptly. “Let’s just all stroll over there and pick ourselves a harem and live happily ever after! Christ almighty! Do you just have to get a whiff of something swinging a dick to lose all sense?”

“There’s no need to be insulting! We’re not dismissing your concerns, Major Sterling,” Brenda said heatedly. “As it happens, I’d rather err on the side of caution myself--although I completely disagree with the suggestion that we just ‘kill them all and let god sort them out’ mentality! Surely to god we can come up with something somewhere in the middle?”

“Liz,” Eden said commandingly. “Just tell us if you feel--intuitively, in your gut, based on the little you’ve seen--whatever--that it would be safe enough to at least proceed with studies?”

Liz’s jaw dropped. She blinked rapidly several times. “Well--I assumed we would. This is an opportunity of a lifetime, studying a culture and species entirely different from our own! We have to do that much!” Assuming a pose of ‘the thinker’, she propped an elbow on the table top, stroking her full lower lip thoughtfully. “This is just a wild stab at this situation, and who knows how accurate it could be considering I have to draw from knowledge of the past of the human race, not theirs, but, assuming we can safely make a correlation here, this actually sounds like a number of Earth societies in their early development.”

“This is your field, not mine,” Colleen Dryer put in. “But I’m kind of a history buff anyway--and I don’t recall ever running across anything even close.”

“Because it’s reversed,” Liz said, sounding more certain of herself now. “Early in man’s history, when they were predominantly an agrigarian society and before they had developed machines to help them, there were cultures where men took many wives to insure their wealth. Having many wives meant many children, who were mainly produced to do the labor needed to survive, and, hopefully, become wealthy. The more wives and children they had, the wealthier they were because they had the labor they needed to produce more and not only have what they needed to feed themselves, but more than they needed so that they could trade for valuable commodities--their offspring were assets in trade, as well. They could sell off their daughters to other men, who paid in herd animals or whatever else they wanted or needed. If they were predisposed to

produce way more males than females, then the females would, by their rarity, be far more important since they couldn't have children without them. It sounds very plausible to me, given what we have learned, that the females became the central focus here, taking many males probably partly because the males would have no mate otherwise, producing more males than females and compounding their tendency with each generation. But their ability to have multiple births ensured that they would have all the labor they needed to make the pazaan strong and wealthy. They may even bear the offspring of more than one male at the time, becoming impregnated by four or five different males within their pazaan each time they mate.

"I couldn't begin to guess why they held on to these old customs even when they became advanced enough to make it unnecessary, but then again I could sight other cultures on Earth that clung determinedly to old customs long past their practical use.

"And as cold as her attitude seemed, the males, apparently, are in greater supply than needed, and thus less valuable--but still a trade item. If you look at it that way, this Sadameen was simply trying to pay for peace with 'goods' she didn't mind trading off--they're nothing to her because she has way more than she knows what to do with, but she figured they'd be valuable to us because we don't have any."

Eden thanked her and stood and began pacing. "I haven't had a great deal of time to think this through myself, but I have a suggestion."

She saw when she turned to look at the council members that she had their full attention.

"We had already agreed that we would have a thanksgiving celebration and invite a representative group to join us. I think we should proceed with that plan. We bring over a small group, observe them at close range, see how they interact with the colonists and then go from there.

"They can't pose too much of a threat if it's only a small group. Granted, there could be some danger in it, but it would be minimized and it would appease the curiosity of the colonists--for now, anyway."

Ivy didn't look the least bit pleased with the suggestion but the other council members immediately agreed that it would be a good place to start. When the others had filed out to make the announcement to their sects, Eden waited to hear Ivy's objections.

"On the surface, I agree that that sounds fairly safe, but you do realize that you'd be giving the enemy the opportunity to study us, not just the other way around? Plus, they would have the chance to study our defenses."

"I may not have a military background like you do, Ivy, but I'm not a complete idiot. It occurred to me. Your job will be to place guards at all key positions to make certain they don't get the chance to study, or sabotage, and also to have 'off duty' militia in the group to keep an eye on things. I'm counting on discretion, though. We're not going to get what we're looking for here if they know they're being watched."

Chapter Seven

Both Liz and Ivy accompanied Eden when she returned to the alien compound. Their shuttle had barely settled to the ground when the gate opened. Even as Eden walked down the gangplank, she saw Baen striding purposefully through the gates.

A mixture of emotions pelted her at once. Foremost among them was appreciation, for she felt like she could allow herself that much and, alien or not, she couldn't help but think he was very attractive--strong, well-built, his facial features very pleasing to the eye. She found his quiet manner and the intelligence in his eyes appealing, as well. And, truth be told, she couldn't help but find his bashfulness rather endearing.

An unaccustomed uncertainty fell over her as Ivy and Liz joined her. She'd been wrestling with her own private fears all the way out and hadn't formulated a speech. Now she felt that that had been an error on her part. She had no wish to insult them, or wound them.

She didn't care what Ivy thought. She had felt that Sademeen's comments had wounded Baen. She didn't believe that she was wrong and she certainly had no wish to injure his sensibilities further.

Smiling a little nervously, she decided to feel her way carefully. "Mother queen, Sademeen was most gracious," she said a little hesitantly.

Something flickered in Baen's eyes. He averted them. His demeanor was as stiffly correct as ever, but she had the sense that he felt the comment was a prelude to a dismissal. "Our customs differ greatly from those of the Xtanians," she added quickly. "And we are not certain that we, or you, would be comfortable with what she proposed."

Baen sent her a confused glance. "The choice is yours," he said finally.

Eden reddened, exchanging a glance with Liz.

"What she means to say is that we feel we can not make a judgment without coming to know one another better," Liz added helpfully.

Baen frowned and returned his attention to Eden.

"In order for our two peoples to begin to know and understand one another better, we wished to invite a small group from the kzatha to join us in celebration of--uh--our new friendship," she added and then stopped again when she realized that a problem of understanding 'when' might arise. They were still using Earth time. New Georgia's calendar would of necessity be different, though, and Xtania's different from that.

"When the darkness has passed ten times more."

"How many will you choose?"

Eden blinked, exchanged glances with Ivy and Liz and finally looked at him a little helplessly. "One moment," she said, turning to Liz and Ivy.

"Fifty," Liz said promptly when Eden looked at her questioningly.

"A dozen," Ivy said at almost the same moment.

Eden held up her hands and turned to face Baen again. "Thirty."

Nodding, Baen turned on his heel and strode back into the fortress. A few

moments passed and Eden was beginning to think that that had ended the interview when she heard the tramping of feet, many feet.

When the fortress began to disgorge a virtual stampede of Xtanians, Eden, Liz and Ivy exchanged a look of pure horror. Fortunately, even Ivy was too stunned to manage much more than a gape. For, despite the overwhelming tide of seven foot males, they were very orderly as they formed up with military precision outside the walls.

Eden's color returned with a vengeance as she looked up and down the rows of Xtanian males.

"We're supposed to choose?" Liz gasped, obviously as horrified at the prospect as Eden was.

"Apparently," Eden muttered, wishing she hadn't thought up the 'plan' at all, wishing she'd sent someone in her place, wishing she was anywhere except where she was.

"I feel a little faint."

Eden sent Liz a narrow eyed glare. "Don't you dare!"

"I'll pick," Ivy said decisively.

Before Eden could say 'yeah or nay' Ivy strode boldly toward the first male in the front row and looked him over as if she was considering buying. Liz and Eden exchanged a glance.

"I'm not letting her do all the picking," Liz growled. "She'll pick all the runtiest ones that are the least appealing, mark my word!"

Eden and Liz joined Ivy. "You'll choose ten," Eden said militantly.

Ivy studied her a long moment and finally shrugged. "No soldiers."

Eden's jaw dropped, her gaze darting from Ivy to Baen, whom she discovered had followed them and could not have failed to have overheard the remark. It was on the tip of her tongue to contradict the order, but she realized almost at once that her desire to do so was far more than an impulse to establish her position. Maybe she was more interested in Baen than she ought to be? Perhaps her interest was clouding her judgment? Finally, she merely nodded.

Looking far more relieved than smug that Eden hadn't contradicted her, Ivy nodded and approached the first row of the formation. She'd made her way all the way down to the opposite end, looking each male over cursorily, before she returned, tapping first one and then another on the shoulder, seemingly at random.

Trying to ignore her discomfort and embarrassment, Eden made her way to the Xtanians lined up in the last row and Liz took the center row.

It was difficult to decide, Eden found. They were all very serious about the business and gave nothing of their thoughts, or personality, away. Uneasily, the thought occurred to her that Ivy might be right about the selection process. They could influence the colonists either way by choosing only those most appealing, or the ones that were least appealing. On the other hand, it occurred to her that what she found appealing might not necessarily appeal to another woman so perhaps she was being unnecessarily sensitive about her own influence? Finally, she simply decided to choose at random as Ivy seemed to have.

It was an unexpected ordeal. She felt more than a little faint herself when she had returned to the shuttle. Liz seemed to have recovered in the interim. She looked as if she was trying very hard not to look too pleased with herself. "They are an exceptionally

handsome race, are they not?"

There was a note almost of giddiness in her voice. Ivy sent her a look of displeasure. "Very fine specimens," she said tartly.

"From that I'd have to guess she didn't find any runts or ugly brutes to pick," Liz said testily.

"This entire thing has made me very uncomfortable I don't mind telling you. I feel very badly that we could not invite them all," Eden muttered. "I know it isn't safe, and I'm not arguing that, but I couldn't help but feel that those not chosen must feel slighted."

"Which is a good thing," Ivy retorted. "Now we will see what behavior this provokes and I'll warrant we will understand them a good deal better."

Eden's eyes widened as she stared at Ivy. "You were hoping to provoke some sort of violence by showing favor to some and ignoring others?" she demanded, appalled. "What if you'd succeeded? There were hundreds of them out there. I'd be willing to guess the entire city emptied. I had heart palpitations only thinking, briefly, that it might be an attack. I do not want to be caught up in the midst of giants like that fighting."

"I had it covered," Ivy retorted dryly. "The techs recalibrated the transporters and targeted the three of us the moment we stepped out of the shuttle. If there had been a problem, they would have snatched us up instantly."

"You know this for a fact? I didn't see you communicate with them!"

"I left orders. I'm not accustomed to having my orders ignored. We were perfectly safe."

"But you're assuming they managed to recalibrate and focus on us. You don't know they did! There could've been a malfunction with the equipment, atmospheric interference ... any number of things."

Ivy gave Eden a look. "I didn't formulate these plans," she pointed out. "That was the decision of the council. It's just that it occurred to me that it would be an opportunity to see just how dispassionate they really are."

"And I'll tell you one thing--I may not be a behavioral specialist like Liz, but these aliens are not emotionless automatons! They are amazingly well disciplined--even the workers--but I saw the look in their eyes when we were looking them over like choice pieces of meat. They were damned anxious to be picked, every one of them, and very disappointed when they weren't! You may be certain that I will have my entire army on full alert when they come!"

"It's no more realistic to assume the worse than it is to assume the best," Liz snapped. "I noticed, as well, but you could be misinterpreting the reason. It doesn't necessarily follow that they were anxious to get inside to attack us. Maybe they just wanted to be picked because they're curious about us. Maybe it was nothing more than the chance to engage in a little entertainment. It doesn't appear to me that they do much besides work."

Upon their return to New Savannah, they were greeted at the landing pad by a good third of the colonists. Dismayed, Eden nevertheless found a point of vantage and addressed them, explaining that a representative group of Xtanians had been invited to join them in giving thanks for a safe voyage and successful beginning to their enterprise.

An air almost of hysteria gripped the entire city thereafter so that Eden began to wonder if she'd made the right decision. Reluctantly, she admitted there had been no

choice. From the moment the colonists had realized the city across the valley was entirely male, for most of them, caution had gone right out of their thoughts. There would have been even more problems to deal with if she had tried to stem their enthusiasm.

It was hard to condemn them when she completely understood their desire for male companionship. Fifteen years was a very long time to spend in the company of women, without even children to break the monotony.

If the Xtanians had not already been across the valley when they arrived and they had had time to settle in and impregnate the first draw of colonists, the focus might have been on 'nesting' and babies. But that had not been the case and now all of them were in 'mating' phase and nothing short of doing so was going to appease them.

The one positive side to the entire business, as far as she could see, was that morale was at an all time high. The colonists were so anxious for their promised treat that they worked far longer and harder than they might have otherwise in establishing order to the colony so that they could prepare for their celebration.

She had a very bad feeling that Ivy and her troops were going to have their hands full trying to keep an eye on the visitors. If these males were the least bit like their human counterparts they weren't going to have any trouble at all coaxing the colonists off for a tryst during the festivities.

Chapter Eight

Hunting wasn't something Eden cared for. She had mastered the skill like all of the other colonists because the project leaders had considered it necessary. They would take what they could to establish the colony from Earth. They would begin to produce their own food on the new world as soon as possible, but it was thought to be unavoidable that there would be a void that would have to be filled, where they would have to supplement the food that remained from their trip with available resources until they managed to establish their own supply through agriculture and animal husbandry.

Protein was in shorter supply than anything else. They'd produced much of the food for the trip in route in the ship's garden and everything that could be transplanted to the surface had been and was already beginning to flourish.

Meat was another matter. Except for what had been processed and packaged, they had no source but the 'pops', frozen embryos, they'd brought with them and they couldn't even begin to develop their farm animals until they'd had time to investigate whether the introduction of these animals would upset the natural balance of New Georgia.

If they were to have a meat course at the celebration, they were going to have to chase it down and kill it.

As revolting as that thought was, Eden was as hungry for real honest to god protein that hadn't come from a freeze dried pouch or a tin as everyone else was. Moreover, she considered it essential to practice what she preached, not simply order someone else to do it.

Sometimes that could be a real hardship. This was one of those times when she would have preferred to send someone else to handle the job.

After the probes had assimilated the data on the local beasts, therefore, she selected a group to accompany her and set out on a hunting expedition. Three days of disappointment followed. Logically it seemed to her, the same techniques used on Earth should work here, but the native beasts weren't cooperating. They found tracks. They found droppings, but they didn't find any targets they could hit.

After the third day, she acknowledged that their method was probably the problem. A half dozen hunters stumbling through the woods sounded like a herd of buffalo. They were scaring their prey off by trying to stay together for the sake of safety.

There hadn't been any threatening activity from the Xtanian compound, regardless of what Ivy seemed to have expected. On the fourth day, Eden broke up the hunting party and sent everyone off in a different direction. No one was particularly happy about the prospect of wandering through an alien landscape alone, but they were all armed, both with bolts for their hunting bows and phazers for anything else, communicators, and even personal locators and vitals monitors in case anyone was injured and unable to call for help.

The strategy seemed to be working. Eden came close to nailing two beasts that appeared to be mammalian. She didn't succeed, but she at least managed to sight

something and fire at it. As the morning wore on, however, and the prospects of capturing anything dwindled, she made her way toward the small stream that bisected the valley, hoping she might come upon some tardy arrival at the watering source.

She wasn't prepared for what she did come across. The sight that met her gaze when she finally reached the roaring noise that told her there was at least a small waterfall, or rapids, nearby so completely stunned her that she simply went catatonic for many moments, as frozen as if she'd been hit with a stun ray.

Sure enough, there was a tiny waterfall.

Baen was standing in the middle of the rush of water without a stitch of clothing on. When the frozen state of shock finally wore off, banished by the unaccustomed sound of fluttering wings, she discovered that he was staring back at her, a half smile playing about his finely etched lips.

Aside from the curling horns that sprouted from his skull and the leathery wings he'd just shaken the water from, there was nothing about his anatomy that looked the least bit alien--except there seemed to be more of everything and he was completely hairless except for that on top of his head, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Dragging her gaze from the impressive male genitalia to his face, Eden felt color rise in her cheeks and pulse as she met Baen's gaze and saw the half smile.

She was in no state to interpret his expression and torn between a craven need to charge off in full retreat and an unaccustomed desire to completely assuage her curiosity and study him to her heart's content.

"I--uh--beg your pardon. I didn't realize there was anyone here bathing."

A frown creased the space between his dark brows, but his expression was puzzled, not irritated.

It dawned on Eden after a moment that, although she'd brought the translator in case of need, she hadn't really expected to meet up with any of the Xtanians. The headset was off and curled around her neck.

She was suddenly uncertain of whether she really wanted to set her weapon down to adjust the headset. They were completely alone in the woods. If his intentions were to do her harm, now would be a very good opportunity for him to do so. No one would know but what the attack had come from some of the local wildlife.

He tapped his ear and for the first time she noticed his ears were formed into a peak at the top, almost elfin in shape.

Abruptly, he started toward her. Panic washed through Eden, but it didn't occur to her to raise her weapon and fire. It also didn't occur to her to run. She simply stood where she was, unmoving, bolted to the ground by her chaotic thoughts until he walked straight up to her, grasped the translator and fit it firmly on her head.

His palms grazed her cheeks as he adjusted it. His hands were chilled from the water, but it wasn't the coolness of his hands that sent a shiver through her. Even though at least a foot separated them, she felt the warmth of his body, felt bathed by his pheromones as if caressed, and the shiver that went through her was an awakening that was both unexpected and unwelcome.

"I did not understand your words."

Eden gaped at him. To save her life, she couldn't remember what she'd said for several moments. It took an effort to gather moisture into her mouth. When she finally did, she swallowed audibly. "I apologized for intruding," she managed finally. "I didn't

expect to come upon anyone.”

He nodded, his gaze moving from her face, over her breasts and downward. She almost butted heads with him when she looked down to see what had caught his attention, for he leaned down at almost the same moment.

She would certainly have come off the loser in that head butt, she thought wryly, studying the horns at close range for the first time.

He took her crossbow from her limp hand. Instinctively, Eden's other hand crept upward to rest on the butt of her phazer pistol, but he didn't seem to notice as he lifted the hunting piece to study it. “This is for hunting?”

“The phazers burn the meat,” Eden responded.

Baen's gaze flickered from the crossbow to the phazer on Eden's hip. When he saw her hand was resting on it, he lifted his gaze to hers for a pregnant moment and finally returned his attention to the bow, handing it back to her almost reluctantly. “I have something similar to this.” He frowned. “Had. We were not allowed to bring many personal belongings because of space and weight limitations.”

Which she supposed explained why his quarters were so painfully uncomfortable looking.

She struggled to think of a response to the comment that would keep the conversation going. She didn't want to say they'd had limitations, as well, since the Xtanian's were laboring under the impression that her party was ‘native’ to this world and she feared at least some of the amiable relations they'd had thus far were due to that misconception.

She also felt uneasy about offering to let him use it.

It wasn't as if he was unarmed, though. His weapon was lying with his clothing a goodly distance from where they stood but he was big enough and close enough that his physical presence could have been enough of a threat if he'd felt the inclination.

Someone had to make the first overture of trust.

Smiling a little uneasily, she held the crossbow up. “Would you like to try it?”

His response to the overture was almost worth the fear inspired sweat gathering in her crevices. He smiled, his golden eyes lighting with pleasure. His expression set off a jolt of pleasurable sensation through her.

Taking the bow once more, he examined it thoroughly and fired a test bolt into the trunk of a broad, ancient tree just on the other side of the stream. Reloading, he took sight and placed a second bolt directly beside the first. An expression of satisfaction settled over his features. He handed the crossbow back to her. “Very good thing.”

Striding away from her, he waded across the stream, leaned down to scoop up his clothing and preceded to the tree to examine it while he stepped into his breeches and fastened them.

Relief flooded Eden. She was having a hard time being nonchalant about his nakedness.

When he began struggling into his tunic, Eden decided to join him on the other side of the stream.

The water was so icy it snatched her breath from her chest when she stepped into it. No wonder his hands had radiated cold! Recovering slightly, she moved quickly across and out on the other side. Water squished unpleasantly from her boots with each step she made up the bank on the opposite side. After looking around for a likely looking

place to settle, she finally plopped down on a fairly flat stone to remove her boots.

Baen squatted down in front of her, grasped the bottom of the boot she'd just loosened and tugged it off her foot, almost unseating her in the process. "Guess I should have taken the boots off for the crossing," she said wryly when he turned the boot up to empty it.

He sent her a faint smile. "Wiser. Smarter still to ask me to carry."

Eden smiled back at him but thoughtfully. "Does your name have a meaning in your tongue?" she asked curiously, trying to ignore the way her stomach jumped when he reached up to brush her hands away and untied her other boot himself.

He glanced up from what he was doing. "Is number seven."

Eden's brows rose. "A number?"

"Yes. Seven of seven."

She no doubt looked as uncomprehending as she felt.

"Seventh baby, seventh birthing."

That comment sank in very slowly. "You're saying you were the seventh baby Sademeen bore?" Eden asked, aghast, feeling her color fluctuate rather madly at the horrific thought.

"In seventh birthing."

She stared at him as he removed her other boot and dumped the water out, wondering whether to pursue the matter until she was certain she'd understood him or not. "You mean she had seven when you were born, but she'd had six babies before that?"

He shook his head. Rising, he glanced around and finally moved to the tree. Turning the boots upside down, he wedged each on a branch and left them to drip dry.

"Eight at my time. Before that ...," he paused, frowning as he thought it over. "Three first time. Five second time and third. Seven each time after until last." He shrugged. "Was supposed to be queen last time. Instead eight more males. Sademeen did not produce a queen, thus we are kzatha and she is liemzde--disgraced. Is not the same with your people?"

Eden was mentally calculating Sademeen's 'production', not an easy task to do in her head when she was accustomed to using electronics to calculate and moreover too stunned to actually have full use of her facilities. Poor thing! No wonder she was so misshapen and too crippled to move around! "You're saying she had forty two babies?" Eden managed a little faintly. They had ... litters? Was this why they had the harem type family unit? Because the females produced so many children it took a small army to tend to mother and children? Was this why they seemed so--detached from each other?

It seemed probable. Under those circumstances she could see that every 'family' would be almost like an institution, processing without much, if any, time for personal attention. Demonstrations of affection would probably be few and far between, if at all, and thus the offspring would not have had an opportunity to really develop emotionally. The negative emotions would have been deliberately suppressed and discouraged because of the turmoil it could create.

He frowned, but nodded. "She is good mother queen. Should not be liemzde."

There was defensiveness in both his tone and the tension in his expression, prompting a wave of empathy. Feeling compelled to reassure him that she wasn't being judgmental about his mother, Eden nodded agreement. In a way, she did agree. It didn't

seem to her that Sademeen could have had control over what her body did, or didn't, do and therefore shouldn't be considered at fault. On the other hand, she had been pretty cold about disposing of her last litter.

But maybe that was being judgmental? Maybe Sademeen had only tried to accept what she had believed could not be changed? As horrible as that seemed to her, comparatively speaking it probably wasn't any worse than some of the human practices. Survival and the insurance of healthy progeny were really at the root of most 'customs' of this sort. If the Xtanian's entire social structure was based on a specific number of males and females and nature threw the count off, it could conceivably create all sorts of problems.

Ivy was right. They weren't emotionless. Apparently, it wasn't even altogether a matter of stern discipline that made them exercise iron self-control.

When she emerged from her thoughts, Eden discovered that Baen had moved to the tree and grasped the shaft of one of the bolts. The sleeve of his uniform bulged as he tugged at it. She was on the point of telling him not to worry about retrieving them, certain he would find he couldn't, when he pulled it loose. Removing the second bolt, he examined both of them carefully and returned them to her.

Mildly amazed and vaguely unnerved by his strength, Eden stared at the bolts for a moment and finally took them from his palm and fitted them back into the slots on the bow designed to hold them.

"Your hunt has been unsuccessful."

It wasn't a question. Eden smiled wryly and shrugged. "So far."

Nodding, he waded into the edge of the stream several yards downstream from where Eden was sitting and grasped something just beneath the surface. Eden gasped when he dragged the carcass of a beast from the water that looked like it must be almost as big as he was and probably weighed more. "I will give you mine and return for another."

A combination of embarrassment and guilt immediately swamped her. "Oh, no! You can't do that! I couldn't take it. Really. I'm perfectly capable of doing my own hunting."

He frowned. "We have hunted here much since coming. The animals are harder to find now."

"At least that makes me feel a little better about my lack of success," Eden commented. "I still don't want to take yours."

He looked uncomfortable. "You would be liemzde to return without."

Shamed. Warmth flooded her at his thoughtfulness. He was concerned that she would be disgraced if she proved to be a bad hunter. She supposed she wouldn't be setting a very good example, but that was hardly a reason for him to do without! Besides, she would be a lot more embarrassed to take credit for something she didn't do. She told him as much.

The reward was immediate and it discomfited her. He gave her a look of admiration she hardly felt she'd earned. "A gift then ... for peace offering."

He wasn't mentally deficient or obtuse. He knew she wouldn't want to insult him by refusing to take it under those circumstances. She smiled with an effort, still not terribly happy about taking his food. "Thank you," she said a little stiffly. "All we need to do now is figure out how to get it back to the city."

He bent over promptly, hefted the thing and placed it on his shoulders. Eden tried not to look as impressed as she was by the show of strength, or as revolted as she was at the thought of having the dripping dead thing around his neck.

He hadn't put on his boots and neither had she, but she didn't want to hold him up when he was carrying something so heavy. Collecting his boots and weapon and then her own, she followed him rather meekly as he struck off unerringly in the direction of New Savannah while she consulted her locator for directions.

Her feet were tender. His apparently were not. She was so busy trying to pick her way carefully to keep from stepping on something that would jab into her feet that she nearly ran into him when he stopped to allow her to take the lead. He gave her a curious look and dropped the carcass. Grasping her upper arms, he pushed her gently to the ground, took the boots from her when she was seated and proceeded to put them on her. "I am not good at this," he said apologetically. "I am soldier. The workers would be very practiced and careful of your comfort."

She looked up at his face as he knelt over her. "You don't give yourself enough credit. Your hands are very gentle."

He reddened. "The workers are better. They are the breeders and thus taught from youth to please. There are five breeders in my brood. Two others are soldiers as I am."

Eden stared at him in confusion for several moments, but the suspicion that rose in her mind refused to be banished. "Are you ...? You're not ...? What do you mean by brood?"

"The birthing brood," he responded promptly, looking vaguely surprised and more than a little uncomfortable. "I have told you we are kzatha."

Embarrassed heat filled Eden's face. Warmth seemed to fill her entire body and not all of it was embarrassment. "Are you suggesting ... uh ... what I think you are?"

He tilted his head at her when he'd finished tying her boot straps. "Sademeen suggested. You chose my brood brothers among those for the celebration. We thought that that meant that you were considering choosing us--if you found us suitable for your needs."

Eden felt her jaw go slack. Her mind instantly began to scramble to recall the details of that embarrassing episode, but to save her life she couldn't conjure any clear vision of the faces of the men she'd thought she had picked so randomly.

Oh my god! She thought, horrified.

Chapter Nine

Despite Eden's shock, it penetrated her chaotic mind that Baen appeared to be more than a little offended by her reaction. He was frowning as he took his boots from her limp hands and pulled them on.

"Your customs are much different from ours," Eden managed finally, her voice sounding faint even to her own ears.

He nodded, but she could see he didn't believe their customs were that different.

Good god! He expected her to take on all eight of them? Was it considered a huge slight not to?

Visions of her home filled her mind. She'd thought it very comfortable, but it would be bursting at the seams with nine people. They'd have to sleep stacked like cord wood!

She banished the image with an effort.

What was she thinking?

She wasn't even sure she wanted one around!

That thought gave her pause. As hard as she'd been trying to pretend she didn't find Baen irresistible, she must feel a lot more than she'd consciously accepted if she'd picked his brood brothers out of such a huge gathering.

Their mind set was obviously very, very different. An Earth man would have been horrendously insulted if she'd shown any interest in his brothers. They were very territorial. Either the Xtanian's weren't, or maybe they were and it was just in a different way? Maybe the brood was almost like a unit? They expected to be chosen in sets? And what would happen if they weren't? Rivalry? Disgrace? War?

She dismissed that thought.

It circled around and came back. She licked her lips nervously, but she was never going to understand if she didn't ask some questions. "It would be an insult to chose one and not the others?" she asked hesitantly.

His brows rose. "Yes, but why would you want only one?" he asked puzzled. "There would be none to care for you and the babies. Soldiers are not trained to care for the young, nor workers trained in the skills to protect. This is not the way of your people?"

Eden discovered her head was pounding with the effort to grasp what seemed to her a very complicated social structure. She realized finally that he was assuming that the Earth women produced a litter of babies all at the same time like the women he was familiar with. She was on the point of disabusing his mind of that misconception when it occurred to her that such an announcement would be as shocking to him as his was to her. It would also emphasize the radical differences between their peoples.

She wasn't certain it was a good idea to help them to understand Earthlings. As little as she liked Ivy's way of thinking, she knew there was a potential for problems between them. Understanding might eliminate a lot of problems, but it might create more.

She was far more comfortable with collecting answers than supplying him with information, period.

She managed a wavering smile. "Why indeed?" she finally responded. "And the--uh--queens--they usually chose a--uh--brood?"

She could tell from his expression that he thought it was a ridiculous question to ask. "Of course."

"Alrighty then," she said, leaping to her feet abruptly. "Well, it was nice chatting, but I should get back now."

She discovered that despite the carcass he'd shouldered, she couldn't out distance him. No matter how fast she walked, he remained a specific distance behind her. She was huffing for air by the time she reached the entrance to the city nearest the forest. Baen seemed a little winded, too, but then he was carrying something that probably weighed as much or more than he did, he'd walked at least a half a mile, and he had kept pace with her.

Immediately ashamed that she'd given him no consideration, Eden sent him an apologetic glance.

By her own customs it would be dreadfully rude to dismiss him at the gate after his gesture without even offering him a chance to rest and refresh himself.

She found wanted to, though, and not just because it would be rude not to offer.

Accepting the inevitability of it, she lifted her head for the scanner. "Eden Chisholm and guest." When the computer acknowledged them, Eden led the way along the dead zone corridor.

Baen had not experienced anything like the automated roadway, she discovered.

When she'd matched her pace to the movement, she stepped onto it. Baen obviously didn't know that he had to do so in order to maintain balance. She didn't know whether it was fortunate that she looked back at just that moment, or unfortunate. He wobbled, the carcass on his shoulders shifted and he abruptly lost his balance. Eden made a grab for his arm to steady him. It was an exercise in futility considering how much bigger than her he was. They both sprawled out in a tangle of body parts. Fortunately, Eden was on top. Baen's weight combined with his burden might have caused her serious injury otherwise. As it was only her self esteem was bruised.

He looked up at her in bemusement as she struggled to get off of him. By the time she managed to do so, she'd wallowed all over him and was thoroughly rattled.

They'd also gathered a sizeable audience.

Almost as if she'd summoned them, a half a dozen colonists broke from their frozen state of surprise and surged forward all at once, trying to help Baen to his feet. Eden frowned when they made no attempt to disperse once he was up and steady.

"Thank you," she said dismissively. "I think we can handle it from here."

A couple of the women glanced at her. The others were so wrapped up in studying Baen her comment fell on deaf ears.

Baen looked downright unnerved to discover himself surrounded by females who were treating him with everything from shy smiles to blatantly avid interest. Eden was so irritated it took her several moments to recall any of the women's names. "Since Baen was kind enough to bring us some fresh meat, perhaps you could show your appreciation by taking it to the food processing plant? Julie? Carla?"

Both women turned to look at her when addressed, glanced down at the beast,

which was now lying at Baen's feet, then up at Eden again as if they were questioning her sanity. "That?"

"It's some sort of herd beast--like beef, I suppose."

"You expect us to carry it?"

It was a bit much to ask, she supposed, but considering that there were six women doing nothing more than gaping at Baen, she thought they might have at least attempted to look as if they had some business loitering in Baen's vicinity. Exasperated, Eden touched her wrist communicator, summoning a bot for the job. "Now that we have that taken care of, you ladies can return to what you were doing."

Patently reluctant and more than a little resentful, the crowd finally began to disperse.

When they'd gone, Eden sent Baen an assessing glance. An almost comical expression of guilt crossed his features. Her irritation waned. It wasn't like she had territorial rights, or that he'd encouraged the women to fawn all over him. Eden knew that and she still felt more than a little ruffled by the episode.

In his turn, Baen eyed the bot rather resentfully as it lifted his offering from the roadway, swiveled around and headed down the sidewalk toward the food processing plant. "These ... machines are your workers?" he asked disapprovingly.

Eden's brows rose. "We all work. The bots help with the heavy lifting."

He had mixed feelings about that, she saw. Obviously, he saw the bots as an impediment to the usefulness of the workers he'd offered. Just as plainly, he was surprised to discover the women actually worked.

She supposed that was understandable.

The females of his race might be predisposed to produce many babies at once, but as far as she'd seen their physiology wasn't really designed for the task. The toll upon their bodies was heavy if Sademeen was anything to go by.

Dismissing the thoughts when she saw they were near her home, she stepped from the roadway, led him inside, and showed him the facilities. He looked the particle shower over curiously, a faintly puzzled frown creasing his brow, but he began to tug at his tunic. He was halfway out of it when Eden turned from explaining how the shower worked. Her eyes widened. Impulsively, she put her hands over his. "No!"

She reddened at the look he gave her.

"Actually, you would--ordinarily. But you don't have to and, besides, your tunic is soiled, too. You might as well clean it at the same time."

Shrugging back into the tunic, he stepped inside. When she saw that he recalled her instructions without any problem, Eden retreated, irritated with herself that she'd given away the fact that his nakedness unnerved her and wondering if he'd realized that was what it was.

He looked vaguely discomfited when he came out of the bathing chamber. It didn't take much imagination to figure out that he wasn't familiar with a particle bath either, or much to see that he wasn't particularly taken with it now that he'd experienced the 'ultimate' clean. He looked around the living area when she handed him a glass of chilled liqueur. Before she could warn him that the drink had a bit of a kick, he'd downed it.

She bit her lip at his expression. "Did you like the liqueur?" she asked innocently.

His eyes were watering. Swallowing with an effort, he nodded. The movement made him sway.

Eden's brows rose.

He looked at the drinking vessel suspiciously. "What is this?"

Uneasiness invaded Eden at her thoughtlessness. She shouldn't have given him anything but water. She had no idea whether he could tolerate alcohol of any kind. It seemed impossible to ignore that he'd never had anything like it. She'd had her mind on other things instead of where it should have been. She didn't know whether to be more amused or more worried about the effect. Surely it wouldn't hurt him? "I should have given you water," she said guiltily. Grasping his arm, she led him to a chair and urged him to sit down.

He sat rather heavily, staring almost accusingly at the vessel.

She took it from his hand. "Let me get you some water."

She discovered when she turned from the sink tap that he'd followed her into the kitchen. He was looking around the room curiously. "This will not be large enough for the pazaan."

A mixture of emotions flitted through Eden. He appeared to think it was all but settled that she would accept them--all eight of his brood!--and they'd be moving in. "No, but then we do not have pazaans," she said pointedly. "This is probably all the room that I'll need. I hadn't planned to have more than two children."

He looked her over with patent disbelief. "But you will need workers to help with two broods and also soldiers to protect the pazaan."

She'd allowed her annoyance to guide her tongue when she should've been using her brain! If he hadn't been more than a little tipsy, he might have noticed she'd said two children, not two broods. Smiling with an effort, she handed him the vessel she'd filled with water and guided him back into the living area. To her surprise and concern, he looked more intoxicated once he'd drank the water instead of less so.

After studying him worriedly for several moments, Eden moved to the communicator set in the wall near the door and summoned Deb from the clinic. "What's going on?" Deb asked curiously.

Eden shook her head, unwilling to say anything more in case she might be overheard by the other women she could see behind Deb in the viewing screen. "Just bring what you need for an examination, will you?"

It was obvious from the look on Deb's face when Eden greeted her at the door that the news had already traveled everywhere that Eden was entertaining one of the Xtanian's in her home.

"I gave him a glass of liqueur," Eden said worriedly when she'd grabbed Deb's arm and pulled her inside.

"You have liqueur?" Deb gasped, instantly diverted.

"From my private things," Eden retorted a little stiffly. "Could we focus on the problem?"

Deb glanced at Baen curiously. Her eyes widened as she turned to look at Eden again. "You gave him something we'd brought with us without checking first to see if he could tolerate it? It could be--like poison to him!"

Eden felt the blood leave her face. "Don't even think that! Just check, all right?"

Obviously angry now, Deb crossed the room and leaned down to examine Baen's

eyes. "How much did you give him?"

"Around eight ounces, I suppose. I just poured the glass full."

Deb straightened, sending Eden a glance of patent disbelief. "No more than that? You're sure?"

Eden gave her a look. "I'm sure! I wouldn't lie about something like that, especially under the circumstances."

After a moment, Deb returned her attention to her patient. Digging around in her medical satchel, she removed a breath analyzer and had him blow into it. Her expression was accusing when she'd checked the results and looked at Eden again. "His blood alcohol level is high for no more than that."

Eden didn't bother trying to explain again. "So, you think he's just a little inebriated?"

Deb's lips flattened. "If he was human, yes. I don't know a damned thing about these aliens, Eden, and you know I don't. It could be anything!"

Eden chewed her lower lip worriedly for several moments and finally surged forward. "Let's get him into my room and help him lie down. Maybe he just drank it too fast. Maybe he hasn't eaten in a while and that's why it affected him so badly."

"And maybe you shouldn't have given him anything at all until we knew more about their physiology!" Deb snapped. She bent to help Eden however. Once they had Baen on his feet, they each dragged one of his arms across their shoulders and guided him from the living area and down the short hallway to the bedroom Eden used, the only one that contained a bed.

He sprawled on the bed like a tree that had been felled, taking both Deb and Eden with him. Deb rolled away almost at once, crawling off of the bed. Baen's arm tightened around Eden as she tried to disentangle herself and move away from him.

She lifted her head, looking down at him a little uneasily.

"I have never regretted being born a soldier. I never thought that I would have cause to." He stroked a hand along her cheek. "Now I regret."

When he released her, Eden was almost sorry. She would've been lying if she'd said she wasn't a little disconcerted, but it had felt rather nice being held tightly against him.

"What did he say?" Deb asked curiously.

Eden glanced at her, but although she'd always considered Deb a friend, she discovered she didn't want to share. "He doesn't understand why he feels so strange," she lied.

"The problem is, he does," Baen muttered.

"What did he say that time?"

Eden moved away from him, but this time she merely shook her head. "Run some tests. I'd rather be sure this is nothing more than a bad reaction to the alcohol than be sorry later."

Nodding, Deb left the room to get her satchel.

Eden studied Baen. The alcohol certainly seemed to have affected him in pretty much the same way it did humans. It had loosened his tongue and made him incautious. Finally, she sat down on the edge of the bed and took his hand in hers. "I'm so sorry. It was stupid of me to give that to you, but I hope you realize that I didn't mean you any harm."

“My head spins.”

“I know. I feel so badly about this.” She glanced up as Deb returned, releasing his hand and rising. “She is a very good doctor,” she assured Baen.

Deb lifted the hand Eden had just released, grabbed a specimen collector and pricked his finger, extracting a tiny dot of blood. He jumped, but Eden thought it was more from surprise than pain. “I’ll just analyze this and see if I can get a better idea of what’s going on here.”

When Deb moved back to her satchel and pulled out her portable lab unit, Eden returned and sat on the edge of the bed again, drawn partly from a sense of guilt to comfort him when she knew he must be alarmed--however calm he seemed--by sensations he had never experienced.

It was a little more than that, though.

She didn’t entirely understand what he’d meant by the things he’d said, but the look in his eyes seemed to indicate that he was as drawn to her as she had been to him from the first.

His hand felt warm and strong in hers, faintly rough from calluses, but pleasantly so. The temptation arose to stroke her hand along his cheek as he had hers. Resisting the urge, she settled his hand on the bed and moved away, glancing at Deb to see if she’d discovered anything yet.

Deb was frowning. As Eden watched the color slowly drained from her face. Alarm went through Eden. “What is it?”

Deb looked up at her, but she was clearly so shocked her thoughts were chaotic.

“Is his physiology as different from ours as all that?” Eden demanded anxiously.

Deb blinked. Slowly, she shook her head.

“They’re not like us. We’re completely incompatible with them,” Eden said, suddenly certain that that must be what the problem was.

“Eden,” Deb said shakily. “They aren’t like us. They are us.”

Chapter Ten

“That’s not possible,” Eden retorted. “You must have contaminated the specimen somehow.”

Outrage contorted Deb’s features. “I’ve been doing this for thirty years! I’m an experienced lab tech as well as a doctor. There is no way the specimen was contaminated!”

It had been a gut reaction. Eden knew Deb wasn’t sloppy. “I’m sorry. It’s just--how could that be possible? We’ve never been here before. And they don’t even look like us, not like any race on Earth, anyway.”

Deb shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m as confused as you are. But the test results are indisputable.”

“System error?”

“I checked it out before I brought it. That’s standard procedure. You know that.”

Eden glanced at Baen, abruptly aware that she’d forgotten that he could hear and understand her side of the conversation at least. His eyes were closed, but she didn’t think he was asleep, or unconscious. Belatedly, she switched off the translator. “How could they look so different?”

“Evolution does some strange things. I don’t have an explanation for it, Eden. But there’s no doubt in my mind that, genetically, they are exactly the same species as we are.”

Eden frowned. “This information is not to be released--not yet--under any circumstances.”

“Why?”

Eden rubbed her head. “Their culture is nothing like ours and when cultures clash they might as well be completely different species, because they do not behave like brothers. This doesn’t really change anything beyond the question of whether or not we are compatible physiologically. In some ways, they’ve evolved very differently than we have and we still don’t understand that. I don’t understand it.

“Baen told me he was the seventh born of the seventh brood. Their women have multiple births--litters. All of them. After six broods, they’re supposed to produce a new queen. And each queen takes a brood to start her own colony or family unit.

“They’re laboring under the assumption that if we accept them, they will become a part of a unit like it exists in their culture. If we try to exert our own culture over theirs we have no way of knowing how they might react to that, but it’s very possible, however likely, that it could be with violence.

“If the other colonists find out that they’re the same as we are, this could get completely out of control before we fully understand it and we might find ourselves dead in the middle of a territorial battle.”

Deb’s dark eyes had grown wider and wider as she listened to Eden. By the time Eden had finished her dark skin had turned a sickly hue. She uttered a sound that carried a note of hysterical disbelief. “You mean to say they would expect us to take on a--

harem of men?"

"There are eight in Baen's brood. He made it pretty clear to me that that was what they expected, yes."

Deb sobered instantly. "Talk about an embarrassment of riches! My god! It makes me giddy just thinking about it, but as wonderful a fantasy as that sounds, how the hell would we deal with having that many when we haven't been around any men in all these years? You're saying we'd have to take the whole brood or just do without?"

"That's what it sounded like to me. We might discover after we study them a while that that isn't the case, but if I didn't misunderstand, that's exactly what we're facing. And if we did, then they would be exposed to our culture, and god only knows how they'd react to that. We'd certainly be placing ourselves in a precarious position."

"In their culture it seems the queens are the central focus and function a lot like a ruler would---the males respect them and cater to their needs and wishes. But we wouldn't be acting like their queens and their response might not be pretty."

Deb focused on packing her satchel. "Other than the jolt of discovering his genetics, I couldn't find anything wrong with him beyond a low tolerance for alcohol. He'll probably have a whale of a headache when he comes down, but otherwise he should be all right."

"If you want my opinion, we should have nothing to do with them at all. I'm as lonesome a gal as everyone else, but I don't think I could deal with walking a tight wire. I know I don't want to. And I know damned well that there aren't many colonists that would know how to maintain such a relationship. There'll be trouble if we try to bring them into the colony."

Eden moved to the edge of the bed and sat down. "I know that. There's going to be trouble if we don't, too. The question is, which would be worse?"

"Having several hundred romping, stomping, bellowing men running amuck in New Savannah!" Deb retorted.

Eden smiled faintly at the image that conjured though it wasn't really funny. "We'll have several hundred screaming banshees if we try to stop it," she said, rubbing her temples. It would have been hard enough to decide what to do if she could have distanced herself from the situation. She couldn't. On a personal level, she was battling a nearly overwhelming impulse to throw caution to the wind herself and explore her interest in the Xtanian's, Baen in particular. He looked fierce. She knew he would probably be a formidable foe on the battlefield, but her mind wasn't on the battlefield when she was anywhere around him.

It would've been an understatement to say she'd never met anyone quite like him. Even with the new information, he seemed more alien to her than brethren, but she thought his exotic looks was one of the things that she found so fascinating. Beyond that, she sensed facets of his personality that drew her to him, most powerfully his neediness. He had never experienced tenderness or affection--not like the cherished offspring of an Earth couple, and yet she felt like he sensed the vacuum and yearned for it.

But maybe that was only her imagination because she ached at the thought of anyone being deprived of something so necessary to happiness? Maybe what she saw in his eyes when he looked at her wasn't desire and a hunger for tenderness? Maybe it was only physical need and confusion because their cultures were so different?

"We can't risk bringing them into New Savannah, Eden. I don't agree with Ivy

on everything, but I think she's right about that."

The comment brought Eden out of her thoughts. "So--what's the solution?"

Deb smiled wryly. "Thankfully, your problem," she retorted, getting to her feet and heading for the door.

"Thanks!"

"You're welcome!"

* * * *

"E zith tsatima tae amen za san piz wil pzyztha?"

Eden whirled to look at Baen with a mixture of surprise, guilt, and embarrassment. Reaching up, she switched the translator on. "What?"

"In what way am I different from the men of your world?"

The temptation arose to pretend she wasn't aware that he'd overheard more than he should have, to try to gloss over her stupid mistake with lies and half truths. After what he'd overheard, though, she knew she was going to have to feel her way carefully to keep from offending him more.

He was offended. She was in no doubt of that. "A lot of ways, actually, but not all of them are bad."

His brow creased in a look that was more angry--or perhaps wounded--than thoughtful. Pushing himself upright, he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "And not all good?"

Maybe she wasn't really cut out to be an ambassador of her people? She thought wryly. She was beginning to think she wasn't worth a damn at diplomacy. "I didn't mean it that way."

He seemed to debate with himself whether to pursue the matter further. "These--differences--they are repulsive to you?"

His voice was carefully neutral, but there was no doubt in Eden's mind that he felt very strongly about his doubts. She forgot her role as colony leader and ambassador and reacted on a purely personal, and feminine, level. "No!"

He sent her a startled look, but she could see her vehemence hadn't convinced him. Yielding to the impulse she'd been struggling against almost from the first time she'd met him, she moved closer. Kneeling in front of him, she looked up at him earnestly. "I am different from a Xtanian woman. Do you find that distasteful?"

He swallowed audibly. "No." A wry smile tugged at his lips. "I am not certain I understand what I feel when I look at you, but it does not seem to be revulsion. I think things that are forbidden for me to think, want things I should not."

Warmth suffused Eden. Doubts surfaced, but she willfully ignored them. Just a kiss, she lied to herself, just to soothe his wound, just to show him I don't find him repulsive at all.

What possible harm could such an innocent gesture do?

Giving in to the impulse to move closer, she lifted a hand to his cheek, tilting her head up to touch her lips lightly to his. He stiffened, but he did not pull away. When she drew back to gauge his reaction, she saw that his eyes were stormy, his face taut.

"What is this custom?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

Surprise flickered through Eden. "The kiss?"

The word didn't translate, but it took Eden a moment to realize it. She didn't know if that was because the computer simply hadn't had that sort of input before or if it

was because they didn't kiss, but she strongly suspected the latter, especially when he traced one finger lightly along her lips, swallowing hard. "It is forbidden for a soldier to touch a queen in any way except to prevent harm to her," he said slowly.

He didn't move away, though.

It was a warning and she should have heeded it. She knew she should, but her lips tingled from his touch and a hunger had arisen inside of her she found she didn't want to ignore. Rising, she placed her palms on his shoulders and a knee on either side of his thighs, settling her buttocks on his lap. A flicker of something that looked like alarm crossed his features, but she ignored that as she had the warning. He planted his hands along the curve of her hips as if he was of half a mind to set her away from him, and half inclined to pull her closer still.

Eden slipped her arms around his neck. Leaning closer, she placed her cheek along his, breathing in his scent. It was intoxicating. "Kissing is one of my favorite customs," she murmured near his ear.

A tremor went through him as she dragged her lips along his cheek and sought his mouth again, brushing her lips lightly back and forth across his. His breathing became labored, his lips parting as he struggled to drag more air into his lungs. Eden felt her body respond, her heart accelerating, warmth pouring through her bloodstream. It decimated what little rational thought remained.

She traced his lips with her tongue, plucked at them with her own lips and finally fitted her mouth firmly against his, thrusting her tongue into his mouth to taste him and explore.

He sighed gustily into her mouth, his hands tightening almost bruisingly on her hips as she leaned against him. She felt him grow hard beneath her as she continued to explore his mouth, felt his great body begin to tremble until he was shaking as violently as if he had fever. His response sent another heady rush through her.

It also set off distant warning bells which she did her best to ignore.

He wasn't used to being touched intimately. The only females they had were queens, and as a soldier, they were off limits to him.

If she unleashed the desire he had been trained to keep inside

She could feel the battle going on inside of him.

Reluctantly, she lifted her head. For many moments she remained where she was, waiting, hoping that he would not allow her to stop there. She realized finally that between the liqueur and the desire she'd aroused in him that he was too disordered to do more than cling to his training at the moment like a drowning man.

Slowly, her desire waned and empathy resurrected itself. She should not have pushed him, she realized. She stroked his hard cheek soothingly. "It's alright, but you do understand now why I'm not at all certain that it would be wise to consider Sademeen's offer? My people and yours are too different to adjust to one another I'm afraid."

He set her off his lap and stood abruptly. Eden swayed slightly as he brushed past her. "Baen?"

He stopped and swiveled around to meet her gaze.

"I'll have to escort you from the city."

He nodded a little jerkily, dark color creeping into his cheeks.

* * * *

"Was that wise?"

Eden felt color pulse in her cheeks as she dragged her gaze from Baen's retreating form and whirled to look at Ivy guiltily. She realized almost at once, though, that Ivy had no way of knowing how stupid she actually had been.

Horny twit! She berated herself.

"Probably not," she retorted brusquely. "He lugged a--something-or-other--over a mile for us, though, besides bringing it down and cleaning it himself. It would've been just plain rude to dismiss him at the gate like he was a servant."

"He is a servant--in their society--from what I can see. All the males are."

Eden brushed past Ivy, heading for her home. Ivy fell into step beside her.

"That's not the only reason you invited him to your quarters, is it?" Ivy asked shrewdly.

In spite of all she could do, Eden felt color rising in her cheeks again. "Actually, it was." She hadn't intended to kiss him. He'd just looked so cute befuddled by the liqueur, and she'd been worried she'd poisoned him.

She was such a sucker for a hard luck story! From the moment she'd heard that they'd been abandoned here every nurturing instinct she possessed had been screaming for her to cuddle and protect as if they were infants and completely helpless instead of full grown, really big and dangerous looking men! She would've found the temptation they represented almost too much to resist if it had only been a fever of the blood that drew her. The other was just icing on the cake to make her behave like a complete idiot!

If they were as cold blooded as they appeared, they could be planning death and destruction and she was going to be as easy a target as all the other red blooded females in the colony!

It could all be an act, this whole 'we need women' thing. Her instincts told her it wasn't, but she had a bad feeling she couldn't really trust her instincts.

"But then you just couldn't resist?"

"All right. I kissed him," she admitted testily. "Not that it's any of your business!"

"It is when it pertains to the safety of the colony," Ivy shot back at her, but she looked more amused than angry.

"Maybe I was just experimenting like you did the other day?"

Ivy made a rude noise of disbelief. "I don't think you should be playing doctor with the aliens. For all we know they might not even have the right equipment, and that could be frustrating all the way around."

"They have the right equipment," Eden retorted, feeling very defensive of them.

"So--you were playing doctor? How was it?"

The question dragged a reluctant laugh out of Eden, mostly because it showed that Ivy wasn't nearly as immune to them as she pretended. "I did not! He was bathing in the stream in the valley when I came upon him."

"Which was probably at the back of your mind all the way back to the city."

Eden thought that over. "Maybe," she finally responded, albeit reluctantly. Not that just seeing a naked man would have been enough, ordinarily, to get her all hot and bothered, but she was already buzzing every time she came within Baen's vicinity. He didn't have to do much to push her over the edge.

She discovered they'd reached her home once more. After a moment's hesitation, she invited Ivy in. "I discovered something when Baen was here," she began.

“He’s a good kisser?”

Eden sent her a look. “I gave him a glass of liquor and he had a really bad reaction to it. Apparently their metabolism can’t handle it.”

“This is interesting,” Ivy said slowly. “Exactly how did it affect him?”

“He was drunk on his ass,” Eden said bluntly, “but that isn’t what I wanted to tell you. It scared me. I thought I’d poisoned him and sent for Deb. She ran tests.”

“And?” Ivy prompted when she didn’t continue.

“They aren’t an alien species. They’re human, just like us.”

Ivy was clearly as stunned as she had been. “How is that even possible? It must have been some kind of screw up.”

“I thought so, too, but Deb was convinced. So now, the three of us know.”

Ivy looked troubled. “When the others find out, there’s going to be no stopping them.”

“I’m not sure we should try to stop them. Unfortunately, I’m also not sure we shouldn’t. Even if they’re just another race, and not a completely different species like we thought, their culture is so completely different from ours that’s enough by itself to cause some real problems. Right now they’re very respectful and I’m pretty sure it’s because they see us as the same as their queens. If we disabused them of that misconception, there’s no telling how they would behave toward us.”

“Did you find this out before or after you kissed him?”

Eden gave her a look and Ivy shook her head. “This is exactly what I’ve been afraid of. You’re one of the most level headed people I know, and look what you’ve done!”

“And you trying to provoke a territorial battle and or jealousy wasn’t just as impulsive and ill advised?” Eden said indignantly.

Anger flashed across Ivy’s face but was gone almost at once. “Maybe it was. But I thought it better to prod them a little while they were on the outside of the fields!”

They both fell silent, thinking.

“Maybe it isn’t such a bad idea,” Ivy said finally, if somewhat obscurely.

“What isn’t such a bad idea?” Eden asked testily.

“I think we can both agree that we’re not going to be able to keep the colonists on their side of the fence long, and not at all once they discover the aliens are just ‘foreigners’. Somebody has to test the waters before it gets completely out of hand. Since you’ve already taken the plunge, I’m thinking you should pursue it and see what happens.”

Eden studied Ivy with a mixture of fear, resentment and, admittedly, more than a little wishfulness. “There’s one little problem with that that you’re forgetting. They form harem units.”

“Just tell them you’re not interested. That’s the whole idea, stirring them up to see how much danger they could represent.”

“Easy enough for you to say! Besides, this family unit is at the very root of their culture. Everything revolves around it.”

“All the more reason. And you didn’t mind kissing him!”

“I wouldn’t mind doing all sorts of things with him, but that isn’t the point! This pazaan of theirs is more complicated than that. Baen is a soldier and, apparently, they aren’t allowed to--uh--mate. It’s the workers that--uh--handle the breeding. Besides that,

he--they expect us to take a brood, like their queens do. If we refuse, they might just decide they want nothing to do with us, or they might decide that they can make us do what's expected, or they might just start fighting over which one's get the females. Then there'll be hell to pay."

"What's a brood?"

"The queens appear to have multiple births--anywhere from five and up at the same time. All those born at the same time are called a brood."

Ivy gaped at her for several moments. "How many in his brood?"

"Eight."

Abruptly, Ivy burst out laughing. "Lucky you."

"Very funny. I can't have eight of them in here!"

Sobering almost at once, Ivy frowned. "No, not enough room, besides the fact that the other colonists would really be outraged about you having eight when they don't have any. So maybe the experiment should be conducted on the other side?"

"If I decided to try it, I'd rather it be on neutral ground, thank you very much!"

Chapter Eleven

Wryly, Eden conceded that she had only thought the colonists were the next thing to hysterical with excitement when the celebration was announced. By the time the day everyone had been anticipating rolled around, nerves were at fever pitch and probably three quarters of the colonists had had disciplinary action taken against them for a variety of infractions. They were behaving a lot more like teenagers, or mail order brides than the educated, mature, sensible women they'd proven themselves to be pre-alien-colony-discovery.

She was hardly in a position to throw stones. Even though it had been Ivy who'd suggested the 'experiment' she entertained a lot of doubts about her own reasons for seriously considering the suggestion.

It seemed reasonable.

It seemed like the only safe solution, really, to a situation that couldn't be simply ignored.

But was it? Or did it just seem like that because she wanted to consider it?

As far as that went, she wasn't completely certain she did. As little as she'd been around any of the others, she didn't feel threatened by the Xtanians, but how much faith could she place in her instincts for survival when her instincts for 'mating' were turning her brain to mush? Intellect and sensibility only took one so far. In the end, people were still animals and had a very hard time ignoring their instincts or controlling them.

Beyond that, just any one wouldn't do it for her. If she was going to consider taking a partner/companion, she wanted Baen, but if she'd understood him correctly, he wasn't really in the picture. And she wasn't sure she dared to cross that particular line, in the interests or either pursuit of knowledge or personal preference. Everything she'd learned about them told her they were born to their stations. Baen didn't strike her as a man that was easily flustered, and yet he'd been so thoroughly rattled by her overtures that he'd left New Savannah as if the hounds of hell were after him.

What did the Xtanians do to those who bucked the system and crossed the boundaries of acceptable behavior? It must be something pretty horrible to keep them all in line, because they were human, too, and however differently they might have evolved it was impossible to believe that some of them hadn't rebelled, or just been too weak to resist temptation.

They weren't immune to jealousy and rivalry. Sademeen had said she'd banished her last brood because the older males didn't want them around. She supposed Sademeen having that extra brood, when she was supposed to have produced a female had disrupted the balance of things and she hadn't been able to settle them with their own queen because there weren't enough to go around--her fault and thus her disgrace.

But if they were as prone to jealousy and rivalry as their Earthly counterparts, how the hell was she going to pacify a whole brood? How did their queens manage it?

She still hadn't come to a decision when the Xtanians arrived to take part in the thanksgiving celebration, but she very quickly had plenty to do to distract her.

The males that she and Ivy and Liz had chosen seemed to be laboring under the impression that they were to stay with the 'queens' who'd chosen them. When she and the other council members had greeted them at the city's main gate and escorted them through the city to the site chosen for their grand party, none of them made any attempt to join the festivities. She didn't know whether she was more horrified or amused at the discovery--because Liz and Ivy looked as horrified as she felt and that struck her as extremely funny.

She'd expected a certain amount of awkwardness. It stood to reason there would be some, but it was much worse than she'd expected. The park north of the center of the city had been chosen as the one and only possibility for a gathering of such a size. Most of the colonists had turned out, although there were a few whose jobs prevented them from participating completely and would only be coming for a short time and leaving again. The colonists had ranged themselves on one side. The Xtanians halted on the other, behind the women who'd escorted them in.

Wryly, Eden wondered if the first thanksgiving that the pilgrims had celebrated with the American Indians had been as unnerving for everyone involved.

Probably. She was certain the white faced, strangely clothed English must have looked just as alien to the American Indians as vice versa. And they were in much the same position, alien in culture and race, each uncertain of just how much the other side could be trusted.

She encountered the next stumbling block when she informed the Xtanians that they were expected to mingle and entertain all of the women. The nearly identical expressions of abject panic that flitted across every Xtanian male's face was enough to assure her that she needed to rephrase the invitation. "We are all here to begin to get to know one another," she added hurriedly. "You must feel free to converse with anyone and everyone here."

Something was lost in translation, Eden decided when the Xtanian's merely stared at her in confusion. After a few moments, however, one--she knew he must be one of Baen's brothers from the strong resemblance--detached himself from the group and strode purposefully toward the tables laden with refreshments. Grabbing a plate, he moved along the tables, studying the offerings carefully and making selections. When he'd filled the plate, he brought it to her. Surprised but pleased, Eden thanked him and took it. She had just begun to relax when she saw that the Xtanian's had decided they'd been brought to serve. The others hurried over to the tables and quickly followed suit, carrying plates of food to the other women gathered on the green.

Eden exchanged a helpless glance with Liz. Liz shrugged. "It's a start. Maybe when they've had time to get used to us a little, they'll relax."

Eden wasn't convinced but the comment about relaxing sent a jolt through her. "Tell me no one's spiked the punch."

Liz didn't meet her gaze. "I made it clear that nothing alcoholic would be allowed at the gathering. Whether they'll ignore that particular order or not is yet to be seen."

Eden bit her lip. "The Xtanians can't tolerate alcoholic beverages."

Liz glanced at her in surprise.

Eden thought she detected just a hint of guilt in her friend's expression. "If you know something"

“I told you I’d issued the order. I don’t know that anybody had plans to ignore it, no.”

“But you suspect?”

Liz shrugged. “We’ll know soon enough, I imagine.”

“Sooner than you think,” Eden muttered. “If they’re anything like Baen, and I’m guessing they are, it’ll knock them for a loop.”

Liz sent her an interested glance. “How did that go, anyway? I heard you had invited him to your place for refreshments.”

Eden glanced self-consciously at the men standing around her. Relieved when she saw that they probably weren’t close enough to overhear the low voiced conversation, she returned her attention to Liz.

She would’ve been more surprised if Liz hadn’t heard about the incident. She knew very well the whole city had been discussing it and speculating about what had transpired. Mentally, she shrugged. “Not very well, actually. I decided, since he was a guest, to give him a glass of liqueur and then I thought I’d poisoned him. Deb said his metabolism just couldn’t handle it.”

“Oh,” Liz said, sounding dismayed. “He didn’t ... behave badly, did he?”

“No,” Eden responded non-committally. She had, but she wasn’t about to tell Liz that. She had debated whether or not to tell anyone exactly why they shouldn’t give the natives anything alcoholic and had finally decided against it, knowing that it would probably inspire as many colonists to check it out for themselves as it convinced that it was a bad idea. She still thought she’d made the only decision she could have. If she’d said nothing at all they would certainly have been serving drinks all around for such an occasion. At least this way they would be cautious--and sneaky about it.

She hoped that meant they would have fewer ‘incidents’. She didn’t really trust that they wouldn’t, though.

Despite her discomfort over the fact that their guests didn’t seem to grasp that they were guests, Eden relaxed fractionally when everyone began to settle and enjoy their refreshments. She would have been a lot more relaxed if she hadn’t been surrounded by Baen’s brood brothers.

She knew at least two of them had to be without even having to ask. Their resemblance to him was too striking, she felt, for it to be otherwise, but since she couldn’t think of anything else to say to introduce a conversation, she asked them.

They exchanged glances. “Yes,” the tallest of the four finally responded.

Very talkative, Eden thought sarcastically. Another strong family resemblance! Tension immediately coiled inside of her again as she thought about the long afternoon before her, struggling endlessly to make polite conversation with people who seemed predisposed not to talk at all, much less carry on conversations purely for the sake of entertainment and politeness.

“I am Trar,” said a deep male voice that drew her surprised attention. “Last of the brood of Sademeen, brood brother to these tongue tied louts--and Baen, as well.”

Eden’s surprise deepened as she looked at the man. He looked nothing at all like any of the others. His hair, far longer than the others, was also much lighter--a pale brown that was nearly blond, and streaked with blond. As she studied him, though, she began to see some similarity in his facial features to the others. The twinkle of teasing amusement and intelligence in his eyes was as appealing as his regular features.

Repressing the urge to chuckle at the glares his brothers were giving him, Eden smiled. "I am Eden Chisholm."

His grin was even more appealing. "Yes. I know this. Baen has told us. What means this in your tongue?"

Eden felt her face go scarlet as blood rushed into her cheeks.

"Paradise," Liz supplied with a chuckle.

Eden gave her a drop dead look and glanced self-consciously at Trar, and then the others. Warmth of a different kind, and a good deal of tension, went through her when she saw they were all studying her now with keen, clearly amorous, interest. It was flattering. She felt an undeniable response, but it was a little overwhelming to have four men giving her 'you look good enough to eat' glances all at the same time.

"This is true, or your friend queen makes jest?"

"My friend is Liz Chin," Eden said, trying to redirect the conversation.

"This Liz Chin has said, is true?"

Eden reddened all over again. She saw when she looked at him that he was determined to pursue it because he could see she wanted to avoid the direction of the conversation, not because of any doubts in his mind.

Trar the tease, she made a mental note. She cleared her throat. "It's from an ancient mythology--a place."

"Very appropriate for you, though, yes?"

Eden felt her jaw sag.

Liz laughed. "I think I'll just mosey over to the refreshment table and see what goodies they've cooked up for us."

"Trar has no manners," another of the men spoke at once. "If queen Eden permits, I will gladly serve you. I am Cal, first born of Sademeen's seventh brood."

Eden shifted uncomfortably as she met the gazes of all four men and Liz's amused one.

"You won't mind loaning him to me, will you, Eden?" Liz asked sweetly.

"Shut up, Liz," Eden muttered, giving her friend a 'behave yourself' look before she focused on Cal, the male who'd brought her plate. "Thank you. You should all go and find whatever you'd like to eat," she added, realizing finally, with a good bit of discomfort, that they must be waiting for her to dismiss them.

"The queens have not all been served."

"He is Pizan, and the ugly one there is Vladiv, and they are all far more rude than I, for I at least introduced myself," Trar said, giving the other two men a provoking glance. The 'ugly' one certainly wasn't ugly. He was by far the most handsome of the four. He took exception to the slight, however, his face growing taut and dark with color and his hands balling into fists as if he was resisting the urge to wrap his fingers around his brother's throat.

"If they wait until all the 'queens' have eaten there might not be anything more than scraps left for them," Liz muttered under her breath.

Eden elbowed her in the ribs warningly. She curled her lips into a plastic smile. "It is our custom that the men and women eat together--at the same time. We will be embarrassed if our guests only serve food to us and don't eat anything themselves."

The brothers all exchanged looks. After that non-verbal communication, all but Trar wandered toward the table. Trar settled himself closely beside her on the grass as

Eden, after looking around and realizing there weren't enough tables and chairs, finally sat down on the green, folding her legs and settling her plate precariously on her lap.

"I will stay and feed you."

"You will not!" Eden gasped, too rattled by the image that popped into her mind to consider before she spoke.

He looked taken aback. "This is not custom either?" he asked doubtfully.

"No," Eden retorted almost sulkily, feeling her head begin to pound with tension and too desperate for a little respite to worry overmuch about diplomacy.

Dismissed, he rose and followed the others. Eden nibbled at her food, watching, but she quickly saw that they had no intention of breaking with their own traditions. When the men reached the table they simply joined the others ferrying plates of food to the women of the colony.

"That wasn't very nice," Liz said chidingly. "I think you hurt his feelings and he was being so sweet and playful."

Eden sighed. "I know. I didn't mean to snap at him, but this is really getting on my nerves, Liz. I feel--smothered. I don't know how their women handle so much attention."

Liz held her tongue as Cal returned and presented her with a plate and a beverage glass. When he'd left, she glanced at Eden. "You should try to relax and just be yourself. You're not feeling smothered. You're feeling the pressure of trying to be diplomatic--which you aren't doing a very good job of anyway--instead of speaking and behaving freely. Stop worrying so much about making a mistake. This whole thing was devised so we could find out if interaction between our two cultures was possible. We, none of us, are going to be comfortable if we try to adapt ourselves to their way of thinking and doing things. I'm sure we'll have to compromise, but ideally we would all compromise, not just the colonists. And, remember, as far as we know now, their society is matriarchal in nature. That means they will expect us to make demands of them. Sademeen said they were all very young. If that's true then they probably aren't as set in their ways as the older males and it should be easier for them to adjust to doing things the way we do."

Eden studied her friend doubtfully. "I don't want trouble today."

"Better now than after they 'invade', don't you think? We're supposed to be gauging their reaction to the differences in our cultures. We can't very well do that if we tiptoe along trying not to offend them by doing everything their way. And that sure as hell isn't going to give us a clear picture of what it would be like if we decided to take them as companions. I, for one, don't particularly care for the rigidity of their customs. I'd never be able to relax if I was constantly worried about offending."

Eden thought that over. "So you're suggesting we initiate them into our own customs and try to convert them. Isn't that against the 'laws of interference'?"

Liz sighed impatiently. "I suggested a compromise. You know as well as I do that any congress between them and our colonists is going to result in 'interference with their customs and beliefs'. I can see the point in the law, and that's all very noble of them, but damned impractical in practice. If we're around them, they're bound to pick things up from us whether we try to influence them or not. And I just don't see this working if we don't try to work out some sort of compromise."

Eden set her plate aside and sat watching the people moving around the green,

laughing, talking excitedly--Clearly the colonists saw this as an opportunity for more than platonic interaction. Quite a few of them were blatantly flirting and a number of the males looked like they would've bolted and headed back for the stag retreat if they'd thought they could.

Deciding to pretend she hadn't noticed when she saw that Ivy, true to her word, was very busy refereeing the party, Eden glanced at Liz again. "You think we could convince them to consider our own customs regarding companions?"

Liz frowned. "I don't think we can go that far. They've clung to their way of doing things for generations. If they'd seen a reason to change, or enough of them had been against it, they would have changed before now. Besides, the possible consequences worry me. If every one of the colonists decided to settle with one, that would leave more than two thirds of them over there to brood over the slight. They might simply accept, as they seem to have accepted being banished, or they might not."

She fell silent, thinking. From her expression, they weren't very pleasant thoughts. "This is a real mess, you know, no matter what we do. One of my chief concerns is the inevitable exchanges. Nobody is interested in a lifetime commitment--especially now when we could live several hundred years--and you know when we can't get along with our own men for more than a few years at the time we aren't going to be able to get along with them. Unless I learn otherwise, I'm assuming they mate for life. I mean, if we can still correlate their culture with similar cultures on Earth, then, once in, never out--unless they were dragged out and butchered for fooling around outside the harem."

Those comments made Eden wish she hadn't just eaten. Her belly clenched, making her feel just a little nauseous. Like everyone else on the mission, she'd taken oath and signed a contract stating that she agreed to ALL of the terms. One of those was that she would continue to take the anti-aging drugs for as long as it was necessary to establish a thriving colony--and nobody knew, yet, how long that would extend life, but the expectation was two hundred years at a minimum. Since the same drug that extended life indefinitely also had the effect of severely restricting reproduction, it could take a very, very long time before all of the colonists had managed to produce the minimum offspring decided upon--two. Unless they decided to dose their partners, then there was probably going to be a huge gap in life spans. Beyond that potential problem, she realized there was another no one had even considered.

The Xtanians formed family groups with the expectation of offspring. They were going to be very outdone when they discovered Earth women did not have multiple births, hardly ever anyway. And when, and if, they discovered that they wouldn't even be the contributors, they were liable to take that badly, too.

She frowned thoughtfully, wondering if there was any real reason they had to opt for the frozen pops instead of the Xtanian contributions. They were human, after all. Going by the letter of the agreement, they were only supposed to use the pops, but that was to ensure a good gene pool, and because no one had expected them to run into perfectly good donors half way across the universe.

The donors from Earth had been very carefully screened, though. Beyond that, as carefully selected representatives of each of the races of Earth, everyone knew they were expected to maintain that balance and ensure at least one more generation carried their race's undiluted genetics. It wasn't in the contract, because even though everyone had

not only agreed to it, they had all wanted it, it was still prohibited to put anything of that nature into a contract.

“I suppose in the back of my mind I knew that,” she responded to Liz’s comment finally. “That’s probably the main reason I’ve been so reluctant to do as Ivy suggested. I think I’m just way too used to being by myself. Not only do I not see how I can juggle eight men, I don’t want to make a huge, long term commitment. I guess in some ways I can see the benefit of having so many--it’d be like changing partners regularly--and you could fight with one a while and switch to another one,” she added, grinning at Liz at her joke.

Liz chuckled, but gave her a quizzical look. “Ivy suggested you take on a brood?”

Eden grimaced. “In the interests of testing the waters to see if it’s safe for the other colonists.”

Liz laughed. “The things you have to do for us!”

Eden gave her a look. “If you want to be the first to discover how serious they are about their pazaans, be my guest. I don’t mind waiting to see if there’ll be fireworks before I decide whether to take a dip or not.”

Liz reddened. “No, thank you. I’ll just wait with baited breath to see if it’s as good as it sounds.”

Eden sighed. “I should draw lots. You can be damned sure if I do it, nobody is going to consider it a sacrifice and the potential danger for me in it.”

“Well, contrary to what Ivy seems to think, I don’t consider you expendable!” Liz snapped angrily. “The colony needs you, whether they seem to appreciate you or not.”

Warmed by Liz’s heated defense, Eden leaned toward her and hugged her impulsively. “It’s nice to know I have one friend.”

Liz hugged her back, but shook her head at Eden when she leaned away again. “You’ve got more friends that you seem to think.”

Chapter Twelve

Eden was still smiling when she glanced up to see who the 'presence' was that had approached while she and Liz were talking. Her smile fell when she discovered it was Baen's brood brothers, all four that were in attendance. They ranged themselves in a semi-circle around her as they settled on the grass.

She exchanged a look with Liz, grabbing Liz's arm when she looked like she was about to rise and leave.

"The two of you are brood brothers?"

Eden wasn't surprised to discover they had no word for sisters in their vocabulary. She was a little surprised to discover it was Trar who'd asked the question since Liz seemed to think she'd angered him when she'd sent him on his way. "Why do ask?" she asked curiously.

Before she could even guess at his intent, he leaned toward her, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing. She felt several bones pop along her spine to say nothing of the fact that he squeezed the breath from her lungs. "What means this custom?"

It took her a moment to recover her wits after he released her. "We don't squeeze quite that hard. The idea is to convey affection, not break bones."

He reddened and she was immediately sorry she'd been so short with him.

Affection didn't translate. She wasn't really surprised, but she was a little appalled even though she'd guessed that they couldn't possibly have experienced much along that order growing up in such huge groups.

"Affection is when you feel a strong bond or connection to someone, either someone in your own family or someone outside of it," Liz put in hurriedly.

Trar frowned thoughtfully. "This affection is word in your tongue for what we feel when we are near Eden?"

Eden turned beet red.

Liz looked like she was struggling to keep from laughing.

Obviously, it was the concept he was having problems with, not the word.

"Somehow, I doubt that," Eden said dryly.

"I think you're probably talking about sexual attraction, not affection, but don't feel badly. Our men seem to have a little trouble with that distinction, too, at least where women are concerned."

"Why don't you and Trar and the others discuss customs while I go and check on our other guests?" Eden suggested, rising before she'd even finished speaking.

"Coward," Liz muttered under her breath.

"Easy for you to say," Eden shot back at her. "You don't have four seven foot males looking you over like you're a choice piece of steak! Stay!" she snapped as the brood brothers got to their feet. "Visit with my friend," she added, immediately sorry and trying to smooth things over. "You need to know and understand our customs, and we need to know yours."

Feeling more relaxed as soon as she'd managed to put a few yards between her

and the men, Eden glanced around. Spotting Ivy, she headed toward her to get a report.

Ivy looked her over disapprovingly. "That wasn't very well thought out," she said chidingly the moment Eden stopped beside her.

Taken aback, Eden merely gaped at her. "What?"

"That little display with the big blond."

"I didn't do that!" Eden snapped indignantly. "I hugged Liz. He saw and he decided to give it a try. That's all there was to it."

"Unfortunately, the colonists that didn't see are already being informed by those who did. I've been having a hard enough time making them keep their hands to themselves as it is. Somebody--I don't know who yet--spiked the punch bowls on tables four and seven."

Eden did a mental count to calm her irritation at the unjust accusation, realizing that Ivy was probably on edge, too, and for good reason if they were already starting to have problems when the celebration had scarcely got underway. "But you got rid of them, right? Maybe they didn't have enough to get too bold," she added hopefully.

"Maybe, and maybe not. That all depends on how many others felt the juvenile urge to liven up the party. Not that I see anything wrong with a drink or two now and then, but the results at this little shindig could be disastrous--especially if the males imbibe."

Worriedly, Eden turned from Ivy and began to study the colonists and Xtanians piercingly. She saw at least two of them that had that sappy 'I'm feeling fine' look on their faces, but she wasn't certain whether it was because they were surrounded by females or if they'd been ambushed by the colonists.

The giggles from the women around them were getting louder and louder, and their overtures bolder and bolder. "Trouble at three o'clock."

"I'm on it," Ivy said grimly, summoning a half dozen MPs as she struck off toward the group.

Instead of following her, Eden headed for the announcement platform that had been set up in the center of the green, deciding a distraction was in order while Ivy hauled the miscreants off. By rushing, she managed to make it up onto the platform before Ivy and her MPs reached the group and deliberately set the microphone to screeching by fiddling with the volume control. The squawk got almost everyone's attention and she adlibbed a short speech welcoming their visitors and reminding everyone that alcoholic beverages were prohibited at the function to keep everyone's attention while the group was rounded up and removed.

Feeling pleased with herself when she'd finished, she waved and made her way from the platform again.

Trar, looking a little sheepish, met her at the bottom of the steps. "My brood brothers are angry with me," he said wryly. "They will strangle me and throw me from the wall of the citadel if I do not make amends for offending you. Since I have great affection for my hide, I decided to risk your temper and try again to please you."

Eden's jaw dropped, but she saw a gleam of mischief in his golden eyes. "You're not serious?" she asked doubtfully.

He chuckled. "I am very serious. I have much affection for my hide."

Eden couldn't help but laugh, but she shook her head. "I'm so flattered knowing it took so little to convince you to come talk to me."

Something flickered in his eyes, but then a slow grin dawned that made her belly jump reflexively. “But this is because you are so beautiful I am terrorized.”

“I guess Liz didn’t have to explain bullshit to you,” she said wryly, but she couldn’t help but find his teasing very engaging.

He looked intrigued. “What is this?”

Eden thought it over but decided she wasn’t up to the challenge of trying to explain. “Never mind. You were sent to--uh--speak for the group?” she asked curiously, wondering if he really had been sent by the others.

He shrugged, but then chuckled. “Vladiv was chosen last time and we are here.”

Eden couldn’t help but smile in response to his tone and his laugh, but she found the whole experience more than a little disconcerting. Beyond the fact that she entertained doubts whether he, personally, found her to his taste--which was lowering, to say the least--her curiosity was thoroughly aroused. She hadn’t considered before how their ‘arrangements’ were conducted. She supposed she’d assumed the contract between them and their perspective ‘queen’ was arranged and that their mother queen handled it. Maybe it was ordinarily, or at least sometimes, but they had had to consider a different tactic because of the circumstances?

Upon consideration she realized she had a hard time envisioning a society where the mothers settled her broods without considering their wishes. After Liz’s comments, she’d done some research herself into some of the old marriage customs, hoping she might understand the Xtanians a little better and she’d discovered social patterns in Earth’s past that were almost as incomprehensible to her as the perceived customs of the Xtanians. But Earth women had rebelled over arranged marriages. It boggled the mind to try to imagine the men standing still for that sort of thing.

So, maybe the contracts weren’t arranged, but they usually courted as a group, and maybe they’d sensed that she wasn’t comfortable being courted by all four of them at the same time?

Who decided which female to go after, though? The oldest of the group? The dominant male? And, if one did the deciding for all of them, were the others inclined to merely go along with whatever choice was made for them? Maybe they just didn’t particularly care so long as they got a female? After all, there was every indication that there weren’t a lot of choices for the males.

It was actually kind of nice to think the males would be vying for them, instead of the other way around. In her memory, women had either equaled or surpassed the number of men, depending on the area, which hadn’t left them in any position of power. Mostly the women ended up knocking themselves out to please the men, not the other way around. Supposedly, at some points in Earth’s history the men had been the ones to have to work to please, but she hadn’t experienced that situation herself and she wasn’t even sure she believed it had ever happened in Earth’s history.

The animal world was exactly the opposite--so maybe the Xtanians were actually closer to ‘natural’ behavior than Earth people were?

Emerging from her reverie, Eden chuckled dutifully at Trar’s comment about his brood brother Vladiv. “Now I have to wonder if Vladiv is as short tempered as I had thought,” she murmured, turning away from the announcement platform finally and beginning to walk slowly across the green. She had no particular destination in mind, but saw no reason to remain on display in the middle of the green. Besides, after the

incident, she thought Ivy could probably use all the help she could get in keeping an eye on the colonists. "I noticed he wasn't particularly happy with your comment, but I'm beginning to think he may be the target of your tongue often enough that his patience is running thin."

His response was an easy grin. "He is the embodiment of patience--though I am inclined to call it complacency because he has the pretty face. I must work very hard to provoke him, but it is well worth the effort. Twice now he has chased me all the way around the citadel, threatening my life, but I run very fast, and he needs the exercise."

Eden chuckled. Either bravery wasn't something considered required for males, or Trar was confident enough he didn't worry about his image. Either way, she found herself relaxing at his banter and felt a budding kinship with the Xtanians that she hadn't felt before. Maybe the Xtanians weren't really so different from them after all? It sounded very much like they teased and argued like close friends, or siblings.

Not that she had any siblings, but some of her friends did and it sounded like just the sort of rivalry and squabbling that went on between them. She smiled. "He just doesn't know how to properly appreciate the effort you go to on his behalf," she murmured with mock sympathy.

He sighed, his look as serious as her own, though laughter gleamed in his eyes. "No."

He glanced across the green toward his brothers, still clustered around Liz, and sobered. "Your friend queen Liz tells strange tales about your world."

Eden's brows rose, but she couldn't imagine that Liz would tease them with story tales. "The customs?" When he nodded, she shook her head, smiling faintly. "I'm sure they sound as strange to you as your customs sound to us, but I'm certain whatever she's told you is true all the same."

He frowned thoughtfully. "I can not draw this image in my mind," he said finally.

It took Eden a moment to realize he was saying he found it hard to imagine. She smiled faintly. "What custom did she tell you about?" she asked curiously.

"She said the queen mothers did not arrange the settling of her young that machines chose for them."

Eden stared at him blankly for several moments. "Computer matching? She told you about that?"

He nodded. "This is true, then?"

"Uh ... yes and no."

"I am confused."

"It really depends upon what one is looking for. If it's merely companionship, then we don't necessarily worry about the pool. Most people do consult the data banks, though, if they're going to start a family. It's to make certain you pick someone who is free of genetic disorders and diseases and also that their genetics compliment your own. And we still make our own choices. We just date within the pre-selected pool of gene donors. If we go through them all and discover we aren't happy with the choices, we run another check and find more selections."

He looked more confused instead of less so and Eden thought back over what she'd told him, trying to decide if it was the concept that was eluding him or a deficiency in the translator. She finally decided that it was a combination of the two and was wondering if it was worth trying again to explain or if he was even that interested when a

commotion near the end of the field caught her attention.

One of the Xtanians staggered through the crowd and collapsed in the clearing.

He was stark naked but it took several seconds for Eden's mind to assimilate that fact. The moment it did, however, her mind also connected with spiked punch and man hungry colonists and she broke into a run. A crowd had already gathered around the unfortunate man before she could reach the scene. She pushed her way through and discovered that he was babbling completely incoherently, or at least words her translator found unrecognizable.

Instinctively, she glanced at the faces of the crowd. The colonists mostly wore expressions of shock, although she detected nuisances of guilt on the faces of some.

The Xtanians were another matter altogether. By the time it had occurred to her to search their expressions for some clue of the magnitude of the situation, they had schooled their faces to blank masks.

The were white faced, though, and Eden was afraid to speculate on what emotions they were struggling so hard to hide.

She had to do something, and quickly, to diffuse the situation, she knew, and yet she wasn't entirely certain of what had happened or what would be the best course of action.

"Take him to the infirmary!" she said sharply as Captain Sterling pushed her way through the crowd and looked down at the hapless victim as if she was contemplating taking his head from his shoulders before he could say more.

Ivy's head jerked upward at the command. For several moments the two women shared a look, but to Eden's relief Ivy didn't try to countermand her. Even as several med techs pushed their way forward and struggled to help the Xtanian to his feet, she signaled the soldiers among them and they began urging the crowd back.

Unfortunately, there were only three soldiers within the circle besides Ivy and the crowd had been growing from the moment the man had been spotted. Fearing a disaster, Eden thrust her way back through the crowd, moving as quickly toward the stand as she could. She was shaking by the time she reached it and climbed onto the platform.

She saw at once as she scanned the field that her fears hadn't been misplaced. The tight knot around the fallen man yielded slowly before the med techs trying to remove him from the field. Otherwise, all of the colonists had gathered round, either forcing the Xtanian's back--or the Xtanian's had simply decided to remove themselves from what was transpiring. They'd formed a tight, orderly knot well beyond the crowd of colonists.

Eden tried not to interpret that regrouping as militarily threatening, but it made her distinctly uneasy. As few as their numbers were, and even though they had not been allowed to enter with weapons of any kind, they still posed a threat to the peace of the colony.

"Attention! Can I have your attention, please!" she yelled into the microphone. Without waiting to see how effective the demand for attention had been, she continued. "We have a situation. Please return to your quarters immediately and in as orderly a fashion as possible!"

To her relief, most of those on the fringes of the crowd looked up, hesitated, glanced in the direction of the Xtanians and immediately began to scatter toward the roadways that surrounded the field. "In an orderly fashion, ladies! We don't want any

injuries. We have the situation in hand!"

She couldn't tell that that announcement had any appreciable effect on those who'd already started moving away, but it drew the attention of many in the crowd who'd ignored her before. The crowd shifted and heaved like a living thing as others pushed their way through and headed back to their quarters.

"No running! No pushing!" Eden yelled bracingly, her hand tightening around the microphone as she saw one colonist burst through the group and begin to run. Her half formed fear was realized. The sight of one woman running was enough to spark panic in others. Just as they'd rushed to the scene to see what was going on, they now reversed course and scattered. The panic seemed to grow exponentially. Like an epidemic wave, it traveled outward from the epicenter and even those who'd begun to move away in an orderly fashion, began to move faster and faster.

She'd lost sight of the techs who were trying to remove the injured man. She had no idea whether they'd managed to reach safety before the crowd began to stampede or not.

She saw, though, that the Xtanians remained where they were, as if rooted to the spot.

It was as well they did, for Ivy and her troops had their hands full trying to control the maddened crowd. Hoping to avert even more of a disaster, Eden dropped the microphone and hurried down the steps toward the Xtanians.

Her heart was in her throat when she reached them, though, mostly from the fear that Ivy and her troops would feel compelled to take action against the aliens. "You must go now!" she said a little breathlessly as she reached them.

Without a word, without even glancing at one another, the Xtanians turned and began to march back toward the gateway.

After staring after them in surprise for several moments, Eden hurried to follow. Ivy caught up to her. Grabbing her arm, she jerked Eden to a halt. "What the hell are you doing?"

As stunned as she was by the assault, Eden recovered quickly and her own anger surged to the forefront. "I'm not one of your soldiers, Captain! You'd do well to remember that! I'm escorting them out."

"Like hell! Have you any idea what sort of repercussions we could be facing from this incident!"

"No! And neither do you. I do know, though, that it'll be a hell of a lot easier to patch this up with only one casualty to apologize for!"

"It could blow up in our faces!"

"It'll sure as hell blow up in our faces if we try to take these men prisoners!"

Ivy stared at the retreating Xtanians through narrowed eyes. "This is a military matter, Eden. Step aside and let me handle it."

"Are you mad! This is a diplomatic incident! And I'm not about to allow you to make bad worse. Take your troops and restore order and find those responsible for this!"

Ivy's face hardened. Instead of responding to Eden's demand, she activated her communications. "Secure the gateway and send a platoon to secure the prisoners."

Eden gaped at her in disbelief for several moments before she pivoted to watch the troops rush to respond to Ivy's command. The Xtanians had to see the troops gathering before them, closing in around them, and yet they did not hesitate. They

continued to march in an orderly manner toward the disaster Eden had hoped to avert.

When she returned her attention to Ivy, she saw that soldiers were double timing it in their direction.

“I am your commander in chief!” she announced as the troops came abreast of them. “Seize Captain Sterling ... NOW!”

The troops blinked, exchanged looks. For several heartbeats Eden was afraid that they would refuse to follow her orders. Abruptly, Lt. Carter saluted, stepped forward and grabbed Captain Sterling’s wrist. Too shocked by the seizure to move, Ivy merely stared at her second in command as two more soldiers stepped forward and grabbed her, jerking her hands behind her back and securing her wrists.

Relief flooded through Eden. “Take her to the brig infirmary and see that she’s treated for space dementia,” she said sharply.

“What about the Xtanians, Madam President?” Lt. Carter asked.

“Release them and allow them to return peacefully to the alien citadel. Until I’ve thoroughly investigated the incident, I have no idea where we stand, but the militia should remain on high alert until we can see just how badly we’ve blundered.”

Nodding, Lt. Carter gave the command and Eden sagged as she watched the troops escort the Xtanians from the city and close the gate once more. Feeling weak and ill, all she wanted to do was to retreat to her quarters now that the worst seemed to have passed off without deadly incident. She knew it was important, though, to get to the bottom of the incident as quickly as possible. She couldn’t try to negotiate peace with no idea of what had happened.

“Locate the culprits,” she told Lt. Carter, “secure them in the jail and let me know as soon as you have them in custody. I’m going to the infirmary to check on the Xtanian’s condition.”

“They’ve been arrested. They’re in the drunk tank.”

Eden’s brows rose in surprise. A faint smile curled her lips. “That was quick.”

Sarah Carter shrugged. “I can’t take credit for it, Madam President. Captain Sterling ordered a squad off to retrace the Xtanian’s tracks the moment he staggered onto the green and collapsed. We met up with two of the perps almost at once---They were trying to sneak back to the party before their absence was noticed. They were happy to supply us with the names of the other four ‘ladies’.”

Eden considered the new information. “It won’t hurt to let them stew a while,” she said tightly. “Thank you, Lt. Carter. Keep me informed of any unusual activity in the alien citadel.”

“Madam President?” Sarah asked as Eden started to turn away.

Eden turned back, lifting her brows questioningly. “What will become of Captain Sterling?”

Eden’s lips tightened. “We’ll have her evaluated.”

Sarah looked uncomfortable. “Do you really think she’s suffering from space dementia?”

“No. I think that she perceives the potential for disaster the same as I do, but she also perceives a far different solution than I. She’ll be facing disciplinary action at the very least.”

Eden found when she reached the infirmary that the Xtanian was unconscious. “Do you think it was wise to sedate him?” she asked Deb, who’d come to stand with her

at the observation window.

"I don't and we didn't. We pumped his stomach. Those idiots had poured enough alcohol down him I'm surprised he didn't drown. I just hope we managed to pump enough out of him to keep him from dying of alcohol poisoning."

Rage suffused Eden. She tamped it with an effort. "What the hell were they thinking?" she muttered.

"They weren't. They'd had way too much themselves to have a thimble full of sense between the lot of them. Four of them had already passed out when the MPs arrived and hauled them off. The other two barely had control of their motor functions. What do you think's going to happen?" she ended worriedly.

Eden stared at the unconscious man grimly. "A lot depends, I think, on whether or not he pulls through ... and how much he remembers. Do you have any idea what happened beyond them getting him dead drunk?"

Deb eyed her a moment. "They took turns with him. When the ring leader proposed another round the guy took off. I'm still not sure whether they meant another round of drinks or another round of him. Not sure he knew."

Eden considered that for several moments and felt the blood drain from her face. "The only group sex that's acceptable to them is ONE queen and her brood. I don't think they could've done worse if they'd set out to start a war."

Deb looked a little ill. "I could try to manipulate his memories," she offered hesitantly.

A coldness speared through Eden. "Don't! We don't know enough about them and the one thing I don't want is to return him to them as a vegetable. You think he'll recover?"

"From the shock? Or the alcohol?"

"Both."

Deb shrugged. "It's too early to tell. We've got him stable right now. Give it a few hours and check back with me. By that time we'll have a pretty good idea of what's happening with him."

Eden nodded duly. "How many injured in the riot?"

Deb blew out a gusty sigh. "We've treated about twenty with minor injuries. Another dozen with broken bones. Three fell and were trampled, but they're stable. I think they'll be alright."

Eden rubbed her temples, applying counter pressure to the throbbing pain. "My god!"

Deb placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up. You did the right thing--the only thing you could've done. The crowd should have dispersed in an orderly manner and no one would've been hurt if they had. It was the one's who panicked that caused the problems. No one knew what was happening. They couldn't see anything except the women that ran and they reacted to the possibility of a threat."

"Which means there are probably a lot of colonists right now who think the Xtanians attacked."

Deb grimaced. "Probably."

"I need to make a broadcast," Eden said decisively. "And then I'm going to my quarters to try to think where to go from here."

"You want something for your nerves?"

Eden smiled wanly. “Can’t afford it--but thanks for the offer.”

Chapter Thirteen

Baen had himself well in hand when he stopped at the stone that indicated the end of the gateway and waited to be acknowledged, but the darkness of fear was not entirely dormant. In point of fact, he was fairly certain that it was fear that had driven him to seek an audience. The populace of the entire kzatha was falling apart with the strain of waiting, and the expectation of sudden and complete annihilation. For they were just as certain that they had broken the peace as they were that the women of the city had weapons far beyond any that they had, or had protection against.

He'd come because he could no longer bear the waiting. The sun had risen five times since the disaster. If he was going to die, he wanted to do so now, while he still had some dignity left to him, before the waiting drove him beyond his self-control.

"What is your business here?"

A jolt went through Baen. He saluted when he spied the female warrior atop the wall and then knelt and bowed his head respectfully. "I crave an audience with my queen," he said evenly, relieved that none of his anxiety shamed him by being evident in his voice.

A prolonged silence followed his request and he had begun to wonder if he was being dismissed, or if they simply hadn't understood his request when the queen spoke again. "Who is your queen?"

He glanced up in surprise, feeling his belly knot as it occurred to him to wonder if his brood had been mistaken about being selected.

Or perhaps, after what had happened, Eden had decided to rescind her choice?

"Queen Eden."

There was a commotion among the warriors. "Baen?"

Baen wasn't certain whether to feel relieved or more apprehensive when he recognized her voice. Before he could repeat his request, however, he heard the faint sizzle that he'd learned to recognize as the opening of the portal. "Come in."

Rising, he straightened his shoulders and focused on Eden as she came forward to meet him.

She looked as nervous as he felt. He tried not to think that that might mean he was in someone's crosshairs, but he was fairly certain he was.

"You wished to speak with me?"

There a faint breathless quality to her voice that rippled through him pleasantly. He was so attuned to the sound of her voice, he didn't actually listen to the translation from the device on her head and his brain was slow to assimilate what she'd said.

"I need" He broke off and tried again. "I wished to know if our peoples are still at peace since Letheen transgressed and if you had come to a decision about the kzatha."

Eden merely stared at him while her mind processed the little he'd given her to feel her way. Letheen had transgressed--As impossible as she found it to credit, it seemed they were laboring under the impression that the fault was all theirs, or at least

Letheen's. She knew that had to be the poor man the colonists had nearly killed forcing booze down him and then taking advantage of his state.

It was the chance she'd been hoping for, hadn't dared to consider a possibility. She supposed the meeting should take place before the council, but she sensed that Baen was far more uneasy than he was willing to show and she didn't want to take a chance that someone might inadvertently do or say something to upset the tentative truce.

Besides, she needed time to think what would be the best approach.

She forced a polite smile. "Please, come with me. We'll talk."

He seemed to relax fractionally and followed her readily enough as she turned and headed back along the corridor. She only glanced back at him once, when they stepped onto the roadway.

Acting commander, Lt. Carter joined them when they reached the first intersection. "Do you think it's wise to take him to your quarters?"

Eden resisted the urge to glance back at Baen. "He's come to make sure the incident the other day didn't disrupt our peaceful relations. I decided a friendly, relaxed atmosphere would be more conducive to peace than cold formality before the council."

Carter studied her a moment and leaned close, closing a fist over the mouthpiece of the translator. "I will have you on my monitor."

Eden nodded and smiled as the Lt. stepped away instead of telling Sarah she didn't think that was necessary.

The truth was, she wasn't completely easy in her mind and it was comforting to think she would have back up.

When they reached her domicile, she indicated that Baen take a seat and offered him some refreshment--water, because she was afraid to offer him anything else. "How is Letheen?" she asked when she'd settled on a lounge across from him.

He looked puzzled, but finally shrugged. "He and his brood are disgraced. We do not see them."

Eden blinked several times and sat up, placing her feet on the floor and sitting rigidly erect. "Because of ...what happened? His whole brood?"

He looked surprised. "Latheen transgressed. The brood shares the disgrace. They will be banished from the kzatha and most likely will seek Iscindee (ritual suicide) for being doubly disgraced. We would have slain them at once, but Latheen was returned in health and we were not certain, at first, that he had been dismissed by his queen."

Eden bowed her head and covered her face with her hands, feeling vaguely ill. She knew the perps had not expected or intended anything so drastic to come of their little 'lark', but that didn't change the fact that the repercussions were very serious indeed. And she found that most of her sympathy was with the Xtanians. Not only had their overtures of peace been violated, but an entire brood was suffering for something that they were completely innocent of.

She couldn't excuse the behavior of the women. They weren't children, although they'd behaved as thoughtlessly as children. They had been ordered not to give the Xtanians anything of an alcoholic nature, and been told, moreover, that great delicacy was required in dealing with the Xtanians until they understood them better.

They'd disregarded everything in search of their amusement.

Eden's anger toward the colonists very quickly displaced the sense of pity she felt about the Xtanians' plight. "He was not dismissed," she said, dropping her hands and

looking at Baen as she abruptly came to a decision. "His queen only awaits a ... uh. Our customs dictate that the brood must build a home to receive their queen, for the city is only for those who have no brood." She gestured toward the room. "As you've seen for yourself it simply isn't big enough. And I have seen the domiciles of the kzatha. That wouldn't do at all.

"You must go back and tell Latheen and his brood, and everyone else. We are pleased and they are not disgraced." She formed her lips into a facsimile of a smile.

He stared at her in blank faced surprise for several moments before a slow smile curled his lips that made Eden's heart flutter. A chuckle escaped him. "This is what we have done wrong?"

Eden suddenly felt as relieved as he obviously was. She smiled more easily. "You haven't done anything wrong," she assured him, and with perfect truth, reaching across the space between them to pat his hand reassuringly. "To be honest, we were wondering if we'd done something wrong. I have been ... waiting to speak to you until I could talk to everyone and understand better what had happened."

Of course, she and they knew they had been in the wrong, but fortunately for all concerned, the Xtanians didn't seem to know it. She'd spent days trying to figure out how to gloss over the incident to prevent serious repercussions, questioning the women who were still in lock up pending trial--because they weren't certain what to charge them with, questioning the Xtanian about what he remembered, tracking down and questioning everyone who'd witnessed any part of the incident. It was such a relief to discover the breach could be mended fairly simply that she felt almost giddy.

The sticking point was the women who'd almost caused a disaster to start with, but they were accountable and she rather thought that, of the options she was prepared to offer, they would be only too happy to take the consequences of their actions.

He studied her hand where it rested upon his for several moments musingly and placed his free hand over hers. "I will take your message back to the others. They will be relieved to know that it was only a misunderstanding."

Reluctantly, Eden removed her hand and settled back again. "This should be a lesson to us all," she said carefully. "We must agree to strive for tolerance of our cultural dissimilarities so that we can learn to co-exist peacefully. It's inescapable that there are vast differences between the social structures and customs of our two peoples, but as long as we understand that, and don't allow ourselves to lose our tempers over the misunderstandings that are bound to arise, I believe we can work out a compromise."

Nodding, Baen rose to leave. Eden rose, as well, and found herself standing almost toe to toe with him. His proximity, she quickly discovered, was enough in itself to resurrect the attraction she'd felt for him from the first that had grown progressively more pronounced, not less so, with familiarity. Her awareness sparked a shy awkwardness. Disordered by it, she extended her hand to shake on their agreement before it occurred to her that that, too, was an Earth custom and one moreover that wasn't even practiced everywhere on Earth.

Before she could recover the blunder, he took her hand, fitting his palm against hers and curling his thumb over to stroke it along the back of her hand. "Your hands are not like the hands of our women," he said musingly.

Eden frowned, trying to cast her memory back to the time she'd spoken with his mother queen, Sademeen, but the image had been grainy and indistinct and she couldn't

recall noticing anything about Sademeen's hands. She wasn't certain she could have anyway. His touch was stirring currents of warmth inside of her that made it difficult to focus her mind on anything else. "No?" she said a little shakily.

He lifted his head until he met her gaze. His throat worked as he swallowed. He seemed to struggle with himself for a moment before he spoke. "I have thought of you and little else since last I came. When I close my eyes at night, I think I can almost feel your lips and it torments me, because I feel things that are not my right to feel, and wish for things that are forbidden to me."

Heat rose in Eden at that, bringing a flush to her cheeks. She swallowed against the dryness in her mouth, struggling against the urge to tell him she'd thought of little besides him since she'd first seen him. Guilt warred with her own desires. She was as irresponsible in her own way, she realized, as the women they'd imprisoned. Her desire for Baen had led her to breach yet another boundary that was taboo to them. And yet all she could think about was that she wanted to do it again, to tear it down completely. "I should not have kissed you," she said a little hoarsely.

Several different emotions flickered across his features. Finally, his face hardened with resolve. "That is not forbidden to me."

Doubt shook her, but her desire magnified until she was breathless. "No?"

He cupped her jaw in his hand, tilting her face up as he lowered his head toward hers until scarcely a hair's breadth separated them. His eyes gleamed with heated desire that matched hers as his gaze locked with hers. His lips curled faintly. "No. Because it is not our custom at all," he murmured, a half smile curling his lips.

It was splitting hairs, and she knew that. She also knew that he did, but she found the offer enthralling, impossible to resist. Closing the distance that separated them, she aligned her lips with his, pressing lightly, feeling a heady rush at the warmth and texture and tautness of his lips beneath hers, and the faint but distinctive and infinitely desirable scent that was him wafted along her senses, mingled with hers, coursed through her lungs into her heart and through her blood stream. He released a gusty sigh, shifting infinitesimally closer as she withdrew just enough to brush her lips lightly, caressingly across his. Heat surged between them, engulfing them in a conflagration that threatened to consume them both, but she couldn't quite bring herself to stop at that. Just a little more, she thought, tracing the seam where his lips met with the tip of her tongue, only a little. His lips parted at the teasing stroke of her tongue and she nipped at his lips with her own, lightly sucking at first the full lower lip and then the upper.

He lifted his head slightly when she stopped, running his tongue over his lips, tasting her, she knew, as she tasted him on her tongue. He stared down at her lips for several moments as if of more than half a mind to demand more.

She wanted more. She wanted to press her mouth fully to his and explore the inner surfaces of his mouth thoroughly, invite him to explore her.

She wanted to explore and taste every inch of him, so much that it was many moments before her conflicted emotions sifted the tingling, faint stinging crawling over her skin and identified it.

They'd locked the particle transporter on her, she realized, her throat going dry as a cold, hard reality washed over her and tamped the fires.

They could not possibly have interpreted his behavior as aggressive or hostile.

She stepped away from him abruptly.

Confusion filled his eyes. For several moments she thought she had broken the barrier that held him in check, that he would ignore everything except the siren call of desire rushing through him. Finally, he straightened, dragged in a deep, shuddering breath and expelled it slowly.

His gaze flickered over her face searchingly, as if he was trying to assess her thoughts. "They are watching," he said finally, his voice, still husky with desire, sounding harsh, grating.

Startled at the accuracy of his observation, Eden's eyes widened. A faint wash of color flushed her cheeks. She cleared her throat. "I'll escort you to the gateway," she said instead of responding to his comment.

He nodded a little stiffly and bowed his head formally.

Straightening her spine, Eden turned and led him from her quarters. As before, he trailed her at a respectful distance, but if possible she was even more acutely aware of him than she had been before. The desire that had enveloped her at their chaste exploration waned, but slowly, leaving behind uncomfortable, pulsing sparks of unfulfilled need.

It was as well that they'd interfered, Eden thought wryly as she watched Baen cross the plain toward the distant walls of the alien compound. She wasn't certain she could have retained enough sense to stop herself.

Lt. Carter met her as she emerged from the corridor once more. "Did it go well?"

Eden shrugged, lifting her head to fix Carter with an assessing look. "Who was in the control room?"

"I was, Ma'am. His behavior was unthreatening, and in any case, I didn't need help in watching over you."

Eden nodded. "Summon the council to chambers." She hesitated, but came to a decision as Lt. Carter turned to leave. "And, lieutenant?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Bring the prisoners to the council room, as well."

Eden had been pacing her office for nearly fifteen minutes before she was informed that all of the council members had arrived and were waiting in the council chamber. It was time well spent, however. She'd had time to compose her thoughts.

They greeted her entrance with various expressions of anxiety.

"Ladies," she addressed them as soon as she'd reached her position at the head of the council table, "I've called you here today to discuss our options regarding the incident at the thanksgiving celebration."

She knew that, by now, they would all have heard that Baen had come to speak to her and she saw from their expressions that they were impatient to hear the results of the conversation none of them had been privy to. They contained their impatience, however, waiting.

"We were not mistaken in considering this a very serious situation. The Xtanians certainly consider it serious."

"They're not considering war?" Deb demanded, unable to contain herself any longer.

Eden studied her for a moment. "I got the distinct impression that they expected us to launch a war."

The women at the table exchanged confused glances. "Impression?" Liz asked.

“He didn’t say it?”

Eden shook her head. “What he said was that they believed they, or at least the poor man that was assaulted, had transgressed, and that they would take action against him.”

“To keep the peace?” Liz asked.

Again Eden shook her head. “No, because it is their custom, evidently, to deal with transgressions of this sort by ostracizing the perpetrator.”

“But ... that’s good news, right?” Stacy Sessions put in.

“Not to those who are to be punished for something they didn’t do. The broods are closely tied. As I told you before, the customs dictate that a woman who chooses one chooses the brood. Even I didn’t realize, though, that they were as closely tied as it seems now that they are. Apparently, they are seen as one. Latheen shares his disgrace with his brood brothers. They are all to be punished. The brood is to be banished from the kzatha in disgrace. And their only recourse for such a shame is ritual suicide.”

She studied their faces as that sank in.

“But ... that’s barbaric!” Stacy exclaimed. “My god! I thought they were an advanced race! How could they practice such barbaric customs if they’re enlightened?”

“It’s not barbaric to them!” Liz snapped. “It’s the way they keep order in their society.”

“It’s completely unjust!” Deb burst out. “I want to keep the peace as much as anyone here, but we can’t let them be punished for something they didn’t do.”

Relief flooded through Eden as she glanced around the table and saw that most of the council members were in agreement with Deborah. “I agree. That’s why I called this meeting. We were fortunate that they misinterpreted the situation, but this isn’t just a matter of doing the right thing--the just thing. Eventually, unless we break off all contact with them, they’re bound to come to realize exactly what happened, and the action we take now could be critical to future relations. Setting aside the fact that it’s unconscionable to allow the innocent to pay for the crimes of the guilty, only because it’s them and not us, we’d be setting an example of irresponsible behavior for our own people, and undermining the trust we now have from the Xtanians.

“The disgrace, as far as I could determine, arose from the belief that Latheen and his brood had been chosen and then failed to meet their ‘queen’s’ approval and been rejected. The only option I see open to us, if we want to keep the peace, and we want to be known for doing the right thing, is to assure the Xtanian’s that they were not rejected. Marion Lynden has chosen a brood. Whether she intended to or not doesn’t matter at this point. She must take responsibility for her actions. Are we in agreement here?”

She settled back to wait as the council members discussed the situation among themselves. After only a few minutes, however, they took a vote to support her decision.

Nodding, she summoned the prisoners into the council chambers. When they’d assembled, she looked each of the women over, catching and holding their gaze for a moment before she moved to the next. Finally, she settled on Marion Lynden. “As the instigator in the unfortunate incident, Marion Lynden, you are most culpable. Don’t try to explain to me, again, what you did or didn’t intend by your actions. By your irresponsible actions, you risked the health and well being of the entire colony. You risked their lives, risked war. All of you are accountable, but you, Marion Lynden, most of all.

“You have two options, and for your sake I hope you chose the one most likely to bring this to a peaceful conclusion. You can accept responsibility for your actions and accept the brood you chose, or you can spend the next fifty years in prison contemplating the seriousness of your actions.”

Marion turned as white as a sheet. Her jaw sagged. Eden could see the wheels turning in her mind while she struggled to cope with the options. “But ...we hardly know anything at all about them! You’re saying I would be banished to live among them?”

“You will be expected to perform the duties that were assigned to you when you were chosen for this mission, but you will live with your brood, on neutral ground outside of either colony,” Eden said, not without sympathy, though she kept her voice even.

“Which means they could do anything to me!” Marion spat angrily.

Eden tilted her head assessingly. “You’re asking for leniency when you risked all of our lives for your pleasure?”

Marion stared at her blankly for a moment, swallowed a little sickly and glanced around at the faces of the other council members. “I wasn’t the only one,” she stammered a little weakly.

“You weren’t,” Eden retorted. “And the others have the same options that you have. They can offer to make peace on behalf of the colony by choosing their own broods and working toward building a better understanding between us and the Xtanians, or they can serve time--and we will draw lots for volunteers among the other colonists.

“Either way, you’ve narrowed everyone’s options. We can no longer afford to take the time to feel our way carefully, to learn their customs and see how well they adapt to ours.”

Chapter Fourteen

Mel was the first of the prisoners to capitulate. Looking petrified, she stepped forward after deliberating the verdict of the council less than a minute. “How are we supposed to go about choosing, Madam President?”

“Are you crazy?” Marion hissed in a furious under voice. “They can’t make us do this.”

Mel didn’t glance at her. “I accept responsibility for my actions. I’d prefer to take my chances with the Xtanians to being imprisoned for fifty fucking years,” she snarled back in a harsh whisper that was perfectly audible to everyone.

“With the stipulation that you will be gracious and accepting of their efforts to please and do your utmost to maintain peace?” Eden demanded sharply.

Mel nodded. “Absolutely. At least I’ll never be alone,” she added with a weak chuckle.

It took less than another minute for the others to agree, Marion included.

“As part of your pardon, your behavior will be monitored closely until we are satisfied that you intend to uphold your part to the spirit of the agreement and not merely the letter of the law,” Eden cautioned them.

Marion sent her a resentful glance, but the others merely nodded.

Relieved, Eden settled in her seat. “You are released on your own cognizance ... for now. When I’ve investigated the protocol for the choosing, I will summon you.”

When the women had left, Eden charged the other council members with the task of making the announcement and dealing with the questions bound to arise. She was glad when the last of them had filed out and left her to her thoughts. Shaky with relief that she hadn’t had to force the issue, with the council members at least, when she’d already promised Baen that everything was in order, she rose finally and went to her office.

She ignored the work awaiting her, however, and moved to the window to stare out toward the Xtanian citadel. Naturally enough, there was no sign of Baen, but she didn’t need to see him to resurrect the confusion of feelings that had filled her when she had kissed him. She was playing with fire. She had no right to sit in judgment on the others when she had willfully ignored the taboos because of her own needs.

It had been bad enough the first time. Even though she hadn’t completely understood their social structure then--she didn’t now--she had been well aware that she was taking risks she shouldn’t. This last time, when she’d yielded to the temptation to kiss him, she couldn’t even claim ignorance. It was some small consolation that she hadn’t allowed it to go any further, but that certainly hadn’t been due to her own clear headed decision.

Carter had watched her back.

Bless the woman!

And damn her, too!

As a politician and leader of her people, she could not but be grateful. As a woman and an individual, she resented the interference in her private life.

It was stupid, of course. The two were intertwined and could not be separated, but she hadn't been 'saved'. She'd only been spared indiscretion of the moment. The only way she could avoid the temptation to yield to her instincts was to stay completely away from Baen, and her position wouldn't allow it.

Movement near the citadel caught her attention, distracting her from her contemplation of her personal dilemma. They appeared as little more than dark specks when she first saw them, and not much more than that when they reached the stream and crossed it. By her count, however, there seemed to be considerably more Xtanians crossing the neutral zone that she'd had any reason to expect.

In truth, she hadn't expected to see any at all, but she supposed that it might be Lethen's brood, and perhaps some others who had come to help them?

They were eager, if that was so.

She sincerely hoped Marion was properly appreciative, or at least could behave as if she was.

"Ma'am?"

Frowning at the distraction, Eden moved to her desk and depressed the communications button. "Yes, Lt. Carter?"

"There's a ... herd of Xtanians heading this way. I thought you might want to be informed."

"I noticed them. Is Lathen among them?"

"Yes, ma'am." There was a brief pause. "And Baen's brood."

A flash of heat went through her. It was followed by a flash of cold.

"Ma'am?"

"I'll be there in a minute."

If they'd been on Earth, and/or talking about Earthmen, she wouldn't have thought much of it. Neighbors helped neighbors. But she'd gotten a fairly accurate, she thought, picture of how things worked with the Xtanians. That was the main reason for the family units they formed. Labor. Each 'family' unit formed a little self-sufficient community. And if every brood was a working unit, then would they still behave like their Earth brothers?

She didn't think so.

It was possible, of course, that Baen had merely decided to come back for another discussion about some other point--or thought of an excuse to meet with her again.

But she had a very bad feeling that Baen and his brood brothers had either mistakenly, or deliberately, decided to interpret something she'd done as a commitment to them.

She didn't know why that thought occurred to her, unless it was because she'd just been right in the middle of manipulating a few dozen people into committing to a really bizarre relationship for the sake of peace, but it did occur to her.

She frowned at that thought as she punched her destination into the lift panel.

She'd seen nothing at all in Baen's behavior to suggest he was inclined toward subterfuge or manipulation. He was certainly intelligent enough, but he seemed very honest and straightforward.

Of course she couldn't say for certain that she knew him well enough to determine that about him.

And she didn't know his brothers at all.

An image of Trar abruptly popped into her mind and it occurred to her that Trar might well be capable of deception. He'd been groomed, after all, to be one of the 'seducers'.

But nothing had happened at the celebration and she hadn't seen him before or since.

It couldn't be the kissing thing. In the first place, the Xtanians didn't kiss so they couldn't have any rules, or taboos, to apply to it. In the second, Baen was a warrior and even though he hadn't specifically said so he had suggested that, as a warrior, his 'duties' did not include contributing to the gene pool. She was almost positive that she'd gleaned that much information and that he wasn't restraining himself because they hadn't bonded, but rather because he wasn't supposed to at all.

Other than that, which she thought she could discount, the only thing she'd done was to choose the men who would attend the party, and if that was being interpreted as mate choosing, then she was really in trouble, and so was Liz and Ivy--because they'd all picked men from different broods. Having five to eight men to have to deal with was mind boggling enough. Having to deal with more than one brood just wasn't acceptable. She didn't care what their customs dictated. They were going to have to comprise on that little detail.

By the time she finally reached the observation tower and joined Lt. Carter, she was expecting the worst. She wasn't disappointed.

The Xtanians had arrived, and the groups had split. Baen and his brood were very obviously examining the terrain to determine a location for their 'nest'.

"Oh fuck!" Eden exclaimed before she thought better of it.

"I suspect that's what they've got on their minds," someone muttered in a perfectly audible under voice.

Janine snickered.

Eden lowered her glasses long enough to send a narrow eyed glance at the women crowding the observation deck around her. It was a wasted effort. Everyone's attention was focused on the two groups of men below them. She was trying to decide whether to suggest that Sarah give them something to do or just ignore them when Janine sucked in a surprised breath. "Is it just me, or does it look like there's about to be a fight?"

Dismissing her irritation with the gawkers, Eden snatched her glasses up again. It took her several moments to train the glasses on what was transpiring below, primarily because everyone on the deck had gone tense with excitement and began to jostle each other for a better view.

Apparently both hunting parties had settled on the same building site. Cal, Trar, Pizan, Vladiv, and another Xtanian Eden had not met before had settled themselves in the shade of a very large tree with the air of spectators. Baen and two other warriors, whom she knew must be his brood brothers, stood in a spearhead formation with their backs to the group. Facing them were the five warriors of the other group.

She couldn't hear anything, naturally enough, from such a distance, but she didn't need to to see that Janine was right. Everything about their tensed-to-spring stances screamed animosity. Moreover, the Xtanian who was obviously the dominant male warrior of the other group was speaking and gesturing angrily.

She couldn't see Baen's face from where she stood and after a moment, she lowered the glasses and moved to a different position. Frustration filled her when she

tried again, because this time she found that the foliage of the tree was blocking her view.

Before she could try for another position, Baen moved--so swiftly she missed most of it, slamming one fist into his opponent's mid-section and the other almost instantaneously into the man's jaw as he bent double. The man toppled backwards like a felled tree, slammed into the men ranged behind him, bounced off and settled heavily to the rocky ground.

Eden was so surprised it took her several moments to realize that everyone was so completely stunned that no one, either on the tower with her, or on the ground below, moved for several moments.

"And it's a knock out!" Sarah muttered with a chuckle.

"Did you see that? I missed it! What happened?"

"He sucker punched the guy. Can you believe that? One minute he's standing there all cool and bored looking while the guy rants and raves and the next the guy's on the ground!" Janine babbled giddily.

Apparently the Xtanians emerged from their stunned surprise at about the same moment the Earthlings did, because the nearly identical expressions of disbelief on the faces of those in the 'enemy' camp slowly gave way to anger and then blazing fury. As Baen's brothers moved forward, ranging beside him and completely blocking her view of him, Eden swept past them to discover that Cal and the other spectators were now jeering and gesturing at the other brood.

Tensing, Eden swung the glasses back so quickly the movement made her dizzy and she had trouble focusing on the warring groups. To her relief, she saw when she finally did bring them into focus that Latheen and his brood brothers had apparently decided the building site wasn't worth an all out battle. The laborers surged forward to collect their fallen man and hauled him to his feet.

He still looked dazed and wobbly as they led him away.

Baen and his brothers stood watching them, still tensed for battle until the group had disappeared from sight, apparently having decided to search for a building site a goodly distance from their rivals.

"Amazingly well disciplined but clearly territorial," Lt. Carter observed.

Eden, who'd watched until Baen settled himself at the foot of the tree with his back to it, lowered her glasses and stepped back from the wall as Baen looked up at the tower. She immediately regretted the impulse to 'hide', because she was fairly certain that he couldn't identify her even if he had spotted her, but the sudden movement was bound to draw attention.

"They haven't seemed aggressive," she said sharply in response to Sarah's comment.

Lt. Carter turned to look at her. "Before now, you mean?"

Eden frowned. "If anyone was being aggressive it was Latheen's group."

Sarah studied her a long moment and finally grinned. "It was Baen that swung the punches."

Eden shrugged irritably. "Even I could see the guy was working himself up to attack. I just don't understand why they were arguing anyway. Obviously, the entire planet is up for grabs."

Sarah shrugged and turned to watch the activity below. "But Baen and his brood brothers settled on the most ideal spot closest to New Savannah. They headed straight for

it as they crossed the valley, as if they'd already staked it out. If I was a betting woman, I'd say Baen had thoroughly checked it out before they were 'invited' to settle nearby."

"If they'd already chosen the site, then that's all the more reason to refuse to give it up. Why is it the best spot?"

Sarah motioned for Eden to join her at the wall. "I doubt he can recognize you from here," she said when Eden looked reluctant.

Curious, Eden moved to the wall beside her.

"... Unless, of course, he recognizes the hair," Sarah added teasingly as Eden settled.

Self consciously Eden swiftly lifted a hand to her hair. "It's dark. A lot of us have dark hair," she said stiffly, irritated that Sarah obviously knew exactly why she didn't want to stand by the wall in clear view of the men below them.

"But it catches fire in the sunlight, goes all bright and coppery. Not everybody's hair does that. And I'd be willing to bet he's noticed. I doubt there's much about you he hasn't noticed."

Eden felt a breathless fluttery sensation grip her. It took an effort to resist the temptation to prod Sarah for more of her insights about Baen, but she firmly tamped it. "I didn't realize you'd had that much opportunity to observe him," she retorted, completely unable to keep a note of jealousy from creeping into her voice.

Sarah sobered. "Begging pardon, ma'am, but you are the most important person here and it's my job to watch you carefully and everyone you come into contact with. Captain Sterling was concerned about your interest in him, and even more concerned about his interest in you. Anyone with a trained soldier's eye can see that he has the potential of being a formidable foe."

She hesitated, turning to study the subject of her conversation thoughtfully. "He's a cool one. Outwardly, if you discount the fact that he's built like a gorilla and is probably twice as strong as any man alive, he seems almost as gentle and unthreatening as a lamb--very gentlemanly, respectful, but it's my considered opinion that he doesn't miss much. I'm guessing that, by now, he's figured out exactly how many soldiers guard New Savannah. When you take into account the fact that the Xtanians, by their own admission, have no designated leader as a whole, and yet no one challenged him when he assumed that role, you have to figure they know something about him we don't."

Eden frowned. "You think he's a threat to the colony?" she demanded, feeling vaguely ill at the thought.

Sarah shrugged. "He could be. Whether he is or not probably depends on where his loyalties lie."

Eden glanced at her sharply. "A man with shifting loyalties isn't exactly trustworthy," she said tartly.

Sarah gave her a steady look. "He is if his first loyalty is to his blood."

Heat rose in Eden's cheeks in spite of all she could do. "You're suggesting"

"I wouldn't take it upon myself to suggest anything, Madam President. I was merely pointing out that it's a happy circumstance when duty and desire go hand in hand.

"Baen obviously intends to have you. I am as certain that you've given them no reason to expect a commitment as I am that he and his brood brothers are determined to get one from you. Only two broods came--the one you'd summoned to collect their queen, who gave Latheen every reason to think she had accepted him when she had sex

with him. And Baen's brood, who obviously already had a site chosen to build on.

“Baen singled you out the moment he set eyes on you. It's up to you to figure out whether that was because of his own desires, or because he knew you were our leader. What did he call you? The queen of queens?”

Chapter Fifteen

As unpleasant as the lieutenant's comments were, Eden realized immediately that her points were valid and she could not lightly dismiss Carter's concerns. Instead, she merely nodded and stood for a time watching as three of Baen's brothers picked up tools they had brought with them and set about clearing the area they'd chosen for a building site. The remaining two, after moving almost aimlessly about for a while, settled to digging.

After a time, she moved away from her vantage point and crossed the observation deck to see what had become of Latheen's brood. Discovering that they had moved to the opposite side of New Savannah and settled to work as the others had, she returned to her office and spent the remainder of the day struggling to focus on her work while her subconscious mind picked at the puzzle of the Xtanians.

By the time she'd finished reviewing the endless reports compiled by the section chiefs regarding their progress, she'd come to a conclusion.

The activity below their walls was an opportunity to better understand the Xtanians and it was important to make the best of it. The fact that that decision coincided with her own curiosity was beside the point, she decided. After contacting Carter for a report on the activity, she made arrangements for a military escort for her and Liz Chin to go out the following morning and contacted Liz directly to finalize the plan.

Her rest period was hardly restful. Her mind was still filled with the problems reported by the sector chiefs when it wasn't struggling with the dilemma of how to deal with the Xtanians. Facing what she knew would probably be a near sleepless night, she reluctantly popped a sleeping pill to help her rest, waited until she became drowsy and finally sought her bed. The pill worked after a fashion, but her dreams were filled with heated images that left her achy, tense, and miserably sluggish when she awoke early the following morning.

Resisting the temptation to find an antidote for the sluggishness in a bottle as she had for her restlessness the night before, she studied her wardrobe for the clothing she thought would be most comfortable for a day spent outside the controlled environment of the city and dressed.

Liz and a handful of soldiers were waiting for her when she reached the rendezvous point at the corridor. Dismissing all but two of the soldiers, they proceeded outside.

She didn't want a show of force that might suggest a lack of trust. In any case, their vitals monitor would lock with the transporter the moment they stepped outside. That would be sufficient protection from any threat, she felt certain, and she and Liz would not be fettered by such a crowd that they found it difficult to focus on their task.

The moment they stepped from the corridor, Eden's senses were inundated with stimuli from every direction. A cacophony of various sounds reverberated against her eardrums. The smell of freshly turned soil tickled at her nostrils, and other smells she found harder to identify.

And on the plain that separated the two cities, a blur of activity filled her sight as at least a dozen groups of Xtanians marched purposefully about, carefully examining and surveying and clearing.

Eden and Liz shared a significant glance and halted to survey the bustle for some minutes.

"There are others in the forest," Liz said after a time, breaking into Eden's chaotic thoughts. "They're felling the trees."

Frowning, Eden followed the direction of Liz's gaze and scanned the dense vegetation. As she watched, the top of one of the great trees began to thrash about and abruptly disappeared in an explosion of sound.

After sharing another uneasy glance, she and Liz struck off in that direction as if they'd verbally agreed to do so.

Their progress did not go unnoticed. Eden was keenly conscious of the fact that, one by one, the Xtanians paused in their tasks, stood for many moments watching them and then returned their attention to what they'd been doing. The two guards accompanying them tensed, their hands moving to the butt of their pistols. After a moment, when they saw that none of the Xtanians seemed inclined to approach closer, they all relaxed fractionally.

They'd covered perhaps a third of the distance between New Savannah and the edge of the forest when a new sound brought the party to a halt. Frowning, Eden glanced around for the source and finally looked up.

Her heart seemed to stand still in her chest for a painful moment.

"They do fly," Liz gasped, a mixture of awe and alarm in her voice. Abruptly recalling herself, she made a grab for her recorder and began babbling her impressions and observations into the piece.

"Hold!" Eden ordered as she finally dragged her gaze from the winged man coming toward them and noticed that the guards had drawn their pistols. When she saw that they had heeded her, she returned her attention to the man just in time to see him alight on the plain less than twenty feet away, fold his wings, and march decisively toward them.

"That was the most amazing thing I've ever witnessed in my life," Liz breathed the words in a barely audible whisper.

Eden felt a knot form in her throat, but she wasn't certain whether it was because she was as entranced as Liz by the sight, because it was Baen, or because she had been so awed she'd barely had the presence of mind to prevent the guards from firing on him. "Set your weapons to stun only, and holster them," she said sharply.

The guards sent her a startled glance, but after that brief hesitation did as she'd told them, though both kept one hand on their pistol butts and the holsters unfastened.

Baen knelt in the traditional Xtanian salute when he neared them. "I will escort you."

Eden frowned uncertainly, wondering if it was purely her imagination that she detected a hint of possessiveness in his statement, or if he was merely following protocol. "We have escort," she said finally. "It's kind of you to offer, but unnecessary."

If she had not been studying his bowed head, she might have missed the frown that drew his dark brows together. By the time he lifted his head to look up at her, the frown had vanished. "I must check on the other laborers anyway. If you permit, I will

escort you.”

Eden exchanged a glance with Liz. Clearly he had not been heading that way as he indicated. If it had only been that, she doubted he would have felt the need to rush, or rather fly, to close the distance so quickly. Finally, however, she merely smiled. “Thank you. Your company is welcome.”

He merely nodded, but she thought she detected a hint of relief in his manner.

Irritation surfaced. If Sarah Carter hadn’t put her in mind of the possibility of a hidden agenda, she wondered if she would have detected anything at all. Now she had to wonder if she was seeing something that wasn’t there only because the thought had been planted in her mind.

As their party turned and headed out once more, she wondered if her judgment had been so impaired by her physical attraction that she’d ignored warning signs she shouldn’t have, or if Sarah had been completely wrong.

By and large, she trusted her instincts about the people around her and the people she dealt with from opposing camps. Obviously, the committee that had chosen her for her position also trusted her judgment, otherwise they wouldn’t have entrusted her with the power they’d given her.

Everyone had their weak points, however, she thought wryly, and she wasn’t so enthralled with Baen that she didn’t realize he was hers.

Although Baen trailed them at a respectful distance as he generally did, when they reached the edge of the forest, he moved around them. “I should lead now,” he said. “The laborers are felling trees and I can show you the safest route.”

Without waiting for a response, he scanned the forest and finally forged ahead.

“Why are they felling the trees?” Liz asked as she carefully picked her way through the low growing brush.

He glanced back at her. “We will need timbers to complete the meznooku, and of course to build the furnishings for comfort.”

Their language decoder tabulated for several moments and finally produced the ‘guess’ that meznooku, since meznook seemed to refer to clan, or family unit, that meznooku ‘perhaps’ suggested the place of the meznook.

Eden wanted clarification. “This is where the pazaan will live with their queen?”

Baen sent her a look that she could only interpret as ‘warm’. “Yes.”

Swallowing with some difficulty, Eden glanced at Liz, wondering if she’d interpreted that look in the same way. From the faint smile Liz quickly hid, she concluded that she hadn’t misinterpreted it.

Apparently reminded that she was included in the party to make observations that she could later collate so that they could begin to get a better picture of the Xtanians’ social structure, Liz took out her recorder again and asked Baen whatever questions came to mind as they trudged through the forest.

Everyone fell silent, though, as they came at last to a huge clearing.

At a quick estimate, Eden figured there were nearly as many Xtanians working in the forest as there had been in the open. When they halted in surprise at the wreckage before them, Baen excused himself and picked his way around the fallen trees until he reached a group of men working on the other side.

Curious, Eden watched him until he stopped to speak to another warrior who was watching a handful of men hack the branches from the tree they’d just felled.

“Isn’t that” Liz broke off, peered toward the group of men, and finally shook her head. “I not really familiar enough with any of the Xtanian’s to recognize them on sight--except Baen--but doesn’t that man look a lot like the one that was sitting with us at the celebration?”

Eden felt a cold sweat pop from her pores despite the unaccustomed warmth of the natural air. “I’m fairly certain it is,” she said a little faintly.

Liz digested that in silence for several moments. “I was under the impression that the broods didn’t really interact, at least not in division of labor. Baen looks like he’s overseeing the work, though, doesn’t he? Why would he?” Breaking off, she sent Eden a wide eyed glance. “He’s one of the ones you chose for the celebration, isn’t he?”

Without waiting for a response, she began to scan the other men in the area carefully, paling as she realized that many of those present were the same men that had attended the celebration.

“Eden! Do they think ...? Tell me this isn’t what it looks like to me!”

“I’d hoped I was wrong.”

Liz blinked at her rapidly for several moments and then searched her face with frowning intensity. “This isn’t funny,” she said tightly.

“If I thought it was just a little misunderstanding, I’d say it was hysterical,” Eden retorted tartly, “but there’s nothing ‘little’ about this misapprehension. The problem is I don’t know if they willfully misconstrued the selection, or if it actually coincides with their own selection process. And worse, I don’t have a clue of what the hell we’re going to do about clearing it up.”

Liz’s jaw dropped. “I’m still trying to wrap my mind around their ideas of a family unit that includes a whole brood. Now you’re saying we may already have ‘inadvertently’ chosen two or three broods each?”

Eden glanced around. None of the Xtanians were looking directly at them, but she had the sense that their ‘ears were pricked’. “This is not the place to discuss anything of a sensitive nature,” she said quietly.

Looking conscience stricken, Liz glanced around, as well.

“Before anyone jumps to any more conclusions, I think you should focus on gathering the data you came to collect since that’s bound to make the situation far clearer than a discussion between the two of us at this time.”

Nodding, Liz considered for several moments. “Unless you disagree, I’d like to summon more observers to help collect the data.”

Eden lifted her brows. “How many?”

Liz shrugged. “Ideally, one for each group.”

Eden considered the request with uneasy skepticism. “That’s that many more chances to do something that could create serious repercussions,” she said pointedly.

After a very little consideration, Liz agreed. “I could call a meeting this afternoon and go over the situation with them. They would be prohibited from doing anything beyond observing and notating whatever questions came to mind. I’ll take the questions and compile them according to validity and you and I can then direct the questions to the Xtanians. From what it looks like at this point, we’re already in deep shit. I don’t think we could make things any worse.”

Eden couldn’t help but agree, but she found some amusement in the comment. “I’m not familiar with that scientific term. On a scale of one to ten, where would you say

that puts us?"

Liz looked surprised then irritated, but after a moment amusement crept into her own eyes. "I'm thinking somewhere around negative five."

Eden grimaced. "Well, let's hope it transpires that we've misunderstood the situation."

"Ah," Liz countered, nodding wisely. "Hope--the unrealistic expectation that everything will turn out all right in spite of every indication to the contrary."

The quip surprised a chuckle out of Eden. When she looked up, however, and saw Baen approaching them once more, the laughter died.

He saluted. "The work is going well, Queen Eden."

Eden couldn't help but blush at the title. She was fairly certain she was never going to get used to being called queen, or even the formality that seemed ingrained in the Xtanians, but she also doubted that they would change. In any case, as uncomfortable as it made her she wasn't cognizant enough with proper Xtanian protocol to know whether insisting they drop the title would be a serious breach of protocol or not.

Partly, though, she blushed because he'd made a point of informing her about the progress of the work. She could hardly not consider that significant. Smiling uncomfortably, she nodded. "This is good news."

He looked disconcerted at her tone but wiped it so quickly from his expression that she wouldn't have seen it at all if she hadn't been looking directly at him. Feeling guilty, she searched her mind for something she could say that might be less offensive to his sensibilities. "These trees will work for what you wanted?"

He seemed to relax fractionally. "When they are dressed."

Eden blinked, wondering if the translator had malfunctioned. "Dressed?"

Amusement gleamed in his eyes for a split second. "The bark removed and the wood cut into workable pieces."

Eden smiled as if enlightened, but she wasn't sure she was. She wasn't certain wood had ever been used as a building material on Earth, but if it had it had been so long ago that no one remembered. In point of fact, there were strict Earth laws prohibiting the desecration of what little woodlands remained. "Oh," she said a little blankly. "How clever that you simply take whatever is here and use it to build!"

He sent her a look that was a mixture of amusement and irritation. "Your people do not?"

She frowned. "I don't think so. Liz?"

Liz opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again, giving Eden a significant look.

Thus prodded, Eden recalled abruptly that they had allowed the Xtanians to believe that they were natives. A discussion of Earth building practices past or present wasn't something they wanted to get in to.

She waved a hand airily. "This is not our area. The bots handle the construction. I'm sure they must do much the same as you do, though."

Baen sent her a curious look, but she didn't give him the opportunity to probe any deeper. Turning away, she retraced her steps out of the forest once more. She didn't look back, but she was acutely conscious that Baen continued to follow them until they reached the safe zone.

"With your permission, I'd like to return to the field to observe for a while," Liz

said thoughtfully as they neared the perimeter.

Eden hesitated, but she didn't think there was any real danger in doing so. "The guards should go with you."

Liz looked as if she might argue, but apparently decided against it. Without glancing at either of them, she turned on her heel and headed out to the nearest building site.

Eden watched until they were out of ear shot and turned to look at Baen quizzically.

"Would you care to see the site we've chosen?"

Unwise, her mind said, but she smiled. "Yes."

She glanced back at him several times as they walked and finally stopped. "It's very difficult to talk to someone who's behind you," she said plaintively.

His dark brows rose. "You wished to speak to me?"

Eden tapped her foot a little impatiently. "Conversation would be nice."

He glanced around. "Three paces is a respectful distance," he said finally, and then smiled faintly. "I am a warrior. I am not well versed in the art of conversation. You would not find it entertaining."

Letting out a faint huff of irritation, Eden gave up and turned away. "I'm sure I'll never know," she muttered. "Are you forbidden to speak with the women? Or is it simply that you are not taught such social skills?"

She glanced back at him as she asked the last question and caught a flicker of emotion that was gone too quickly to decipher. It occurred to her as she turned around again that very likely this was the main reason she hadn't noticed the things Sarah had spoken of. Most of the time she'd spent in Baen's company, he had trailed her at the required three paces. She didn't have eyes in the back of her head, so she could scarcely observe him, and on the few occasions when she had managed to speak to him face to face, he had been prepared to shield his thoughts from her.

"There is no reason to teach social skills to warriors. Their only purpose is to protect. We do not give comfort or pleasure ... only our lives when necessary."

Eden stopped abruptly and turned to face him, trying to tamp the horror and empathy that had welled inside of her. "That is your place in life?" she gasped.

He tilted his head curiously. "It is not the same with your warriors?"

"To fight and die if necessary to protect everyone else? Yes. But they also have value beyond their calling. They are certainly entitled to give and to receive comfort and pleasure."

He studied her for a long moment and finally looked away. "This would be a ... dangerous concept to introduce to my people," he said slowly. "Order is necessary to maintain the balance within the meznook. Everyone has tasks they were born to, and trained from birth to perform to the best of their abilities."

Eden swallowed against the hard knot that had risen to her throat and looked away. It was a warning, very plainly spoken so that she could be left in no doubt as to his meaning.

Finally, she merely started walking again and kept walking until she reached the site Baen had offered to show her. Her thoughts were tumultuous and it was several moments before she realized that the men paused, glanced toward her and then halted in their tasks, looking for all the world as if they'd been caught at something they shouldn't

be doing.

Trar, smudged with dirt from head to toe and gleaming with the moisture of his labors, grinned at her bashfully when she stopped at last. Apparently, recalling himself abruptly, he bowed. "I am disgusting," he announced.

Eden bit her lip trying to contain a smile. "You are working very hard," she said reassuringly, hoping to ease his discomfort over the fact that she'd arrived to find him dirty from his labors.

He looked even more embarrassed when he encountered glares from his brothers. "I beg pardon for my appearance. There is no water yet ... for bathing."

"Water?" she asked curiously.

Nodding, he pointed to the hole she'd seen them digging the day before. "So far we have only found mud ... very sticky mud."

"It's a well!" Eden said when she'd walked over and looked down, finally enlightened, although she could hardly credit that they expected to dig deep enough to reach the water beneath the ground with the crude hand tools they were using. Moreover, it looked like a dangerous undertaking. Already the two who were busy digging at the bottom had had to light a fire on a stick to provide them light.

"On Xtania we would have machines to help. Here we must make do with what is at hand."

Eden glanced at him at that. "We have machines," she said tentatively.

The expression on his face was enough to assure her that the suggestion wasn't well received and, moreover, that he wasn't certain how to take it. "This is a test of our skills and resourcefulness," he said finally. "It is to prove our worth to ... the one we wish to please."

"Oh, I see," Eden responded, though she didn't see at all.

"We are only just beginning. When we are done, you will see that we have built a place of beauty and comfort."

It took an effort to resist the urge to ask him point blank why they were building and what their plans were, but she managed it, summoning a smile. "I'm sure it will be."

She didn't stay more than a few minutes since it was obvious to her that it made all of them excruciatingly uncomfortable to be in her presence when they were dirty and sweaty from working. After she caught the second resentful glare directed at Baen for escorting her to the site when they were unprepared for a guest, she excused herself and returned to the city.

She didn't allow herself to dwell on the conversation she'd had with Baen. Returning to her office, she focused on the work that needed to be done, firmly pushing personal matters to the back of her mind.

A decision had to be made about the disposition of the mother ship. It had been orbiting New Georgia since they'd arrived with only a skeleton crew to maintain it for weeks. Theoretically, it could continue to orbit indefinitely with only minor adjustments now and then to keep it locked into an orbit that hid the ship from the world the Xtantians inhabited.

The ship had only been designed to bring them to their new colony, however. It had simply not been possible to devise much of a contingency plan with the limitations they had to work with and it had been understood that they would have to make do with one of the planets in this star system if they found New Georgia unsuitable for any

reason.

No one had anticipated finding another race to contend with, however, and after a very little consideration Eden realized that a new plan was needed to protect the interests of the colonists. If they stayed, integration was inevitable. At this point there seemed no way to avoid it--there'd never been any real possibility of avoiding it.

The situation could well be a powder keg waiting to blow up in their faces, though. They had the advantage of superior weaponry, but the Xtanians had the advantage of superior numbers and their customs did not mesh well with the customs of the colonists.

Her decision made, she called a council meeting and discussed the necessity of overhauling the U.S.S. Plymouth, replacing the nearly depleted fuel cells, restocking the supplies and beginning a search for an alternate location for the colony. To her surprise, the council was unanimous in their support of the project, despite the tension it put on already strained resources. She hadn't realized until then that they were as uneasy about the possible outcome of their situation as she was. None of them were in any great hurry to give up and leave, but all of them felt as strongly as she did about having the security of an alternative.

Despite the ease with which she'd gained support and approval of the council, Eden wasn't at all certain the majority of the colonists would agree with their assessment of the situation. As hard as she worked to keep her focus on her work, she was not unaware of the growing excitement among the colonists about the grand domiciles popping up around New Savannah and she cautioned the sector chiefs to keep the information to themselves for the time being. At this point, the colonists were only to be told that the ship had to be maintained as a security measure until such time as the colony had achieved stability.

She didn't want a mutiny on her hands, and she didn't want the colonists fighting among themselves and alerting the Xtanians.

Chapter Sixteen

“I don’t envy you your office,” Liz said flatly when she’d settled with her reports in the living area of Eden’s quarters.

Eden, who’d been in the process of pouring each of them a drink, paused and sent Liz a searching look. After a moment, she returned her attention to her task and filled the glasses. Setting the vessel aside, she took both glasses and crossed the room, handing one to Liz before she settled on her lounge with her own drink.

She’d arranged the meeting in her quarters to hear Liz’s findings because they were friends and she hoped the location she’d chosen wouldn’t alert the colonists to the fact that it was a meeting, and not merely a social visit between friends. “That sounds ominous.”

Liz frowned. “It could be.”

“Go on,” Eden prompted when she hesitated as if searching for the right place to begin.

“We’ve only had a few weeks to compile these findings. The language decoder has been a help, but you do realize that we can’t be a hundred percent certain of the accuracy of translations because language isn’t like mathematics. There are no hard and fast rules and sometimes the way something is said can completely change the meaning. When you add to that the fact that we’ve only had a few weeks to observe and interpret what we’ve observed, that leaves a lot of room for misinterpretations and plain out errors.”

Eden frowned. “I understand that this isn’t an exact science and that the time constraints you’ve been given have made your job that much harder. But I also know that I can depend on you to have carefully assessed every speck of information you and your group has collected.”

Liz relaxed fractionally, took a long draught from her glass and firmly set it aside. “The bottom line is that, as far as I can see, these men are disposable as far as the Xtanians are concerned. They were banished here because the Xtanians consider themselves ‘enlightened and civilized’ now. Historically speaking, the instances where the queen failed to produce a female to carry on her line were rare and the ‘offending’ brood was usually dispatched immediately.

“God only knows why they evolved as they have, but the tendency towards prolific reproduction of the males, and virtually no females is responsible for their system. Females are in short supply, very short supply, and so they are the most important. The males are so abundant they have almost no value at all. They attain value if they’re chosen by a queen, because the females are little more than baby making machines and they aren’t really physically designed for what their bodies are doing.

The females are generally nearly twice the size of their male counterparts, and yet, from what I can tell, not nearly as strong as we are. They are sickly. They are weak, and after their first brood, as often as not, they’re usually crippled to the point where they can hardly move without assistance. By the time they’ve produced two or three broods,

they are completely dependent on their pazaans for everything.

“When a brood is chosen to become a part of the pazaan, they become important only because they are responsible for the health and well being of their queen.”

When Liz paused, Eden digested her comments in silence for several moments, trying to ignore the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach and view it dispassionately. “I’ve seen a lot of things that seem to support your theory, but it’s hard to imagine the minority, especially since, if you’re right, they’re much weaker than the males, could dominate their society.”

“I’m not saying I don’t find it as bizarre as you do, and ordinarily the strong do dominate. In this case, the ‘strength’ of the females is due almost entirely to their rarity. If I had to guess, I’d suppose that in ancient times the males tried dominating, but that would have produced wholesale slaughter when there were so few females to fight over—which might also account for the fact that the males have virtually no value to their civilization. And the need for ‘order’ would have arisen from the same circumstances. This is probably also why they seem so cold and emotionless to us. They would have a need to be emotionally detached besides the fact that being born in litters would make it nearly impossible for their mothers to lavish them with affection.

“The fact that the birthing has a crippling effect on the females compounds that problem, because it’s the males who care for the young.

“Most of this is speculation, though, as educated a guess as I can come up with, but still theory. I haven’t run across one that actually seems to know anything about the history of their civilization. They can recount their line through the queens, going back for generations, but their focus is on their clan or meznook.”

Discovering with a touch of surprise that she’d finished her drink, Eden eyed the empty glass with disapproval and set it firmly aside. “What did you find out about their selection process, or more specifically, our particular problem?”

“They’re trying to adapt,” Liz said flatly. “Ordinarily, their mother queen arranges a match for them. They are not, contrary to outward appearances and what that might suggest, subservient. I don’t think they particularly care what queen they get, so long as they get one and they have not, historically speaking, had choices. They don’t expect a choice, but they have the same drive to ensure their progeny as any other species. They’ll settle for one because they don’t know any different, but I have a very, very strong feeling that our choice is going to be to divide them up, all of them, or face a war.

“The good news is that we didn’t actually commit ourselves when we picked the men for the celebration. The bad news is that we showed favor, and that’s the next thing to a commitment as far as they’re concerned. That’s the way they’re interpreting it, anyway.

“Something you apparently said has led them to believe the final approval will only come once they’ve proven their value by building a meznooku worthy of the one who ‘smiled’ upon them.

“Right now they’re working out their aggression in creativity, trying to outdo each other in producing the most magnificent meznooku of all. If we reject them, they will be shamed because they have been found unworthy and chances are good they’ll seek lscindee, their word for ritual suicide, because it’s the only accepted way to redeem their honor. If we accept one brood and reject the others, and the rejected decide to

challenge that decision instead of seeking Iscindee, which they might since they've become somewhat 'uncivilized' since they came here and are reverting to the 'old ways', the chosen will try their best to kill the unwanted to prevent them from trying to steal their queen."

Eden stared at Liz in horror for several moments and finally leaned back in her lounge, massaging her temples. "Oh god! That was stupid! Criminally stupid. I should have taped my mouth shut instead of trying to negotiate peace with them!"

Liz drained her own drink, but unlike Eden, she saw no reason to stop there. Rising, she helped herself to another glass. "I'm not going to tell you I wasn't furious when I found out, even though I knew all along that you'd done your best to try to keep peace. But after I cooled down a little I realized that you were no more to blame than the rest of us. We all agreed to the celebration as a way of gaining a better understanding of the people we were dealing with.

"I felt like kicking my own ass when that occurred to me, but blaming anybody isn't going to get us any where. We have to deal with this." She settled in her seat again, studying Eden's profile for several moments. "Ivy's going to be fit to be tied."

Eden's eyes flew open. She sat up abruptly. "I'd forgotten she chose, too! This is a hell of a mess!" she cried, jumping to her feet and beginning to pace.

"Suggestion?"

Eden glanced at Liz hopefully.

"Give her the same ultimatum you gave the others. She knows she screwed up big time when she tried to usurp your powers and take control of the militia. That was a clear case of treason and under the circumstances she should be facing life in prison or death. The alternative might look a lot better to her."

Eden considered it for several moments. "Even if she went for it, do you think she could be trusted to stay in line? It'll only make things worse if she appears to go along and then offends the Xtanians."

Liz thought that over and finally shook her head. "I am as certain as I can be that Ivy thought she was doing what was best for everyone or she wouldn't have committed treason to start with. She's as by-the-book as they come. I don't believe her loyalty is really in question. She'll do her best to protect the colony, even if she doesn't like your politics or like what will be required of her."

Relieved to discover that Liz's assessment matched her own, Eden hesitated and finally went to pour herself another drink. "I'd hoped to avoid having to choose a pazaan," she said reflectively. Ignoring the look of surprise on Liz's face, she settled on her lounge again with her drink. "You said they didn't seem to care what female they got so long as they got one?"

Liz was studying her with frowning intensity when she looked up again. "You're suggesting sending someone to take your place?"

Eden found she couldn't maintain eye contact with her long time friend. She shrugged. "I'm thinking it might be best if I remain unencumbered, particularly in light of the information you've gathered. We don't know that all of the colonists would be in agreement on taking a pazaan. In fact, I know they won't. They're very divided on this. Some of them are almost too eager, others nervous but intrigued, and still others completely revolted at the thought. I could manage, I suppose, but I don't like the idea of emptying New Savannah and casting our lot with the Xtanians. We'd be divided and

vulnerable.

“Add to that the fact that it could be a year or more before we could even conceivably prepare the ship for an evacuation, and that puts us all in a very dangerous situation.”

“That’s the very reason I don’t think we have an alternative at the moment,” Liz pointed out. “We can’t evacuate, and they’re working like hell to get those domiciles erected. My guess is we have a matter or weeks, not months, to decide.

“Every day I go out to check the progress, I find another group that’s decided to build a meznooku to attract a queen. And the broods are forming triads. They know exactly how many females are in New Savannah. Don’t ask me how, but they do.

“And I haven’t got a clue of how to stop them or even to slow them down, but, at a guess, I’m thinking the Xtanian compound will be emptied in a lot less than a year.

“If we want to keep the peace--even if it’s only a ruse to allow us time to escape, everybody, and I do mean everybody, is going to have to choose a pazaan of their own.”

Eden went back to rubbing her temples. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

Liz set her glass down and moved to the lounge beside Eden, giving her a reassuring hug. “It’s Baen, isn’t it?”

Eden gave her friend an unhappy look. “It’s that obvious?”

“Do you want me to lie to you?”

Eden sighed. “I think it would be better to choose a different group, if I must.”

“You think it’s going to make you feel better to know he belongs to someone else?” Liz demanded, shaking her head in disgust. “You are gone or you’d have enough sense to know that would only make things worse--all the way around. I said they don’t seem to care, but that was a generalization. Baen and his brood do care. They’re expecting you and I don’t think disappointment would even begin to describe how they’d feel if you rejected them. Hardly a day passes that one or another of them doesn’t come up to pump me for information about your likes and dislikes.

“You can do this, Eden. You’re stronger than anybody I know. I know you can do this.”

Anger surged through Eden. She wanted to scream at her friend that she couldn’t, that she wouldn’t. Whatever Liz said, she didn’t think she could bear being with Baen all the time and not being with him ... ever.

Almost as if she’d read Eden’s mind, Liz spoke again. “It wouldn’t have to be forever. We’re in power here, unless we give it over to the Xtanians. We can yield now, and try to teach them our own customs--at least in so far as the maintenance of the colony and the jobs we’re committed to. When we’ve had the time to prepare the ship, if we still find the situation intolerable, we can leave. Even if some want to stay, those who don’t will have a choice. Right now, I don’t see a lot of options for us, unless you want to declare war now and try to wipe them all out. And I’ll be honest with you. I think we’d have a hell of a time convincing the majority of the colonists that war is in our best interest.”

Eden digested that for several moments and finally rose and began pacing. “You’re right. I know you’re right. But that doesn’t change the fact that even yielding is incredibly dangerous. We’ll be divided. Even if we insist on coming in to work each day, that’s going to leave us vulnerable to them probably two thirds of the time.

“And what about the vast difference between us and their women? They’re going

to be expecting us to produce--and not just a baby. Even if we take the fertility injections a lot of us aren't going to be able to produce at all, and I doubt many will be looking at multiple births."

Liz frowned. "Going along still gives us time we wouldn't have otherwise. Like I said, if things don't work out, we can always evacuate and find a new location for the colony if we stick to the plan and re-equip the Plymouth."

Eden was not happy with Liz's report or her suggestions, but once Liz had left and she'd spent hours, and then days trying to come up with an alternate plan, she finally conceded defeat and called a council meeting to announce Liz's findings and open the floor for discussion.

The council was divided. Weeks of meetings produced more arguments instead of bringing them closer to a solution, primarily because everyone felt the pressure of time limitations.

The first meznookus were nearing completion.

A decision had to be made.

Finally, the council arrived at the same conclusion that Eden and Liz had. The Plymouth was a long way from being even adequately prepared for another trip and they had no choice but to at least appear to concede to the Xtanians. Thankfully, it was the council members' task to explain the situation and to convince the people in their sectors, not only of the appearance, at least, of full compliance, but also of the necessity to keep their contingency plan a secret, and to insist upon the freedom of movement needed to implement the contingency plan, because that one deviation from the customs of the Xtanians was going to be a major stumbling block in and of itself.

The solution to that was to make that a non-negotiable point of acceptance.

Eden thought she'd prepared herself.

She hadn't.

When her prospective pazaan presented themselves at the gates of New Savannah to request an audience she took one look at the team of men she was supposed to accept as her 'grooms' and felt her knees turn to water. "Oh my fucking god!" she whispered.

Liz slipped an arm around her waist for moral support. "You'd think they would have enough sense to pick one to represent them," she snapped angrily.

"I feel a little lightheaded," Eden gasped, struggling to keep from hyperventilating.

Liz pinched her, hard enough it drew a yelp of pain and a glare. "There you go," she said bracingly. "Better now?"

Eden rubbed her abused flesh, still glaring at Liz. "I'd rather have fainted."

"But it wouldn't be a good example. Remember, you're the queen. You're the boss. Tell them point blank that you're flattered, but you won't take no for an answer. You have to 'rule' the colony and they'll just have to get along without you while you take care of business."

Eden nodded, thankful that Liz had had the presence of mind to remind her because she wasn't really capable of thinking for herself at the moment. Straightening her spine, she steadied her nerves with an effort.

"Uh ... did I mention that they have a consummation ceremony?"

Eden's head whipped around so fast a bone cracked in her neck. Liz wasn't smiling, however, despite Eden's hope that it was some sort of sick joke prompted by a

misplaced attempt to distract her from her anxieties.

Liz quailed before the look in Eden's eyes. "Guess I didn't."

Gritting her teeth, feeling much, she thought, like a felon facing a death squad, Eden moved to the entrance to the safety corridor. Liz caught up to her again when she was almost halfway through.

"There's something else I don't know how important it is, at this moment, but I thought you should know. I just discovered it myself or I would've told you before," she added hurriedly.

Eden contained her fear, anger, and impatience with a strenuous effort.

"Something I should know right now? Because I have to tell you if it's more bad news I'm not sure I can handle it at the moment."

Liz bit her lip. "It's about the fertility."

Eden felt the blood rush from her face. "Don't tell me! They kill the queen if she doesn't produce."

Liz blinked at her. "The queen kills them."

Chapter Seventeen

Eden thought for several moments that she was going to disgrace herself by throwing up. “How?” she finally managed to ask weakly. “You said their queens were virtually helpless.”

Liz swallowed audibly. “They pinch their heads off.”

Eden stared at her friend in disbelief. “You’re serious?”

“One of them asked me why we didn’t have pinchers--why we had hands instead. That’s how I found out. I told you the men have no value to them. If they don’t reproduce, the queen is considered well within her rights to dispose of them, or have them disposed of. Sometimes they merely use their weight to crush them to death and pretend it’s an accident. I didn’t say anything because I don’t know how to handle it and I was afraid--Well, you know how Ivy is. She’s liable to take it as good thing and use it to wipe her pazaan out. I wouldn’t put it past her to encourage everyone to do so and we could end up causing the war we’re trying to avoid.”

Eden’s mind was chaotic, but one thing became crystal clear to her almost immediately. Liz was right. “Does anyone else know?”

“I didn’t tell anyone. It’s in my notes, but ...”

“Delete it from your notes and omit it from your report. I’ll give it some thought and try to decide the best way to handle this. We’ll discuss this again when I come back.”

A sea of male faces greeted Eden at the exit to the safety corridor. She was distracted enough by the ‘food for thought’ Liz had given her that she managed to greet them with what she thought was a nice mixture of aloofness and politeness. Bracing herself, she glanced around at the men, wondering if all of them were ‘breeders’ except the small army of warriors standing at the rear, or if only some of them were. She hadn’t given it much thought, she realized. Baen had made it crystal clear, however, that the warriors were merely warriors, and not allowed to be considered for breeding.

Lucky them.

Enlightenment about their barbaric practices would certainly explain why the Xtanians had first received them with a mixture of excitement and fear. They desperately wanted a mate for themselves and at the same time knew that if they failed to ‘please’ they were dead men.

All things considered Eden had to wonder if their women simply disposed of the men any time they were displeased.

Maybe that was why they sometimes ‘accidentally’ crushed the life out of them?

It didn’t matter, Eden told herself, smiling woodenly as one of the men, one she didn’t recognize, bowed formally and asked if she would care to examine the meznooku they had designed and built in her honor.

She graciously agreed that she would be absolutely delighted and curbed the impulse to whirl around and run back down the safety corridor.

She was distracted by movement within the group as four men came forward

carrying an odd looking contraption supported by poles that rested on their shoulders.

They set the thing on the ground.

Eden stared at it, completely dumbfounded.

The stranger, who'd introduced himself as Jred, or something like that, took her hand and led her toward the thing. Another stepped forward, grasped one side and opened it. When she stopped and leaned down to peer inside curiously, she saw that the interior looked to be padded and filled with brightly colored pillows. She had no idea what the pillows had been made from, but she suspected some of their clothing had been sacrificed for the project because the color and texture looked very much like the uniforms they wore.

She saw that everyone was watching her expectantly when she straightened and looked around. Frowning, she looked at the thing again, studied the poles, and finally it dawned on her that they expected her to climb inside so that they could carry her.

At any other time, she would've flatly refused. It was absolutely absurd to consider being carried when she was perfectly capable of walking.

Truth be told, though, she didn't actually feel perfectly capable of walking at the moment. She felt weak and ill and confused and frightened and the prospect of even a few minutes respite after what she'd just learned from Liz was enough to clench the matter. She climbed inside.

A wave of dizziness washed over her as the door was closed and the men lifted the thing to their shoulders again. It subsided slightly when they began to move, but only slightly. The thing swayed with their measured steps, even though she could tell they were trying very hard not to jostle her.

Lying back among the pillows, she closed her eyes and tried to focus her mind away from the motion and the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

What the hell were they going to do about this newest 'wrinkle' in the bizarre mating practices of the Xtanians, she wondered, feeling borderline hysteria?

What could they do?

Would the Xtanians decide that they were weak and unfit to be queens if they didn't kill the men that displeased them?

She pushed that thought aside. How long, she wondered, before everyone knew, Xtanians and colonists alike? Unless another Xtanian decided to question the lack of pinchers, or a colonist decided to ask too many questions, months?

Maybe.

If the practice was to slay the ones who weren't fertile enough to impregnate the queen, then that was something that would take months to know.

Unless their gestation period wasn't the same as Earth females?

She frowned, but it seemed to her that it was more likely that it would be longer, not shorter, if anything.

Unless the Xtanians decided to get talkative and/or the colonists curious, they should have a couple of months to figure things out.

It occurred to her about the time the conveyance stopped that she was probably worrying over nothing. These males hadn't had a female--ever, unless she was greatly mistaken and the colonists hadn't had a male in years. How likely was it that they were going to be doing any chatting?

That realization would've soothed her a lot more if she'd been sitting at her desk

in her office instead of surrounded by eager young men with nothing on their minds but waiting their turn.

She hoped they were going to wait their turn.

Her first sight of the meznooku completely obliterated all other thoughts from her mind.

Although built on a far smaller scale, it was a fortress much like the one the Xtanians had built across the stream. The resemblance ended, however, at the outer walls. When she had been escorted inside, she simply stopped, staring around in stunned surprise.

Whether the Xtanians had technology even close to that of the Earth culture or not, those banished to New Georgia had no access to it, but they'd proven that they were as resourceful as Trar had claimed. The interior was as comfortably cool as her own office. Natural light spilled into the enormous, almost cavernous great room from every direction, channeled in like recessed lighting, she saw, by small angled holes high in the walls that were covered with some sort of fabric to keep insects out and/or to limit air flow.

The great trees that had been felled in the forest had been cut and shaped, carved and smoothed, and then stained and rubbed with something that made the wood gleam warmly. Pillars and overhead beams had been cut from it. Tables and chairs and stools and couches had been wrought from it.

The furnishings were sparse for so large a room, but each appeared to have been very carefully thought out and produced.

An army had built this, she reminded herself, and still wondered how they'd managed to create a thing of such stunning beauty in only a matter of months.

She'd been in New Savannah for months and still hadn't managed to unpack the small trunk full of personal possessions she'd brought with her.

She cleared her throat with an effort and glanced around at the men waiting tensely for her verdict. "It's ... beautiful."

The men within Eden's view exchanged relieved glances. Trar broke from the group and hurried toward her. "I will show you the sleeping chamber."

Eden blinked at him as if she'd been smacked between the eyes as Liz's comment about the consummation ceremony hit her. Chastising herself, she forced a smile and lifted a hand. He stared at her hand uneasily for several moments, but made no attempt to take it, which reminded her of what else Liz had told her.

She smiled more easily and reached for his hand. "Show me," she urged him as she closed her fingers around his hand.

He curled his fingers around her hand as she had his and turned to lead her across the great room.

Wide doors along the rear wall that looked as if made for giants opened from the rear wall into a chamber that was almost half the size of the one she assumed was a gathering area.

"This I designed myself," he told her, pride in his voice as he lifted a hand to encompass the enormous bed that was the center piece of the chamber. The floor had been raised to form a platform. Steps formed tiers down to the main floor. The bed itself was supported by an enormous frame, ornately carved posts and a massive head and footboards. Delicate vines and flowers wound their way up the columns and across the

headboard and footboard. Nestled amongst the carved leaves here and there were small creatures.

She wasn't certain if it depicted the local wildlife or that on his home world, but she examined them with interest, wondering how accurate the images were. "I've never seen anything like it. What is this?"

He studied her face a little doubtfully, but finally knelt beside her. "It is a jupin."
"From Xtania?"

He frowned slightly. "They are here, as well--not just like this, but much the same."

Realizing abruptly that she'd not only unintentionally insulted him by appearing not to recognize what the image depicted, but she was also on dangerous ground insofar as her origins, she merely nodded. "Oh. I don't get out much," she said a little lamely.

The one who'd called himself Jerd rescued her, taking her hand and leading her to a slightly smaller room that she discovered was a bath--she thought it was a bath. A pool that looked large enough to accommodate a half a dozen people at once was the focal point. Formed from the local stone, it was irregular in shape, seeming almost 'natural' and filled by way of a waterfall set cunningly into the stone and spilling forth in seemingly endless abundance.

Either the water was circulating or draining at much the same rate as it was filling, for the water level seemed to remain constant.

It reminded her of the waterfall in the woods where she had come upon Baen. The memory promptly dampened her enthusiasm.

Smiling her approval with an effort, she glanced around at the remainder of the room. It occurred to her after a moment that the theme common through out the great room, the bedroom, and the bath was nature. Not only had they used all natural materials to build the structure itself. They'd carried it through into the colors of the manmade materials used to cover pillows and tables, the linens on the bed. And beyond that, the carvings on every surface depicted the simple beauty of flourishing life, vines, leaves, flowers and tiny creatures of the meadow and forest.

She was no artist, but even she could see that the domicile they'd built was far more than functional. It was a work of art, a place of beauty, and peace.

Vladiv led her from the bath, through the bedroom and into the great room again to point out a cabinet that he'd built.

A sense of unreality gripped her as she was led to admire one thing after another and each man pointed out his contributions to the joint effort. She'd begun to feel dizzy with the input into her brain, not just of the finer points of the docile and all its appointments, but the names and faces of the men by the time Cal rescued her and led her to a lounge in the center of the great room to rest.

He settled on a pillow on the floor beside the lounge. "We have prepared a feast in your honor. We hope that it will be a celebration feast for us, as well, and that you will grant us your favor by accepting us as your pazaan."

Eden tried to look delighted at the prospect, but she realized even before she glanced around to discover that everyone had gathered and settled that she'd reached the moment of truth--or at least the first hurtle. Her stomach knotted instantly.

"You do realize that our customs differ a great deal from your own?"

Cal said nothing, merely studying her with a faintly doubtful expression. She saw

a similar expression on the faces of most of the men gathered around her.

“We do.”

The voice drew her gaze.

It also drew the surprised gazes of everyone else--as if a tree had suddenly spoken.

Baen was standing near the far wall with the other warriors. For a handful of fluttering heartbeats, Eden met his gaze and then, with an effort, she looked away again. She'd been studiously avoiding the possibility of looking for him among the men since she had first left New Savannah. Hearing his voice alone was enough to send her heart rate soaring. Seeing him after so long, feeling the touch of his gaze, threw her into complete disorder.

With an effort, she gathered her thoughts. “I can only accept if you can all accept that I hold an office of importance to the ... uh ...city and the people who live there. If I agree to live here, then each morning I must return to the city and perform the tasks that need to be done. Each day I will return near sunset.”

An uncomfortable silence was the only response to her demand. Eden had begun to wonder if there was any room at all for negotiation with the Xtanians when Cal spoke.

“We are here to provide for you in any way, to fulfill your wishes, your desires, your needs. You will not need to labor.”

Eden studied his face for a long moment, trying to think of the best way to make them understand. After some thought, it occurred to her that they might not be able to fully accept anything she told them, but she could at least try to make them understand by using terms they were familiar with. “This is the way of my people. It's a matter of honor and duty,” she said flatly. “It isn't open to negotiation, and it isn't something I can or will abandon. Beyond that, it's important to me. If you can't understand and accept that there is far more to me than ... being a vessel to carry and produce your young, then I can not accept your generous offer.”

It was unnerving, to say the least, to hand out an ultimatum when she in the midst of her 'enemies'. Inside, she was quaking like a leaf, but she thought she managed to preserve an outward appearance of calm resolve well enough. She'd already begun to reach for the button on her wrist band that would signal an immediate evac via the transporter when Cal stopped her. A jolt went through her that was primarily fear when he caught her hand.

“We are here to serve. We will honor your wishes and learn your customs so that you will be comfortable living among us.”

Eden studied his expression doubtfully, but finally nodded when she saw nothing but earnestness in his gaze. Struggling to keep the depth of her relief from showing, she forced a smile. “I know our ways seem as strange to you as yours seem to us, but if you are willing to learn and accept, then I am willing to stay.”

The slow smile that curled his lips was so like Baen's it fisted uncomfortably around her heart. His hand tightened slightly on hers for a moment before he released it and turned to send a significant glance at several men who had settled to her right. The men rose at once and left. Eden watched their departure uneasily.

“It is so very different?”

Eden looked at him questioningly.

“Where you are from?”

Eden stared at him, wishing abruptly that there was no need for the subterfuge they had felt necessary for protection. Having to constantly be on guard and examine every word before she spoke was taxing. She rubbed her temple idly. "Much different."

He watched the gesture, frowning slightly. "You have pain there?"

"What?"

He lifted a hand and lightly touched her head. "Pain here?"

She was about to deny it when it dawned on her that she had not only cautioned everyone to accept the ways of the Xtanians so long as they didn't directly conflict with their own personal beliefs, but she had agreed to accept them herself. She wasn't particularly comfortable with the concept of allowing others to do things for her that she was perfectly capable of doing herself, but they were used to it. Finally, she merely nodded.

Rising promptly, he settled on the lounge beside and slightly behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders, massaging them. "Too hard?" he asked, pausing when she sucked in a sharp breath.

She thought it over. "A little," she said finally, trying to force herself to relax. It wasn't easy for his nearness touched off a sensual awareness that created as much tension as the kneading motion of his hands. He bore a strong physical resemblance to his brood brother, Baen, which she had noticed at once, but it went beyond an outer resemblance. His voice was much the same, as well, and, she suspected, the pheromones he gave off were close enough that her body could tell little difference.

He wasn't Baen, though. Baen, she knew, was standing near the front wall of the great room. She thought she could feel his gaze, and that only made the tension climb higher inside of her.

In spite of every expectation to the contrary, however, Cal's persistent ministrations did ease the tension and with it the mild, painful throbbing in her temples. She'd reached the point where she was struggling to keep from relaxing into a limp puddle when a stir of activity brought her mind back to focus on her surroundings.

The men who'd left a little earlier, she saw, had returned bearing platters of food and vessels filled with a beverage of some kind. Eden hadn't realized she was hungry until the aromas of the various dishes began to waft around her in a seductive dance.

The first platter was settled on the table closest to her lounge, but within moments similar platters had been settled all around. Trying not to be too obvious about it, Eden shifted away from Cal, placing her arm close enough that the computer in her wrist band could pick up the scents and analyze the ingredients.

She didn't suspect foul play, but she wasn't going to bet her life on it, and in any case, she had no way of knowing whether their food might be compatible with her own physiology. She thought it probably was, since they were basically the same species, but there was no getting around the fact that there were also radical differences between them.

To her relief, nothing was detected that could be considered harmful to her and she'd just begun to wonder what the Xtanian protocol was for dining when Cal leaned over to the tray, picked up something like a wafer, scooped some sort of meat hash onto it and held it to her lips.

Instinctively, she withdrew to examine the food he'd offered, trying to decide if it would be very rude to refuse to eat from his hand, or it was perfectly acceptable to refuse

the offer.

Ignore the little things and save the battles for those things that are really important, she reminded herself. The food smelled appealing. She bit down on the wafer, uncertain of what to expect.

Relieved and pleased to discover that whatever it was tasted to her liking, she sent Cal a smiling glance as she chewed it.

Apparently that was proper protocol because as soon as she'd begun to eat, the others began to move to the trays and select portions of food for themselves.

Everyone except the warriors, who remained at their post.

The beverage Cal held out to her wasn't water. She wasn't certain what it was, but it had a hint of a kick. It went down cold, but warmth blossomed in the pit of her belly when it settled.

Curious, she thought.

The next time she thought to glance at the warriors, she discovered that perhaps a third of them had disappeared. Perhaps ten minutes passed and they reappeared and another third crossed the great room and disappeared through the doors where the men had appeared with the trays.

Frowning, Eden swallowed the food Cal had given her. "The warriors aren't allowed to eat with everyone else?"

Looking mildly surprised, Cal glanced around. Finally, he shrugged. "I have never heard that it was forbidden. They simply don't."

"Why?"

He considered the question in frowning thought as he selected something else for her. "Perhaps because they are the peace keepers, they feel it best to remain aloof from the breeders."

Eden choked on the bite of food she'd just taken. Waving Cal away when he looked at her in alarm, she coughed until she finally managed to dislodge the particle of food that had gone down the wrong way and reached for the glass he held out, taking a large gulp to soothe her throat. Again the warmth blossomed in her belly, producing a floating effect not entirely unlike an alcoholic beverage ... and not entirely like an alcoholic beverage either.

Breeders certainly didn't require an explanation but she wondered for the first time if everyone who wasn't a warrior was considered a breeder. She'd been certain they couldn't be, that there must be levels--like warrior, laborer, breeder. If that wasn't the case she had a hell of a lot more to contend with that she'd expected.

But then Cal had labored with all the others and she had the distinct feeling that he'd somehow become designated as first in line.

By the time Eden decided she'd had her fill, she realized she'd also had far too much of whatever beverage it was that they were serving. She didn't feel inebriated, precisely, but she felt far more relaxed than she thought she should and not nearly as cautious as she liked.

That concern for the possibility of making a misstep was the reason she merely watched as the warriors began to circulate about the room, handing out something she couldn't see. Finally, her curiosity got the best of her, however.

She leaned close to Cal. "What are they doing?" she asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

“The choosing.”

Eden debated whether to try to pretend enlightenment or demand an explanation she could understand. Her curiosity won out. “What are they choosing?”

He sent a look that was both heated and filled with amusement. “I am the eldest of all here, so my place is assured. To keep peace, the others must draw lots.”

The heated look was enough to penetrate Eden’s fog.

Chapter Eighteen

Eden was still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that the time had apparently arrived for the consummation ceremony when Cal rose, scooped her off of the lounge and straightened. Even as he turned and picked his way through the crowd toward her bedroom, Eden saw others rise and begin to follow them.

She encountered Baen's gaze just as Cal stepped through the doorway but in the next instant he disappeared from her view.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or alarmed when she discovered that only four others followed them to the bath. Half was certainly better than all, but only by a little, not enough to keep from scaring the hell out of her.

Trar was among them, and looked almost as unnerved at the prospect as she felt, which didn't help her feelings at all.

The mellowing effect of the drink she'd had with her meal had pretty well worn off by the time Cal set her on her feet and began to examine her clothing. Realizing he was trying to figure out how to remove it, Eden had a moment's internal battle to deal with--help? Or ignore his dilemma?

She'd known she would have to do this, she reminded herself.

And it still took an effort to willingly remove her clothes with so many men looking on.

She was sorry now that she hadn't gotten so high on that stuff that she didn't know or care what was going on.

Once she'd shown Cal the self-sealing opening of her suit, he slipped his hands along her suit down along her belly and thigh. A shiver went through her as she felt the brush of the back of his hand along her skin, but contrary to all reason, it was a pleasurable reaction, not one of nerves.

One of the men removed her translator carefully from her head. As she glanced around in dismay another took her wrist. When she turned back, she saw it was Trar. After examining it frowningly for several moments, he located the catch and removed the wrist monitor, as well.

And then Cal was tugging her suit from her shoulders.

The water, she realized, trying to calm herself. This was no particle bath. The water would damage the electronics and they knew that.

There was no reason to feel threatened by the loss of her headset and monitor, but she felt far more naked without them than with the loss of her clothes.

Two of the men, already naked as she was, led her down the steps into the pool as the others undressed.

She didn't even know their names, she thought a little wildly, but she realized after a moment that she did. Jerd was the one who'd greeted her at the entrance to New Savannah. The other, who'd designed and built the artificial lighting in the meznooku, which caught and utilized the rays of the sun spilling through the holes high in the walls, had told her he was known as Podicum.

The water, contrary to what she'd expected, barely brushed her knees. It was warm, though, as if it had been heated. Leading her across, they settled her on a bench that she discovered lay just below the water's surface and then each took up a cloth, dipped a hand into a bowl filled with a jellied substance and began to work it into the cloths. To her surprise, she saw foam forming on the cloths they held. Before she could speculate on the purpose, Jerd knelt in the water, grasped one of her ankles and lifted her leg until the sole of her foot was resting against his belly. Once he had settled her foot, he began to rub the foam along her foot and calf, lightly scrubbing.

The foam didn't hurt. In point of fact, she found the stroking of his hand oddly soothing and arousing at the same time.

Podicium knelt beside Jerd and grasped her other ankle, forcing her to lean back and brace herself on her hands for balance as he did as Jerd had and propped her foot on his belly.

It wasn't until Cal, Trar, and a third man, whose name she was certain she didn't know, waded across the pool to watch the proceedings while they bathed themselves that she realized she had a bigger audience than the three staring down at the curling thatch of red hair between her thighs. Five warriors had ranged themselves along the walls.

Baen was among them.

Her belly clenched the moment she saw him, saw that his gaze crawled over her body with open hunger.

Her mouth went dry. With an effort, she dragged her gaze from him after only a brief glance, fearing her focus on him would draw the attention of the others, fearing what might come of it.

I want what I have no right to want, he'd told her once. She'd known then that he was telling her he desired her. She just hadn't understood that he was telling her he could never have her.

Why had he come then, she wondered?

The peacekeepers, she remembered Cal calling them, realizing abruptly what he'd meant, that a large part of their duty was to make certain the breeders were kept in line.

Even if it was required that warriors always watch over her even when she was with the breeders, though, why hadn't he simply sent someone else?

The stroke of a hand along her cleft jerked her attention back to the men bathing her. Before she could decide whether the touch had been accidental or not, Jerd pushed her leg wider, bathing the tender flesh of her cleft with infinite care.

Touching, she realized, feeling her body heat up with desire, was allowed here even if it wasn't allowed at any other time. His face hard with his efforts at self-control, he moved aside after only a moment and Podicium 'bathed' her.

Jerd's hand closed over his wrist after only a few moments. Podicium sent him a swift glance and moved away. Eden had already started to sit up when Trar and the unknown man knelt as Jerd and Podicium had. They, at least, made a pretense of washing her upper body before they, too, examined her sex.

More than a little disconcerted, she nevertheless found it highly arousing, being watched, being touched so intimately, feeling the heat of their desire. She was almost disappointed when Cal, who'd done no more than watch, turned away and climbed the steps out of the pool.

As if that was a signal to the others, they finished bathing her, quickly scrubbed

themselves and led her from the bath. Cal, she discovered as they rubbed dry cloths over her to absorb the excess water, had disappeared.

So, too, had three of the guards.

As she was led back into the bedroom, she saw that Cal was lying on his back on a lounge similar to the one she'd occupied in the living area, except that it was perhaps twice as wide. Total confusion filled her when she realized that the guards were securing restraints on his wrists and ankles.

His breathing was labored, but she found it hard to decide whether it was because he was sexually aroused or if that was only part of it. It was certainly part of it, because his member was turgid and fully erect.

She gasped when the men escorting her grasped her and lifted her. Bearing her on their shoulders across the room until they reached the couch where Cal waited, they righted her. Trar and Jerd, who held her legs, folded them beneath her and positioned her above Cal, lowering her slowly until she felt the couch beneath her knees, they reached between her legs, spread the fleshy lips and then, to her shock, Jerd grasped Cal's cock and aligned it with her body.

She was aroused despite her confusion and the head of his cock breached her with little resistance. They did not stop there, however. They bore down on her body until, slowly but surely, Cal's turgid flesh was embedded deeply inside of her and she was gasping with the penetration of his hard, heated flesh. She felt his cock jerk inside of her and her body responded with quaking echoes. The need to move filled her, the need to feel his flesh stroking her passage.

It was denied her. They held her so that she could do no more than shift, panting with the need that quavered on the verge of completion. He twitched beneath her, his hips seeming to lift of their own accord until he ground against her. The grinding motion against her clit sent a harder wave of desire through her and she moaned faintly, partly from frustration that they wouldn't allow her to assuage the ache, and partly because it still felt wonderful.

Cal groaned, bucking against her despite the restraints as if he could no longer bear to be still. It was enough to send her over the edge. Even as she felt his cock jerk and begin to spew his hot seed inside of her, her own body began to quake in a release that was almost disappointingly mild and left her almost as needy as she had been before.

She was still struggling with the sense of being cheated when she finally realized that Cal had not ceased to ejaculate. Sweat had popped from his pores. His face with contorted almost as if he was in agony. His body twitched, jerked, as he convulsed endlessly.

She stared at him, trying to gather her scattered thoughts, trying to grasp what was happening.

It dawned on her abruptly that the lounge was designed specifically for coupling. She'd thought Cal had been restrained because touching wasn't allowed, but she realized abruptly that he'd been tied down because they had expected this reaction. And it seemed to follow that they were somehow responsible for it. She didn't know how. She didn't know what they were doing to make him continue to convulse on and on in release, but she could see he'd gone past bearing it.

She jerked against the hands restraining her. "Stop it," she said hoarsely, struggling harder when they didn't release her immediately.

They didn't understand, she realized when she glanced around at their faces. She wasn't wearing the translator and they couldn't understand. She looked around for Baen, caught his gaze. "Stop it, Baen! Please!"

He stared back at her for so long she thought he would do nothing. Abruptly, he uttered a string of words unrecognizable to her, gesturing sharply.

Just as abruptly, Cal stopped seizing. Uttering a shuttering gasp, he went limp.

Eden wasn't certain whether Jerd and Trar finally released her or if she managed to twist loose from them, but she abruptly found herself free. Leaning forward, she placed her ear over Cal's heart. Reassured when she heard and felt the pounding rhythm, she lifted her head to study his face. "Cal?"

His eyelids fluttered.

Eden promptly burst into tears. She wasn't certain whether it was tears of relief to see that he was alive and conscious, if barely so, or if it was the fear that remained that his body hadn't been able to cope with whatever had been done to him.

Someone grasped her arm as if they would lift her away. "No!" she cried out, flinging the hand off. Moving up to settle beside Cal on the lounge, she stroked his cheek lightly with her fingers. "Cal?"

This time he opened his eyes a sliver and looked at her, muttering something she couldn't understand.

It didn't matter, she decided. He'd spoken to her, seemed to recognize her. Struggling with his weight, she slipped an arm beneath his head and cradled his head against her breast, stroking his chest soothingly. He shifted after a moment, rolling onto his side and snuggling closer and she felt a warmth encompass her that had nothing at all to do with desire and everything to do with feeling needed.

She drowsed after a time rousing when she felt someone pulling at her. Disoriented both by the lingering remains of what she'd drunk earlier and the drug of sleep, she murmured a complaint at being disturbed. Apparently, it had the desired effect, for only a few moments later she felt herself being lowered again. Cool sheets embraced her and the softness of a mattress. Snuggling deeply into the comfort of fresh sheets, soft bed and even softer pillows, she drifted away again.

She knew even as she drifted toward consciousness that something wasn't quite right. For several moments after she finally opened her eyes, she simply stared at the alien ceiling above her head blankly before the events of the day before began to filter into her mind.

Pushing herself up on one elbow, she discovered that she was in the bed that Trar had said he'd designed for her, and she was alone.

In the bed.

She wasn't alone in the room, she discovered. A warrior stood on either side of the door leading into her room like matched bookends.

One she knew must be of Baen's brood, for there was a strong resemblance between all of the brothers. The other reminded her strongly of Jerd and she thought he must be of that brood.

Collapsing back against the mattress, she closed her eyes again, trying not to think of what had happened the night before.

Of all the things she'd imagined happening that was furthest from anything she'd thought of. What had they done? More importantly, why?

One thing she was certain of was that it was common practice. Everyone had expected it except her.

After a few minutes, uncomfortable with the presence of the guards, she got up and headed toward the bath. They immediately followed. Stopping in the doorway to block their path, she pointed toward the outer door. "Stay there!"

They didn't understand what she'd said, but she could see they grasped her meaning. After exchanging speaking glances, they finally returned to the position they'd held before apparently having decided they didn't actually need to be in the bath to guard her.

Maybe it was because she'd ordered them away, but she had the distinct feeling that they would have ignored any order she gave if it conflicted with their prime directive, which was to guard her with their lives.

Sighing weakly when she closed the door behind her, she moved to the pool and climbed in. The water level was a little high for sitting on the bottom, but she had her chin above water, and it felt good to have the warm water swirling around her. Relaxing slightly, she returned to the thoughts that had been plaguing her before.

She knew what they'd done. They'd used some device to trigger Cal's ejaculation that continued to stimulate him long past anything that could be considered pleasure. There was no excuse for it, of course, but was there any actual reason behind it? Or was it some left over bit of barbarism they still practiced because of out dated beliefs? Or something else entirely?

Liz had said the women were pretty much incapable of getting around without assistance. She supposed that explained the fact that they'd 'mounted' her on Cal's shaft. Possibly that was also the reason so many had been sent. Maybe it took four strong men to lift their females? Maybe they hadn't been restraining her so much as they'd acted as they usually would, as if she needed help to stay mounted?

It made sense, she realized, feeling a little less angry and repulsed over the procedure once she'd reasoned it through.

If the female really couldn't move without assistance, why place her on top though?

Because it was the dominant position, the position of power?

That seemed less reasonable but still a likely explanation, however unreasonable it might be.

Maybe, she decided, whatever it was that they'd used to stimulate Cal was something commonly used to 'relieve' the males? They'd all seemed familiar with it.

She was embarrassed and uncomfortable about the fact that she'd come under the circumstances. They'd relaxed her and aroused her without actually trying terribly hard, though, and she hadn't felt a man inside of her in so long she'd almost forgotten how good it felt. She supposed that was reason enough to get overly excited with so little provocation.

And it wasn't as if she'd had a fabulous, explosive orgasm. She'd felt almost as let down about it as she had relieved--like a half sneeze that only partially relieved the tickle.

She dismissed it. She'd dealt with the lack of a real sex life for years. She could deal with it right on.

What was she going to do about her current situation, though?

She'd lost it the night before, totally lost it when she'd realized that Cal was suffering. She hadn't given one thought to the possible consequences of interfering with their customs after she'd braced herself to accept or ignore, and warned the others to do the same.

They couldn't have understood what she'd said because she hadn't been wearing the translator, but she knew damned well they'd never, ever, seen one of their women behave as she had.

Sitting up, she drew her knees up and covered her face with her hands, wishing she could go back in time, not to the night before, but to the day they'd arrived. If she'd had any inkling then of what the customs of the Xtanians were like, she would have refused to have anything at all to do with them.

How could she deal with this? How could any of them deal with this ... this sexless sex? Reproduction without any feelings at all, even pleasure? She thought she understood the reasons behind most of their bizarre, ritualistic customs, but that didn't make it any easier to accept it.

She was struggling with the purely feminine desire to pour out her misery in a torrent of tears when the door burst open so abruptly it scared the hell out of her. Her head snapped upwards as if someone had yanked it up.

Baen, looking both furious and frightened at the same time, stood in the door, his expression slowly slipping back into the mask he habitually wore to pretend he felt nothing at all.

Apparently recalling himself, he knelt in salute.

She couldn't understand a word he said, however. She couldn't tell if he was cussing her out for sending the guards away, or begging pardon for intruding. Apparently he realized it. A look of frustration crossed his features and he scanned the room. Rising, he moved to snatch her translator from the ledge where it had been left the night before and, to her dismay, waded into the pool and squatted down to shove the band onto her head.

He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger then and nudged her head up, studying her face. "You are unhurt?"

Her chin wobbled. She wasn't unhurt. She hurt clear down to her soul, but she knew he wasn't talking about that. "No."

Something flickered in his eyes. "I know our customs seem as strange to you as yours do to us," he murmured, quoting her almost verbatim from the day before, "but you must understand that you can never be left unguarded within the pazaan. We are here to make certain that no one trespasses."

Eden frowned at that, feeling a prickling along her back. "I don't understand."

He studied her for a long moment. "You do, little queen. I will not believe that you are unfamiliar with the look of desire in a man's eyes."

Releasing her chin, he slipped an arm beneath her knees and one behind her back. Lifting her and carrying her from the bathing pool, he set her on her feet, glanced around and finally grabbed one of the drying cloths that had been discarded the night before during the ritual. After examining it to find the edges, he straightened it and wrapped it around her. He caught her chin again when she'd gripped the edges of the fabric, holding it around her.

"They see that you are not the same as the queens that they have known before.

Now they begin to understand how great the difference is.”

Hearing the sound of footsteps in the bedroom, he released her and stepped away. A moment later Cal, Trar, and Vladiv appeared in the doorway. The three paused on the threshold, studying Baen for some moments, almost as if they were communicating with one another. Finally, they turned and moved to assist Eden, carefully drying the moisture from her skin and then helping her to dress.

Cal moved a little stiffly, but otherwise Eden could see no sign of any lasting hurt from the events the night before. He would not meet her gaze, though, and she sensed anger beneath the surface calm, sensed disapproval in all of them.

Under the circumstances, she supposed she should be relieved that it was no more than that. She'd been too upset to recall everything clearly, but it was enough to remember that she'd been upset, that she'd demanded that they stop, that she'd tried to offer comfort to him when it was something that was simply not done among his people.

She wanted to ask him if he was angry with her so that she could at least try to open a discussion, but she finally decided that it was probably for the best that she not attempted it.

She was borne back to the entrance to New Savannah as she'd been carried away. Contrary to what she'd more than half expected, however, no one made any wise cracks about it when she strode briskly through the corridor and into the city. Sarah Carter met her when she arrived, but aside from looking a question at her, the lieutenant was discreet enough not to broach the subject without invitation.

Her reticence, Eden reflected wryly, might not have been entirely due to her good judgment. Baen had detached himself from the others as she emerged from the thing they called a medenza and informed her that he would be her escort for the day. It had irritated her. She not only didn't want to be under observation at all times, she had decisions to make that she preferred the Xtanians know nothing about. A very little consideration convinced her, however, that it would be better not to arouse any suspicions by flatly refusing to allow any Xtanians within the walls of New Savannah.

Instead, she ignored him, lifted her head for identification and entered the zone. When Carter met her on the other side, she told the lieutenant that there was to be a meeting in her office mid-morning regarding the Plymouth project and then proceeded to her office without a backward glance.

When she reached her office, she asked her assistant to bring her coffee and settled at her desk, removing the translator, switching it off, and tossing it aside. As casually as she discarded the translator, she saw a frown of consternation flicker across Baen's features as he followed her movements.

Pretending she hadn't noticed, she focused on the stack of reports that inevitably filled her virtual desk. The food processing center, she saw with some satisfaction, had reached almost 50 % in production. They were doing better than she'd thought possible considering the first New Georgia crops had only just begun to reach maturity. They'd been fortunate in the timing of their arrival, however. The planet itself had yielded up far more nutritious, harvestable vegetation and proteins than they'd expected.

It was disheartening that it appeared that they would have to give up a world that held so much promise, but she was beginning to realize that their first 'gut' reaction to the discovery of aliens had been right. The Xtanians presented the greatest threat to the success of the colony.

Beyond the food processing center, the foundry and synthetic development plant, none of the other production centers even had a projected date for when they might be able to begin producing, but she didn't find that particularly disturbing under the circumstances. They would be far better off at this point, she thought, to focus on producing the raw materials they would need for goods.

She was contemplating whether or not it would be advisable to have the manufacturing bots and machines crated for relocation when Sarah Carter arrived for her meeting.

Sarah's gaze immediately flickered to the translator. When she met Eden's gaze, Eden saw relief in her eyes. She smiled faintly. "I'm hurt. I thought you knew me better than that," she murmured cryptically.

"There are a lot of diversions here, ma'am. It just occurred to me that those diversions might be a little ... distracting."

Eden grimaced. "Not so much you'd notice," she said dryly.

Sarah looked intrigued but she didn't voice the questions Eden could see had risen to her mind.

"Any luck with the probe?" she asked, waving Sarah toward a seat and getting down to business.

"The next planet out is somewhat less desirable than this one, but we already knew that. I ordered a survey anyway before I sent it further, but it hasn't picked up any real possibilities. Houston's suggestion was that we limit contact with the aliens," she said, grimacing.

"That's such helpful advice ... and so timely!" Eden retorted tartly, drumming her fingers on her desk top. "They can't help us out here. They can't even advise us."

Sarah shrugged. "They did make an assessment on the Plymouth. According their calculations, we should have just enough supplies and fuel to back track to the star system selected for the Aurora."

Eden leaned forward in her seat. "Have we heard from them?"

Sarah hesitated. "Nothing good," she said finally. "The last communication anybody had from them was right after they landed and that was two years ago."

Chapter Nineteen

Eden had become so adept at ignoring Baen's existence that it startled her when his hand settled over hers just as she reached to pull her translator off and toss it aside.

"Why do you always remove this?"

He was behind her. The heat of his breath as it caressed her neck and cheek sent a shiver of awareness through her.

She didn't turn to look at him. "Because I don't need it here," she responded, keeping her voice even with an effort.

He said nothing for several moments and Eden had just decided that he wouldn't when he surprised her again. "You find it . . . difficult to accept our ways."

She found it impossible, but she didn't tell him so. She had a pazaan of three broods, more than a dozen men and yet no lovers. She'd had herself well in hand when they went through the impregnation ritual the following night, and she'd managed to refrain from interfering, but she had not liked it and she had liked it less each time thereafter.

Her efforts to simply grow calloused to the situation hadn't been met with much more success. She could ignore the proceedings to a point, but the plain truth was they aroused her. They just didn't fulfill her and she was learning that that was far worse than being repulsed. Sometimes she came in spite of the fact that so little was done to please her. Sometimes she didn't, but even when she found release it only seemed to make things worse, make her hunger for more.

They might need nothing more, but she needed to be touched, to be caressed. She ached for it, and yet she didn't dare even attempt to initiate such a thing. Lovemaking was as completely alien to them as pure clinical coupling was to her. She thought she could've borne barbaric rutting better than the cold, almost mechanical detachment she got.

Her scientific mind told her that there was logic behind it, reason behind the rigid discipline of their society. They had many, many more males than females. The order they required enabled them to share without trying to wipe each other out. The cold detachment of their coupling prevented them from losing the control needed to keep order.

Her woman's side hated it, though, despised it more the longer she had to endure the feeling of being imprisoned, helpless.

She wasn't even certain anymore that the decision to leave was completely reasonable because her emotions were in total chaos.

Against all reason and logic, she'd grown emotionally attached to far too many of them.

Or maybe it wasn't against reason or logic. She'd been attracted to Baen from the first, vulnerable to the least encouragement to grow attached to him and he'd given her more than enough to build on. His brood brothers reminded her of him--but beyond that they were attractive in their own right. They were attentive, careful of her needs,

anticipating before she even asked, eager to please in every way that they knew how to please.

She was not nearly as attached to the other broods that made up her pazaan, but she wasn't completely immune to them either.

What woman could be when they were such beautiful specimens? So determined to take care of her in all ways?

"There is no happiness in your eyes," Baen said, breaking into her thoughts. "Something else has taken its place. Hurt?"

Eden shifted away from him and turned to look up at him. "You're wrong."

Anger and frustration filled his eyes. "I am not."

Eden's lips tightened. "It doesn't matter," she said finally, turning and moving toward her desk.

He caught up to her as she reached it, caught her arm to stop her. "Why does it not matter?" he asked sharply.

She sent him a startled glance, wondering if he'd begun to suspect their plans to leave. "You wouldn't understand if I tried to explain it. We're too different. We don't want the same things."

"How have we failed you?"

Eden stared at him, feeling her defenses crumbling fast, feeling the desire rising inside of her to fever pitch to ignore the need to guard her tongue. She wanted to lash out at him. She wanted to forget diplomacy altogether and just say what she thought, tell him how she felt. "We?" she muttered before she could stop herself and then bit her lip before more angry reproach spilled out. She looked away from him, dragged in a shuddering breath. "The pazaan, you mean? I'm sure they're doing everything just as they've been trained."

He caught her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Then I. Tell me how I have failed you. Tell me what you want. I will get it for you, give it to you."

A hard knot formed in Eden's throat. "You can't. You don't know how."

His gaze flickered over her face. "Teach me."

Eden closed her eyes, struggling against the temptation. "It's forbidden in your culture, on your world."

"You are my world. Nothing else matters. Nothing will matter if you chose to leave me," he said harshly.

Her eyes flew open at that, a mixture of alarm and desire warring with each other. The fear that he knew of their plans sent a chilling wave of anxiety through her. The promise of his vow and the look in his eyes countered with heat, confusing her, throwing her thoughts and desires into chaos.

She didn't know whether it would be best to try to deny his suspicions or ignore them, but as he shifted closer, bent his head toward hers until little more than a hair's breadth separated his lips from hers, the offer when she'd hungered so long and been left wanting instantly became something impossible to resist. Desire flooded her. Every other consideration fled from her mind, consumed by the fire that rolled through her in a scorching tide, snatching the breath from her lungs, sending her heart into a mad race that made the blood pulse frantically throughout her body.

She lifted to meet him without any pretense of coyness or patience, slipping her arms around his neck and plastering her body tightly against his as she nipped hungrily at

his lips, explored them with the tip of her tongue and finally delved inside his mouth. The haze of desire deepened as she tasted him on her tongue, inhaled his breath into her lungs.

A shudder went through him as she stroked her tongue along his. Abruptly, he wrapped his arms around her, tightening them as he mimicked her in the mating dance and explored her mouth as she had his. The heat between them intensified into palpable waves as their tongues glided sinuously along one another in a deeply intimate caress like no other.

Drugged by the pleasure surging through them they ignored the need for anything beyond the taste and feel of each other until darkness began to crowd close and they were forced to part to suck desperately needed air into their lungs. For several moments, neither of them could manage more than that. Gasping hard as if they'd run for miles, shaking with the hunger for more, they hovered close, their chests brushing with each heaving breath, their lips and noses grazing with the faintest of movement.

Dragging in a harsh, shuddering breath, Baen closed the slight distance between them again, sucking at her lips before he covered them, thrusting his tongue into her mouth with more surety.

Eden stroked her tongue caressingly along his for several moments and then closed her mouth around his flesh, sucking on his tongue until faint tremors began to course through him.

When he broke the kiss again, he was gasping her name hoarsely. "Edie, Edie," he gasped out, rubbing his cheek along hers, as if he couldn't bear to break contact completely, needed to fill his senses with the touch of her flesh against his, the scent of her skin. "I have longed for this," he murmured, supping at her lips again in brief, teasing kisses that made her lips tingle and her mouth go dry with want.

She matched her lips to his again, running her tongue along the exquisitely sensitive inner surface of his lips before entwining her tongue with his again.

Filled abruptly with the need for more contact, she stroked one hand along his silky hair, searching with her other hand for the opening she remembered along his shoulders that would free him of his uniform. Finding it at last, she broke from his lips, nipped at his chin, and then his throat as she opened the fabric along the back.

Finding his height impeded the exploration she wanted, she dragged her arms from around his neck, slipped her hands into the opening she'd made and stroked her hands along his muscular back to his shoulder blades. To her surprise, she discovered the skin that stretched over his wings was as silky and smooth to the touch as the rest of his skin.

Disentangling the fabric from him, she returned her attention to the front fastening of his suit, pulling it open and exploring the exposed flesh with her lips, nipping at him, sucking small love bites of flesh into her mouth.

She'd forgotten how beautiful his body was to her, but then she hadn't had the chance before to explore it and discover for herself if it felt as wonderful as it looked.

It did. His muscles were taut, hard, rippling beneath the silk, bronzed sheathing delightfully.

He stilled, his tight hold on her loosening as she pushed her hands beneath his clothing, peeling it from him as she examined him with infinite care and absolute fascination, inch by inch, with her hands, her lips, and her tongue.

The idea teased her to step back and examine him her eyes when she'd pushed the suit from his arms and down his body to his hips, but she'd admired him from afar long enough. She wanted to appreciate him up close, and show him the things that pleased her.

Skimming her hands down his chest, she cupped a male breast in either hand, massaging the taut flesh, teasing the tiny nipples with the light rake of her nails until the buds stood erect. Winding her way downward, she flicked her tongue over one, sucked it. He sucked in a shaky breath, his hands closing over her shoulders, kneading them.

His reaction sent a fresh wave of desire through her and after a moment she moved to the mate, teasing it as she had the first and slipping one hand down his belly until she could cup his sex. He stiffened at her touch, began to shake as she slowly stroked the length of his turgid flesh from root to tip.

She sank lower, tracing a path of kisses down the center of his stomach and finally kneeling on the floor and peeling his suit from his hips. His cock, freed from restraint, sprang forward. Painfully swollen with his need, it was as huge and hard as the rest of him, and as beautifully formed, flawless. Her mouth went dry with desire, her belly clenching as she curled her fingers around him. His hand tangled in her hair as she ran her tongue over the head, sucked it into her mouth experimentally and then stroked her hand downward to caress the soft testicles at the base.

He jerked as if she'd punched him in the belly as her mouth closed over his flesh, his fingers clenching in her hair. Releasing a breathless grunt as she sucked the head of his cock and stroked him with her hands, he went perfectly still, breathless, tense, grew so taut that after a moment he began to tremble with the effort to hold himself still. His breathing grew harsh, ragged.

And with every groan and shudder that told her of his escalating pleasure, Eden felt her own intensify, felt her body rising toward release.

And she caressed him more feverishly, so caught up in her own growing excitement in pleasuring him that she scarcely noticed when he reached the point when he could no longer remain still at all. Abruptly, a hoarse groan rumbled from his chest and scraped his throat as it emerged. "No more," he said harshly, releasing a sobbing breath. "Edie," he gasped hoarsely. "I am on fire."

Reluctantly, she released him, lifting her head.

Uttering a sound of frustrated need, he caught her arms and jerked her to her feet, tearing at the closure of her suit. It gave way at his hard tug, opening from the neck to one knee in one swift motion. He skimmed shaking hands down the flesh exposed and then closed his hands on her waist, lifted her, and settled her on her desk, struggling to drag her suit off and taste and explore her body at the same time.

His caresses were rough, untutored, mindless with need and it enflamed her own burning desire. She didn't need finesse. She needed raw desire, a hunger to match her own, the clumsiness of desperation and urgency.

"I know I am of no use to you. I am a warrior, not a breeder. I have no seed to fill your womb with babies," he murmured harshly, almost feverishly as he burrowed against her, tracing kisses over her face and neck and throat, "but I want to know what it feels like to bury my flesh inside yours, to feel your body wrapped around mine."

Eden felt her belly clench in want at his words, felt liquid heat curl inside her. Something painful fisted around her heart, as well. "Shhh," she said soothingly, curling

her arms around him and kissing him as he kissed her, feverishly, on any part of his flesh that she could reach. "Don't say that. Don't think that. I want you, too. It's all I ever wanted."

He went still at that, lifting his head to meet her gaze for a long moment. Dragging in a harsh breath, he caught her face between his palms, covering her mouth in a deep, ravenous kiss. Her translator, having defied gravity and rough caresses, finally tumbled from her head unheeded as he slipped his hands upward, threading his fingers through hair.

Breaking the kiss almost as abruptly he'd begun, he grasped her suit, nearly unseating her as he wrested it from her hips and tossed it aside. "Now," he gasped, his voice a hoarse growl as he reached for her once more.

Too mindless with need to know or care what he'd said, Eden reached for him as he moved toward her again, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He lifted her, reversing their positions so that it was he who lay back against the hard surface of the desk. She came up on her knees, slipped a hand between her thighs to part her flesh as she grasped his cock and guided him to the mouth of her passage, pressing down until she felt the head of his cock enter her.

Gasping, she lifted her head as she pressed slowly downward. He was watching their bodies joining, she saw, his eyes half closed, his face taut. Her belly clenched, pushing against his flesh. Lifting slightly away, she pressed down again, feeling his cock stretching her as her body's moisture began to ease his possession. His cock jerked as she at last took him fully. Leaning forward, she braced her palms on either side of him and kissed his throat and chest. "Hold on for me, baby," she murmured against his skin as she lifted her hips and bore down again, slowly at first and then more quickly.

She heard his teeth grinding as he caught her hips, but he made no attempt to still her movements. She uttered a throaty groan and began to move faster as her body, already pushed to the limit, swiftly scaled the heights to the peak. "Oh god! You feel so good inside me, baby," she gasped as her body began to quake in the first hard convulsions of release, pushing him beyond his control so that he began to shake with his own imminent release. "Oh my god," she groaned as the full force of it rolled over her and she struggled to keep thrusting until she felt his hot seed spilling inside of her, heard him groaning with his own culmination.

Gasping, shuddering with the tiny aftershocks, she finally collapsed weakly on top of him, trying to catch her breath. He went limp, as well, his arms dropping to the desk on either side of him.

She didn't want to move. She wanted to lay draped over him and drift blissfully into oblivion but the hard surface was hell on her knees and after a time couldn't be ignored anymore. Stirring reluctantly when she felt his flesh slip from her body, she lifted her head and looked down at Baen.

He was lying perfectly still, his eyes closed, but when he felt her movement, he lifted his eyelids enough to peer at her beneath his lashes. A slow smile curled her lips. Leaning down, she nibbled playfully at his lips. "I think that made the whole trip worthwhile," she murmured.

A faint frown appeared between his eyes, but his lips curled in response to her smile.

She shook her head. "Never mind," she said softly, kissing him lightly one last

time before she began to struggle off of him and the desk. He sat up, looping an arm around her to steady her and then allowing her to slip slowly to the floor.

He was reluctant to release her even then, but allowed his hand to drop when she pulled away and looked around to see what had become of her clothes. Spying her suit dangling from the back of a chair across the room, she crossed to retrieve it and then headed for her private washroom to bathe off.

As she bathed the sticky semen from her thighs, a frown marred her brows as a memory surfaced.

Baen had said he was sterile. Did he know that, she wondered? Or was that what all of the warriors were told? After studying the matter over for a moment, she found a bottle and collected a specimen for testing.

When she returned to her office, she saw that Baen had dressed himself and was busy collecting the things that had fallen to the floor from her desk during their wild tango.

He turned when he heard her, holding out the translator.

Her lips twisted wryly when she saw it. She supposed it would have been too much to hope for that the fragile piece would survive their wild bout of lovemaking.

Shrugging, she took it from him, moved around the desk and summoned her assistant.

The place reeked of sex, but then the woman had probably been watching most of what had happened on her monitor, so Eden sincerely doubted she would be shocked.

It was amazing, Eden reflected later, that sex was such a panacea for tension. Despite the usual aggravations she had to deal with throughout the remainder of the day and the thoughts that niggled at the back of her mind most of the time, she felt more relaxed and less jittery than she had in months.

The thoughts that niggled at the back of her mind refused to be completely silenced though. As relieved as she was that Baen returned his post, behaving as if nothing had happened, and nothing had changed, she found it a little disconcerting, too.

It hadn't just been wild sex between them. Baen had told her in the only way he knew how that he loved her and what they'd done was make love, not merely have sex to assuage each other's needs. She was as certain of that as she was that Baen had no real conception of love as Earth people knew it. Nothing in his background could have taught him and yet she didn't doubt for a moment that he'd meant it when he had told her she was everything to him and nothing else mattered.

The most disturbing part of what he'd said, though, was that nothing would matter to him if she left him.

She tried to convince herself that it was merely a figure of speech, but where would Baen have learned that as a figure of speech? From what she understood of his culture, and she thought she understood it pretty well now, they didn't 'leave'. The men entered into a sort of contract with the females that chose them and there they remained for the rest of their natural life.

She went cold all over when it occurred to her to wonder if she'd inadvertently spoken of their plans while Baen was near enough to hear and she'd been wearing the translator. She didn't think she had, but Baen had been trained to be unobtrusive. Sometimes he would stand almost perfectly still for hours without making any sound at all.

Had she gotten busy, been so distracted by her frazzled nerves and the weigh of her duties that she'd 'forgotten' he was in the room?

She couldn't remember, no matter how hard she worked at recalling each meeting she'd had on the subject, she simply could not remember any time she'd been wearing the translator. She had, in point of fact, made it a habit to discard the translator as soon as she arrived in her office.

So had one of the others been wearing theirs and she just hadn't noticed?

Or was she building a mountain out of a mole hill?

Maybe Baen had just been around them enough that he'd figured out that they didn't consider sex a life commitment to the partner they'd chosen to have sex with?

Chapter Twenty

Between her preoccupation with the state of affairs in the colony, the progress with the secret evacuation plan, and her concern that Baen might have overheard something he shouldn't have, it wasn't until it came time to retire for the night that it occurred to Eden to wonder if the intimacy she'd allowed Baen might have serious repercussions to all concerned. She'd been well aware at the time that what they were doing was forbidden in his culture. She hadn't cared--then. The sexual frustrations she'd suffered in the weeks since she had taken her pazaan added to the desire she'd had for Baen from the first had left no consideration for good sense.

When Cal took her hand to lead her to her room to prepare for bed, however, it dawned on her forcefully to wonder if he would be jealous of her. He had never been with a woman and he had indicated that he felt more than simple lust.

He hadn't shown jealousy or possessiveness before, but had she broken a barrier that should never have been broken? Would it come spilling forth now in a tide that could no longer be contained?

It made her uneasy thinking it might.

One thing she certainly couldn't afford--or any of them--was to start a war within their own pazaans, not when they still had many weeks of preparation before there was even any hope of leaving with a minimal chance of surviving relocation.

Hind sight was always twenty/twenty, she thought wryly, wondering if it would be better to refuse her favors to any of the men for a few days until she was more certain of where she stood with Baen.

She hadn't done so before, but it was her pazaan, after all. Obviously, since they'd split into three groups instead of four, they expected some down time for her cycle if nothing else.

She was sated from her gymnastics with Baen earlier and she didn't particularly care whether she had sex or not, especially since there was no real passion to it when she 'performed' with her pazaan--actually, no passion at all.

The question was, would Baen's ability to feel and express passion be expressed in rage and violence toward the others if she did what she knew she had to do, which was to keep them all pacified until she was in a position where she no longer needed to concern herself with how to keep the peace?

She could read nothing in his expression as Cal led her from the gathering room, but how much faith, she wondered, could she place in his expression when she knew now the depths of passion he hid behind that wall of cold distance most of the time?

Was it the same with all of them? Had they just been conditioned to hide those deep emotions? Or had they been conditioned not to feel them as they'd first believed?

She didn't know, but she realized even as they reached her bed room that if Baen was jealous, putting the other men in her pazaan off for a few days wasn't going to change that.

She might only succeed in riling them all up.

Baen was intelligent enough, she knew, and disciplined enough, to contain his feelings, however he might feel about it. And since he was the one who always went with her into the city, she could try to reason with him, if necessary, when the others weren't around.

Truthfully, she couldn't see a lot of reason for jealousy, even if he was so inclined, because what happened between her and the men of her pazaan was mechanical at best.

As far as she'd been able to see, there wasn't a great deal of difference between the consummation ceremony that had begun her official claiming of her pazaan and any other time. The men had been carefully divided into groups, one week with a group and then a rotation to the next--she supposed so that if she did conceive, then they would have a clearer idea of who'd successfully fathered her offspring--sort of like the firing squads of ancient times, she supposed, where all the men in the squad fired, but only one had a real bullet. Except in this case, only one made the goal, but all of them had the possibility and could think they might have been the one.

Unless, of course, they believed that the group had fathered the offspring, which wasn't really that farfetched considering their mating practices and the fact that their women had litters. Maybe their women were able to produce a multitude of eggs at once and each could be fertilized by a different donor?

Without research, which they weren't likely to get a chance at, they would probably never know.

And even if that was the case, it didn't change the fact that nothing like that was going to happen to her.

She just hoped it was going to take the men a while to figure out that the Earth women they'd taken as their queens were not the fertility goddesses their own women were.

Preoccupied as she was with her thoughts and anxieties, Eden still hadn't made up her mind whether to beg off for the night or not when she discovered that they'd reached the bath room.

As with the first time, Cal helped her to undress and handed her over to the others before removing his own clothing.

It was only as they led Eden into the pool to bathe her that she made a startling discovery. Baen had joined the men in the pool. Stunned that he'd so boldly broken with tradition, Eden's gaze flew from one man to the next, trying to see how they felt about what must seem odd behavior to them at the very least.

Surprise and confusion filled her when she saw nothing in a single expression to give her cause to worry, nothing beyond the gleam of anticipation she'd come to expect in their eyes. But something did strike her as odd, and when she had made the rounds, she looked at each man again, more carefully and finally lifted her head to look at the two guards who stood by the door.

Unlike each time before, she saw that this was no random selection. It was Trar and Vladiv who escorted her to the bench and began to lather her body in the seductively soothing and infinitely arousing bathing ritual. Baen, Adri, and Pizan had joined them in the pool and stood watching the proceedings. Cal stood at the edge of the pool, and beyond him, guarding the room, were Pael and Miccan.

To a man, every one of them was Baen's brother, his brood.

More puzzled than alarmed, Eden glanced at Baen questioningly as Trar and Vladiv finished bathing her. He met her gaze, held it for a long moment and moved toward her as Trar and Vladiv helped her to her feet and rinsed the foam from her and then stepped back to allow him to pass. Lifting a hand, he caressed her cheek. Murmuring something to her in his own tongue that she couldn't understand, though she found the tone soothing, he moved behind her. Placing a hand on either shoulder, he pulled her back until she was resting against his chest and then slipped his hands downward along her arms slowly and grasped her hands. Just as slowly, he lifted her arms, draped them around his neck and then skimmed his hands lightly down the underside of her arms, touching off waves of sensation as he brought the sensitive skin to tingling awareness.

Her eyes slid closed as he cupped her breasts, massaged them, and then flicked his index fingers over her nipples until they stood erect, hard, pulsing with the blood that had engorged them. Heat curled in her belly as he released her breasts and skimmed his hands down her body, her breath catching in her throat as he slipped both hands between her thighs and parted the fleshy lips of her sex, pulling them back to expose her clitoris and then flicking a finger over the tiny, exquisitely sensitive bud until she began to struggle to breathe, sinking more heavily against him as the intoxicating euphoria of passion burgeoned inside of her from a seductive warmth to a breathless sense of anticipation.

Disappointment filled her when he stopped, but her breath hitched a little more tightly in her chest when he brought his hands upward again in the same feather light caress as before, stirring more warmth within her as he paused to massage her breasts once more and finally lifted one hand to her cheek and nudged her head upwards until she was looking up at him.

She met his gaze with a look of both arousal and confusion, but what she saw in his eyes, or thought she saw, only sent her into more chaos. The warmth in his eyes seemed to go beyond desire.

Dipping his head, he brushed his lips lightly, almost teasingly over hers, making them prickle with keen sensation even before he nipped at them, intensifying the sensations and causing her heart to slam against her ribcage as he sucked first her lower lip and then the upper, traced the point where they met with the tip of his tongue. He lifted his head slightly, met her gaze for a heartbeat and then covered her mouth, thrusting his tongue boldly inside and stroking it hungrily along her own. Her knees seemed to turn to water. She would've turned to face him then but he held her, one hand on her cheek, his arm tightening across the upper slope of her breasts, supporting her and imprisoning her at the same time.

As focused as she was on the sensations Baen was creating inside of her, she was also aware that the others watched and the feel of their heated gazes hitched her heart rate upward another notch.

The heat that filled her and pulsed through her veins seemed to drain the strength from her entire body. Uttering a moan, she kissed him back as he broke the kiss, lifted his mouth a fraction from hers and then covered her mouth again, over and over until desire had become an intoxicant in her blood.

Caught up as she was in the sensations he was creating within her, she jerked when she felt a hand cup first one breast and then the other, massaging it. Dragging her

lips from his, she looked down in bemusement even as Trar and Vladiv lowered their heads and each sucked a nipple into his mouth. Knee weakening sensation shot through her as she felt the heat of their mouths close over the painfully taut buds. Her breath seemed to seize in her chest.

She uttered a moan even as Baen nudged her jaw upward again and covered her mouth, inhaling the soft sound. Her mind and body were instantly at war with the sensations that pounded at her from three directions at once. At one moment her mind focused completely on the mouths sucking and tugging at her nipples and sending jolts of hard sensation arrowing through her body to pool like molten lava in her lower belly. In the next, she was totally focused on the stroke of Baen's tongue along hers, the pull of his mouth as he sucked her tongue.

If they hadn't been holding her up, she would've melted into a sizzling puddle in the pool long before she felt fingers grasping her legs just above her knees. Baen lifted his head as she shifted when they tugged her feet out from under her. Almost reluctantly, Trar and Vladiv released her nipples and lifted their heads, as well, slipping a hand beneath her shoulders as she was lifted higher, her legs parted until she could feel the lips of her sex part. Dizzy, drunk with the pleasure already pounding through her, it took an effort to lift her lids to look down the length of her body as she felt yet another hand settle on her buttocks, pushing upward on her hips until her nether lips opened wide and cool air traced a chill finger over her cleft.

Cal stood between her legs, his gaze focused on her sex. She felt the heat of his breath as he leaned closer, settling one hand on her mound and using his fingers to spread her nether lips wider still. Her breath caught in her chest as she felt the tip of his tongue as he flicked it out and traced her cleft almost experimentally. She held the breath expectantly as he seemed to hesitate, expelling it in a sharp gasp when he thrust his tongue out and dragged it over her cleft. Goose bumps erupted all over her as she felt the faintly rough texture of his tongue raking over her clit. The heat of his mouth invaded her even before he covered her clit with his mouth and sucked on tiny the nub.

She panted in short, sharp breaths as she watched Cal feed on her greedily, felt hard jolts traveling upward into her belly with each sucking tug of his mouth and each teasing flick of his tongue.

Baen, Trar, and Vladiv watched him as well for many moments before one by one, they returned to their own piece of flesh. Eden let out a sharp cry as Trar caught her nipple between his teeth, nipping at it sharply and then sucking on it. Before she'd even caught her breath, Vladiv sucked her other nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue and sending another keen rush of sensation through her.

She was nearly sobbing for breath as Baen dipped his head to cover her mouth again. Her body tensed, jerked as one hard wave of delicious sensation after another went through her, one upon the other until she could no longer tell which mouth caused her more torment.

It was delicious torment, though, and she struggled to hold still and savor it to the fullest. Within a disappointingly short time, her body peaked, hovering at the brink of exploding with the building rapture. She fought the culmination, wanting nothing more than to feel the wonderfully torturous sensations on and on. Her struggle kept her teetering on the edge for so long that when she pitched over it, her body convulsed shatteringly, almost painfully in ecstasy, dragging a raw, keening cry from her throat.

And still they fed on her flesh, sucking and tugging until she began to think she would die from the pleasure as darkness filled her mind. Almost reluctantly, they stopped at last. Limp as a wet rag, Eden hardly knew when they bore her from the pool and lowered her feet to the floor to dry her. She tried and failed to lock her knees as they settled her, tried to hold herself upright.

Cal caught her as she began to wilt limply to the floor, stroking her body soothingly until she'd ceased to shiver with the aftershocks, nuzzling his face almost lovingly along her cheek.

Still dazed and confused, she merely draped her arms around his neck without protest as he leaned down to scoop her off her feet and lifted her against his chest.

It didn't occur to her until they'd reached the bed room that they'd broken yet another tradition. Usually, four men lifted her up and carried her--probably because it generally took four strong men to carry one of their queen sized women, but still a part of the ritual they hadn't deviated from before.

He took her to what Eden had come to think of as the sex couch. Stepping across, he sat astride the wide bench and settled her between his thighs. Pulling the arm from beneath her knees, he stroked his hand up her thigh to her waist as he tightened the arm around her back, bringing her breasts up against his hard chest.

Thoroughly disoriented by his deviation from what she'd come to think of as the 'norm', for them at least, Eden lifted her head as he leaned down. He met her halfway through the movement, fitting his lips to hers, mimicking the kiss he'd watched Baen give her she realized dimly as he nipped and sucked at her lips sending a pleasurable tension through her.

There was little comparison beyond that first, tentative foray, however. His lips and mouth, his taste and scent were as uniquely different as his face, form, and personality from Baen or any of the others. The moment she responded, kissing him back, he transformed from supplicant to conqueror, thrusting his tongue into her mouth in a bold, restless invasion of her senses that allowed no room for passive acceptance. Startled by his unrestrained passion, but sinking fast beneath the intoxicating waves of desire generated by his ravenous, demanding assault, Eden captured his tongue, sucking it. A shudder went through him. A rumbling groan sounded from deep in his massive chest. It shattered the last of his control.

Capturing her face between his palms, he made love to her mouth with a quaking need that resurrected Eden's spent passion and churned it into a fiery conflagration that quickly matched his. Breaking the kiss after a moment, he dragged in several harsh breaths and slipped his hands beneath her arms, lifting her and ravishing her breasts as he had her mouth, nipping and sucking at the exquisitely sensitive tips as if he meant to devour her.

Moist, heated tension coiled in her belly with each tug of his mouth on her aching, distended nipples, depriving the rest of her body of any strength at all in moments. Gasping, too weak from the sheer force of his passion to hold her head up any longer, she allowed her head to loll on her shoulders, fighting the waves of darkness that threatened to snatch her from consciousness and deprive her of drowning in the wickedly delightful sensations.

The world shifted. She felt herself falling, and for a split second she thought the darkness had overtaken her. The softness of the bench beneath her shoulder blades

dispelled the illusion. The heat of Cal's mouth and tongue as he shifted the focus of his exploration from her breasts to her body emphasized the fact that she'd lost none of her awareness of his touch.

His sucking, nipping kisses on her lower belly seemed to punch the air from her lungs. Before she'd managed to fully catch her breath, he moved lower, parting her thighs and nipping a trail of kisses from knee to groin on first one leg and then the other.

She reached for him, desperate by now to feel her body impaled on his turgid flesh. Instead of gratifying that desire, however, he scooped his hands beneath her hips and buried his face against her mound, licking and sucking at her clit.

A near painful jolt went through her at his first touch that dragged a cry from her lips. Her body burgeoned in great leaps that sent her skyrocketing toward the brink of release.

He was too, too good at this, she realized dimly, struggling to fight off her release.

Tangling her fingers in his hair, she tugged gently, and then more demandingly.

"Cal," she gasped out shakily when he either ignored the demand or simply didn't notice in the heat of fervor.

He enjoyed kissing her there far too much, she thought a little desperately, fearing she would come before he entered her, feeling a desperate yearning to feel him inside of her.

Her tugging at him finally penetrated the heated fog of his mind and he lifted his head. She pushed herself up with an effort, grasping his shoulders to urge him to cover her. Instead, he caught her waist and pulled her upright.

She didn't care. She just wanted to mount him, she thought, looping her arms around his neck to hold herself up as she struggled to position herself for him.

Hands grasped her, lifting her upward, parting her thighs and aligning her body with Cal's. She sucked in a sharp breath as she felt the swollen head of his cock spreading her flesh. Arms--Cal's arms tightened around her as the helping hands were withdrawn. He bore down on her, impaling her on his hard flesh with slow but persistent pressure until his cock was buried to the root inside of her and she was panting for breath from the frantic pace her heart set.

He went still when he could bury himself no more deeply inside of her, his teeth grinding as he savored the excruciatingly wonderful fit of their bodies.

Eden stroked her hands along his neck, back, and shoulders, nuzzling her face against his throat and then working her way up his neck to his ear with nipping kisses. He released a harsh breath as she explored the sensitive cavity. Gripping her hips almost painfully, he lifted her up slightly and bore down on her again, sending exquisite waves of pleasure through both of them that brought Eden's focus to the need to feel him driving into her.

She shifted, trying to set a rhythm, but the position was awkward for both of them. With her legs draped over his, she could get no purchase for ease of movement.

Dizzily, she leaned back, tugging at his neck and trying to urge him to lay her back against the couch. She might as well have tried to pull a tree down for all the effect she had on moving him.

He acquiesced to her demand after a moment, however, holding her tightly to him as he surged forward to lay her on her back. She lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist and locking her ankles together as he withdrew and thrust into her again, slowly

at first and then with more surety as he found the rhythm that drove their pleasure upward to new heights, and then faster still as his own pleasure drove him to a mindless quest for release until he was pounding into her at a furious pace.

Eden's tension ruptured in an explosive discharge of pent up tension. She cried out as her body seized and began to spasm in intense paroxysms of undiluted bliss. The sound of her rapture and the milking seizures of the muscles of her passage dragged him over the edge moments behind her. He uttered a deep, guttural growl that was a mixture anguish and ecstasy as his body tensed at the precipice and went over, grinding his pelvis into hers as his cock jerked, pumping his seed into her.

Thoroughly spent, weak as water in the aftermath, Eden held on to him for several moments and finally gave up the effort, allowing her arms to slide from his neck and droop limply at her sides.

Cal, supporting the weight of his upper body on his elbows, sagged more heavily against her, allowing his head to drop to rest against hers as he struggled to catch his breath. Dragging in a deep, gusty breath after several moments, he nuzzled his face against hers, murmuring her name, whispering words she couldn't begin to understand as he brushed light kisses along her forehead, her cheeks, her lips in what she knew was a lover's praise even if she couldn't understand his language without the aid of her translator.

She kissed him back to show her own appreciation, more than a little stunned by the things he'd made her feel, the magnitude of the pleasure he'd wrung from her.

Lost in the wonder of it, it wasn't until Cal finally, reluctantly pulled away from her and sat up that her focus shifted from him to the room around her and her awareness encompassed the others.

Baen knelt beside the couch. Slipping one arm beneath her shoulders and the other beneath her knees, he lifted her up and carried her to her bed.

This was a signal that had, up until now, meant that she would be left to rest. As exhausted as she was from the expenditures already, she found she didn't want to be left alone. More than that, she wanted to give Baen a taste of what he'd given her by teaching the others to pleasure her.

She knew it was him. As scattered as her thoughts were, she realized that that was what he'd been doing when he'd joined her in the bathing pool, showing the others what she needed and how to pleasure her.

There would be other nights, she also knew, but despite the temptation to simply roll over and ignore the fact that their needs hadn't been assuaged, she found she couldn't, found that she was moved to give them something they had never had, a lover's appreciation, passion, affection. She tightened her arms around Baen when he would have simply released her and stepped away.

He studied her in surprise for a moment and finally settled beside her on the bed, stroking her body more soothingly than with purpose.

Trar, who'd come to bathe the semen from her thighs and cleft, a ritual they'd added when they'd seen she would get up and attend to it herself if they didn't, hesitated in confusion when Baen settled beside her. After a moment, still looking uncertain, he climbed onto the bed and pushed her thighs wide.

She watched him through slumberous eyes as he carefully bathed her thighs and genitals. His hands shook with his own needs, she saw, feeling her resolve harden.

They wouldn't ask. They certainly wouldn't demand. They would simply withdraw, and no doubt suffer a sleepless night of aching without release.

They did not service themselves, no matter how desperately they needed release. She supposed that had been denied them, as well, perhaps for fear that they would 'waste' seed meant to be used in their queen's service.

In any case, as sated as she had been moments before, her body responded to the glittering need in Trar's eyes and his touch.

Her motives were not entirely altruistic, Eden thought with wry, inward amusement as she lay supine and completely still, savoring the soothing touch of Baen's hands while she drifted lazily. She did empathize with the discomfort she knew they must feel. She did feel a sense of unfairness about taking her own pleasure and then ignoring the needs of her lovers.

Beyond that, however, their hunger was almost palpable. She felt it deep inside of her in a hunger that refused to be entirely quenched, felt their heated gazes move caressingly over her body and even as she cooled a restlessness entered her that prevented her from relaxing entirely, a budding of warmth, a resurgence of need. She felt a wild, wicked yearning to have them all, to glut her senses with their touch, the taste and scent of them, to feel them thrusting into her with savage need.

Resolved, she dragged in a last deep, sustaining breath and rolled onto her side to face Baen. Lifting a leg and draping it over his hips, she shifted closer, tilting her head up to nuzzle her face against Baen's neck, breathing in his scent with a sense of welcome. He stiffened, his hand hesitating for many moments before he resumed stroking her, more hesitantly now, as if he wasn't entirely certain of what her objective was.

She decided not to leave him in doubt. As she felt his cock, engorged with his needs, nudging her belly she arched her hips against him.

He exhaled a faint hiss of pain, flinching at the pressure against his painfully swollen member. Contrite at once, she moved a little away from him and reached between them, caressing his cock with her hand and finally shifting until she could push the head of his cock into her nether mouth.

He swallowed thickly, arching his hips and pressing deeper, claiming her passage by excruciating inches that sent her heart rate soaring.

The heat of his desire enveloped her as he shifted closer abruptly. Grabbing her hips, he thrust upward, struggling against the awkward position to seat himself fully inside of her in a series of breathtaking sorties. He stopped when he had worked his way as deeply inside of her as he could manage, breathing in short, harsh gasps. After a moment, he grasped her hair, tugging her head back so that she was looking up at him.

"Feels so good inside you, baby," he murmured hoarsely and claimed her surprise parted lips before she could speak. Rolling on top of her, he thrust his tongue deeply into her mouth as he drove his cock deeply into her passage, grinding his groin against her clit. The effect of the double penetration was total annihilation of her senses. She groaned, sucking his tongue greedily as he withdrew slightly and drove deeply inside of her again and again until he'd set a pace that spoke of unleashed, savage need.

Eden felt her body respond to the call, burgeon so quickly that she had no time to relish the building, no time to savor his possession before her body reached its crescendo, catching her so totally by surprise that she tore her mouth from his, crying out.

He uttered a throaty groan, then, burrowed his face against her neck and

shuddered with his own release.

It wasn't until she lay panting, struggling to catch her breath in the aftermath, that it occurred to her that Baen had spoken to her in her own tongue.

Chapter Twenty One

It was morning when Eden roused to awareness again. One moment she'd been worrying over the fact that Baen had spoken to her in English and the next--oblivion.

The memory was the first thing that teased her when thoughts began to whirl through her mind and it roused her more fully, making it impossible to simply roll over as she felt inclined to do and burrow deeper into the bedding.

Warmth flooded her at the memory, too, not just because he'd said it, but the way he'd said it.

It dawned on her abruptly that she'd said almost those exact words to him when they'd made love in her office. Had he merely repeated the sounds he'd heard her say without any idea of what it meant, she wondered?

He didn't have to know what it meant to repeat it, she realized, and repeat it with much the same inflection that she'd used.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or outdone when that occurred to her.

Frowning, she recalled that she'd worried before that he might have understood some of what they were saying because he had said he didn't want her to leave him.

Had she dismissed that anxiety too easily because she didn't want to face the possibility that he might know of their plans?

Aside from that remark, though, and the fact that he'd repeated what she'd said when they'd made love, she couldn't think of anything he'd done or said, any particular looks she'd encountered that would seem to indicate that he was watching, listening--spying on her.

He was intelligent, though. She didn't doubt that for a moment. Intelligent enough to begin to learn her language only by listening to the words she used?

It dawned on her abruptly that the translator, because of its very nature, told him what everything she said meant. She hadn't considered that before, that he could be listening to what she was saying and the translation at the same time and learning her language.

It hadn't occurred to her because he'd never used it before.

So, could she consider that there was nothing ominous in her discovery? Was he only just now beginning to learn it? Or had he had a good grasp on the language long before now and kept it from her?

If that was the case, though, why reveal such a strategically important factor only because he was in the throes of passion? Only because he was disturbed that he had failed to please her?

She was worrying for nothing, she decided. He was a soldier, incredibly well disciplined and trained, but he did not have the slyness, she felt certain, for subterfuge.

She knew now that he was beginning to pick up things. She would just have to make sure she was more careful, and she would have to warn the others to be more careful.

It was Trar and Vladiv who came to help her with her morning bath and to dress

her, Adri and Pizan who brought her breakfast. Guilt swamped her when she saw them. She'd intended to give tit for tat, to please them because they had tried so hard, and succeeded in pleasuring her--fabulously. Instead, she'd flaked out after her third mind-boggling climax and left them to deal with their 'problem'.

She had work to do, however. As tempted as she was to ignore business just for one day and spend it with Baen and his brood, she knew it was a bad precedent to set. Instead, once she had eaten and rose to leave she paused before each of them, and caressed their cheeks. "Tonight," she promised, smiling at each of them, wondering even as she made the promise if she could handle the four of them--which still left two, she reminded herself. She couldn't ignore Miccan and Pael only because they were warriors when she had taken Baen into her bed.

Pausing on the threshold where they stood like matching bookends guarding the door she lifted her hands and stroked their cheeks affectionately, as well. "And then the two of you."

It was a hell of a job, she thought with a mixture of wry amusement and anxiety as she was carried to the city, but somehow she was going to manage.

It would've been easier if she didn't have two other broods to be concerned about.

Despite her anxieties, Eden's spirits were high when she reached her office and she settled to work in a more cheerful frame of mind than she could recall in years. It was a struggle to keep her mind off the night she'd spent with her men and almost as hard to keep from dwelling on the promise she'd made to the others for the night.

She managed after a while to focus on her work, however, and had sifted through the majority of her daily reports before Ivy and Liz arrived for a meeting that Eden had forgotten, but that they'd scheduled several weeks earlier.

Instantly mindful of her suspicions about Baen, she suggested that they take their meeting over lunch.

Liz and Ivy both sent her a look of surprise, but agreed readily. Their timing was good. The café wasn't so full as to make it nearly impossible to find a table, but it was bustling.

When they'd settled at a table, Ivy studied Eden speculatively for several moments. "You think he's starting to understand our language?"

Resisting the urge to glance toward Baen, who had assumed a watchful position near the exit, Eden shrugged. "I don't know. He ... uh ... repeated something I'd said, which might mean nothing."

Liz frowned down at her plate and finally picked up the condiments one by one and began assembling the sandwich she'd chosen for her lunch. "Arrogance," she muttered succinctly.

Eden sent her a sharp glance. "Excuse me?"

Liz shook her head. "I didn't mean you. At least, not just you. We know these people are an intelligent, advanced race. If we hadn't gotten so caught up in trying to figure out and understand their bizarre social structure, it might have occurred to us that they could be just as busy analyzing us as we are them."

Ivy sent her a cold look. "Speak for yourself. It occurred to me. That's why I didn't want to get too chummy with them to start with."

Eden felt a tension headache coming on. "I've no intention of debating this at this time. You're both wrong. I think it occurred to pretty much everyone that this was a

ticklish situation and whether they were conscious of it or not, part of the uneasiness all along was because we were concerned about how they would react to our social structure once they figured out that it was nothing at all like theirs. That's certainly why I suggested that we must at least appear to accept their customs.

"It's not that I didn't think they were capable of learning our tongue. I've never had any doubts about their intelligence. It's just that we're so dependent on our own technology--and lazy about learning things we don't have to learn because we have machines, and bots, and computers to do them--that I didn't consider the fact that the group of Xtanians here have had to learn to get along without most of their technology because they were dumped here with little more than the clothes on their backs.

"Pointing fingers isn't going to help, either. I accept responsibility for not taking all necessary precautions for the sake of security."

Liz frowned. "What exactly did he repeat?"

Eden reddened to the roots of her hair.

Ivy snorted and then tried to pretend she'd choked.

Liz reddened until her face was almost the color of Eden's. "Oh." She was silent for several moments. "I think, maybe, we can discount that," she said thoughtfully and then shrugged. "Truthfully, I suppose I'm as guilty of being blind as anybody. "Half my pazaan has taken to muttering 'fuck and shit'. I knew they'd picked it up from me. I just didn't make the connection between picking up a few expletives and actually learning the language."

Eden bit her lip to contain her amusement, wondering if her own had picked up any of her verbal expressions. She thought it improbable. Unlike Liz, who apparently spent a great deal of time in the company of her pazaan, and for good reason since studying the Xtanians was her job, her contact had been fairly minimal and half that was spent fucking, not just yelling fuck.

She noticed that Liz was glaring at her indignantly and shook her head. "I was just wondering if that was going to be our legacy--teaching the natives to cuss in our language."

Ivy frowned. "It's absolutely settled, then? We are leaving?"

Eden glanced at Ivy in surprise. "We established more than a month ago that a contingency plan was needed, but, no, it certainly isn't settled. In the first place, we still haven't found an alternative site that even begins to compare to New Georgia--a few possibilities, yes, but nothing nearly as good. In the second, we're still months away from meeting our bare minimum preparation.

"Can I assume from that question that you're beginning to see things differently? And if so, why?"

Ivy's dusky skin darkened. "My pazaan seems to be adapting readily enough to our customs and I haven't noticed any break down in their behavior."

Liz and Eden exchanged a speaking glance.

"What?" Ivy demanded irritably.

"It's just ... I never thought I'd hear you say that there was even a possibility that they might not be a threat," Eden said.

"What 'customs' did you introduce them to?" Liz asked curiously.

Ivy focused on her food long enough they'd both begun to realize that she was stalling, and that she didn't particularly want to tell them. Finally, she shrugged.

“Recreational sex.”

Liz and Eden both gaped at her.

Ivy sent them a resentful glare. “I figured that if anything would jog them into the sort of behavior we were worried about that would.”

“And it hasn’t?” Eden asked carefully.

“Not that I can see. Nothing seems to ruffle them, to be honest. I’ve picked favorites. I’ve flatly refused to have sex at all if I didn’t feel like it. I’ve picked two or three at the time and experimented with orgies. If anything, it seems to me that they only try harder to please me.

“And, to be perfectly honest with you, I have a hard time hating or distrusting them when all of them are as well disciplined and orderly as the finest soldiers I’ve ever seen--not just their warriors. They work together like a well oiled machine--no slackers, no complainers--no trouble makers.

“If you want my honest opinion our people are more likely to cause trouble than they are. At least a quarter of our population doesn’t want anything to do with them--at all. Of the others we have some champing at the bit to collect their share of the men, and the vast majority resentful that the men come in ‘sets’, which they don’t want to have to deal with. But at the same time, they still want a man.

“Mark my words, it’s the colonists that are going to start in squabbling over the men, not the other way around.”

After staring at Ivy for several moments, trying to take all of that in, the three focused on their food for a time to consider it.

“That still spells trouble,” Eden pointed out as she finished her meal. “Whatever direction, it’s something that we have to consider.”

“Moving somewhere else isn’t going to make that go away,” Ivy pointed out. “Then everybody would be miserable, not just a few.”

“I’d be miserable, I think,” Liz muttered. “I’m actually growing rather fond of mine.”

Eden felt a knot form in her throat at that. She was growing rather fond of hers, some of them far more than others.

She was far more thoughtful when she returned to her office. Despite their difference of opinion that had resulted in Ivy being reduced in rank, she respected Ivy’s judgment for the most part, at least militarily.

Ivy was still a woman, however. Undoubtedly, she was currently thoroughly enjoying the novelty of having a harem--she was for that matter--but it was so radically different from what any of them knew that she couldn’t help but wonder if, once the novelty wore off, they would all have a lot of regret about adopting that particular custom.

There was also still the issue of off spring. Baen’s brood seemed to be enjoying the changes she’d made as much as Ivy claimed her pazaan did, but would the Xtanians be as accepting once they realized that their entire existence was threatened? The Xtanians had formed these strange ‘pyramid’ relationships solely for the purpose of giving everyone the chance of having a woman and children of their own. They couldn’t do that. They’d be lucky if they managed to produce one or two children--period--not broods. And she sure as hell didn’t want to even if she could and doubted any of the others would be keen on that either.

The Xtanian women had evolved the capability and bearing so many children still crippled and disfigured the poor things horribly. The wonder was that they managed to produce such healthy offspring in spite of it.

Or maybe that was why the males tended to be smaller in stature than the females? As big as the females were it seemed unlikely they could carry so many to full term, and immature fetuses were generally a lot smaller and often stayed that way, never catching up.

She was fairly certain Ivy had been right about the colonists, too. So far maybe a quarter of them had elected to choose a pazaan for themselves. Probably half were still vacillating, intrigued, but too cautious to nerve themselves to take the leap. Down the road, though, assuming they remained where they were, resentment was bound to arise when those who'd chosen not to fraternize with the Xtanians began to feel cheated because some of the women had more men than they knew what to do with, while they had none.

It was human nature.

She was still mentally debating the pros and cons when she realized that the sun was setting and it was time to return to her meznooku. By then, though, she had a powerful tension headache.

Ordinarily, Eden either spent her evenings going over work she'd taken 'home' with her, or the pazaan entertained her and each other by gathering to engage in various games, or conversation, occasionally playing music--or what passed for music on their world. Eden didn't particularly care for it, but it seemed to entertain the men, so she simply tuned it out and focused on her work, or amused herself with a novel.

She found it difficult to focus on anything besides her dilemma, though, and the annoying tension headache that throbbed just enough to remind her continually that she was in pain. The evening meal soothed the discomfort somewhat, but a new tension arose in her when she finally emerged enough from her preoccupation to realize that it was nearing bedtime.

She'd been so full of energy that morning she'd blithely promised to take on half of Baen's brood for the night.

It was far more daunting a prospect than it had seemed that morning and she began to toy with the notion as soon as she was escorted to her bath of reneging on her promise and sending them all away.

By the time they'd undressed her and led her into the pool, though, she'd concluded that she just didn't have the heart to do so, no matter how unappealing the thought was at the moment. Because she couldn't help but notice that those she'd promised expected her to honor her word and were containing their eagerness only with a supreme effort.

Struggling against her reluctance, Eden forced a smile of welcome for Trar and Vladiv when they knelt to bathe her.

They seemed to sense her reservations, or perhaps they merely noticed that she was more tense than usual, for they seemed to take more care in bathing her even than they ordinarily did, stroking her until the tension began to ease from her. By the time they'd rinsed the cleanser from her body, she'd not only relaxed enough to begin to enjoy their attentions, her belly had begun to shimmy in anticipation.

It occurred to her as Trar scooped her up to carry her back into the bedroom that

Ivy claimed to have had more than one at the time. The notion was surprisingly intriguing, and not just because it meant that she could please more than one at the time.

The thought made her warm all over, particularly since it resurrected the memory of the night before when Baen, Cal, Trar and Vladiv had driven her to a frenzy by kissing her all at the same time.

She wondered why it hadn't occurred to her before. Unlike Earth men, the Xtanians were used to doing everything as a group. They weren't the least bit self-conscious about standing around naked and erect and merely watching the proceedings or moving forward to help position her or whoever she was with if they saw it was necessary.

Beyond the fact that they worked as a group whenever she saw that it was necessary or beneficial, they didn't, in point of fact, seem to pay much attention to each other at all.

She'd made her mind by the time Trar settled her on the bed and climbed up beside her. Pushing herself up on her elbows, she looked around until she'd spotted Vladiv and crooked a finger at him, summoning him.

Trar, she saw when she lay down again, looked taken aback. She caught his hand as he tensed to move away, however, drawing him back.

He exchanged a perplexed glance with Vladiv as he settled on the other side of her, but his uncertainty vanished as she hooked an arm around his neck and drew him down. He yielded to the pressure, covering her mouth with his and kissing her with heated need, stoking the fires inside of her as he stroked his tongue along hers in eager exploration.

Vladiv, after a hesitant moment, began to massage her breasts and stroke her belly, bringing every nerve ending to vibrant life. His heated breath evoked a rash of goose bumps all over her as he leaned down to pluck at one engorged nipple and then sucked it into his mouth.

A torrent of heady need raced through her blood then, the muscles low in her belly convulsing almost painfully.

Blindly, she reached to stroke and explore both men as they kissed her, pleasuring them with her touch as they pleased her with their mouths. The intoxicating drug of desire filled her mind, so dizzying and disorienting that she scarcely noticed the dip in the bed until she felt hands settle on either of her thighs, felt the stimulating caresses as the hands skated downward, grasped her calves and pushed her legs upward until her knees were bent and her soles resting flat on the bed.

She broke the kiss to look down as those same hands pushed her legs apart and she felt the coolness of air on her sex.

Pizan and Adri, she discovered, apparently laboring under the impression that she'd meant all of them at once, had joined the party. She was still trying to decide whether she was up to having them all when Adri bent to explore her cleft.

All thought of objections fled instantly at the jolt of fire that went through her when he dragged his tongue along her cleft and zeroed in on her clit.

Trar drew his legs up, shifting to allow Pizan closer.

It was crowded to say the very least, but as Pizan bent to finesse her orphaned nipple and Trar leaned down to cover her lips once more, Eden's senses were so bombarded with pleasure from every direction that she couldn't focus on anything

beyond the meteoric rise of her body toward explosion.

She was gasping hoarsely for breath and near mindless with the pounding demand of her body when they began to shift around her, changing places so that each of them could explore her body.

Their tactic was sheer torture. Over and over, she peaked, hovered on the edge for many moments and then slipped back again when they would abruptly cease teasing her, change positions and cover her erogenous zones with their mouths and torment her some more until she could no longer be still. She moved beneath them feverishly, her mouth dry from gasping for air, her heart pounding with nearly unbearable excitement.

The quest to reach orgasm began to be almost more torture than pleasure.

She fought it for a while, endured, struggled to achieve her goal, and then fought it again, reaching a point where she felt like she simply had to have a cock pounding inside of her.

Pushing them away finally, she struggled to roll onto her belly and then onto her hands and knees. Trar had migrated to her feet by that time. She positioned herself for him, looking back at him expectantly, demandingly.

It went without saying that he had never considered sex in such a position. Moreover, he was gasping hoarsely for breath himself, and nearly as mindless with need as she was and in no shape to figure out anything more complicated than shoving his cock into her.

That one fact led him in the right direction, however. After staring at her cleft for several heartbeats as if hypnotized, he shifted closer, grasped his engorged member and dragged it along her cleft, searching.

She gasped when his cock connected with the mouth of her passage, pushing back.

It was all the encouragement he needed. A shudder went through him as he countered her push and began the struggle to claim her completely. She dropped onto her elbows, bracing herself as he plowed past her resisting flesh and finally drove deeply inside of her.

Her body had plateaued during Trar's struggle to enter her, but as he became caught up in the search for release, and began to thrust into her, she felt herself rising rapidly toward culmination again.

Vladiv was crouched on his knees by her head, she discovered, when she lifted her head. Her mouth instantly went dry as she looked at his painfully swollen member. Grabbing it, she opened her mouth over the head, sucking hard.

He jerked, whether from surprise or pain or both, she wasn't certain, but a raw groan escaped him as she stroked and teased him with her tongue and mouth. He shifted closer after a moment, giving her better access.

Someone wedged himself beneath her and began gnawing greedily at her sensitive nipples, plucking at them almost painfully with the jerking movements of her body from Trar's pounding thrusts. She moaned around Vladiv's cock as it sent a hard wave of exquisite sensation through her.

She was still struggling to adjust to the rhythm when another head was wedged beneath her belly. Doubt flooded her when she realized the objective, not doubt that it would be stimulating but uncertainty of exactly how he thought he could suck her clit with Trar pounding at her so hard it nearly buckled her spine.

Fingers tugged at her flesh, peeling the nether lips back and stretching her clit up her belly. A hot mouth attached itself to her clit, took a hard drag that sent an electric jolt through her, disappeared, and then attached itself again for a second heart stopping drag. The third time he managed to close his mouth over her clit and suck, he detonated the hard knot of compressed rapture inside of her with a force that dragged a scream from her.

A rush of fire filled her veins, fried her brains. She began to suck and fondle Vladiv feverishly as the first quake of release slammed her.

Her fervent ardor broke Vladiv's control. His cock bucked in her mouth. He tensed, shook all over. Realizing dimly that he was fighting his own culmination, nearly mindless as ecstasy crashed through her in hard waves, Eden ceased to allow his cock to slip in and out of her mouth and began to suckle him greedily as if she could pull his seed from him. He shifted, ground his teeth, and then groaned as if in agony as his body gave up his seed regardless of his will to resist.

His hands closed on either side of her head, tensing against her skull as if he wasn't certain whether he most wanted to push her way or hold her to him. She ignored him, continuing to tug at him until the pounding waves of her release began to mellow.

He fell back against the bed as if Eden had sucked the life force out of him when she finally released him and lifted her head. Gasping for breath, Eden slumped against the bed as Adri and Pizan slipped from beneath her, gripping the bed as Trar uttered a deep groan and came to a shuddering halt, leaning heavily against her while he fought to catch his breath.

Sated, limp as a wet rag in the aftermath and conscious of little besides her heart beat thundering in her ears, Eden drooped against the mattress as Trar, dragging in a last shuddering breath, finally withdrew. She hadn't realized it was even possible to come so hard, she thought dimly--not before she'd experienced the brood. She was actually a little surprised she hadn't had heart failure.

Her nipples, clit, and passage were still pounding dully from the blood that they drawn to engorge her most sensitive areas with their absolutely lovely and talented mouths.

As intrigued as she'd been by the prospect of an orgy of indulgence, she hadn't actually expected the experience she'd had--not after what Baen and Cal had done to her the night before. Nothing should have even come close to comparing.

But this was definitely close.

Someone grasped her hips, lifting until her knees were beneath her. Groaning, Eden angled her head back to see that Adri had taken Trar's place even as he stroked his member along her cleft and nudged the rounded head inside of her. It felt amazing.

She only just climaxed and his thrusting invasion still felt delightful.

Without a great deal of surprise, she discovered when she faced forward again that Pizan had knelt in front of her to offer his engorged member.

Instantly intrigued, she took his shaft into her mouth as she had Vladiv's, stroking and suckling him with enthusiasm if without a great deal of need. Her blood was still high, however, and her body began to rise to the occasion, warming again after a few moments, the tension curling inside of her and rising.

She was nearing the peak when she felt Adri's cock jerk in her passage. Almost at the same instant, Pizan's body seized. More desperate to reach her own release before

she lost the wherewithal to do so than because she felt driven, she worked more feverishly over Pizan, raced to catch up with them ... and failed.

A peculiar mixture of emotions swamped her as she felt them culminate, pleasure that she'd given them pleasure, both irritation and disappointment that she'd missed her chance at coming again, and relief that she'd done her good deed for the day.

Telling herself that she was getting greedy, she sank limply to the bed when they withdrew, drifting lazily, trying to ignore the twinges and sparks that still thrummed through her, demanding attention. She'd just decided her body was going to cool and stop bothering her when Trar came to bathe the semen from her. She watched him through slumberous, covetous eyes as he carefully bathed the stickiness from her, tempted to demand a repeat performance.

That hardly seemed fair to the others, though, she decided, watching a little wistfully as they filed out of the room to find their own sleeping couches.

The 'unfairness' stuck in her mind and after a moment, she rolled onto her side and studied her warriors speculatively.

She wanted Baen. She was fairly certain that she could've been completely and totally satisfied only with Baen. What she felt for him, though, went well beyond mere desire and she couldn't afford to nurture those feelings. Moreover, Baen, from what she could tell, expected her to receive all of his brood. None of them would understand if she chose one and ignored the rest.

After a moment, she got up and approached Miccan. He looked surprised when she caught his hand, but he didn't resist when she led him to her bed. His eyes, she saw when she lay down again, were gleaming with desire and uneasiness and hopefulness.

Warming to him at once, she smiled up at him as he climbed on the bed carefully and lay down on his side beside her.

Chapter Twenty Two

Wisdom, Eden thought wryly, was something that was supposed to come with age. Although she made it a point not to spend a great deal of time dwelling on her own age, she certainly had enough years and experience under her belt that she should have attained the wisdom to know better than to take on a half a dozen men in one night, she thought ruefully as she roused enough to begin to feel pain in every joint and muscle in her body.

There was no getting around the fact that the pazaan was inspiration enough to behave without restraint. At every moment that she was within the menooku she was surrounded by gorgeous males catering to her every need, caressing her whenever the opportunity arose and watching her hungrily whenever they thought she wouldn't notice, making her hyperaware of her femininity and their masculinity. There was also no getting around the fact that Baen's brood in particular sent her sex drive through the roof.

Her empathy for their discomfort and her sense of fair play had driven her to act against her better judgment.

And of course Ivy had planted the intriguing notion in her mind of indulging herself in an orgy of debauchery.

And she still didn't know why she'd hatched the idiotic notion to 'take care' of her brood.

Actually, she did, but she didn't particularly want to examine why it mattered so much to her to make them happy, why she was trying so hard to please them when she knew very well it wasn't expected of her.

Groaning, she struggled to turn over onto her back and lay panting for several moments when she heard the brood enter her suite to attend her morning ritual. When she finally opened her eyes, she saw that Cal, Trar and Vladiv were standing beside the bed, wearing almost identical expressions of concern.

Smiling up at them wanly, Eden pushed herself up on her elbows with an effort, letting out a hiss of pain as did so and her muscles and joints protested the movement.

Someone settled on the bed beside her and she turned to see it was Baen, looking as disturbed as the others. Lifting his hands, he fitted her translator onto her head.

"You are hurt?"

She felt hot color seep into her cheeks. "Just ... sore," she admitted a little lamely.

"We will make it better," Cal said promptly, leaning down to scoop her up before she could protest and carrying her into the bathing room.

He was disapproving when she insisted that she could attend her personal needs without any assistance, but she ignored the look as she hobbled a little stiffly into the little nook where the toilet sat.

The three men were standing just outside when she emerged again. She noticed, though, that Trar and Vladiv refused to meet her gaze and looked a question at Cal.

Cal, she saw, was glaring at both of them accusingly, but his expression softened

to a look of concern and empathy as he met her gaze again. "The heat of the water will soothe," he murmured, lifting her carefully into his arms and carrying her down into the bath.

Instead of settling her on the bathing bench as they generally did, Cal sat down in the water with her in his lap, pulling her back against his chest. Trar and Vladiv joined them. Settling on their knees on either side of her, they began to stroke their hands over her in a soothing massage, beginning with her feet and working their way upwards.

Cal's movements were as tender. He stroked her arms for several moments and then focused on working the tension from her shoulders and neck.

She was half asleep by the time Trar and Vladiv had worked their way up to her thighs. Their ministrations then, however, were far more stimulating than relaxing. Before they'd spent more than a handful of minutes stroking her from groin to knee, tension had begun to coil low in her belly, and her sex, the insatiable hussy, was demanding to be fed--again.

She was relieved when they finally ceased stroking her, helped her from the bath and dried her.

She was still stiff and sore when she emerged, but far less so than before, and in any case her body was buzzing cozily for more, which was enough of a diversion that she managed to dress without too many grunts and groans and settled to break her fast.

Typically, she had no appetite in the morning and only nibbled at the food to appease them because she'd discovered early on that they seemed very unsettled about her size. She supposed it was to be expected. Obviously, their concept of beauty and health was their own queens, and she doubted any of the Xtanian women were under seven feet tall or even close to thin. She only had Sademeen to go by, of course, and she, poor thing, had already borne many broods--reason enough to be more than a little overweight even for her height--but she thought that Sademeen was typical, not unusual. And if that was the case, it certainly explained the impression she got that the Xtanian men thought the Earth women in general were unnervingly puny and weak.

She thought her pazaan was probably fearful that she was going to keel over dead and that was why they looked so upset when she displayed so little interest in eating.

It was far worse today, though, she discovered because she felt vaguely nauseated even looking at the food. Girding herself, she struggled to eat enough to satisfy them and left with a strong sense of relief to be free of observation--or relatively free of it--for a few hours.

Deborah Pugh, Stacy Sessions, and Brenda Coleman, sector chiefs for med techs, engineers and agriculture respectively arrived midmorning for a meeting. Glad for the diversion, although she expected trouble since they'd come to speak with her in person, Eden told her assistant to show them in.

Deb went straight to the point. "The natives are getting restless," she said tartly.

Eden's brows rose almost to her hairline. "What makes you say that?" she asked sharply.

Stacy sent Deb an irritated glance. "Our natives," she said pointedly. "They feel like they've waited long enough. They want to know if it's safe to choose their own men."

Some of Eden's tension ebbed, but only some. Acutely aware of Baen, she struggled for several moments to figure out a way to speak with them without him

present and finally accepted that trying to do so would only make him suspicious.

"I'm not sure it is safe," she said hesitantly.

Brenda's expression was disbelieving. "You're alive. The others that were allowed to pick a harem are, too. I haven't seen anything to indicate any of you have had trouble.

"In fact, just the opposite. With Marion Lynden and the others strolling around and preening themselves over their 'punishment' for what was clearly dangerous behavior, and you, and Liz, and Ivy floating around with sappy happy looks on your faces, everybody, including me, is beginning to resent being excluded from having a choice in whether or not they want to mate up with the Xtanians."

Eden's expression hardened. "A little professional courtesy would be appreciated," she said tightly.

Brenda reddened. "I apologize for what might have seemed like criticism," she said stiffly.

"I was referring to respect for the office I hold," Eden said pointedly. "You have the right to criticize. You do not have the right to speak to me as if I was one of your inferiors."

Brenda's blush deepened, but the anger in her eyes was replaced with discomfort and guilt. "Yes, ma'am."

Eden surveyed the other two women coldly for a moment and finally unbent slightly. "Regardless of what you may perceive to be the case, we're walking on egg shells here, and all is not as it seems."

She stopped, considered for several moments and finally decided that it would be far better to explain the customs of the Xtanians in excruciating detail than to allow the others to make their decision blindly. Very likely, they would dismiss it, but they could not later complain that they weren't warned.

When she'd finished describing the mating process, she saw that all three women were staring at her with varying degrees of horror, revulsion, and disbelief.

"I find that hard to credit," Brenda said finally.

Eden grew angry at the not so subtle implication that she was lying.

"Nevertheless, I will expect you to explain this to the women in your sectors so that they know what to expect. If they're still interested, we still have to consider security for the colony at large. Names will be drawn by lot, but only one at the time per sector per week. Until we have had time to be absolutely certain that there will be no danger, or at least a very minimal danger, integration will only be allowed slowly and cautiously.

"The Xtanians are showing signs that they are both willing and able to adapt to our customs--at least to a degree. Splitting up the broods is not an option. The bond between them isn't at all like anything any of us has ever encountered, but it's obvious they're inseparable and trying to do so could create problems we don't want to have to deal with. As long as the women fully understand as much as we do know of their customs, though, and are careful not to push too quickly, there should be no trouble.

"But it will be your responsibility as sector chiefs to see to it that you don't send any loose cannons."

"You mean like Marion Lynden and her cronies?" Stacy said tartly.

Eden gave her a look. "Exactly like Marion and cronies," she said coldly.

"Unfortunately, they left us with no choice but to send them since they'd already done so

much damage sending them was the only way to try to mend the breach.”

Stacy looked away uncomfortably, but Eden doubted she felt any real guilt that the majority of the group in question belonged to her sector.

Dismissing the remark after a moment, Eden considered the situation carefully, trying to decide if she'd covered all angles and finally came up with another potential for disaster. “There aren't enough broods to go around,” she said finally. “Men certainly, but now that we know they will not be separated from their brood brothers--not enough broods. This isn't something we need to be particularly worried about at the moment since there are some who are very much against mixing anyway. But it still has to be considered for the long term. We don't want the women inadvertently favoring men from several different broods, as Ivy, and Liz and I did. And we don't want them fighting over the men. They will single out the one man that interests them most, one at the time, and then make certain that all the men of the brood they've chosen have identified themselves before the next chooses.

“They will be sent out under military escort to make certain order is kept.”

Stacy and Brenda obviously had mixed feelings as they left, but both women seemed more at ease, no doubt because they finally had something solid to appease the women in their sectors.

Deb lingered behind, studying Eden speculatively. “It's been rough?” she said with a touch of sympathy.

Eden reddened. “An adjustment, certainly. I don't know that it would exactly qualify to call it ‘rough’ when they treat me like a queen, wait on me hand and foot and always put my needs before their own.”

A slow grin curled Deb's lips. “That bad, huh?”

Eden couldn't help but smile back, but she sighed wanly. “In all honesty, it's wearing and more often than not irritating. I'm used to doing things for myself--we all are. Being pampered like a helpless infant might sound appealing from the outside, but its nerve wrackingly awkward--like trying to feed yourself with your left hand.

“And I . . .” She broke off. “They're so sweet, all of them, so eager to please and so hurt when you don't want their help that I spend most of my time worrying about pleasing them.”

Deb shrugged. “I expect it wouldn't be as wearing if you didn't have to contend with quite so many. Is there no way to get out of that?”

Eden frowned. “I'm not sure. Eventually, assuming it just doesn't get to be too much for all of us, and mixing doesn't lead to violence and all sorts of unpleasant repercussions, maybe I'll figure out a way.”

“You wouldn't be against it?”

Eden stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. “I care about them, too much to take a chance that they'd do something to themselves because they were rejected, or be banished, or anything awful like that. But one brood is certainly enough.”

“Mmm,” Deb responded noncommittally. “Almost too much, I'd guess. Why don't you stop by the clinic and let me run a check on you?”

“I look that bad?” Eden asked jokingly.

Deb chuckled, but shook her head. “You look tired and a little pale.”

A blush climbed Eden's cheeks. “Maybe I'm overdoing it--a little.”

Deb burst out laughing. “Almost certainly. I'd still like to give you a checkup.”

Eden gave in to the inevitable. "Let me check my schedule," she muttered, somewhat irritably. "Next week? Say midmorning?"

Deb nodded. "I'll make sure I have an opening for you. Promise?"

"Unless something comes up that I can use as an excuse," Eden murmured teasingly.

"I could always bring a portable and come to you," Deb retorted chidingly, "And I will if you don't show up." She hesitated at the door. "We know their food isn't harmful to us, but you're primarily on an alien diet. It might not be meeting your needs."

Nodding, Eden waved her off. She wasn't particularly disturbed about it. She felt fine, as she'd admitted, tired because she'd overindulged, but otherwise fine. She was far more worried, in any case, about the exodus of the colonists toward the Xtanians.

Problems were bound to arise no matter what they did to circumvent them.

Eden's edict was received pretty much as she'd come to expect from the colonists. Everyone grumbled. Even the angriest among them, though, were at least able to look forward to a specific point in time where they would be allowed to chose a 'husband brood', or a harem for themselves, which ever way they preferred to look at it.

As she'd also expected, they also tended to ignore the down side to the Xtanian's customs but the first to have the opportunity discovered quickly enough that it wasn't merely propaganda devised to manipulate them and they were no happier than Eden, Ivy and Liz had been.

Eden was secretly glad, because it quieted the mob and dampened their enthusiasm--at least temporarily. She knew, though, that it wouldn't last any longer than it took for the brood to begin to adjust to the preferences of their 'queens'.

Regardless, the unrest was enough to keep her busier than usual, and she might have forgotten her promise to Deb to go in for a checkup except for one circumstance.

The vague sense of nausea became a regular occurrence.

Eden wasn't certain whether Baen had caught the gist of her conversation with Deb, but after Deb had finally left and she flicked a glance at Baen to see if he seemed to have understood any of what had been discussed, she saw that he looked a little ill himself as he examined her face searchingly.

Disconcerted, she considered asking him point blank if he'd understood the conversation--or any part of the conversation she'd had with the others.

She hesitated to back him into a corner, however, because there were only two possibilities that she could think of. Either he'd picked up only a handful of words and had grasped enough to understand Deb was concerned about her, or he was trying to hide the fact that he'd learned far more than he'd given her reason to believe and he'd understood everything, or pretty much everything, that had been discussed.

He might only have understood enough that, put together with Deb's tone and body language, he'd figured out she was concerned.

She wasn't certain she wanted to delve into any reasons he might have for keeping it secret from her if he had learned enough to follow her conversations.

Besides, how much faith could she place in her interpretation of his expression?

He would only be unsettled if he cared about her and she wanted to believe he did.

Dismissing it after a time, she focused on her work.

Sooner or later, she would know for certain just how much Baen understood and

in the meanwhile she was taking all of the precautions she possibly could to protect the interests of the colony.

Despite the problems of the day, and the fact that Eden had begun the day feeling much the worse for wear, she found herself looking forward to spending 'quality' time with Baen and his brood. She might not have if not for the fact that Trar and Vladiv had stirred her up just enough to tease her throughout the day with possibilities, but they had and she wasn't at all reluctant to engage in a little more sensible recreation.

Baen, to her surprise and a touch of both amusement and irritation, nixed that idea. As soon as she'd been carried to bed and settled, he'd ordered his brood out to allow her to rest.

She didn't protest. She was tired, a little randy after her invigorating bath and massage, but it wasn't anything she couldn't deal with. She was a little less pleased and amused the following night and became downright indignant by the third night.

"I'm not that tired," she protested.

He pretended he had no idea what she'd said, but he made no attempt to fetch her translator to find out either.

Deciding after several tense moments that she really didn't want to fight with him about it, she finally flounced onto her side and stewed over it until she fell asleep, but she was resolved to confront him about it by the time she'd reached her office.

The problem, she discovered, was that it was a rather delicate subject--at least as far as she was concerned and once she'd marched over to him to give him a piece of mind she simply stared at him for several moments, trying to decide how to phrase her complaint. "I'm the -- uh -- head of the pazaan, right?"

He studied her warily for a moment. "Yes."

"Then its my decision whether or not I take one of the pazaan -- uh -- into my bed, or more than one," she said, stabbing him with the point of her index finger for emphasize.

Anger glittered in his eyes. "No."

Eden gaped at him in surprise. "What do you mean 'no'?" she demanded indignantly.

"I am high warrior, and you are my responsibility. At any time that I deem it necessary to protect you, even from yourself, it is my duty to do so."

Taken aback by the response, which she certainly hadn't expected, Eden went back to gaping at him. "I don't need to be protected from--that!"

"You were hurt and ill the day after," he reminded her. "And for two days since you have scarcely eaten."

Eden felt her face heat. "Sore, not injured," she retorted. "I'm not as weak as you obviously think I am."

His expression softened after a moment. Amusement took the place of his anger. He lifted a hand to stroke her cheek gently. "You are not nearly as fragile as I had believed, nor as strong as you believe."

Disconcerted, uncomfortable with the conversation anyway, Eden decided to drop the subject. "Maybe not," she muttered as she turned away and settled at her desk, "but I don't need someone else to tell me when I'm hungry, sleepy--or horny, damn it! I've been teased for days, and next week I won't be with you--and your brood," she added after a considerable pause.

She was somewhat mollified by Baen's explanation, but as grateful as she was for a reprieve to recover from overindulgence and a little more time to rest, his behavior seemed inconsistent with what she'd thought she understood about the Xtanians and it made her more than a little uneasy, made her worry that she was seeing changes within her brood that weren't at all customary for the Xtanians.

Baen and Cal made love with her that night with infinite care, but with a thoroughness that left her breathless and completely sated and the following night Vladiv and Trar. It seemed indisputable that they were all chastened by her condition the morning after her wild romp, or had been castigated by Baen, because thereafter all of the others vanished as soon as she'd made her choice for the night and she didn't get seconds, much less thirds.

It annoyed her, in more ways than one, but mostly because she couldn't help but feel that she and Baen were locked in a power struggle to see which of them was actually in charge of the mezooku.

On the bright side, Baen was equally strict with the other broods, denying them nightly access to her, giving her one night to rest undisturbed every other night. They yielded to his orders without any apparent anger or resentment, but they seemed surprised, which seemed to her to indicate that his behavior was not the norm.

She might have spent more time worrying about it except for the fact that she discovered the vague nausea she felt every morning not only didn't go away, it got worse and she began to wonder if she was being poisoned.

Chapter Twenty Three

“Eden? Eden Chisholm?” Deb exclaimed in pleased surprise.

Eden gave her a look. “Very funny!”

Chuckling, Deb ushered Eden into her office. “It’s just that I haven’t seen you in so long! What’s it been?”

Ignoring the chair Deb indicated, Eden paced to the window to stare out at the city below. “You know I’ve been busy,” Eden retorted irritably.

“Haven’t we all? Wait! My memory’s starting to come back. Didn’t you tell me you’d come in for a check up about three weeks ago?”

Sighing, Eden turned away from the window and moved to the chair Deb had indicated when she’d come in. Flouncing into it, she flicked a glance toward her shadow, Baen, and focused on Deb again.

“Has it been that long?”

“Give or take. I assumed since you didn’t show that you’d adjusted and/or had no problems that concerned you. But you still look pale and tired. Not getting enough sleep?”

Color crept into Eden’s cheeks. “I’m glad you’re in such a good humor,” Eden retorted dryly.

Deb studied her for several moments and finally sat back in her chair. “You aren’t feeling well, are you?”

Eden shrugged. “I suppose I’ve been feeling a little more tired than usual, but I’ve taken to waking up during the night so I figured that was why.” She hesitated for several moments before she continued. “Vague nausea from time to time.”

Deb’s brows rose. “Something in your diet, you think?”

“Not that I can figure out. That’s what I was hoping you could tell me.”

Nodding, Deb got to her feet. “Well, I know you’re a very busy woman, so why don’t we just go ahead and do a full scan and see what we see?”

Relief flooded Eden. “Good. I’ll feel better if you cover everything,” she said pointedly.

Deb sent her a piercing look then, but merely nodded, gesturing for Eden to precede her into the examination room. When Eden had settled on the table and stretched out, trying to relax, Deb began to move the various electronics into position. “You ok with having the hulking brute hovering over you? Or would you like for me to call security to escort him down the hall to wait?”

Eden resisted the urge to glance toward Baen, but she saw in her peripheral vision that he was looking the array of equipment over with a thoroughness that probably missed very little. Apparently satisfied, he moved to a position along the wall that put him in direct line with her vision.

She wasn’t certain of whether he’d chosen that particular spot because it was the clearest, or because it gave him the clearest view of her and the monitors.

“It’s all right.”

“You’re sure? It would bother the hell out of me to be under watch at all times.”

Eden smiled wryly. “I am under watch at all times,” she reminded Deb.

Deb thought it over and finally shrugged. “The monitoring devices aren’t quite as intrusive, however.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re not under surveillance all the time.”

Deb chuckled. “With the weight of office It’s your fault you’re the most important person on the planet. That’s what you get for being so damned good at your job that everybody’s terrified to let you out of their sight.”

Eden knew she was teasing, but the comments warmed her. “It’s nice to get a pat on the back occasionally. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m going to start the scan now. Just close your eyes and try to relax and keep movements to a minimum.”

Eden nodded and closed her eyes as she felt the slight warmth of the laser touch the top of her skull, breathing slowly and evenly and counting off the seconds in her head as it moved slowly across her forehead and continued its journey down the length of her body. She was so totally relaxed by the time the scan reached her toes and started back up that she dozed for a handful of seconds.

A faint sound jolted her awake again moments later and she opened her eyes, blinked them several times to clear her vision and searched for Deb.

Deb, she saw, had moved around to study the readouts.

It was only then that she realized Deb had switched audio off and was reading the stats the system was displaying. Instantly, she tensed. “Anything interesting?” she asked when Deb simply stood staring at the display, her expression stern with either concentration or dismay. Eden wasn’t certain which, but she didn’t particularly like the idea that Deb was reluctant to tell her what the readings were.

Deb glanced at her a little distractedly. “Nothing alarming,” she said soothingly. “Something a little unexpected--although I’m not sure why I’m surprised. That’s a shut out. Home team wins.”

Irritation surged through Eden, along with alarm. She surged upward. “In English, if you don’t mind,” she snapped irritably.

Deb grinned. “Patience. Lie still. I want to run another scan.”

“Why?” Eden demanded suspiciously.

“Because I’m the med tech and I get to be boss here.”

Resentfully, Eden settled again. “Is it something I’m eating that’s making me nauseous?”

“Shhh!”

Eden pursed her lips, but when the scan skipped her upper body and then slowed to scan her lower body, she tensed again. “What is it?”

“Four.”

Ignoring the order to lay still, Eden tried to struggle up again. Deb planted a hand on her shoulder and pushed her flat. “Be still!”

“Four what?” Eden demanded.

“That’s what I’m trying to see here,” Deb said testily. “If you’ll be still, I’ll tell you in a minute.”

Eden stilled, but she found it impossible to relax.

“Wise woman,” Deb murmured after a moment. “Not that I’m completely certain

you had anything to do with it. Ordinarily, of course, it would be entirely up to you, but this is just weird and totally out of my realm of understanding.”

“What is weird and beyond your understanding?”

Deb shrugged and finally swiveled the monitor so that Eden could see it. She might have saved herself the trouble. Eden had no idea what she was supposed to be looking at. The holographic 3D display just looked like layers and layers of flesh ghosted one on top of another. Deb took her pen and pointed to a roughly lozenge shape. “Male.” She pointed to another just a little distance away. “Male, female, female,” she added when she’d pointed out three more. “I’m going to have to order at least three more incu-sys ... unless you don’t want to do one au naturale. Probably ought to order a dozen.”

Eden stared at the shapes Deb had pointed out blankly, glanced at Deb and then studied the monitor again. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Deb’s brows rose. “The babies.”

Shock instantly closed over Eden. “What?” she asked faintly.

Something about the tone of her voice penetrated Deb’s abstraction. She sent Eden a sharp look. “Breathe.”

Obediently, Eden sucked in a deep, gasping breath.

“Did you take the fertility drugs?”

Eden merely stared at her. “Fertility?” she echoed blankly.

Deb studied her a moment. “I didn’t think so.”

Eden’s mouth was desert dry. “You’re saying ... you’re telling me that I’m ... I’m”

“Yes, you are. Tired, nauseated, not sleeping well ... My god, Eden. Don’t tell me you didn’t even suspect?”

“I thought I was being poisoned,” Eden said faintly.

Deb gaped at her in stunned disbelief, blinking rapidly. “Why would you think that?”

Eden closed her eyes. “Because I’m so popular around here? There’s no mistake?” she asked abruptly, opening her eyes again.

Deb gave her a look. “Nothing in the tox screen. You’re as healthy as you were the last time I checked you, which is to say in excellent condition. You’re pregnant. That’s all that’s wrong with you. Except ... Well, I suppose it’s a matter of opinion whether it’s actually wrong. It just isn’t anything I’d expected and it’s unprecedented among us, that’s for sure. I should be used to it by now, though. Want to know who the fathers are?”

Eden stared at her blankly. “Fathers?”

Deb shrugged. “Well, can’t tell you exactly until I run some tests on the prospectives. But this little lady here,” she tapped one of the lozenges, “belongs to that great hulking brute standing over there like someone pole axed him.”

Eden’s gaze moved automatically to Baen. She saw that Deb was right. He was so pale that she thought for several moments that he was going to keel over. “Baen’s?” she asked faintly.

“Mmmhmm. DNA matches that sample you sent around a while back. The other three are his brothers’. I can tell you that much, at least. If you want to know which ones, you’ll have to get them to come in.”

The shock still hadn't worn off and Eden couldn't seem to gather her wits. The only thing that kept cycling in her brain was four--pregnant--and Baen. "That's possible?"

"Ordinarily, no. But these aren't ordinary circumstances. From what I've been able to figure out the Xtanians aren't the only ones 'adjusting'. So far every female that I've checked that's taken on a pazaan has turned up pregnant. I haven't gotten the chance to test any of them, but I'm guessing they must secrete hormones during intercourse that rev up the female reproductive cycle--in our case that would be super revving since we, as you well know, are infertile most of the time due to the anti-aging drugs."

She paused, studying Eden critically for several moments. "I think you need a little time to adjust to the news," she said intuitively. "I can give you a few weeks--it'll take that long to build the incu-sys, but you need to give some thought to which ones you want me to take."

Eden merely stared at her blankly.

Deb patted her shoulder. "You can't carry them all, you know."

Nodding, Eden finally pushed herself upright, sat staring down at her toes for a few moments and finally slipped off the examination table. She didn't look at Baen as she left the room. She didn't hear what Deb called after her. She merely nodded and kept going.

It was fortunate, she supposed, that she was such a creature of habit. She found herself in her office without any memory of having headed that way. After looking around the room a little vaguely, she sat down at her desk. She merely stared at her computer monitor, however.

She was fairly certain she would not have been as shocked if Deb had told her it was poison that was causing the listlessness, the difficulty sleeping, the vague, and sometime very pronounced nausea.

She thought she had covered every possible scenario, but she had not considered that any of them were likely to conceive. She certainly hadn't thought about the possibility for herself, although she had no reason to think she was any less likely to conceive than the others.

Four. Deb had said four. How could she have gotten pregnant at all? Let alone with four?

Infertile meant rare egg production, not a half a damned dozen at one cycle!

Deb hadn't been surprised, though, and that wasn't only because she'd thought the symptoms suggested pregnancy.

Everyone she'd checked was pregnant, and carrying more than one.

She felt a nearly overwhelming, and hysterical, urge to giggle. They were certainly going to have a bumper crop of new colonists!

She sobered after a moment, realizing she'd given the go ahead to the other colonists to choose men for themselves. The Xtanian men were more than potent. They had to be secreting something that was forcing the women to produce.

She still didn't understand how, even if they'd boosted her reproduction, that four different males had managed to fertilize four different eggs.

That thought halted her in her rambling contemplation, though.

Baen had fathered a child on her. Baen who'd been certain he couldn't, or least told her he couldn't.

Who'd fathered the others?

Deb had said it was Baen's brood, but that wasn't good enough. She wanted to know who.

"Tell your brood that they must come into New Savannah and go to the clinic," she told Baen without bothering to turn around.

It occurred to her almost at once that he might or might not understand since she wasn't wearing her translator. Grabbing it off her desk, she set the device on her head and repeated the command. When Baen still didn't move, she swiveled around to look at him.

He didn't look as pale as he had earlier, but he looked stunned.

However well he usually pretended not to understand, she knew he had to have understood a good bit of what Deb had been telling her.

"Now, Baen," she said in a tone that brooked no argue.

He swallowed a little sickly, nodded, and then frowned as if trying to recall what she'd said.

"Go and get them," she said slowly.

"They are coming," he responded.

Eden stared at him, feeling her jaw slowly go slack. She blinked several times. "I ... uh ... How do you know they're coming?"

He touched his temple, rubbed it with his fingertips as if it hurt. "I summoned them."

"How?" Eden demanded, wondering a little wildly if the shock had unhinged her mind.

He stared at her in confusion. "We are brood. We are as one," he said slowly. "It is much like the thing on your wrist."

"The communicator? You have one in your head? You communicate telepathically," she guessed abruptly as it hit her suddenly why they worked so well together, why they always seemed to know what needed to be done without having to be told. They did communicate. They just didn't need to verbalize to do so.

They hadn't thought about it because they couldn't.

She supposed the Xtanians had not told them because it had not occurred to them that the Earth women couldn't.

Maybe.

Maybe they realized they had an advantage?

She considered it carefully for some time and finally dismissed it. He'd said brood. He hadn't said pazaan. He could communicate with his brothers without speech, not the others.

That was the bond, she realized. They shared thoughts, maybe all thoughts. Maybe they couldn't block the others from their minds at all? Did that mean they shared feelings, too? Knew about them? Or felt them?

The nerves might carry sensation, but it was the brain that translated. That was why Baen--all of them--usually said 'we'.

She thrust that from her mind after a few moments. She had enough to deal with without trying to understand the confusing relationships of the Xtanians.

Most important at the moment was how, if at all, the discovery that they were pregnant impacted the colony. The pregnancy changed their situation drastically.

Moving would mean placing a high risk on the babies. Even if they could feel that they'd taken every possible precaution to protect them, unless they placed all of the developing fetuses in incu-sys, they would be at greater risk themselves, and perhaps not physically able to do the things they would need to do to survive, let alone flourish.

It occurred to her that they did not have to have the babies at all. There was another alternative, but it made her feel like throwing up.

She could not make this decision alone, she decided.

After a moment's thought, she buzzed Deb. "Contact the other ... uh ... mothers," she said, stumbling over the word. "They're to meet with me in council chambers."

Surprise flickered in Deb's eyes, but after staring at her speculatively for several moments she nodded. "When?"

"Now."

"It'll take me a few minutes to locate them. Thirty minutes?"

"Fine."

"Anything else?"

"Baen's brothers will be coming for testing. Notify the guards at the gate and have them escorted to med lab, and when you're done, have the ones that test positive wait."

Deb's brows rose at that, but she merely rang off without voicing any of the questions Eden could see buzzing through her mind.

A couple of the women were already in the council room when Eden arrived. They looked questioningly at her, but Eden ignored it, gesturing for them to be seated and then pacing to the window to stare down at the city while she waited for everyone else to arrive.

It was late afternoon, and many of the women had already ended their shift and were heading to their homes. A handful were headed toward the security passage and the new city that had sprung up between New Savannah and the Xtanian Citadel.

Either they hadn't gotten word before they'd gone off the clock, or they weren't pregnant--yet.

Eden hadn't summoned the council, but Deb buzzed, appearing on her vid screen to inform her that she'd contacted the other nine women in question and to inform her that Baen's brood brothers had arrived. When Eden rang off, she counted heads and discovered everyone had arrived.

Eden saw without surprise that they'd been escorted. Ten Xtanian warriors were ranged around the room, including Baen.

Tension settled as a knot in the pit of her stomach as she considered ordering the guards from the room and the possible consequences of doing so.

She didn't feel up to the possibility of a challenge in authority at the moment. Moreover, the Xtanians either already knew everything--or they knew nothing because they couldn't understand the language.

It seemed a little like trying to close the barn door after all of the cows had already escaped.

She decided to simply ignore them, but she removed her translator very deliberately, switched it off and set it in on the conference table. Without so much as a blink, the other women removed theirs, as well.

“I’m sure some of you have guessed by now why I called this meeting. Deb informed me earlier this morning that we have a ... situation that will have a tremendous impact on the decision we made months ago to seek an alternate location for the colony.”

Several of the women exchanged looks, but it was Ivy who spoke. “I was under the impression that that plan was merely a contingency, in case we discovered that it was necessary for the safety of the colonists to remove to a new location.”

Eden shrugged. “It was. It still is. Moreover, we have not located a site that is even nearly as good as this world. If worse comes to worse, there’s still the option of heading back toward Earth and settling on one of the other worlds.

“At least, I considered that an option before. I don’t feel particularly comfortable with the thought of trying to transport fetuses. Even with the incu-sys units, they are very, very fragile at this stage of development. I think the risks to them would be high.”

This time instead of merely exchanging glances, the women began trying to talk all at once. It was hard to catch individual remarks, but the general consensus was that no one wanted to take the risk.

Eden studied her hands. “That being the case, I’m fairly certain the alternative won’t appeal to any of you, but it is my duty to point out the option nevertheless. We came with donors, anticipating a need that hasn’t arisen. We don’t have to consider the fetuses, at all.”

As understanding dawned, they paled one by one. “Abandon them, you mean?” Liz demanded, aghast at the suggestion.

“That’s one possibility.”

“Why would we have to?” one of the women cried out. “I don’t see why we’d have to! And I won’t! I’ll stay. The rest of you can go if you want to!”

It took Eden several minutes to get everyone relatively quiet again. “I don’t want to. This isn’t personal with me. I’m trying to make a decision that will be in everyone’s best interests. Don’t make me the villain here.

“Liz, it was you who warned me of the dangerous situation that could arise from flouting their customs, and you, Ivy, who most loudly vetoed the idea of integrating our colony with that of the Xtanians to begin with. As you also pointed out, one on one, we don’t even come close to being capable of defending ourselves if the need arose. Militarily, they outnumber us three to one.

“And their social structure is presenting problems for us. None of us are physically or emotionally capable of handling pazaans. I’m not. Considering our history, I don’t think we could go so far as to claim to be truly monogamous, but we are still more accustomed to one on one relationships.

“The long term has to be considered on this, because the mental and emotional health of our colony is just as important as the physical health and well being.

“We also have to consider that, even though they outnumber us three to one, their entire culture is based on the broods remaining together. They would suffer from any attempt to split them up because the bond between them is far stronger even than the bonds siblings generally form. They are telepaths, mentally joined even though we see no physical joining between them.”

She could see from their faces that none of the women had realized that particular fact, but she waved a dismissing hand at those who wanted to question it.

“The point is, it can’t happen, and that means that we could be looking at conflict

within our own colony between the haves and the have nots.”

“Well, I know three who already have more than their fair share,” Marion Lynden put in testily.

Eden glared at the woman, but she wasn't surprised at the accusation. She was more surprised that she hadn't already heard complaints. “If you're too stupid to grasp that that is not a circumstance that I, Liz, or Ivy are particular delighted about, then you should certainly be able to grasp ‘screw up’,” Eden snapped before she thought better of it. “One brood is certainly enough--more than enough. But since I have no intention of allowing someone else to suffer for my mistakes, I deal with it. We all deal with it.”

“You could choose to give the unwanted broods as gift to another.”

Eden--every woman at the table--swiveled around sharply at the male voice that intruded.

Baen ignored the stares of the other women, his gaze unwavering as it locked with Eden's. “They would not be shamed in that way. It is acceptable.”

Eden merely stared at him blankly, too stunned to discover he could speak and understand their language so fluently to be able to think of anything to say. She'd suspected he had some grasp of it long since, but she had not really believed he'd mastered their tongue. She'd been thinking more in terms of him having picked up a small vocabulary.

He swallowed uneasily. “We are a peaceful people. We have never offered a threat to you. We would never do so, but if you feel that you must go, that you can not be comfortable living among us, then there is no need to go to another world. This one is large enough. We will go far from this place and you will have no need to go at all.”

Eden felt tears burn her eyes and nose and clog her throat.

She fought the urge back with an effort, dragged her gaze from Baen and looked at the other women. They were studying their hands, or the table, uncomfortably. Eden cleared her throat. “This meeting is at an end, ladies,” she murmured huskily.

Pushing herself up from her chair, Eden moved to stand in front of the window while the women filed out.

Chapter Twenty Four

Eden saw Baen's reflection as he moved to stand behind her moments before she felt the warmth of his nearness. He didn't touch her, and yet she could feel the insidious invasion of her senses that always threw her into chaos, that made thinking optional and feeling treacherously appealing. She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "When I accepted this position, I don't think I ever really anticipated a time or a situation where I would feel conflicted between my responsibilities as the president of the colony and my personal feelings."

She paused and a wry smile curled her lips. "On a personal level, I don't think I ever truly distrusted you or felt threatened by you in any way. I was wary, yes, a little uneasy, very confused, but I wanted to trust you because" She broke off and dragged in a shuddering breath, clearing her throat uncomfortably again.

"The first time I saw you, you just ... took my breath. I couldn't think, not rationally, anyway. All I could do was feel, and I knew that wasn't something I could trust, not as woman, and certainly not as a leader who had the responsibility for the lives of two hundred colonists."

"It was much the same for me the day you came," Baen said huskily. "When you came with the others, I could not tear my eyes from you, or move. I did not think to breathe even until I began to grow dizzy and remembered that I had forgotten to. I am not at all certain, but I think I was terrified. My knees quaked and my heart beat so hard I thought it would burst through my chest."

The comment dragged a shaky chuckle from her and she tilted her head to look back at him. The look in his eyes made her heart skitter to a painful halt, however, made her mouth go dry, and thought fled.

"I was struck deaf, and mute, and stupid, and blind to all else around me but you. To me, you were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and for many, many moments I could not think beyond that. And then I realized that you were also the smallest woman I had ever seen before, and the boldest, and you were not frightened at all to look up at me and command me to do your bidding. That made me nervous, for I thought, if she is so small and feels no fear, then she has reason to feel none."

Eden chuckled, realizing that he was teasing her. "Liz is smaller than me," she said pointedly and then it occurred to her to wonder if he had found what must have seemed very strange to him appealing. Surely, given the fact that Xtanian women were larger than the men, their notion of beauty and desirability was not the same as the men she was familiar with? Had he been drawn to her anyway? Or because of the difference?

Maybe it had been the latter, she thought, realizing that part of what had drawn her to him was the fact that he was so exotic. She hadn't found him appealing in spite of the fact that he had wings and horns. She'd been fascinated by the fact that he did. The differences between him and the men she'd known before had added to her excitement and enthrallment with him.

Obviously, it went beyond that, for there were others of his kind also winged and

horned, and he was still infinitely more appealing to her than anyone else.

He shrugged. "But I did not see Liz. I saw no one but you."

She looked away, uncertain of whether or not she believed that.

He caught her shoulders, turning her to face him and capturing her face between his hands so that she had to look up at him. "You made me think things that I had never thought before. From that moment, I could think of nothing beyond claiming you for my brood and that is not done among us. Never has a male had the choosing. And certainly never a warrior. It was not my place, not my right, and I still could think of nothing else.

"Stay with us, Edie. We are your devoted slaves. We will care for you as no other would, attend to your comfort, protect you from all threat of harm. Do not allow the others to persuade you to leave us." He swallowed convulsively. "Do not allow that one to take our young from your belly. I know that we are not ... the same, but they will be strong and worthy of life."

A sense of deflation hit her at that. It hurt and because it did it produced a spark of anger in response. Catching his wrists, Eden dragged his hands from her cheeks. "You misunderstood," she said flatly, turning away from him again and moving closer to the window to stare blindly at the cityscape. "As you pointed out yourself, we are smaller than the women of your world, too small to safely carry so many and deliver healthy babies. The discussion was not about disposing of them. It was about protecting them so that they had a better chance of developing into strong, healthy babies. They will be removed to incu-sys, synthetic, biological wombs designed to protect them throughout development."

He moved closer, hesitated for several moments and finally dropped his hands to his sides when she stiffened as he reached for her. "She said that one was mine. Is that Did I misunderstand that as well?"

Eden frowned. "No. You didn't misunderstand. One is yours--the others your brothers."

He swallowed audibly. "She could not be wrong?"

Eden shook her head. "No. She could not."

He was silent for many moments. "Mine is female?" he asked finally, cautious excitement threading his voice.

His obvious pleasure in the knowledge that she was carrying his daughter warmed her and yet Eden couldn't help but feel cheated and painfully disappointed. Maybe love was overrated, she thought dully. Passion was excitement, fire, a feast of the senses, and Baen gave her that without restraint, made it clear with every touch, every kiss, the look in his eyes that he felt all that she felt, perhaps even more. His brothers gave her that same fiery passion unstintingly. They were willing, more than willing--eager to do whatever it took to please her, sexually, and otherwise.

It was stupid and greedy to whine for more than she already had.

But she knew the passion she felt for Baen was just an extension of the love she felt for him. Without the love, she might still have felt desire, and yet she knew it would not have been nearly as powerful, and certainly not as enduring, growing stronger each time they made love instead of mellowing and cooling with familiarity.

It still hurt that she'd been trying to tell him she loved him, and he had spoken about desire, called himself and his brothers 'devoted slaves'.

It was unreasonable. She might never fully grasp what his life had been like

before because she had no similar experience to draw from, but she did realize that he had no reason to understand love and, never having been taught it in any form, he probably could not feel it.

“You are ... not pleased,” he murmured after a moment, and, because she loved him, she heard the hurt in his voice. “Is it because one is mine?”

From out of no where the urge to cry swept through her again. Her chin wobbled in spite of all she could do. “I love you,” she said shakily. “I could not be more pleased, or more humbly grateful that I have been given the chance to bear your child.”

He placed his hands lightly on her shoulders. “What is wrong, then?”

“Nothing. It’s silly,” she said, sniffing.

“It is neither nothing, nor silly, if it makes you unhappy.”

She covered her face with her hands. “I want you to love me back,” she muttered lamely.

His hands tightened on her shoulders. “I do not know what this word is. I have not heard it,” he said slowly.

“You have not felt it either,” Eden snapped, pushing his hands from her shoulders angrily.

“How do you know what I feel?” Baen asked, his voice rough with both anger and confusion. “Explain.”

She turned to look up at him. “I can’t. It’s ... complicated.”

His expression hardened. “I am not stupid. I can understand if you explain.”

Eden pushed away from him, pacing for several moments, feeling irrationally angry and abused at the demand to explain, when she’d wanted spontaneity. It really ruined the effect, she thought, when one had to explain. How could she know, even if she managed it, and he then told her he loved her, that he really did and wasn’t just saying so because she’d already stupidly told him she wanted it?

“Its passion, desire, caring more about someone than you care about anyone else, caring more about them even than you do yourself. Being willing to do anything for them, wanting to do anything for them. Being willing to sacrifice your own happiness for theirs if necessary.”

He frowned, looking more confused than less and her irritation and agitation mounted. “Have I not said as much? Done as much? This is only another word for care, yes?”

Eden stopped abruptly, blinking at him in stunned surprise. Slowly, as her mind recounted everything that he had said to her, she realized that that was exactly what he had said. He had said that they would go if staying meant that the Earth women didn’t feel safe to have them there, didn’t trust them. He had done everything that he could think to do to make her happy, taken care of her even when she hadn’t particularly appreciated his interference.

She rubbed her head. “You didn’t say ‘I’. You said we.”

He thought that over. “They love you the same as I.”

Frustration erupted. “How do you know?”

“How could I not know when I know their thoughts and feelings as well as I know my own?” He frowned. “You do not want them to love you, too?”

Eden sought patience. “Love is when a man and a woman are devoted to one another.”

“You do not love us because we are more than one?” he guessed.

This was getting worse and worse. Eden was on the point of snapping at him that she was ‘in’ love with him and not his brothers, but even as she thought about it, their faces rose hauntingly in her mind and memories surfaced of all the time she’d spent luxuriating in their attentiveness. She thought about all the care and thought that went into the food they prepared to tempt her appetite when she was too tired to have any real interest in eating, or nauseated from her pregnancy and revolted at the thought of eating. She thought about their untiring efforts to entertain her--the stories, the games, the singing and music, the conversation when she wanted it, the companionable silence when she didn’t. She thought about the massages when she was tired and sore, the baths that were so often only a prelude to sex, but also soothed when she needed soothing. And she thought about the passion they so easily aroused in her, and thoroughly appeased once they had.

She did care about them. Maybe she even loved them, because it was an absolute truth that she would not hurt them, any of them, for the world. It was also true that she was as thrilled about their babies that she carried as she was about Baen’s, and unhappy at the thought that the others would be disappointed.

It might be a very strange bond according to her own customs, but it was real nevertheless, and substantial. Truth be told, she felt for all of them, even the other broods, but it was Baen’s brood that mattered most to her and she supposed, just maybe, that meant that she loved them as family and cared for them as individuals.

She shook her head, closing the distance she’d put between her and Baen. “You’re right. I can’t think of a single reason why I couldn’t love you all.”

He looked at her a little doubtfully, but encircled her with his arms when she embraced him, holding her snugly against his body. “They will be happy when they learn that we are to have young,” he said tentatively.

Eden pulled away from him and looked up at him. “We should go then, and tell them.”

Eden was amazed at how nervous she was with excitement as she and Baen headed for the med lab, wondering which of the others she would find waiting. Her heart was pounding so hard when she paused to catch her breath before she went in that she felt almost faint.

Cal and Trar came to their feet abruptly as she entered the lab with Baen. Behind them, looking as if he was struggling with a desperate desire to flee, stood Miccan.

It was immediately apparent that Deb hadn’t explained to them why they’d been summoned or why they’d been detained because, to a man, they looked guilty as hell, uneasy, as if they suspected they’d done something wrong but just weren’t certain of what it was.

Smiling at them, she turned to look at Deb, who was seated at her desk and obviously struggling to ignore the ‘intruders’ in her lab. “I thought you’d never get here,” she muttered irritably when she saw Eden.

Eden shrugged. “We had things to discuss. Could we,” she asked hesitantly, changing the subject abruptly, “show them what you showed me before?”

Deb stared at her in surprise for several moments before a grin dawned. “I’m not sure their hearts can take it, but sure. Why not? This ought to be fun,” she said with a chuckle, getting up immediately and heading into the examination room.

Summoning the men, Eden followed Deb and climbed onto the examination table once more. Baen entered the room directly behind her, moving to the spot where he'd stood before. Cal, Trar and Miccan stopped at the door as if they'd hit an invisible barrier.

"You can't see from over there," Deb said dryly as she positioned the scanner. "Go stand with him," she added, pointing to Baen. "That way you won't be in my way."

After glancing at each other uncomfortably, Cal, Trar, and Miccan did as they'd been told and Deb proceeded with the scan.

When the lasers had completed the cycle and the image appeared on the display, Deb looked up and motioned for the men to move closer. Taking her pen, she used the image to help guide her to the corresponding spot on Eden's abdomen. "This little speck of humanity here is Baen's baby girl."

Cal and Trar leaned closer, stared at the misshapen lump for several moments and then turned to look at Baen blankly. Miccan craned to peer over the shoulders of the other two. "Baen's?" Cal murmured, clearly stunned.

Baen grinned broadly. "A female," he announced proudly.

Chuckling, Deb moved the pen to another fetus. "This big, strong fella here," she murmured, comparing the readouts that appeared side by side, "is Cal's son."

Cal's head snapped upward. After staring at her a split second, he looked down at the image again, and then up at her once more, turning first pale and then bright red. "Mine?" he asked hoarsely.

After several stunned moments, Trar grinned broadly and clapped his brother's shoulder enthusiastically.

"And this little fella is Trar's son," Deb continued, ignoring the commotion.

Trar's grin vanished so abruptly it was almost comical. Reacting much the same as Cal had, he was simply stunned for several moments. A weak chuckle escaped him as Baen gave his shoulder a congratulatory squeeze. Cal pounded him on the back hard enough he might have fallen except for the fact that Baen had gripped his shoulder.

"And this little beauty right here is Miccan's daughter," Deb finished triumphantly, looking up at the stunned faces of the men as if she'd done it all herself.

Miccan stared at the fetus and then looked at his brothers, turning white as death. Abruptly, his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell backwards like a felled tree, slamming into the floor before anyone could react with more than open mouthed surprise.

"Oh my god!" Eden gasped in dismay, bolting upright so quickly she almost slammed her head into the scanner. "Miccan?"

Dropping her pen, Deb grabbed her, trying to keep her from falling off the table. Baen, Cal, and Trar, surged toward their fallen brother, crouching beside him and staring down at him as if they weren't certain whether he'd keeled over dead or not.

Abandoning Eden, Deb rushed to the fallen man, shoving Trar out of the way and examining Miccan's vital signs first and then his head for signs of trauma. Scrambling off the table, Eden pushed her way between Cal and Baen and knelt on his other side.

"Is he ok?" she asked worriedly, grabbing his hand and stroking the back soothingly.

"A nasty knot," Deb said. "It didn't break the skin. I'll have to do a scan to see if it broke his head."

Miccan's eyes opened. He stared up at her blankly.

Eden's chin wobbled. Impulsively, she leaned down to hug him and then scooted around him to lift his head into her lap and hold his shoulders down when he made an abortive attempt to get up. He looked dazed and confused, but she couldn't decide whether that was because he still hadn't managed to recover from his shock over the news or because of the blow to his head. "Shh! Be still and let Deb check you, sweetie," she chided him, stroking his cheek.

He subsided, staring up at her for several moments before he transferred his gaze to his brothers. He frowned after a moment. "She said mine?" he asked. "Is all right?"

Eden uttered something midway between a chuckle and a sob. "Of course it's all right! If I'd known you'd take it like you did, I wouldn't have surprised you."

He tensed, as if he would try to get up again, but subsided when Baen placed a hand in the middle of his chest, eyeing Deb with patent suspicion as she knelt and held the portable scanner over his head.

Deb sat back after several moments. "He's fine. Good thing he's got those horns, though. Guess that's what I heard crack when he hit the floor, because it wasn't his skull, fortunately, and there's no sign of trauma to the brain."

Relieved, Eden leaned down to plant a kiss on his chin, which was all she could reach from her awkward position. When she straightened, Baen and Trar bent down, caught his arms and hauled him to his feet. He swayed dizzily, caught himself, and then his knees buckled.

"Don't let him fall again!" Eden exclaimed.

Wedging their shoulders beneath his arms, Baen and Trar half led half carried him from the room while Eden, Cal, and Deb trailed in their wake. Miccan looked at Baen a little drunkenly. "Little beauty means male or female child?"

Baen grinned at him. "Female ... I think. Mine, too."

"Fella is male, then?" Cal and Trar demanded almost in unison.

"I hadn't expected that much fun," Deb called dryly as they maneuvered Miccan out of the lab.

Eden glanced back at her absently, smiling apologetically at her friend. "I should get him home."

Deb chuckled. "You should. Home is always the best place to be."

Epilogue

Eden discovered she'd worried for nothing. Which of the babies to remove to the incu-sys had been a hard decision because she was just as anxious that all of her babies feel loved and wanted as she was that all the fathers feel loved and wanted, but she had yielded to her heart and kept Baen's baby within her own womb.

The Xtanians hadn't known what to make of the units entrusted to their care--at first, but she discovered that Cal, Trar, and Miccan were just as pleased to discover that they could watch their babies developing as Baen was that she had decided to keep his in her womb. If she'd been of a jealous nature, she might almost have felt put out by the way her brood hovered over the incu-sys--all of them, Baen included--and Pael, Vladiv, Pizan and Adri, beaming down at them even though they had to know the babies couldn't see their faces, singing to them, talking to them.

She almost felt unnecessary. Ordinarily, it was crucial to the development of the fetuses in incu-sys that their mother spend as much time near them as possible, recording her heartbeat and the sound of her voice for them to listen to whenever she couldn't be with them herself. But she had to wonder if the babies would even have noticed her absence because one or more of the brood were always with them.

Parenting, obviously, was not a skill they would have to learn. She might have to, but they wouldn't.

Baen's daughter, Georgia, made it into the world a full two weeks before her siblings and enjoyed the undivided attention of her mother and eight fathers, who fought over who would get to hold her every time she uttered anything even approaching a cry. It was a relief when Deb finally announced that the others were ready to see the world because then there were enough babies to keep them all occupied.

Jerd's brood was bestowed upon Deb, who was very appreciative of the 'gift' and delighted them by presenting them with four boys less than three months after Eden's family had arrived.

Eden settled her other 'extra' brood with Stacy, sector chief of the engineers, who also thoroughly appreciated the gift and produced a bumper crop of six bouncing babies the following year.

Houston wasn't particularly pleased about the fruitfulness of the colony, especially since the fathers were all Xtanian, but none of the colonists particularly gave a damn since Houston was several light years away from having a say in the matter. And, since further studies indicated that the colony on New Georgia was not only the best producers, by far, of any of the colonies they'd established, but also had the healthiest babies and the 'freshest' gene pool, they decided to be pleased about the integration of the two colonies after all, and after a few years had even come to realize that it was actually their idea all along.

The contingency plan, due to a majority vote by the colonists, remained in effect throughout the first ten years of the life of the colony, but was neither implemented nor ever actually finished.

The End