

Kaitlyn O'Connor



THE LION'S
WOMAN

The Lion's Woman
by Kaitlyn O'Connor

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Chapter One

It was the worst part of the city to be in at 2:00 AM. Bright streets lights had been installed to discourage crime, but the area still looked like a war zone in some third world country. Keeping her eyes on the deserted street in front of her, Kelly Scott reached for the automatic door lock and depressed it—again—just to be sure.

She was a stranger to the area, had only moved to the city the week before. Wryly, she wondered why it was that she still couldn't find her way to the mall nearest her apartment, but she could, almost unerringly, find her way into the worst part of the slums any time she got into her car.

Obviously, she'd missed the turn for the freeway. She debated briefly whether to simply keep going in a straight line and hope she'd see another sign indicating the freeway, or to turn around and go back. Going back was almost as risky as continuing. The street she was on was one way. If she turned off to look for a street heading back the way she'd come, she could be diverted by blocks and would risk getting even more lost. That option also involved, possibly, driving down streets not nearly so well lit.

And then there was the little matter that she'd have to decrease her speed to make the turn, and she had no desire to slow down at all.

She covered three more city blocks and saw she only seemed to be traveling deeper into the heart of the 'urban jungle'.

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She was tempted to just make a U-turn and head back on the same street. She hadn't seen another car in miles. It would be risking a ticket if she ran up on a cop, but she rather thought she'd prefer that than to continue traveling this 'no man's land'.

It occurred her, forcefully, that it would have been wiser if she'd followed her first instincts and declined the invitation to meet up with some of her new coworkers at the local nightclub they frequented. She'd convinced herself it was actually a good idea to go, that she needed to familiarize herself with the area as soon as possible, and she couldn't do that unless she got out and got to know the city. So much for impulsiveness!

Finally, she chose a cross street at random, braked, took the turn. Her heart leapt into her throat as she straightened the car. Only one street light illuminated the narrow side street. Dead center about halfway down the block, a dark, mingling mass indicated a roving gang. Even from this distance, they looked big and mean.

Kelly slammed on the brakes, bringing the car to a screeching halt. Several shadowy heads lifted at the noise her tires made on the pavement, turning in her direction, but none of them showed any indication, yet, of an interest in her. Slamming the gear stick into reverse, Kelly had already stepped on the pedal when something about the scene in front of her clicked in her brain.

A solitary figure stood in the center of the group.

She patted her brake, turned back to get a better look and reassess the situation she'd stumbled upon.

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No one had followed her. The group still encircled the lone figure, who stood only slightly apart. It might, of course, have been their leader, discussing the plan for the night, or whatever it was gang leaders did. But there was something about the man's stance that told her he was in trouble.

She stopped the car, torn.

It wasn't her problem. It was a man ... a big man. He could take care of himself.

He was surrounded by at least a half a dozen gang members.

She ought to just head out and flag down the first cop she ran across.

But she hadn't seen one since she'd left 'civilization' behind.

Coming to a decision, she put the car in drive abruptly and floored it, heading straight for the knot of animals still milling around in the street. Unless they were too doped up to know which end was up, they'd get out of the way. If they didn't ... well, she just hoped none of the bodies slowed her down, because she didn't have any intention of stopping and facing a pissed off mob of thugs.

Alerted by the roaring engine, a couple of members of the band stiffened. She watched as their heads swiveled in her direction as she gunned the engine. The two studied her a few seconds, then nudged the men standing beside them.

As if they were caught up in some sort of old western show down, the group began to spread out across the street, forming a threatening wall between her and the man in trouble.

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Kelly gritted her teeth, gripping the steering wheel in white knuckled fists. She wasn't playing a game of chicken. If they weren't totally bombed, they'd figure out she meant business. At the last second, they dove left and right, parting like the red sea before Moses. Kelly slammed on the brakes at almost the same instant. Smoke and the fumes of burning rubber filled the air as she skidded, the rear end of the car trying to outrun the front. The victim hadn't moved. He was looking at her swerving car as if mesmerized, like a wild animal caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

Kelly laid down on the horn, fighting for control of the car. "Move!" she yelled.

In the next moment she saw him spring straight up into the air. He landed on the hood of her car. The sound of crunching metal filled her ears as the hood caved in with the impact. Kelly screamed, broke two nails getting the car door open and ran around to the front of the car.

She came up short when she saw he was crouched, as if nothing had happened, or more accurately, as if ready to spring, facing off against a newer threat. She stared at him, opened mouthed, dumbfounded. He should have been covered in blood. He should have been unconscious or dead. Her mind couldn't seem to grasp the implications.

She could not spare the time at the moment to jar her brain into presenting her with an answer to the puzzle, however. She'd only intended to slam on the breaks and fling the door open for him, something that could've been executed in a matter of moments. Instead, she'd wasted valuable time slamming the car into park and leaping out to

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check on the man. She knew she'd lost the element of surprise. The gang members were already picking themselves up, muttering curses as stunned surprise gave way to murderous fury. "Get in the car! Hurry! They're coming back!"

He said nothing. He didn't move, although, dimly, she realized that it wasn't shock that held him still. He was waiting, watchful. She grabbed his arm, urging him off the hood of her car. "Quick! Get in the car before they come back!"

She saw his gaze move from her face to a spot above her shoulder just as someone caught her from behind. Screaming in anger as much as surprise, she lifted one leg and slammed her heel against her assailant's shin as hard as she could. At the same time, she clasped her hands together, using the strength of both arms to shove her right elbow backwards as hard as she could. The guy who'd grabbed her grunted in pain as her elbow connected with his solar plexus. He released her abruptly, bending double as he struggled to catch his breath. She whirled the moment his grip relaxed, slamming the palm of her hand straight at the man standing next to the first assailant, knowing it was a dangerous maneuver, hoping she wouldn't kill him with the blow. Her palm connected with the tip of his nose, driving upward, rocking his head back on his neck. Blood spurted in every direction. He collapsed on the ground, screaming in pain, both hands clasping his bleeding nose.

"Get in the car before they kill both of us!" she yelled to the man behind her, bracing herself for the onslaught of the two men rushing toward her.

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A body flew over her head, missing her by inches. The flying man connected with the two racing toward her, knocking their feet out from under them so that the three went down in a tangled mass. Kelly whirled in time to see the 'victim' catch another one of their attackers. Lifting the man over his head, he tossed the wriggling, yelling man in the direction of the only two thugs still standing, a distance of at least five feet.

She was still gaping when the man she'd come to rescue leapt over the hood of her car and landed on the pavement in front of her. Grasping her, he urged her toward her open door. She held onto him when he would have shoved her into the car.

"No! I'm not leaving you here! Come on!" she cried, holding onto him when he would have released her, trying, without much success, to push him into the car. He hesitated and finally dove through the door opening and into the passenger side of her car. She scrambled in behind him, stabbed the auto lock button and threw the car in drive all at the same time. Several of the gang members had already staggered to their feet when the car shot forward with a squeal of tires, swerving a little wildly as she grappled with her seat belt.

She was gasping for air, partly from fear, partly from the struggle, her heart pounding in her ears like a jackhammer. It took her a few moments to realize the man beside her didn't seem to be suffering a similar distress. She tossed a glance in the rearview mirror to make certain the gang hadn't had a vehicle close enough to give chase. Once she was certain they

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weren't on her tail, she spared several quick glances at her passenger, trying to decide whether he was conscious or had passed out. "You OK?"

He said nothing. He was hunched over, as if in pain, twisted slightly away from her, his head down, but the rigid set of his body told her he was not unconscious.

"Hey? Are you hurt?" She realized the moment it left her mouth that it was a stupid question. She'd hit him with her car.

Hadn't she?

Oddly enough, she couldn't remember hearing an impact, couldn't remember feeling one. As big as this guy was, surely she would have? Or had she just been too shocked to notice? And if so, why had she noticed when he'd landed on the hood of her car, because she'd certainly heard and felt that impact.

"No."

She glanced over at the man again when he spoke. He had an accent. Maybe he didn't speak much English? "I need to get him to a hospital," she muttered to herself.

"No hospi-tal. No hurt."

His accent was so thick she could've cut it with a butter knife. It took her brain a couple of seconds to translate the unfamiliarly pronounced words. "Hey! Don't go all macho man on me, OK? I hit you with the car. I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you. I just couldn't think of anything else to do to get those guys off of you. I thought you'd jump out of the way."

He turned his head slightly, but he didn't look directly at her. "You no hit."

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Kelly laughed shakily, fighting a sudden urge to burst into tears now that the terror was beginning to seep beyond her shock. "I saw you. I must have knocked you twenty feet into the air. Maybe you're just running on adrenaline. Maybe you're hurt worse than you think and just can't feel it yet." She'd heard of that, of people driven by sheer adrenaline after an accident, and then abruptly dropping dead.

"No hospi-tal. No hurt. I get out now."

Panic seized her. She leaned over, grasping his sleeve. "No! You can't! I can't let you do that! Not here. They're liable to find you again. It's a wonder they didn't kill you! Obviously you've got no idea how dangerous some of the people around here are! The drug addicts would just as soon kill you as to look at you."

As distracted as she was, she noticed he felt a little warmer than she thought he should have. He might be overheated from the fracas they'd just been involved in, but she couldn't help but wonder if he had a fever. Maybe he'd already been sick and that accounted for him wandering around such a god awful place in the middle of the night?

It was dark in the car, and her attention was focused of necessity on her driving in any case, but she had glimpsed him well enough to know he didn't have the look of a homeless man. For that matter, she could smell he didn't. His clothing didn't appear to be grime spattered or wrinkled. His hair was long, falling past his shoulders, but clean not oily and stringy. She didn't detect cologne of any kind, but he didn't smell like unwashed body either.

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He was obviously a foreigner, though. Maybe he'd just gotten lost like she had?

"Look. You really, really should go to the hospital, but I don't want to upset you so I'm not going to argue with you about it anymore. I probably couldn't find the hospital anyway. But, how about doing me a favor, huh?"

He still didn't glance at her, but she knew from the way he'd tensed that he was listening. "Vat fa-vor?"

"Let me take you somewhere where I can get a good look at you and make sure you're all right. It'd make me feel better. I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight if I just let you out. I'll be having nightmares about leaving an injured man on the side of the road. Please?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why vant do dot?"

Again, she had to run what he'd said through her mind several times to filter out the strange accent and understand what he'd said. What was he, Russian? German? She'd heard a lot of accents in her time, but his eluded her. "Uh. I'm not sure what you're asking."

"Why...."

He seemed to be searching his mind for the word he wanted.

"Like me?"

Kelly was taken aback. Annoyance quickly replaced her surprise, however. She was trying to help the guy and he thought she was trying to put the make on him? She'd seen

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plenty of egotistical males in her time, but this one took the cake!

"No ... wong verd. Care?"

She relaxed. "If I hadn't cared what happened to you, I wouldn't have stuck my neck out and almost got myself killed! Look, I don't know you and you don't know me, so I can understand why you wouldn't trust me. I realize you probably think there's no reason why I should care, except ... I saw a fellow human being in trouble. I just couldn't pretend I hadn't seen it and ignore the fact that you needed help. I'm not trying to make you feel like you owe me anything. The truth is, I'd have done it for anybody.

"Anyway, I screwed up. I hit you with my car. I'm responsible for you now. If I let you out and you are hurt, and something happens to you, then it would be my fault.

All I want to do is get a good look at you and make sure you're O.K. If you don't look like you've got any serious injuries, I'll let it go. I promise I won't bother you anymore."

"Stop now."

She glanced over at him. "Be reasonable, huh? This is a bad neighborhood. If you hadn't been here in the first place, you wouldn't have been attacked. If we stop we're risking another gang attack, or mugging ... or who knows what? I've got no weapons of any description. Nothing to protect either of us from an assault. Anyway, I need to know you're not hurt. You owe me that much, don't you think? A little peace of mind?"

He lapsed into silence, but she had the impression that he wasn't terribly pleased about her rescue efforts. Well, that

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was tough! She hadn't meant to hit him, but she had. She wasn't going to let him out of her sight until she was convinced he wasn't going to keel over dead somewhere, wearing a chip of paint from her car that the cops would trace back to her.

She *was* concerned about his well being. But she was also determined to cover her ass.

She saw the freeway sign and whipped in that direction without thinking. She'd no sooner edged into traffic, however, than it occurred to her that taking the man to her apartment was almost as insane as what she'd done on the dark side street.

She cut a considering glance sideways at the man, recalling suddenly that he'd lifted one of the men over his head and *tossed* him. Make that two. She didn't think the other guy had suddenly dove over the car. Maybe he was on something, after all? PCP? People on PCP had been known to display super human strength.

He didn't act like anybody on drugs though. He didn't act crazy, or even dazed. Maybe he was just strong and it had been a super adrenaline rush?

"My name's Kelly. Kelly Scott. What's your name?"

He glanced directly toward her for the first time. Unfortunately, it was too dark in the car now to tell anything about his face. "Am Tau."

The gruff timber of his voice sent a little tingle of awareness through her. She liked the accent, too. She smiled faintly. "Nice name. I like it. What sort of name is it?"

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He remained silent and she decided she'd lost him. He seemed to understand English pretty well though, maybe better than he could speak it. She got the distinct impression that he managed to understand much of what she said, at least when she didn't talk too fast.

"I'm from Mississippi ... originally. Where are you from?"

He glanced at her. "Oddur place."

She chuckled. "I figured that out. I can tell from the accent that you're not from around here. You're not an illegal alien, are you?"

This time his movement told her he was startled by her remark. Undoubtedly, he'd jumped ship somewhere. That must be why he was so determined not to go to the hospital.

She felt a twinge of guilt as she realized the incident might well result in deportation for him, but decided whether he objected or not she couldn't ignore any injuries resulting from their meeting. If she saw any indication whatsoever that he was in need of medical attention, she was going to dial 911.

It took almost twenty minutes on the freeway and another twenty after she got off before she pulled into her parking spot at the apartment complex. Kelly was becoming increasingly jittery. If he was hurt, as she suspected, he should be at the hospital now, not miles from it with somebody who knew next to nothing about medicine. She jumped out of the car when she had parked and ran around to the other side as he opened the door. Grasping one of his arms, she pulled it across her shoulder, wrapping an arm around his waist to help support him. Uneasiness crept up her spine as she leaned against him and realized for the first time

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that the man wasn't just huge, he was hard as a rock all over, and weighed a ton, despite the fact that he did not appear to be of much more than medium build. He must have muscles on top of muscles to be so heavy.

It flickered through her mind that it was just this side of ridiculous for her to be trying to support the man. She was strong, but he was easily twice her weight, if not more, and at least a head taller. His arm alone bulged with muscle and felt like a tree limb. From the arm she'd put around him she could feel that his waist was trim and narrow, his stomach flat, but every part of him her hand had touched was taut, muscular. Fortunately, he seemed to be supporting most of his own weight. She was fairly certain that the two of them would've been wallowing around on the ground otherwise.

She urged him to lean against the wall while she fished her keys out and opened the door of the apartment. Reaching in, she flicked the light switch on the living room wall, then assisted him inside and helped him to sit.

Dropping her purse to the floor, she knelt in front of him, her attention immediately caught by the strange clothing he was wearing. Oddly, it looked almost as if it was some sort of metal, and yet it clung to every part of his body like a snug stretch knit. The color was almost as unusual as the fabric itself. Curious, she laid her hand on the knee closest to her, rubbing her palm across it, examining the texture with her fingertips for several moments before it occurred to her that it was a rather personal touch and might be misconstrued as caressing his knee and thigh.

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If the huge bulge in his crotch was any indication, and she suspected it was, then he had certainly noticed her invasive touch. His cock looked like a python! Kelly felt heat rush through her as she stared at it, unable to pull her eyes away for several moments.

Feeling a blush creep into her cheeks when she realized what she was doing, Kelly looked up and met his gaze for the first time. It was on the tip of her tongue to beg pardon for her behavior, but as their gazes connected her mind went perfectly blank with shock. Her heart lurched in her chest. She jumped reflexively, sitting backward on the floor.

His eyes looked like cat eyes.

After a couple of frozen seconds, her brain functions kicked in. She caught her breath, laughed shakily. "Sorry. Cool contacts, but they startled the *hell* out of me!"

He said nothing, merely continued to stare at her unblinkingly.

There was curiosity in his intense scrutiny, as if he'd never seen anyone quite like her.

She knew it was a crazy notion, but she couldn't shake it. There was just something about the way he was studying her that strengthened her conviction that she hadn't misunderstood the nature of his interest.

But she saw something else, as well ... Desire.

It brought her to the realization that she had unconsciously laid a palm on either of his thighs to balance herself when she'd picked herself up off the floor to kneel in front of him once more.

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As casually as she could, she removed her hands, sitting back on her heels and dropping her hands to her lap, but she could not shake an equal fascination with him.

Maybe it was the cat eye contacts, but, as she studied his face, something about him reminded her very distinctly of a lion. His face was a long oval. His nose was straight, sharply defined and well formed, almost the perfect classic nose, except slightly hooked on the end. Looking at him straight on, though, the tip looked wedge shaped, like the tip of a feline's nose. His lips were hard and thin, curling up slightly at the corners, even though he wasn't smiling. Above his piercing yellow gold eyes, were thin, arched brows only slightly darker than the hair on his head. His hair grew down his forehead in a wide widow's peak. It was streaked with varying shades of blond, though mostly a russet color.

She finally decided it must be the hair and the contacts, that made the impression of a lion-like appearance.

Overall, his face was very appealing despite the effect—maybe because of it—making her stomach muscles clench reflexively, sending tremors of awareness through her she had rarely felt, even when she'd been an impressionable teenager and had fallen for Rick, her 'first love'.

His skin, all of it that was visible, was golden brown, the skin tones not quite like anyone else she knew, but she thought he probably had the prettiest tan she'd ever seen.

She blinked when she realized she'd been staring at him a full minute, and that he'd been looking straight at her and couldn't have failed to notice her fascination. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. It's those eyes."

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Shaking her abstraction, she came up on her knees and took his hand to examine it. As she did so she saw it was covered in blood, mostly dried, making it impossible to tell where the cut was. "Hold on a minute and let me get something for this."

She dashed into the bathroom, grabbed bandages from the cabinet and antibiotic cream, then got a washcloth from the linen cabinet and dampened it. When she returned to the living room, he was still sitting as she'd left him. She washed his hand gently, then frowned when she saw no cut.

"No mine."

She looked up at him questioningly.

"Blood no mine."

"I see that."

She sat back on her heels, looked up at him, studying him. It took an effort to concentrate on searching for injuries instead of merely gazing at him in starry-eyed fascination. The pheromones were so thick in the air between them they could've been cut with a knife.

She couldn't help but wonder if he found her as attractive as she found him.

Somehow, she doubted it. It seemed to be the bane of her existence that the men she was most attracted to had no interest in her. It was the ones she had no interest in that she couldn't scrape off.

She'd seen the evidence of his desire, of course, could barely concentrate on anything beyond the bulge that continued to draw her eyes like a magnet, but she was hardly ignorant of men. A man's cock was erectile tissue and tended

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to respond to certain stimuli even when a man didn't find a woman particularly to his taste. She'd overheard too many guys laughing about 'putting a bag' over a woman's head to be in any doubt that a man was capable of getting a hard on for anything with hole they could poke.

Under the circumstances, it was hardly conclusive evidence of a mutual attraction when she'd been practically stroking his thighs.

Finally, she shook her musings off and rose, lifting each arm in turn and checking it for cuts, making sure there was no visible sign of broken bones. She'd checked his legs and his torso and seen nothing that looked out of place, no sign of bleeding or swelling ... except that monstrous bulge she couldn't keep off her mind. Finally, she stood, placed her hands on either side of his head and felt around carefully for any sign of a knot that would indicate an injury. "How about your head? Did you bump your head?"

"No."

She felt something, though, and parted his hair to reveal an ear—not just any old ear, though. Her heart thudded painfully as she examined it, knowing it wasn't a prosthesis even as she looked for signs that the pointy elf ear she'd just discovered wasn't anything out of nature.

She stepped away, feeling a little lightheaded, trying to focus on her original goal in bringing him home with her, although it was becoming momentarily more difficult. There was certainly no sign of any broken bones, which was almost as disconcerting as her other discoveries. "This is ...

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unbelievable. Great, but ... I can't believe you weren't hurt when I hit you."

"No hit."

Kelly swallowed with some difficulty, licked suddenly dry lips. "You flew into the air. I saw you."

He frowned. Finally, almost reluctantly, he said, "Leap up."

Despite the uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, she looked at him skeptically. "Twenty feet? Straight up? You looked like you'd been launched off of a trampoline."

"I go now."

She moved back so he could rise, still puzzled, more than a little unnerved. It occurred to her, however, that it probably wouldn't be a good idea to try to detain him any longer, even if she'd been stupid enough to think there was any way to stop him from leaving. "You want me to call a cab?" she asked tentatively.

He looked at her in confusion.

"Call a car to come get you and take you where you need to go?"

He looked like he would speak, then paused, lifting his head suddenly, as if he'd heard something, tensing.

Kelly stared at him blankly. She heard nothing at all ... at first.

Abruptly, her door burst open with a splintering of wood. Kelly froze in shock as four men moved into her apartment.

She was shocked over a good deal more than the fact that four strange men had just burst into her apartment, however. The four men, like the one standing beside her, all stared at her with the same golden feline eyes. And all of them were

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wearing the exact same outfit that Tau was wearing, right down to the strangely contoured boots.

She glanced quickly at the man beside her. "Tau?"

Chapter Two

Kelly backed up as the men advanced into her tiny living room, stumbling when she bumped into her coffee table. She righted herself, backing around the low table until she felt the couch behind her. Bending her knees, she felt around for the phone she knew was on the little table beside the couch.

The men stopped several feet in front of Tau, glanced toward her consideringly for several moments then back at him. "Why have you come here? This is not one of the subjects," Nal said to Tau.

Tau's jaw hardened for a moment. "I was spotted on my way to the rendezvous point. Attacked. The female helped me to get away."

Surprised by the comment, everyone but Tau turned and glanced assessingly at the woman again. Nal returned his attention to Tau. "The ones who spotted you?"

"Two are dead. The others scattered," Tau responded grimly.

"That was careless. We'll have to hunt them down before we leave."

"Then let us go now," Tau said.

Nal studied him a long moment. "The woman will have to be killed."

Tau had expected as much. He moved to stand between Nal and the woman. "No."

"We can't leave her alive. She'll talk. It would risk all future expeditions. They'd be waiting for us next time."

Tau knew Nal was right, but he found he could not allow it. "She knows nothing."

Nal was silent for several moments, studying Tau curiously. "We can't take that chance. You know that. If you don't want to kill her, I'll take care of it."

"No."

Nal's eyes narrowed. "The council was specific. We are ordered to leave no witnesses behind that could jeopardize our project."

Tau glanced at the female for the first time since his crew members had burst into the room. He didn't like his choices. Of the two, however, he found there was only one he could allow. "Then we'll take her."

Nal looked at Tau in surprise. "She's not one of the test subjects. We don't know anything about her. She could be useless to us."

Kin-ko, who'd been silent up until that moment, spoke up. "Tau's right. Just bring her. What difference can it make? She is a tiny creature. She can not consume so much as to be a threat. If you've any concern, we can always take on more supplies before we go."

Nal turned to look at him. "We can't afford another delay. We should have departed days ago. And what if she's useless for our purposes? We need strong females. This one's puny. Very likely, she'll die anyway."

"She's a female. That makes her useful enough, regardless," Tin spoke up, chuckling, his eyes gleaming with interest as he looked the female over.

Tau's eyes narrowed. "You have chosen your woman."

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"I could take another. There's no law against it. With two, I've more chance of at least having one to survive."

Tau's face hardened. "If you treat the female you have more gently, she might have more chance of surviving," he said tightly.

Ral-o, who'd remained silent, nudged Tin, glaring at him, but then turned his attention to Nal. "I agree with Kin-ko. What difference can it make if we take one more?"

"The council may disagree," Nal said sharply. "They expected four."

Tau shrugged. "I will take responsibility and present the matter to the council upon our return."

"Do you think she'll come willingly?" Kin-ko asked doubtfully.

Tau turned and looked at Kelly, who'd grabbed up her telephone and was punching buttons. "Probably not," he said wryly. "Tranquilize her. We can't have her alerting her kind with her screams."

* * * *

Kelly backed away as Tau turned toward her. She hadn't understood one word that had passed between the men, but she didn't like the feel of the situation. Whatever language they'd been speaking, it damned sure wasn't anything she'd ever heard before.

Her certainty she was in danger, however, went beyond knowing they'd been discussing her when she had an uncomfortable suspicion she knew what they wanted to do with her. It went beyond the threat implied the moment the

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men had invaded her apartment. One man with cat eye contacts that reminded her strongly of a human version of a lion was a curious encounter. Five men that carried similar traits became a race she'd never seen, and she was fairly certain they weren't overzealous Star Trek fans.

There appearance was not the results of either costumes or makeup, unless someone had gone to an extraordinary amount of trouble, for, despite the traits they had in common, each of them was completely unique. The color of their hair varied from nearly black to pale blond. Their skin tones varied. Their weight, height, builds and facial features were distinct and individual. She *knew* it could not be some sort of game.

She had a bad feeling she knew now why Tau had been startled when she'd asked him if he was an illegal alien.

She snatched the phone out of the wall just about the time she heard a voice say, "911 what's your...." And threw it at Tau as he moved toward her, launching herself toward the hallway that led to her bedroom at the same moment.

One of the men caught her. Something was stabbed into her arm. She looked up at Tau accusingly as she felt her knees give way and then everything went black.

* * * *

Kelly became aware that her ribs and belly were aching and that she was having difficulty taking a deep breath. She was moving, swaying. It took an effort to open her eyes. When she did, she couldn't assimilate what she was seeing.

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She closed her eyes again, faintly nauseous from the movement, and realized that her head was throbbing. For several moments, she grappled with her mind, trying to jostle her last memory loose.

She tried to sit up when she did remember. It was then that her groggy mind pieced together what had happened and where she was. She was hanging upside down, over someone's shoulder which accounted for her throbbing head. Righting her vision made it possible to discern in the shadows that surrounded them, that they were moving through an area of the city very much like that area where she'd found Tau ... maybe the same area ... probably the same area. She should have known he'd had a purpose for being there, she realized now.

When she discovered she wasn't particularly alarmed, she knew that whatever they'd drugged her with was still in her system.

It occurred to her that the entire situation was bizarre. If they actually were aliens, shouldn't they have had something like a ray gun? Maybe even something like a bug zapper. But, a tranquilizer?

She knew that was what she'd been injected with. She'd had surgery before. It had been a lot like she felt now, half conscious, vaguely aware of her surroundings, but unable to put up any sort of resistance and not particularly alarmed that she couldn't.

As sluggish as her brain was, she pieced that much together and doubts surfaced regarding her 'alien' abductors. There'd been one of her favorite TV shows where government

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men had dressed up very convincingly to pass as aliens in order to conduct secret experiments.

If they were aliens, would they be using regular old made-in-the-USA tranquilizers?

Her thoughts wandered off subject after a few moments, however, and she realized she was in no condition to puzzle it out in her present condition. She knew she should be fighting, or at least trying to fight off the effects of the drug. After a few moments, she realized neither was much of a possibility.

She concentrated instead on trying to keep from being sick.

They came at last to the remains of a warehouse. The building was too big to have been anything else. One of the men pried back a section of the metal sheeting that covered the outside and held it while the others stepped through. It should've been darker inside than it was outside, but Kelly found she could tell little difference. After a few moments she managed to turn her head enough to see that huge sections of the roof had fallen in.

Within a few minutes she heard a sound that was similar to a car door opening, metallic in nature. They entered a tightly confined area that contained a row of high backed seats—a room? She wasn't certain, even with the dim lights inside. It was really tight, however. She bumped against something hard as the man carrying her inched his way in. She was lowered at last, but her body felt as limp as a wet rag and just sort of melted against what seemed to be a seat. Unable to balance herself, she slumped to one side.

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Tau knelt in front of her, securing her to the seat with straps. She grasped his hands, trying to push him away. She was fairly certain it would have been a useless gesture even if she hadn't been in her current condition. As it was, she couldn't even grip his hands hard enough to hold on to him. "Why?" she managed to ask in a slurred voice.

He frowned. "Fa-vor."

Kelly glared at him. He thought he was doing her a favor? Kidnapping her? Taking her god alone knew where? "Take me home. Better favor."

He glanced over his shoulder. "No can," he said quietly.

Despite the drugs, Kelly felt a surge of fear. "What are you going to do with me?"

He shook his head fractionally. "No hurt. Tau no hurt Kelly."

She was a long way from being reassured, but she found she was exhausted from the effort to talk and drifted once more into black nothingness.

* * * *

Tau stared at the unconscious woman, feeling a mixture of frustration, anger and complete confusion.

Only a small part of it, however, had to do with the fact that his grasp on her language was virtually non-existent, making communication difficult to say the least.

He had volunteered his scientific expertise for the first mission to Earth even though he had rejected the council's offer to allow him to be among the first to choose a mate. He

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had reminded them that he had only lately lost his woman and was not ready to choose another.

It was only a partial truth. He had been fond of his woman, Kia-ta. He mourned her loss and missed her, but he was not devastated as he would have been if he'd loved her. He was not so deeply sorrowed that he found the idea of taking another mate repellent, in fact just the opposite. He felt a need for a mate, strengthened to the point of desperate yearning by the impossibility of fulfilling his desires. There were no females of his own kind who had not already been taken. Truthfully, there were none that had been spoken for that he had any interest in.

Regardless, he simply could not bring himself to accept the council's ruling.

As a scientist, he knew better than most that the decision had not been an easy one, and that there was no choice for them. As a Ducranian, he was revolted at the thought of mingling the bloodlines of their race with those of another race, maybe even another species.

However, with their home world destroyed by the war, they'd been fortunate even to have survived. If not for the fact that they'd stumbled upon a method of interstellar travel a bare decade earlier, there would have been no survivors at all of the planet-wide disaster. In the end, it had been sheer luck that they'd managed to discover a living planet they could call their new home, for there had been little time for exploring and mapping the universe between their discovery and self annihilation.

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Their survival during the colonization period had been paid in blood, however, as they'd struggled to build a new civilization for themselves on the raw, new world. They had lost many more of their small number in the endeavor, but in the early years they had been too consumed with the need to carve out a place for themselves to spare much thought to consider the full ramifications of their situation.

It was only when they had at last begun to achieve stability that they had realized they had not survived as a people after all. There were too few of them. It was not merely a matter of an uneven ratio of male to female—since more females had succumbed to their struggles than males—though that circumstance alone had begun to form a rift among the people as those who'd survived now fought for mates.

Battling among themselves for mates was the least of their worries, however. The inescapable fact of the matter was that they did not have enough people to form a healthy gene pool to support their race even if they bought peace among themselves by allowing the females to take more than one mate. Within the next couple of generations, they would already be weakened from inbreeding. They were doomed as a race. There was no hope for them.

The technology they'd managed to take with them had allowed them to travel great distances in space very quickly, but despite a desperate search they had not found more of their own kind. They had found other higher life forms, but they had found none, until now, that were even close enough biologically to consider as a possibility.

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Unfortunately, even though the humans of Earth were physically much like the hadens of Ducran, even though preliminary genetic studies seemed to indicate that they were virtually identical on the genetic level, there was no certainty that they would be able to successfully mate the two races.

They had learned that humans had experimented with combining similar species of lower life forms and the results had been less than desirable ... useful in a sense, but ultimately undesirable. The cross breeding had resulted in a new species neither male nor female and unable to produce offspring of its own.

If they encountered a similar result there was not even the hope of keeping a part of their own species alive.

On a more personal level, the Earth female he had stumbled upon had created more turmoil even than that.

He had been stunned to encounter a human willing to risk their own survival to come to the aid of another. Granted, he had not studied the species as extensively as he needed to to arrive at scientifically conclusive data, but he had observed enough to know this was not typical behavior. Neither had the abilities and instincts she had displayed in fighting off her attackers. It was the basic nature of any species to fight when cornered, of course, to protect its own survival, but this was something so frowned upon by Earth society that most of the species seemed to have lost their instinct for survival, lost both the urge to protect themselves and the ability.

He had not merely been favorably impressed by her spirit, however. He had, to his complete amazement and utter confusion, been physically attracted to the creature.

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He had been too long without a female. His reaction was embarrassing and he would gladly have put as much distance as possible between them, except that he had not been able to convince her to release him. He had not been willing to risk injuring her to gain his release.

And now, because he had also not been willing to allow her to be harmed by others, it seemed highly possible that he would be forced to accept her as his own.

And, as exotically beautiful and desirable as he found the female, he was repulsed on an intellectual level to find himself sexually attracted to a species not his own.

* * * *

Nal smiled at the test results, clapping Tau on the shoulder. "See for yourself. She is free of defect. You have not made a bad choice in your female, after all."

Tau studied the test results, trying to ignore the sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He should have been glad the results had been positive. It meant the female would be allowed to live. She would be accepted by the council.

However, he realized that, in the back of his mind, he'd hoped she would not pass their criteria. He had prepared himself to fight for her life. He would try to convince the council that she had use, at least as labor in their tiny community that was as poor on labor as other resources. If she had been found to be defective in any way, however, he would not have been expected to take her as his mate. He would, in fact, have been forbidden to take her as mate,

which would have relieved him of the necessity of having to reject her.

Irrationally, he was angered, both with himself and with her ... but mostly with her. If she had not interfered, she would be happily going about her life on Earth, oblivious to their existence, and he would be allowed the time he needed to come to terms with the idea of taking a mate outside his own kind.

He looked up at his friend and forced a smile. "I felt that she would be an asset to our colony. She is ... strong for a human female, I think, and skilled in self-defense. It improves her chances of surviving the harsh, primitive conditions on New Ducran."

"We observed the encounter. I had not thought you in need since the humans are so weak, but she could not know that. The fighting skills she displayed were impressive. I have to agree with your assessment.

"We have removed the birth control devise that had been implanted inside of her. She is ready to breed. In fact, from my examination it appears she is at the peak of her reproductive cycle. Your chances of a positive result are very good."

Tau forced another smile, wondering how the female would take the glad news. Not well at all from what he'd observed of her personality. But the other females they'd taken were already impregnated. In their ultimate wisdom, the council had decided that the best course would be to impregnate the females before taking them back. In this way, the females would, hopefully, be more willing to accept their fate, more

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amenable to blending into the society they would be expected to join, and there would be the added benefit of being a step closer to determining whether the cross breeding would even work for them.

He wondered if he would be able to perform as expected. He had certainly reacted to her before, but he'd had time to consider his response since. It was possible it had been no more than a natural result of contact with a female. His brain had not been included in the equation. Now that he'd had time to consider that she was not haden, he might not be able to react at all. If he couldn't, she might well be discarded anyway. If he could, he would be well and truly trapped into taking her.

If they had had the facilities on board to inseminate her without physical contact he would have been tempted to do so. On the other hand, she was at risk if he allowed it to be known that he did not want her for his mate. He decided he would have to at least appear to have accepted her until he had the chance to present the matter to the council. There were plenty of unattached males in the colony that would welcome a female of any species that bore any resemblance at all to their own. They would probably have been willing to accept one that looked far less appealing than the female he had found. He was certain a place could be found for her.

He discovered, when he entered the chamber where they'd placed her, that she had been prepared to receive him, though not at all as he'd expected.

He stopped as abruptly as if he'd run into an invisible force field.

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They had stripped her of her clothing. She was bent over a table, her arms extended before her, her wrists bound. Her legs had been forced apart, splayed wide so that her genitals were vulnerable to his penetration, her ankles manacled to the floor so that she could not move.

He should have been repelled to see her bound in such a way. He was, on an intellectual level. Physically, it had the opposite effect on him. The blood shot from his head to engorge his cock so fast that his brain simply ceased functioning.

Like a sleepwalker, he removed his clothing, then moved toward her, unable to pull his gaze beyond the delicate pink folds of flesh between her legs. He didn't even realize that he had approached her until he noticed, as he placed his hand on her bare buttock, that her flesh quivered. He stared at it for a long moment and finally glanced up. He saw that she had twisted her head, trying to see him. He'd thought she was sedated. The fact that she wasn't aroused him more, but also disturbed him in an indefinable way.

His brain reacted sluggishly to the effort to analyze, but he realized finally that he felt uncomfortable with the idea of taking instead of encouraging her to yield. She was not haden, but she was a higher life form, as he was, civilized, as his people considered themselves, though desperation had led them to barbaric practices.

Regardless of his feelings, there was no time for finesse. Under the circumstances, she was not likely to fall easily to persuasion and he would not be allowed the time to try, in any event. He must claim her to save her. It was unfortunate

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that his communication skills in her language were so poor he could not explain the situation and reason with her, but he knew the possibility of communicating the circumstances to her was nil. He simply did not have sufficient vocabulary to even attempt it.

Deciding gentleness might at least assuage her fears, he leaned over her, stoking his palm along her back. Her flesh was cool to his palm as he'd known it would be. Her body temperature norm was fractionally lower than his own, but the texture of her skin, the softness of her flesh, sent a painful shaft of desire through him. Her scent, as he leaned close, assaulted him like an aphrodisiac, clouding his mind further. He closed his eyes, fighting for control as he caressed her, feeling his focus wavering between his desire to soothe her and his desire merely to feel the texture of her skin for his own pleasure.

"Don't," she said in a husky, breathless voice.

It took him a moment to figure out what she'd said, and many more to force his mind to produce a response. "Must."

He was no longer certain, however, if he 'must' for her sake or because rational thought had flown and he felt himself spiraling out of control. He stood up, running his hands over her buttocks, his gaze once more locked on the dark, damp curls that surrounded the delicate pink folds of flesh of her sex. Fascinated, he touched the petals, parted them with his thumbs. A red haze engulfed him as he felt the moisture, caught the faint fragrance of her body's natural juices.

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Grasping his painfully throbbing cock in one hand, he parted the folds of flesh of her sex with his other until she was spread wide for his penetration. He aligned their bodies, pressed against her opening, watching as their bodies joined as he pushed the head of his cock into her. Her flesh yielded reluctantly, despite the juices her body had produced to ease his way, clutching at him, cupping around him so tightly as he slowly penetrated her flesh with his own that he almost came before he could sink his cock all the way inside of her. When he'd sunk his cock to the hilt, he stopped for a moment, placing his palms on the table on either side of her, his eyes squeezed tightly, gasping for breath as he tried to gain control.

She bucked, the movement slamming her buttocks against his lower belly, sliding her hot, clinging flesh along his cock in an intimate caress. He lost control then, driven by instinct to thrust inside of her and withdraw harder and harder as waves of pleasure moved through him.

He came, quick, hard, in a mind shattering release that sapped the strength from his muscles. Tremors shook him as he braced his palms against the table once more, trying to support himself, his mind drifting in the euphoria of release.

Slowly, it filtered through his pleasure numbed brain that she was pushing against him, rocking back and forth. His body reacted instantly to the stimulus, his cock growing erect once more.

Dimly, it occurred to him that she was more likely trying to throw him off than caught up in the heat of passion as he had been, as he once more found himself, but his body acted

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independently of his brain. Bracing himself with one arm, he wrapped his other around her hips, gripping her as he thrust inside of her over and over, finally erupting in culmination.

Too weak to brace himself on his arms any longer, he slumped over her, laying half atop her, gasping for air and trying ineffectually to support himself off of her with muscles that trembled weakly. But as the moments passed and his heart slowed, her scent, the scents of their coupling infiltrated his body, slowly bringing his body to life once more despite his absolute certainty that he had wrung himself dry and could do no more.

With a mixture of dismay and rising excitement, he felt his cock grow hard once more, could not seem to stop himself from penetrating her, thrusting slowly in and out of her again and again until he found himself rushing toward climax again.

Finally, he moved away from her, swaying slightly, feeling the muscles in his legs trembling with the effort to support him. Her buttocks were reddened from his repeated assaults. He had pumped his seed into her over and over until her body could no longer contain it. His semen oozed down her legs in thin trails. The sight shamed him but it also brought him half erect again. He was fairly certain he'd pass out if he took her again without allowing his body to rest, however. He resisted the impulse to try and moved toward the door where he'd discarded his clothing, where he was safe from her scent, which was enough in itself to drive him into mindless coupling.

With great difficulty, he dressed himself and left the room.

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He'd hoped he could reach his own quarters without encountering any of his companions, but Nal and Kin-ko caught up with him as he turned into the corridor where the crew's sleeping quarters were located.

They looked him over curiously.

"You are ill?" Nal asked, obviously puzzled by the fact that Tau had to lean against the bulkhead to support himself.

"No," Tau said irritably. "Just ... tired."

Kin-ko grinned.

Tau glared at him, daring him to speak, wishing he hadn't felt compelled to add that last comment.

Kin-ko shrugged.

"You've claimed her then?" Nal persisted.

"I have bred her." Tau thought about it a moment. "Do not bind her thus again. It is demeaning to the female and I can not bind her to me if she feels I am abusing her."

Kin-ko looked like he might speak, but wisely held his tongue at the look Tau gave him.

With relief, Tau entered his chamber, closing the door firmly behind him.

Kin-ko looked at Nal and grinned. "I think he's more worried he'll hurt himself if we bind her like that again. He was ... very thorough. I had to carry the female back to her cabin. She seemed ... satisfied that he'd performed his duty to her."

"He'll take your head off at the shoulders if he hears you speaking so disrespectfully about his woman," Nal growled.

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Kin-ko sobered, eyeing the door panel of Tau's room speculatively, but amusement still gleamed in his eyes, and devilment.

Nal frowned at him. "Take care. Friend or not, Tau will not take kindly to your childish games. He is not pleased about this situation at all. Whatever he says, he has not accepted the female as his mate. No one as vocally opposed to taking a human as a mate is going to be persuaded to change his mind only because the female makes his cock hard."

Chapter Three

Despite his earnest efforts, Tau was informed that his seed had not taken and that he must try again. He wasn't certain whether he welcomed the news or not, or even if he trusted the look of innocence in Kin-ko's eyes. His body's reaction to the news displayed no such uncertainty, however.

Without a word, he left the control room and made his way to the room where the female was awaiting him. He came to an abrupt halt when he stepped inside the chamber. Kelly met his gaze. Slowly, her eyes filled with anger, her skin flushed.

Tau was scarcely aware of her reaction to him, however. As he'd ordered, Kelly had not been bound as she had been the first time. She was seated on a bench that had been tilted so that her hips were thrust forward and she was partially reclined. Her wrists had been bound to the arm rests. Her legs had been placed in the stirrups they used for examinations, her knees bent until they would have rested against her body except that her legs were splayed wide.

He could not take his eyes from the dark pink flesh of her sex, fully exposed to his gaze by the position she'd been bound in. In a haze of lust, he removed his clothing, approached her, only dimly aware of the angry words she flung at him, unable, in any case, to understand the half of them.

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He wasn't even aware that she'd ceased speaking as he undressed until he managed to tear his gaze from her sex and look up.

* * * *

Kelly was stunned when Tau, far from reacting in any way to her tirade, began to remove his clothing almost mechanically, as if he were drugged to a state of purely automated response. When he lifted his head at last, however, and their gazes met, she knew instantly that it was no drug, but pure animal lust driving him.

Her body responded instantly, tensing against the wave of desire that rushed through her.

Resolutely, she ignored it. She supposed she'd been bound by his Neanderthal friends because she'd fought them tooth and nail when they'd rushed her that first time. She was entirely certain she wouldn't have cooperated with them if she'd known what they meant to do, but they had not even attempted to explain.

By the time Tau had entered the room, she'd had a fair idea of what she was about to receive. She'd been torn between relief when she'd seen it was Tau, and surprise and anger when she realized that he fully intended to take advantage of her.

Despite all of her anger and confusion, however, she had found herself responding to his tentative caresses, felt herself climbing toward explosive release over and over each time he'd taken her. When he'd finally left her, she'd been so exhausted she'd only been barely conscious when the other

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men had come to take her back to the chamber where she had been kept since they'd kidnapped her.

When they'd come for her again, she had fought harder than she had before, knowing what would come next, where before she had only guessed, and been as fearful as she was angry.

It had been just as useless. She was no match for them at all.

She had more than half feared it would be another who came to her this time and had been torn between relief that it was Tau, and fury with him for using her as a ... sex toy after she'd helped him.

He stopped in front of her, his erection grazing her thigh. She glared at him, fighting the thrill of anticipation that surged through her body.

He studied her a long moment and lifted his hand, touched her cheek gently. "Kel-ly."

She turned her face away, unwilling to attempt to decipher the emotion in his eyes that lay behind the lust he was obviously trying to control.

He leaned closer, breathing deeply as his nose grazed the skin of her neck, just below her ear. She felt the hot moistness of his tongue as he tasted her. His tongue, faintly rough, sent shivers of excitement thrumming through her veins.

"Don't," she said, closing her eyes. Even she wasn't certain whether it was an effort to savor the sensations he created in her or to ignore them.

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She turned to meet his gaze. For someone who 'must' he was giving a damn good impression of wanting to, but perhaps she had misinterpreted? Not really surprising since his command of the English language was extremely limited. "Why? You said that before."

He frowned, but apparently he recognized his limitations. After a moment, he leaned close enough to graze her cheek with his lips. She looked up into his eyes, saw her own desire reflected back at her.

Dimly, the adage 'honey will catch more flies than vinegar' flickered through her mind, but she wasn't certain whether it was because she wanted him or if she actually *was* using logic to fight in the only way she could. She decided she'd try to understand later. She turned her head, brushed her lips lightly across his.

He sucked his breath in, his eyes widening slightly in surprise.

She traced the surface of his lips with her tongue, then caught his lower lip between hers and sucked. His breath came out in a short gust as if he'd been holding it.

She knew when she placed her lips over his that kissing was not something he knew. It was surprisingly pleasing, sending a shaft of heat coursing through her.

He held himself perfectly still as she traced his lips once more with her tongue and then delved inside his mouth, exploring his taste and the texture of the sensitive inner flesh.

He groaned, opening his mouth over hers, his breath coming raggedly now. When she'd explored his mouth thoroughly, she withdrew her tongue, coaxing him to pursue.

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He followed her, pushing his tongue into her mouth as she had his, raking it along her tongue. It was rougher than her own, not painfully so, just enough that it stimulated her senses, sending wild jolts of pleasure through her, making moisture pool in her sex.

She felt the head of his cock nudge against her, blindly seeking. She moved her hips, trying to align her body with his, sighing into his mouth when she felt the head of his cock parting her flesh, pushing inside of her.

A fresh burst of anticipation rushed through her as she felt her body yielding, adjusting to his penetration. She closed her mouth around his probing tongue, suckling hard as she felt the muscles in her sex close around his cock. He groaned, plunging full length into her in a single, hard thrust that made the muscles in her sex quake wonderfully.

He tensed all over, holding his breath. Kelly was far too close to culmination, however, to allow him to hold her at the edge of rapture. She rotated her hips, moving against him.

He dragged his mouth from hers, groaning as if in agony, held himself still for a moment more and then began to move as if he could not stop himself, thrusting deep, hard, fast, as if he had lost all semblance of control. His urgency pushed her over the edge. She bit down on his shoulder to keep from screaming as her body became awash in exquisite sensation.

Her reaction sent him over the edge. He shuddered, groaned and finally went still, breathing harshly.

His expression was shuttered when he lifted his head at last, but his gaze focused on her mouth for a long moment

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before he lifted it to meet hers. "English ... no good," he managed to say after a long struggle.

"I hadn't noticed," Kelly said dryly.

Apparently, he didn't have nearly as much trouble understanding her tone and expression as he did her speech. His face darkened, first with embarrassment and then with anger.

He stepped away from her abruptly and began to dress. He did not look at her again.

Kelly tried to tell herself that she wasn't sorry for the biting remark, but as she watched him leave she felt more than a little uncomfortable. He'd been struggling to say something when she'd cut him so rudely. She would never even be able to guess what it might have been. Not that it mattered, really.

She just wished she hadn't seen what she thought she'd seen in his eyes the last time he'd looked at her—the wounded look just before the anger.

She sighed, wondering how it was that the male of the species always seemed to know how to make a woman feel like a total bitch, even when *they* were in the wrong.

* * * *

Kelly had no sense of time. She had tried, after her abduction, when she'd finally become lucid enough to piece together everything that had happened, to arrive at some notion of how long she'd been gone but had discovered that it was an exercise in futility.

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She was certain several days had passed, but it could've been anywhere from two days to a solid week since she had no idea of how much time she'd spent knocked out, or sleeping naturally for that matter.

There were no clocks, and no windows she could see out of to tell whether it was daylight or dark.

She didn't even have a clue as to where she might be. Something about the utilitarian surroundings made her wonder if they were in some kind of military facility, maybe even underground since she could hear no sounds at all that seemed to be coming from outside, but she had to wonder what kind of bizarre experiment she'd been abducted for.

Unless she was being fed hallucinogens, the 'men' she'd come into contact with had to be the results of some kind of genetic experiments if she discounted the possibility that they were alien. And somehow she found it easier to believe the former than to accept the latter.

But it was clear they were not wearing costumes and gibbering some sort of fake language. It wasn't just that they all had that odd feline appearance. All of them seemed to be around the same age—which appeared to support the genetic experiment theory. All of them were also incredibly strong, far stronger than a normal human being.

Maybe the men were the results of genetic mutation and she'd been kidnapped because the government wanted to see if they could breed hybrids for military applications?

Only a decade ago, when she'd been an ignorant kid, she would have scoffed at the very idea of her own government doing such a thing, but she'd lost the rosy glow of self-

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deception when she reached adulthood. Freedom was little more than an illusion anymore. She wasn't certain when the U.S. had stopped being a free country, but probably sometime along the time of the cold war ... well before her time, at any rate. The government controlled everything, and they knew everything—there was no privacy and very little freedom even to make her own choices.

The government from her text books would never have considered infringing on the rights of a private citizen. The real world government wouldn't hesitate if they could convince themselves it was in the best interests of the government, it having apparently escaped them that the government and the people were not the same thing.

She didn't care if they did put her on one of their damned lists. When she got out of here—IF she got out, she was going to blow the lid off of their little experiments if she had to start an underground newspaper!

A sound in the corridor outside interrupted her thoughts, and Kelly stood up, backing against the wall. The heavy set man called Nal stood in the doorway. "Come."

Kelly stared at him. She'd understood well enough. She just wasn't certain she wanted to go with him. When he frowned, however, she realized that she could walk, or he would carry her—or they'd knock her out again.

She pushed away from the wall and moved toward the door. He stepped back. Kelly peered around the edge of the doorway warily, but no one stood waiting. Nal pointed down the hallway and after a moment, Kelly stepped into the corridor and started down it, trying to ignore the sinking

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sensation in her stomach that told her she was not going to like this, whatever it was.

He guided her to a room that was perhaps four times the size of the room she'd been staying in. This room, however, contained tables and chairs. Kelly turned and looked at him questioningly. "Stay. No move."

Kelly gaped at the door when he went out again, closing it behind him. When he didn't return immediately, she relaxed fractionally and began to look around.

There was little to look at. The walls were smooth and seemed to be made of some sort of metal, just as the walls of her prison cell was. She couldn't see either rivets or bolts, however, nor even welding seams, and wondered how it had been fashioned. The tables and chairs that littered the room were much the same, as if they'd been molded to shape. She'd moved to a chair to sit down when the door panel slid open.

A shock wave went through her as she stared at the woman standing anxiously in the opening. It was obvious the other woman was equally stunned to see her. She turned deathly pale for several moments and then let out a squeal of delight and rushed toward Kelly.

"Oh my God! You're human. I thought I was alone!" she cried, throwing her arms around Kelly and hugging her tightly. "I've been so scared! What's happened? Why are we here? Do you know?"

Kelly hugged her back, realizing she had been nearly as desperate to see someone who looked familiar. "I'm Kelly Scott," she said, smiling as she pulled away, but shook her

head at the questions. "But I'm afraid I don't know any more than you do."

"Maggie Fitzgerald," the stranger responded. "Are you from Atlanta, too?"

"I just moved to Atlanta ... uh ... about a week before. I don't know how long I've been here."

Maggie shrugged. "I'm not a native. I'd been living in Atlanta about a month before ... this."

"What happened to you? Do you remember how you got here?"

Maggie sighed, looked around and finally pulled out a chair and sat down. "Not really. I was ... well, I thought I was having really weird nightmares. It was like being awake, but not. And then I would find myself in a place I'd never been before, but I always woke up the next morning in my own bed, until ... well, until I woke up here."

Movement at the door drew their attention. When they turned they saw three other women entering the room, all frightened and confused, but looking somewhat reassured by the presence of other women.

They were not allowed the chance to talk with the other women. Nal moved into the room and made them form a line facing one wall. They glanced at each other nervously.

For herself, it seemed entirely too similar to a firing squad lineup for Kelly's comfort. She didn't doubt that similar thoughts were running through the other women's minds, for all of them looked as frightened as she felt. In a moment, however, she discovered why he'd lined them up. It was almost worse than if it had been a line up for execution.

He touched something on the wall and a panel slid open, revealing what at first glance appeared to be a window. Beyond the 'window', however, was a view like no other.

Nal moved in front of them, stabbing a finger at a tiny blue ball in the distance.

Kelly felt the strength go out of her knees. She had to lock them to keep from wilting to the floor. "Earth?"

Nal nodded, stabbing at it as if for emphasis. "Gone. No go dere."

Kelly turned and looked at the other women. For the most part, they looked as shocked and disbelieving as she felt. A petite blond near the middle, who looked to be no more than eighteen, uttered a sound midway between a giggle and a sob. "It's not real, right? It's like a TV, huh? Or maybe a movie screen."

Kelly and Maggie exchanged a look. "I don't think it's a video of any kind," Kelly said woodenly. "I think it's a porthole."

"It can't be real," the girl beside her cried. "It can't be. It's not possible to ... to travel so far so fast. We haven't even been here that long. If that was Earth, we'd have to be ... half way out of the solar system."

The young blond began to cry, her face puckering like a baby's. Kelly went to her, patted her shoulder in sympathy. The girl embraced her, weeping against her shoulder. "I want to go home!"

Kelly put her arms around the girl, watching as the tiny blue ball became smaller and smaller and finally vanished from sight. She looked up then. Their captors were standing

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in the doorway, but her gaze moved unerringly to Tau. She stared at him for a long moment, watching him blur before her vision. She looked away before the tears could spill over onto her cheeks, turning to stare blindly out the porthole at a view no human had ever gazed upon before.

They'd been gathered together and brought to look so that they would understand everything at last. Their captors weren't part of an experiment. They weren't human at all. And she and the other women, their captives, were never going home again.

Chapter Four

Kelly was a little surprised when she looked up and saw that the one called Kin-ko had moved into the room. He was looking at the blond with a mixture of anxiety and sympathy. She jumped when he touched her, whipping her head around to look.

"No! Don't you dare touch me!" she cried, moving around to stand behind Kelly.

He reddened, but he didn't attempt to touch her again. Instead, he turned and glared at Nal, speaking angrily to him in their language.

Nal glared back at him and responded heatedly, gesturing toward the women and then the porthole.

When she heard Tau's voice, Kelly stiffened. After a moment, without looking in his direction, she turned and walked toward the porthole, staring longingly at the pinpoint she had once called home, watching as everyone and everything she held dear vanished from her grasp forever.

She couldn't bear to think of it. If she allowed it, she was going to collapse on the floor and weep like a baby.

Resolutely, she pushed it from her mind, absently listening to the voices around her, the arguing men, the wailing women.

Apparently, none of the men were entirely happy about the way Nal had handled breaking the news to the captives. She wasn't happy about it either, but as far as she was concerned, there was no gentle way to break it to them that they had

been stolen from their own world and were being whisked off to another one.

One question remained unanswered, however. It was one none of them had thought to ask. Why?

Where didn't matter. It was sufficient that it was no where on Earth. It was enough to know they'd never see friends, family—anything familiar again.

What she would very much like to know but feared to ask was, for what purpose? Why them? Why anyone from Earth? These ... beings were not human. What possible use could they have for females that were not even of their kind?

After a while she realized the weeping had quieted and the arguing had ceased. She turned from the porthole and was surprised to see that the men had withdrawn, leaving the women together.

She supposed, since it had been brought forcefully home that there was no escape they'd decided it didn't matter if the prisoners were allowed to interact.

One of the women, she saw, was pacing the floor, wringing her hands and muttering to herself. The others had huddled into a forlorn little group around one of the tables. She moved to join them.

The blond looked up when she sat down, smiling apologetically. "I'm sorry for crying all over you. But ... thanks."

Kelly shook her head. "Don't worry about it. I felt like crying myself."

"You think it's real, then?"

"You don't?" Kelly asked, surprised.

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The women exchanged glances. "We were discussing it. Don't you think it's possible that this is just some kind of ... experiment?"

Kelly was very much afraid that it was and she was fairly certain she didn't want to know what kind. Fear of the unknown might be hard to deal with, but there was a lot to be said for ignorance. She shrugged. "I thought so, but it's hard to believe our government would go to such elaborate lengths. Anyway, what would be the purpose? No. I think, however unreal it might seem, we've got to accept that this is as real as it gets."

"I don't think it's our government at all. Kin-ko told me he was Russian."

Kelly lifted her brows and glanced at Maggie. "He actually said that? That he was Russian?"

She thought about it and finally frowned. "Actually, I guess he didn't. I asked him if he was a Russian and he nodded."

Kelly looked around. "Maybe it would help if we all knew how each of us had wound up here? My name's Kelly Scott, by the way. This is Maggie Fitzgerald."

The petite blond introduced herself as Kirstin Lane. Her story was similar to Maggie's, except that she had been well aware that Kin-ko was no dream. They'd met over the internet and become lovers. She was, she announced uneasily, carrying Kin-ko's baby, though she hadn't told him yet.

Maggie looked horrified, which provoked an angry look from Kirstin. "Well, I *thought* he was Russian! How was I supposed to know he was an alien? I mean *really* an alien?"

Apparently, brainless, big-tit, blonde appealed to males the universe over, Kelly thought wryly. "You weren't at all suspicious that he looked so ... leonine?"

"What's that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Cat like," Kelly said wryly.

"Were you?" Kirstin snapped.

Kelly blushed. "All right. I thought he was wearing contacts. I did notice he didn't look like ... well, that he didn't look human, but I didn't get a good look at him until I was back at my apartment and it hadn't even sunk in when his friends arrived. Up until I saw them, I thought he was just ... uh ... interestingly different. So I guess I can see your point. I suppose you'd have to be *expecting* to run into an alien to really believe something like that."

Maggie shook her head. "I'm sorry. I really wasn't passing judgment. It's just ... I think I might be pregnant too. I was sure I couldn't be. I haven't been seeing anyone since I moved."

Kelly looked at the other two women, both in their early twenties, who'd introduced themselves as Lovey Carlson and Sheryl Pitt. "What about you two?"

Both women nodded, their expressions a mixture of fear and distaste. "It's possible," Lovey said. "I'm late. I hadn't even considered doing a pregnancy test because ... I haven't had a boyfriend in six months."

"What do you think it means?"

Kelly realized with a jolt that the women were all looking at her as if she had the answers. It only took her a moment

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to come up with the obvious one. "That all of you were chosen. I just got in the way."

* * * *

Tau steeled himself as he entered Kelly's room. The bed, which was the only furnishing the room contained, had been wedged into a corner to allow as much floor space as possible. Kelly was sitting with her back against the juncture of the two walls, her knees drawn up, watching him, fear and distrust in her eyes.

He wished he hadn't sensed that.

For the first time, he saw the situation entirely from her perspective. It was a luxury he couldn't allow himself, that none of them could, unless they were willing to simply sit back and wait to die, watching their kind weaken and wither with each new generation of births.

If they had appealed to the humans for help, however, and been turned down, they would have had no options at all. They would have found it difficult even to steal what they needed having put them on guard. He, himself, had agreed with that consensus. In theory, he knew it was the only thing they could have done. In practice, it took on a whole new light when one was forced to look into eyes as intelligent as one's own and see the condemnation of one's actions.

He realized now that it would have been preferable to have sought, and perhaps, found, acceptance. Maybe their species didn't deserve to survive if they could not convince others to want them? How would they find companionship in females they abducted? They could force the females to mate with

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them, force them to bear their offspring. They could even force the females to care for their homes and their cubs. But they could not force acceptance and they could not force affection. Those must be given willingly.

It was unfortunate that no one had fully grasped that particular point.

They had also failed to grasp the difficulties in learning the language of their captives and the problems that could arise simply from their inability to communicate. How were they to seek any sort of understanding when neither could speak the language of the other?

Then again, perhaps even that would not bridge the void that lay between them. The people of Ducron had not been able even to overcome the differences between the different peoples of their own world. The more their world had advanced technologically, bringing them physically closer together, the wider the gap had grown, until finally they had been so consumed by their hatred that they had destroyed their world and each other in warfare.

He'd observed much the same on Earth. The races barely tolerated one another, constantly clashing on both a personal level and a governmental level. And, if they could not live in harmony with other races of their own species, how could they live with a race so much different?

"All of the other women were selected and impregnated before they were brought on board the ship," Kelly said. "That's what you meant when you said you must, isn't it?"

Tau frowned, trying to understand her words. They seemed to flow together when she spoke, making it difficult

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to separate the sounds into individual words that he'd learned. He knew few, in any case. Even if he could separate them, he might still not understand. He fought down a sense of frustration, knowing that would only make it more difficult to concentrate and possibly understand.

"Pregnant? Baby—child—offspring?" She placed her palm on her stomach.

It clicked. "Cub. Must."

"Like the others? The others like me. The women? Females?"

He nodded. "Fe-males."

Kelly studied him, wondering if he had understood what she'd been asking, and, if he had, if she'd understood the situation correctly. She felt like it was very important that she understand, that her life might depend upon it, but she couldn't bring herself to ask him that. Any way she looked at it, it seemed to her that her best chance of survival depended on cooperating, however she might feel about it. Trying to fight them at this point could lead to a quick death.

But, as miserable as the current prospects seemed, where there was life, there was hope.

She got off of the bed and began to remove her clothing.

He stared at her in surprise.

Despite her best efforts, she blushed, wondering if she'd completely misinterpreted the situation. Had he not come to try to impregnate her again? Had he come for some other reason?

He began to remove his own clothing, but it didn't help her feelings. It might only be because he thought she was

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offering herself. On the other hand, even if they'd both completely misunderstood, it seemed probable that males were males, whatever race, where ever they happened to come from. A willing female was more favorably looked upon than an unwilling one. If he grew attached to her, even if only for sexual gratification, surely her usefulness, and therefore, her chances of survival, increased?

She certainly hoped so because unless they'd examined her and discovered her IUD, unless they'd figured out what it was and removed it, he was going to have a hell of a time getting her pregnant.

She'd scarcely been able to sleep for worrying about it, wondering if she could convince him to keep trying.

She sat down on the edge of the bed when she'd finished undressing, looking down at her hands. She knew she was doing what she had to, the smart thing, but she was still uncomfortable with the way it made her feel. Even a pretense of affection or attraction beyond the purely physical would have made her feel less like a lab animal and more like an individual who had worth.

She wondered if prostitutes felt this way, having to sell their bodies to survive, knowing they were considered sub-human by pretty much everybody in society who'd never found themselves at such a low point in the food chain. But then, deep down, humans were no different than any other animal. They despised weakness in any form, and a failure to succeed was weakness.

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She realized after a few moments that he'd moved to stand in front of her. She refused to look up at him. Instead, she lay down on the bed and closed her eyes, trying to relax.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. She knew he was studying her. She just wished she knew why.

After a moment, the bed shifted and she knew he'd gotten up. Seconds ticked past and nothing happened. Finally, she opened her eyes.

He was getting dressed.

She felt a spurt of panic.

There wasn't one single female on board this ship who hadn't been chosen by one of the men on the ship ... except her. She couldn't know for certain, but there had been something about the attitude of the men when they'd come for Tau that had told her she would die. Tau had stopped them, bringing her instead. She was—almost—positive she understood that much. If he didn't want her, her life might still be forfeit.

She got up and went to him, catching his hands to stop him.

He looked at her, his expression guarded. "No want."

She felt the blood rush from her face.

He struck his chest with his hand. "No human. No want—Kel-ly."

Kelly paled but then frowned as confusion washed through her. He didn't want her? Or he thought she didn't want him? Did it matter? He was going to leave if she didn't do something.

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Primitive communication allowed no room for finesse. Kelly reached down and cupped his cock. He flinched, but it leapt to life in her hand. "Tau want Kelly," she said, daring him to deny it.

He blushed. "Kel-ly no want Tau."

Kelly stared at him, feeling surprise, amusement and, oddly, a sense of kinship. He was embarrassed by his reaction to her touch, particularly when he thought she didn't want him. That meant he felt emotions she could understand, so maybe these people weren't all that much different from humans after all? His statement seemed to imply that.

That presented another problem, however. She could lie with her words. He was obviously not going to be satisfied with her lying like a log while he pleased himself. She would've preferred to remain detached, but she thought it more than possible her life was on the line. She was going to have to generate some enthusiasm.

The truth was, she was hardly indifferent to him and he should damn well know it by now.

It irritated her to realize that she was going to have to seduce him. Chivalry had vanished from the universe as soon as the female demanded that the male not make the assumption that she was willing. The truth was, the moment a male became aroused, his brain turned to mush and he had no more idea whether a woman was in heat or desperate to fight him off than a rock. It was all very well to say they ought to be able to tell the difference. They couldn't. Which meant a woman couldn't just yield any damned more. She had to commit herself and risk rejection the same as men did

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if it transpired that she'd misinterpreted his body language and he was not, in fact, interested as she had supposed.

But it was one thing to demand to be pleased by a man one knew from long time intimacy. She might even have been able to make it through a one night stand, buoyed by the knowledge that, once done, she'd never have to set eyes on the man again. It was another matter entirely to be bold with a man that was not only a virtual stranger, but one she would not be able to leave afterward.

She shook off her reservations and pushed the shirt he'd just pulled on up, revealing washboard abs few women would be able to resist. His skin tones might differ considerably from the familiar. His features certainly did. But his body, except for being more toned and muscular than most of the men she'd known, was no different than any human form. If she could simply stop her brain from clamoring Alien!, banish her fears to the back of her mind, she could enjoy this.

She finished removing his shirt and tossed it aside, then placed her palms against his chest. She could feel the rapid beat of his heart. It was reassuring, but she couldn't help but wonder whether it was accelerated as it seemed, indicating desire, or if their hearts always beat faster than the human heart.

She dismissed the thought.

His skin was warm. She'd noticed that before and thought he must have a fever. Obviously, they were naturally warmer.

Stop it!

Maybe he was turned off by the fact that she was cooler to the touch?

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She removed her hands, looked up at him.

His lips twisted. He said something in his native tongue she couldn't understand.

She found she didn't need to. Stepping closer, she slid her palm across his hard male breasts. "I like the way you feel."

"Like?"

She nodded, smiling faintly.

"Show."

She looked up, feeling a mixture of confusion and irritation. Some seduction! If she could gag him....

"Show Tau. Please Kel-ly."

Show him, please? He'd paused, though. Show him how to give her pleasure?

"Tau—want—please—Kel-ly," he said slowly, separating each word carefully.

She put a fingertip to his lips, shook her head. She was in no position to complain. She didn't even know that many words in his language, but his efforts were confusing and distracting. Beautiful body or not, she was not going to be able to 'get a hard on' for him if didn't stop reminding her he was an alien!

Taking his hand, she led him back to the bed. He stopped when she climbed in the middle and pointed at his clothing. After a moment, he removed his pants. She stared at his male member, but he couldn't decide whether she found it to her liking or not.

"No wonder it felt so good," Kelly muttered. A cock that size wasn't likely to miss a single nerve ending.

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She looked up at him, saw he was looking doubtful and smiled, holding her hand out. He climbed into bed beside her and lay down. Kelly got to her knees and leaned toward him, skimming his body with her hands. "It'll please me if you do this," she murmured, leaning down to follow the path of her hands with her mouth, placing nibbling kisses across his belly and upwards, tasting him with her tongue. "It'll please me even more if you do this," she said, opening her mouth over his nipple and teasing it with her tongue, then sucking.

He sucked in a ragged breath as she continued for long moments before she moved to the other nipple, suckling and teasing it with her mouth. "Your taste pleases me," she whispered, feeling her body growing warm and liquid. "Your scent pleases me."

She moved upward, rubbing her cheek against him, nibbling, lathing him with her tongue. "I like your mouth," she said breathlessly, as she skated her lips over his. "And especially your tongue."

He grasped her, rolling until he was looming above her, staring down at her for a long moment before he placed his mouth over hers and kissed her deeply. She moaned in pleasure as his tongue entered her mouth, suckling on it, dueling with her own tongue. Disappointed as she was when he ended the kiss, as he worked his way down her body, nipping, tasting her with his tongue, she felt little regret except to wish he could kiss her everywhere at once. She cried out when his mouth covered one hard, erect nipple. The rough texture of his tongue was wildly exciting, more stimulating than she'd ever felt before, sending almost

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painfully hard jolts of pleasure through her until she was drunk on ecstasy. Dimly, it occurred to her that that tongue on her clit would make her cum almost instantly.

She realized she didn't want to. It felt too good to end so quickly, but she desperately wanted him inside her.

She reached down to grasp his distended flesh, gripping his cock firmly, sliding her hand up and down its length. He jerked, groaned as if in agony. She released him abruptly, wondering if she *had* hurt him. He grasped her hand, placing it on his heated flesh once more and she massaged him with more surety, relieved that she was pleasuring him, feeling her own pleasure mount as her body climbed closer and closer to release.

She was wet, more than ready for him, aching to feel his penetration. She spread her legs, urging him to take her. He moved between her thighs, probing her sex with the head of his cock. She shifted, lifted her hips, felt their bodies align, felt her flesh stretch as he penetrated her vagina. She pushed against him as he thrust, gasping as her muscles yielded at last and he sank deeply inside of her. He began to move then. She drew her legs up until the soles of her feet were against the mattress, allowing her to counter each thrust.

She ran her palms along his back in a restless caress, finally reaching down to cup his buttocks, digging her fingers into the taut muscles and urging him to thrust faster and deeper inside of her. He sought her mouth, opening his own over hers, thrusting with his tongue in the same rhythm as he thrust inside her with his cock. It sent her over the edge. She tightened her mouth around his tongue, sucking hard as the

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shock waves of rapture pelted her. She felt his cock jerk as he spilled his seed inside her.

She released him as the last echoes of her climax faded, feeling limp, sated.

He collapsed, breathing hard, trying to hold himself off of her, tremors running through him with the effort.

Kelly's brain engaged about the time he gathered his strength to move off of her, but it was still working sluggishly. She kept her eyes closed, trying to decide whether she should do, or say, anything, wondering if he would just get up and leave now that she'd given him what he came for, uncertain of whether she wanted him to or not.

Slowly, his breathing evened out. She decided he'd fallen asleep.

Typical!

She opened her eyes.

He was staring at her.

Now why hadn't she sensed that?

She stared back at him, wondering what was going through his mind.

"No speak," he said finally.

Fine! It wasn't like she wanted to.

He rolled his eyes, sat up on the edge of the bed, holding his head in his hands. Finally, he reached for his clothes and began dressing, but he sat down again when he was dressed. "Tau no speak," he tried again. "En-lish."

She stared at him. Jeez! She needed him to tell her he couldn't speak frigging English! "Not well," she responded tartly.

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He reddened. "Tau not well speak En-lish."

She couldn't help it. She giggled.

He glanced at her quickly, affronted.

She grasped his arm when he started to rise. "You—
don't—speak—English—well."

He repeated every word very carefully, including the 'you'.

She shook her head. "I." She pointed to herself, then
pointed at him. "You."

He made the same gesture, repeated her words.

She contained her frustration with an effort. She stabbed
her chest with her finger. "Me, myself, I—I am Kelly. You are
Tau."

He surprised her. "I am Tau."

She smiled. "Yes!"

He smiled back at her, but wryly. "Not know many En-
glish."

She sighed. It was hard enough to communicate with other
people when they spoke the same language. At the rate they
were going she wasn't going to figure out what was going on
until it was too late to do anything to change it.... Always
assuming she might have a chance if she understood ahead
of time.

He touched her face, running his finger lightly along her
cheek from just below her eye to her jaw. "Have ... sad?"

Kelly looked away, realizing he'd noticed her tears after all.
"Yes."

He caught her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Tau ...
have sad ... no." He stopped, searching his memory.
"Regret."

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Surprise filled her when she realized he was telling her he was sorry, must be. For taking her away from her home? Because she'd cried? Or because he was as trapped by his decision to bring her as she was?

Chapter Five

The kitchen, or whatever it was supposed to be called on a space ship, was more than a little intimidating. Kelly, Maggie and Kirstin had been ushered into the room by Nal, who proceeded to jabber at them in his own tongue, pointing from one thing to another.

Kelly was tempted to play stupid and pretend she had no idea what he was talking about, but decided she couldn't carry it off nearly as well as Kirstin did. When he'd left them alone, they looked at each other. "I guess this means kitchen duty, ladies. Amazing, isn't it? Here we have males from a totally different galaxy and they still think having a pussy automatically means a person can find their way around a kitchen."

Maggie gasped, obviously shocked by Kelly's language, but laughed. Kirstin looked worried. "But I *don't* know how to cook!" she said peevishly. "At least. I usually just get stuff I can microwave. How are we supposed to know what to do with this stuff?"

Kelly and Maggie studied the thing in her hand. It was packaged. That was just about all Kelly could have said about it with any certainty. She took the package, but found she couldn't tear it open.

Looking around, she discovered that Kin-ko was standing in the doorway. On guard duty? Or merely curious? He took the package from her when she tried to tear it with her teeth, having failed to find anything that looked even remotely like a

knife. Holding it in one hand, he balled his other into a fist, bending his fist inward. Three needle-like claws three to four inches in length popped from the third knuckles of his hand.

Kirstin screamed, dropping the container she was holding.

Kin-ko's head whipped around so fast he should have gotten whiplash. He turned beet red when he saw Kirstin was staring at his claws in horror. Anger rapidly overtook his discomfort, however. Swiping at the package, he sliced it neatly, set the package down and departed without glancing her way again.

Kelly felt a tug of sympathy as she watched him leave. "You really should try to control yourself a little better," she said neutrally.

"Did you see that!" Kirstin gasped. "Control myself? He could—he could cut my head off with those things!"

Kelly had to wonder why he hadn't. Obviously, he was either fond of the bimbo or had amazing patience. "Has he ever threatened you with ... them?"

"My God! I didn't even know they were there!"

"Exactly."

"But ... but it's freaky!"

"You liked him well enough before you figured out he was an alien," Maggie pointed out.

Kirstin glared at her. "Because I thought he was just a foreigner!"

Kelly chuckled. "He is."

"You think this is funny?" Kirstin said angrily.

"Would it help your feelings if we all flopped on the floor, kicked our heels and squalled like babies? You think it would fix anything?" Maggie snapped furiously.

Kirstin's face puckered. "I'm scared, ok?"

Kelly felt her irritation vanish. "We're all scared."

"But ... I'm only eighteen!"

Maggie, like Kelly, was obviously torn between sympathy and indignation. "What? I'm twenty two so my life was over anyway?" Maggie snapped.

"I didn't mean that! It's just ... I just moved out on my own! I didn't even get the chance to get used to it! And now I'm pregnant!"

"You poor thing," Kelly said, trying to sound sympathetic instead of snide. She supposed Kirstin was likable in some ways, but her absolute conviction that the universe revolved around her was extremely annoying. How, she wondered, could one person be so completely self absorbed as to think she was the only person suffering, when there were five of them in the same predicament?

Maggie turned away. "I think we should just see if we can figure out how to get through one meal."

Kelly patted Maggie's shoulder consolingly. "This should be interesting. Let's see—we take food we can't identify and prepare it in equipment that we don't know how to use. Yum!"

Maggie sniffed, but then giggled. "I'd say it would serve them right if we tried to make an ungodly mess, but I don't think we'll have to try very hard. What do you suppose this stuff is, anyway?"

Kelly stared at it. "Dehydrated meat, maybe?"

"We could put water on it and see what happens," Kirstin suggested a little doubtfully.

Kelly shrugged. "Why not?"

They applied water and stood over it, watching as it turned to a disgusting yellow brown mush. "You think it's done? It doesn't look done to me," Kirstin said.

"How would you know? We don't even know what it is. Maybe it should be cooked?" Maggie said, looking around.

"This looks kind of like a microwave. I think that's what it is," Kirstin said excitedly.

"And it might just be a cabinet," Kelly said dryly. "I don't see any buttons or dials."

"I'm going to put it in there anyway," Kirstin said. "Maybe it comes on automatically when you put something in it."

"Fine. I'm going to look and see what else is around here. Maybe something will look familiar," Kelly said hopefully. She discovered a number of packages similar to the one they'd already found. Deciding each must contain something different, she arranged a selection on the counter, trying to decide if it looked like it would be enough to feed ten.

"Is that ready yet?"

Kirstin shrugged. "I don't know." She pulled the package out, studied it. "It looks the same. It doesn't feel hot, either. Maybe there's a button somewhere."

"Or maybe it's just a cabinet."

"Maybe that stuff doesn't need to be cooked?"

Kirstin sniffed it suspiciously and finally dipped her finger into the goo. "Here, you taste it," she said, sticking her finger under Maggie's nose.

Maggie slapped her hand away. "Taste it yourself!"

The goo caught Kelly across the face. "Hey!" Stalking across the kitchen, she dipped her finger into the container and flicked it at Kirstin.

Kirstin looked first shocked, and then furious. Dipping her hand into the container, she came out with a handful of the dripping mess.

"Food fight!" Maggie yelled and almost knocked Kelly down racing for the door. Kelly shrieked as the glob caught both her and Maggie, then burst out laughing at the look on Maggie's face as it landed in the middle of her back and began dripping down. Scraping the food off of her blouse, she flung it at Kirstin. Kirstin threw the container up to ward off the incoming glob and poured the remainder on the floor at her feet. She looked down in surprise for a moment and then burst out laughing.

Apparently drawn by their laughing and shrieking, Kin-ko poked his head around the door just about the time Kirstin, who'd leaned over to scoop up the food dripping between her toes, raised up and fired. She caught him right in the face with her food missile.

It would've been difficult to say which of them looked more shocked, but then Kirstin laughed. A purposeful look came into Kin-ko's eyes. He advanced on her. Kirstin shrieked and took off around the counter, still laughing.

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Kelly laughed too, until she looked up and saw Nal and Tau standing in the open doorway. Her eyes widened. Her laughter died.

Nal looked positively furious.

Tau was looking straight at her, his eyes gleaming with suppressed mirth.

Suddenly self-conscious, Kelly put her hand to her face. It would've been hard to say whether there was more food on her hand or on her face. She wiped it off the best she could, wiping her hands on her pants.

Nal was yelling, pointing to the food that was dripping from nearly every surface. Kelly backed away guiltily, bumping into Maggie. Unnerved, Kirstin moved back around the counter, huddling between them.

Kelly was fairly certain she understood what the tirade was all about even though she couldn't understand a word he was saying—and he was right. It had been a childish thing to do. It was also possible, though she hadn't thought of it before, that the food supply was limited. "I'm sorry," she said stiffly. "We didn't mean to make a mess."

Nal lifted his hand, but what he'd intended to do, Kelly was never to know. Tau caught his arm. At the same instant, Kirstin, apparently certain the threat was intended for her, swung an open handed slap in the direction of Nal's face. Kelly blocked it with her forearm, grasped Kirstin's wrist and forced it down.

A brief argument ensued among the men, but although none of the women could understand anything that was being

said, it seemed pretty obvious that Tau and Kin-ko were protecting them from Nal's wrath.

When the men had finally left, Maggie rounded on Kirstin furiously. "You stupid little girl! What are you trying to do? Get us all killed! Didn't your mama teach you not to slap someone unless you were ready to be slapped back?"

"A gentleman wouldn't...." Kirstin began tightly.

"What planet did you come from, anyway? Do these ... creatures look like frigging gentlemen to you? They're savages, and if you had an ounce of sense I wouldn't need to tell you that!"

"They're not savages," Kelly said quietly.

Maggie and Kirstin turned to look at her. She studied their angry faces, unwilling to provoke another argument, but as certain as she'd ever been of anything that it was vitally important that they make every effort to understand their captors and not underestimate them.

"They can't even speak English!" Kirstin snapped.

"Maggie's right, they *are* savages!"

Kelly burst out laughing, but she was appalled at Kirstin's ignorant arrogance.

"Not everybody on Earth can speak English!"

"They can't?" Kirstin said, aghast.

"You're not serious."

Maggie glanced from one to the other. "As much as I hate it when Kirstin agrees with me, they still seem like savages to me."

"Their technology is way ahead of ours. We can't build anything like this," Kelly pointed out.

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"So, they're smart savages."

Kelly shook her head. "You are wrong, both of you and you'd better start trying to adjust your thinking. Our lives may depend on it."

* * * *

Despite their best efforts, the meal was pretty much inedible. They did finally find an appliance that seemed to be cooking, but they could not identify the ingredients they were working with except by smell and taste. Ordinarily, one would have thought that sufficient, but apparently the combinations they thought presented the best possibilities were repugnant to their captors.

Nal took one look at the food and got up, slamming his chair against the table before he departed the dining area. Tau turned a little pale, but gamely tried a few bites. Kin-ko actually appeared a little green. He looked a little more green after he'd tried a bite. He departed shortly behind Nal. Tin and Ral-o looked it over doubtfully, but ate anyway.

All things considered, Kelly wasn't particularly anxious to sample their first attempt at cooking alien food, but then it hadn't looked appetizing even before they'd combined ingredients. Screwing up her courage, Kelly dipped her eating utensil into the food, took a deep breath, closed her eyes and stuck her tongue to the glob she'd speared. The taste was indescribable. She screwed up her face, shuddering.

When she opened her eyes, Tau was looking straight at her, obviously struggling to contain the urge to laugh.

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She choked, laughed, put her eating utensil down and pushed the dish away. "Ugh! Bad, very, very bad."

Maggie looked at her doubtfully. "It doesn't smell that bad."

"Trust me."

Kirstin took a spoonful and put it in her mouth. Her eyes widened. She looked around frantically and finally jumped up and dashed into the kitchen.

Maggie pushed her dish away. "I'll take her word for it. Guess this means we go hungry tonight, huh?"

Kelly got up, gathered her dishes and headed for the kitchen. Kirstin, she saw when she arrived, had her head under the water tap and was sucking in gulps and spewing them out again.

Maggie arrived with Tau. Kelly looked at him doubtfully, wondering why he'd followed them into the kitchen. He motioned for them to line up along one counter, then commenced a pantomime of cooking, taking containers and cooking utensils out, pretending to mix things and then sticking them into—a microwave. It wasn't the same one Kirstin had used. This one actually worked.

Grasping Kelly, he tugged her close and showed her the barely visible pressure buttons.

Of course, she still didn't know how long things would need to cook, but she was worlds ahead just knowing where the cooking apparatus was and how to turn it on.

Next, he began opening cabinets and removing various packages. These he lined up on the countertop by color. No one could read the markings on the packages, but color

coding they could grasp. He started with the blue, frowned for a moment and finally grasped Kelly's arm, pinching the muscle of her upper arm.

Kelly stared at him. "Flesh?" She exchanged a look with Maggie and Kirstin, but then it dawned on her what he was trying to impart. "Meat? I think he means this is meat of some kind."

"You don't think he means ... flesh?" Kirstin asked worriedly.

"Don't even talk like that!" Maggie snapped. "Kelly must be right." She thought about it a moment. "We must have done something wrong. It didn't look like meat when we mixed it with that other package ... didn't smell like meat either. Nothing I've ever eaten, anyway."

Kirstin looked at her.

"Don't!"

Taking the package, Tau extended his claws and ripped it open. He looked up to find that all three women were staring at him, wide eyed. He glanced at Kelly questioningly. She shrugged.

After a moment, he seemed to dismiss it and turned to the cooking apparatus, placing the package inside. Tugging Kelly close once more, he made her watch while he punched the buttons. Then he stopped it and made her punch them in again. After she'd punched it twice more, stopping it and starting it again, they stepped back and waited. A ping sounded. Tau stepped to the appliance, opened the door and removed the package, placing it carefully on the counter.

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Everyone gathered around, looking at it, sniffing. It didn't particularly look appetizing, but it didn't smell half bad. Taking a utensil, Kelly speared a tiny piece, blew on it until it cooled and carefully tasted it. She rolled it around on her tongue a moment and finally swallowed. "Not bad. It could use a little salt."

They discovered, contrary to what they'd thought, that the packaged foods were in the nature of TV dinners, already prepared. Kelly was embarrassed, but how were they to know? Nal had brought the three of them in. They'd thought he expected them to cook.

Another thought occurred to Kelly sharply on the heels of that. She was tired of thinking, and referring, to them as aliens. They belonged somewhere. As a race, they had to have a name.

When Kin-ko came in to dispose of his dish, she approached him. He looked her over questioningly and she pointed to herself, and then the other women. "Humans—Earthlings. Kelly, Maggie and Kirstin are humans from Earth."

He glanced over at Kirstin and winked.

Kelly waited until she had his attention again, then ticked their names off on her fingers. He nodded, touched his chest. "Kin-ko are haden from Ducran."

Kelly smiled, feeling like she was finally making some progress. "We go Ducran?"

He frowned, but it did not seem to be an expression of confusion.

Nevertheless, Kelly looked around for something that might help explain and finally found a small object. Taking it

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in her hand, she mimicked a ship in flight. "Earth...." She patted the countertop, then lifted off and moved the object through the air. "Ducran?"

An indecipherable expression crossed his features. "Gone. Dead."

"Who?" Kelly said blankly. "Who's gone? Who's dead?"

"Ducran. World dead," he said quietly and turned to go.

Kelly stopped him. "Where are we going then?"

He looked at her for a long moment, and she wondered if he'd understood any part of the question. "Oddur place. New home."

* * * *

The first morning Kelly woke feeling nauseous, she thought it was something she'd eaten. After the third day, however, she knew she'd come down with the same thing every other female on board was suffering from—pregnancy.

She wasn't particularly surprised—she'd discovered her IUD was mysteriously missing. She wasn't particularly relieved, either. She thought it might insure her continued safety, but she could not be certain without knowing what the plan was. After her 'discussion' with Kin-ko, she felt like she had a fairly good grasp of the situation, but it was only guessing when all was said and done. She couldn't be sure Kin-ko had really understood what she was asking. She couldn't be sure, for that matter, that she'd understood him correctly.

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And, even if she was right, she was still only guessing at the purpose she and the other women were expected to serve.

If it was true, though, that their planet had somehow been destroyed, maybe the men on board this ship were the last of their kind and had decided to raid Earth to find females for themselves?

She didn't spend a lot of time wondering why they hadn't just decided to try to settle on Earth. They would've been strapped to a lab table and dissected before they could say 'we come in peace'. She might not know Ducrans, but she sure knew her own species.

Unfortunately, she *didn't* know Ducrans. For all she knew they were as arrogant about their own superiority and as unfeeling of 'lower life forms' as humans were. She and the other women might be nothing more than lab rats being taken home for study. She might have been just as well off if she hadn't been impregnated.

It was not only a sobering thought, the possibility of it gave her nightmares. She had no way to escape, no way to return home.

It didn't help her feelings that Tau stopped coming to her room after he'd impregnated her. Apparently, that had been the full extent of his 'favor', to see to it that she was impregnated, which must mean there was safety for her in being in that condition—she hoped.

Kirstin, their resident brain child, had suggested one evening while they did kitchen duty together that they take over the ship and go home. Kelly would've been game for a

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try if it had seemed even a remote possibility. There were far too many insurmountable obstacles to that little plan, however.

For one, the men were two or three times as strong as a human. The strength Tau had exhibited when he'd lifted those men over his head and tossed them as he might a stick of wood, his ability to leap, straight up from a standing position, twenty feet into the air, were displays of extraordinary strength that she might not have believed if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. But she had. She knew Tau could not be the exception, that all of the Ducrans were incredibly strong. Five women might have some possibility of overcoming their own counterparts—and that was a strong might—but they had none of overpowering their captors.

There were drugs on board, of course. She knew that, too. Sedatives had been used on her and the other women. None of them were allowed free rein of the ship, however. There was always one or more of the Ducrans nearby. Even if they could get their hands on the sedative, none of them knew how much to use, how much would be enough, or too much.

She supposed, under the circumstances, she should not have felt squeamish about the possibility of killing their captors, but she was. If they'd been treated with cruelty, beaten, tortured or threatened with death, she didn't doubt she could have overcome her reluctance to kill. They hadn't been, and, as anxious as she was that there was still the possibility of all of the above, she couldn't kill on the off chance that her survival depended on killing them when that might not be the case at all ... when, in fact, an act of

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aggression on their part might fail and bring about something that had never been intended.

The most insurmountable part of Kirstin's escape plan, however, was the fact that none of them had any idea whatsoever of how to pilot the ship even if they managed to take over it. Somehow, she simply could not envision the possibility of holding one of the Ducrans hostage and forcing him to fly them back to Earth.

Then, too, they'd been traveling for weeks now, she was certain. Was there even enough fuel, food, air and water to make it back to Earth alive?

Chapter Six

Of all the Ducrans, Kin-ko was by far the friendliest. Nal was testy, to say the very least. Tau was aloof and had begun to avoid her about the time she discovered she was pregnant. Ral-o was shy and mostly kept to himself. Tin was downright scary. The way he looked at her gave Kelly the shivers and she avoided him whenever possible.

Kin-ko, however, seemed approachable. Each time she had an opportunity to speak with him, she taught him a few words of English, and made him teach her a few words of Ducranian ... or whatever they called their language.

By the time they'd been traveling for—at her nearest guesstimate—a month, she'd mastered enough to begin to feel that there was at least a possibility of carrying on a conversation one day. Self-preservation, she'd discovered, was a tremendous inspiration.

Unfortunately, no matter how hard she worked to teach, and learn, no matter how friendly Kin-ko seemed, she did not manage to wheedle a great deal of information out of him. And her attempts did not go unnoticed.

Kelly was straightening the dining area and wiping the tables and chairs when she realized she was no longer alone. She glanced toward the door to the kitchen, thinking Lovey or Sheryl, whom she'd worked with that evening, had come in. Seeing neither of them, she looked toward the door that led into the central passage.

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Tin lounged in the doorway, propped against the frame. A slow grin split his face when she noticed him. He pushed away from the wall and sauntered toward her.

Kelly glanced toward the kitchen again, realizing with a good bit of concern that she'd worked her way to the far end of the room. Tin stopped and propped one hip on the table nearest her, effectively cornering her and blocking her path to either door.

Her heart immediately leapt into double time, but she did her best to hide her uneasiness, instead looking at him questioningly.

"Kel-ly work hard," Tin said, grinning.

Kelly said nothing.

"Learn speak like Ducran." He poked his chest. "Tin wonder why."

As much as she hated to, Kelly realized she might as well drop the pretense of cleaning. She was done. She couldn't continue to wipe the same spot over and over without looking like she was trying to be nonchalant. "I thought it might be helpful."

"What way? So speak Kel-ly man?"

Kelly frowned. The Ducran's mastery of English might have improved, but it was still hard to follow. Not that she'd had difficulty in this instance. She just wasn't certain of what he was getting at. "Kin-ko said we were going to Ducran. I thought it would be nice to be able to carry on a conversation."

His eyes narrowed. "Kirstin Kin-ko's woman."

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What did that have to do with anything? She shrugged. "I know. Maggie is Nal's woman. Sheryl is Ral-o's woman. Lovey is your woman."

He nodded. "All belong. Not Kel-ly."

Kelly was afraid she knew where this was going. "Tau—"

He cut her off, making a slicing motion with his hand. "Tau no want human. No want Kel-ly. Tau say to Kin-ko. Tin hear."

Kelly felt a sick sensation in the pit of her stomach. It wasn't as if she particularly cared whether he wanted her or not, but she'd thought when Tau impregnated her that that would mean she'd been claimed, that she had a place and would be safe. "I'm pregnant, carrying his ... baby," she said, touching her stomach.

Tin shrugged. "Tau proud haden. No want human/haden offspring."

Kelly felt a surge of anger. It was a hell of a time to be telling her that! He'd allowed her to think.... She stopped, realizing he'd implied he was returning the favor, her life for his. He hadn't intended to claim her as his woman any of the time. He'd only 'performed' to insure her safety by impregnating her. He'd given a damn good impression of enjoying it at the time, but she supposed sex was just sex to a man, where ever they hailed from. "So you're saying I'm not claimed, even though I'm carrying his child?"

He nodded. "Tin would take."

She'd been afraid that was what he was angling at. She rather thought she would've preferred Nal, who was nearly as unappealing, but not quite as nasty. "You have Lovey."

He shrugged. "Take both. Tin allowed."

"You are, but no one else?"

"No law against take two."

"Then I could choose anyone I pleased?" Kelly said tightly.

"You no choose. You no Ducran. Female Ducran choose. Female Earth no choose."

In other words, she was not actually to be an accepted member of their little colony. She supposed none of them were. "When we reach Ducran, there are others?"

"Some."

"Well, maybe one of them will decide to choose me."

"Will not. Kel-ly different."

Kelly felt her jaw go slack in surprise. "We're all different. We're all from Earth."

"You no like others." He pointed to her hair, then to her skin.

She frowned. He meant her coloring? It had never occurred to her that the Ducran's might be prejudiced about color! She was black Irish, with a little American Indian thrown in for good measure—dark hair, green eyes, medium complexion. The other women were all fair, Maggie and Sheryl had red hair. Kirstin was blond. Lovey's hair was strawberry blond ... and all were blue-eyed, very fair skinned. "My coloring?" she said incredulously. "You mean because I'm dark?"

He nodded but held his hand out and lowered it. "Bad genes."

Because she was a little under average height? Unless one counted the fact that nothing was ever designed for use by short people, she'd never encountered prejudice because of

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her height! But, quite suddenly, it clicked as she mentally reviewed the other women. They'd been carefully selected for the traits they had in common with the hadens. They were all average in height, weight, had light skin, light hair ... like the Ducrans. She was short and dark, and dark was supposed to be genetically dominant. She not only hadn't been chosen. She wouldn't have been. And that meant she was the least likely to be acceptable of all of the Earth women in their society.

"If I've got bad genes, why would you want me?" she asked tightly.

He shrugged. "Kel-ly work hard. Smart."

Lovely! Which was worse, being a sex slave or a work slave? "I think I'll just take my chances," she said angrily, trying to push past him.

He caught her, pushed her back so that she was trapped between his body and the wall. Something long, thick and very hard nudged her cleft through her clothing. Kelly tried to bring her knee up, but she didn't have enough room to maneuver. A slow grin split his face. "Like woman fight."

Kelly felt the blood drain from her face. It was a very bad sign when a man wanted a woman to fight him.

On the other hand, yielding wasn't something that appealed to her. "Let me go," she said through gritted teeth.

He slipped an arm between them, cupping her sex in a grip that was painful. "Tin claim Kel-ly, Kel-ly safe."

Kelly's lips tightened. "I've heard that one before."

He looked puzzled.

"Tau claimed me."

Slowly, he shook his head, grinning. "Tau...." He paused, searching for the word he wanted. "Fuck. Not same ting."

Glorious. The 'F' word was now universal! "Same thing as what you want," she said tightly. "Damned if I can see the difference."

"Fuck Tau, fuck Kin-ko, now Tin."

Kelly tried to knee him in the groin again. "I did NOT fuck Kin-ko!" she yelled at him, trying to scratch him when the knee-to-the-groin failed again.

He caught her hands, forcing them to the wall on either side of her head. "Like woman fight," he murmured huskily, grinning.

He leaned closer. Thinking he meant to kiss her, Kelly turned her head. Instead, he bit down on the soft tissue between her neck and her shoulder, hard enough to draw blood. Kelly screamed, wrestling to free her hands, mindless in her pain.

Abruptly, he was pulled away. Kelly was slammed back against the wall as Nal wrenched her from Tin's grasp to separate them. Weak and shaky, Kelly slid slowly down the wall until she was sitting on the floor, watching in terror as Tin swung at Nal, hitting him hard enough on the jaw to snap his head sideways. Nal roared in fury, retaliating with a blow that lifted Tin off of his feet and pitched him over the table behind him. He twisted as he went over, landing on his feet, then launched himself at Nal again.

Dimly aware that she was liable to be trampled at any moment, or struck by one of the flying tables and chairs, Kelly tried to crawl away. Whether by accident, or design, a

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flying foot caught her in the stomach, knocking the breath from her. Blinded by the pain, she curled into a tight ball, but blackness swarmed around her. The sounds of battle grew distant, indistinct and finally vanished with the light.

* * * *

The raised voices caught his attention, but it was the scream that galvanized Tau. He reached the doorway to the dining area just as Nal dragged Tin from the woman he'd cornered. When Tau saw that it was Kelly, fury surged through him. Kin-ko and Ral-o caught his arms even as he surged forward, however. He struggled to throw them off, uncertain of whether his uppermost thought was to rush to Kelly to check her injuries or to get his hands on Tin—until Tin kicked her.

A mindless rage consumed him then. With a roar of fury, he tossed Kin-ko off and broke Ral-o's hold, launching himself at Tin. Catching Tin around the throat, he squeezed with all his might, slamming the man against the bulkhead. Tin's eyes bulged. Frantically, he worked to loosen Tau's grip on his throat. Tau was vaguely aware that the others had leapt at him, trying to break his hold, but only vaguely. His entire focus was on squeezing the life from Tin.

They broke his hold by sheer weight of numbers, taking him to the deck and pinning him there. Slowly, as he watched Tin struggling to catch his breath, the rage receded to allow more than primal brain function. He glanced quickly toward the wall, where he'd last seen Kelly. She was curled into a ball, barely breathing.

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He lurched against his captors, trying to break their hold. Something pricked his arm and he whirled toward the new threat, but his struggles were useless. Slowly but surely the sedative worked its way into his system. The last thing he saw before unconsciousness claimed him was Nal bending over Kelly.

When he regained consciousness, he found that he'd been confined to the brig, and confinement, he discovered, gave him far too much time to think.

* * * *

When Kelly woke, she discovered she was in her own compartment. She frowned, grasping at fragments of memories. Someone had carried her to another room. It was a room she'd been in before, when she'd first been taken, apparently some sort of infirmary. She felt her shoulder and discovered it had been bandaged.

So, she hadn't imagined it. She had been taken to the infirmary and patched up before she'd been returned to her own room. She tried to sit up, but discovered her chest was bandaged too, which accounted for the fact that she was having so much trouble breathing. Nal, or Tin, she wasn't certain which, must have cracked ribs when he'd kicked her.

She still wasn't certain whether she just hadn't managed to get out of the way fast enough, or if it had been deliberate. She wasn't sure of which of the two men had kicked her either. Which was fine. She hated both of them.

She knew Nal hadn't come to her rescue so much as he was 'handling a disturbance'. He was the mission leader. It

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was his job to make sure everything ran smoothly, and having his men fight over the women wasn't conducive to a smooth running operation.

She tried to piece together just what had happened in the dining hall, but could only remember bits and pieces.

Exhausted with the effort, she drifted off to sleep once more. Some time later a sound filtered through her subconscious. Instantly alarmed, she tried to jerk upright, but relapsed as pain shot through her body seemingly from every direction at once. When she managed to open her eyes she saw that Lovey had stopped at the door to study her.

There was no compassion in her eyes, far from it. A self-satisfied smile curled her lips faintly.

"I brought you some food," she said flatly.

Kelly groaned. She wasn't hungry. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me. I was told to. I'd just as soon let you starve."

Stunned by the verbal attack, Kelly couldn't even come up with a suitable reply. She hadn't seen much of the other woman, but she had certainly never done anything to antagonize her.

Lovey looked pointedly at Kelly's bandages. "That'll teach you to mess with another woman's man."

"I didn't!" Kelly exclaimed indignantly. "Tin tried to rape me!"

"Yeah, right! He told me you'd come on to him. Just like you have all the other men on board!"

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Kelly's lips tightened. "Your idea of a come on must be the same as that asshole's! Breathing! Only I get the impression he'd screw a corpse if it was still a little warm."

Lovey took a threatening step in her direction, but stopped. "Just stay away from Tin. You'll live longer!"

If she'd been able to get up, Kelly would've slapped the woman's head clean off her shoulders. As it was, she could do nothing but rage inwardly as Lovely smirked and took her leave.

Kelly had had trouble keeping up with the passage of time since she'd been on board the ship, but she lost all concept of it thereafter. Nal came the next time she woke, checked her shoulder, changed her bandages and left again, all without a word. Not that she nursed any particular desire to chat with him, but it would've been nice to know how she stood now—apparently, she soon realized, in complete disgrace.

She was confined to her quarters. The only way she could measure the march of time was by the meals that were brought to her. She didn't know how long she'd lain in a half stupor from her injuries, but almost a week passed before Nal came again and removed her bandages. Instead of departing immediately afterwards, however, he motioned for her to get up.

Unnerved, Kelly struggled to her feet. It still hurt to move. It still hurt to breathe deeply, but the wound on her neck seemed to have healed, for which she was grateful. She'd more than half expected to get gangrene or something from the bite.

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She was ushered down the long corridor that bisected the ship and through a smaller doorway. Once inside, she discovered that it was a tiny room, filled with seats that had been bolted to the floor. She moved to the only seat not yet taken and sat. Nal strapped her in, then turned and made his way to the front.

She realized then that they were in the lander.

Apparently, they had arrived at their new home.

Chapter Seven

Seated in the back, Kelly could see little of their approach. In any case, the shields covered the front as they descended into the atmosphere. She closed her eyes as her stomach did a free fall, gripping the hand rests on either side of her. Someone—Sheryl, she thought—emitted a squeaky scream as the lander bucked twice and began to shudder so hard it seemed as if it would disintegrate or jar her teeth loose from her skull, at the very least.

For herself, she was too scared to scream. She'd always hated flying and had managed to avoid it most of her life. The few times she'd been on anything airborne had been frightening enough, but the lander went through the atmosphere like a stone skimming a pond, bouncing, dropping abruptly, bouncing up again.

She was praying for unconsciousness when the bucking and bouncing stopped abruptly. It was nearly as frightening as the jostling had been. For several moments she thought the lander had gone into a free fall.

She squeezed her eyes more tightly shut as she heard a mechanical whir and grinding. When she finally nerved herself to open her eyes, she saw the ground rushing up to meet them. She would've screamed except she was too terrified to find her voice.

In the next moment, the lander slammed against something solid. Instead of flying to pieces as she had more

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than half expected, however, she felt the familiar vibrations of wheels against a rock hard surface.

It seemed they'd landed.

As soon as they taxied to a stop, Nal and Tau, both seated in the very front, began flipping switches and punching buttons. Tin, Ral-o and Kin-ko unbuckled themselves and moved to the rear to help the women. Kelly unbuckled her own seat straps, fearful that Tin, who'd thrown her several challenging glances, would use it as an excuse to manhandle her.

She rose unsteadily, wondering if her wobbling knees would support her, and filed out behind the other women.

Outside, she saw a small crowd had gathered. They were silent, staring at the women as they walked down the gangplank, their expressions varying from curiosity to hostility. When the first of the crew appeared in the door, however, a joyous shout went up. Kin-ko and Tin grinned and waved. Ral-o reddened and ducked his head, but it was obvious he was as thrilled to be home as the others were.

The men flanked them as they reached the ground, herding them toward a small building that stood near the landing strip. Kelly could see little beyond the crowd. She craned her neck to appease her curiosity, however. Uncomfortable as she was with the stares of the Ducrans who'd gathered to gawk, she was determined not to allow them to think they'd cowed her as they had the others.

It reminded her of westerns she'd seen, where the Indian braves returned from a raid with white captives and all the villagers lined up to stare sullenly at their enemies.

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Ignoring them, she looked around at the new world, feeling a breathless excitement fill her despite her anxieties. She was among the first Americans to look upon another world, to walk on it. It seemed doubtful it would ever be anything she'd get the chance to brag about to fellow Americans, or anyone on Earth for that matter, but it was still thrilling.

The air was muggy. It seemed the city had been built in a tropical area, for she could see a tangle of forest threatening to encroach in every direction. The sky was more teal than blue, but she had no idea what that might signify other than the fact that it was pretty.

It was cooler inside the building they were taken to. Despite the fact that Kelly would've liked to have seen more, she was relieved to be out of the heat, and also away from the stares of the Ducrans.

There was a bathing facility inside, but otherwise the building had only a single room, which was crowded with beds.

Evidently, they were all to be held here a while.

* * * *

After a week of having done little more than sleep, Kelly was still weak enough from her injuries that the expenditure of energy in the terror of their descent tired her enough to climb onto the nearest bed and sleep.

She awoke to the sound of whispering. Disoriented at first, it took her a few moments to figure out where she was and who was whispering. She was tempted, when she realized it

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was Kirstin and Lovey, and their subject was her, to simply pretend she was still asleep. She finally decided, however, that she disliked the two women enough as it was. There was no sense in encouraging them to make her dislike them more by listening to their nasty remarks and allowing them to think they were talking about her behind her back.

She stretched, winced at the sharp pain that went through her, and sat up. She saw she had had the unmitigated gall to choose a bed right in the middle of the dorm, separating the 'chosen' golden girls. They were all piled on the bed furthest from where she lay.

"Kin-ko said she lied about him. He didn't sleep with her. He doesn't even like her. He was just trying to be polite."

She had to say one thing for the bimbo. She didn't mind saying to your face what she'd rather say to your back. It took an effort to restrain herself from informing Kirstin that she hadn't been out to get in Kin-ko's pants any of the time, but Kelly realized it would be a waste of breath. Obviously, they'd all decided what they wanted to believe.

She got up and went to use the facilities. There was a shower inside, an honest to god real one with running water. The facilities on the ship had been more like those on a plane or train. When you turned the facets on, it spit on you. In any case, she hadn't even had that much of a bath in nearly a week because of her injuries.

After about two seconds' thought, she decided to do a man thing. She climbed in fully clothed and washed her jeans, shirt and panties first, while she was still wearing them, then wrung them out and tossed them in the sink while she

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bathed. When she'd finished showering, she wrapped in a length of cloth she assumed was meant to be a towel, wrung her clothes again and took them back into the main room, hanging them over the head of her bed. They were probably no cleaner now than when she'd used the chemical cleaning device aboard ship, but it was all she had. She had to take care of them and make them last.

"She probably used all the damn hot water too," Lovey said in a loud whisper.

"Every fucking drop," Kelly responded complacently, not even bothering to look up.

"She thinks she's hot stuff," Kirstin muttered.

Kelly sighed, but decided to pretend she hadn't heard her. She sat down on her bed, cross legged, propping her elbows on her knees. She knew they'd gone back to whispering and snickering about her. It wasn't that she cared what their opinion of her was, but they'd banded together and formed the gang mentality. What one didn't have the guts to do or say if they were facing somebody one on one, with a gang at their back, they became brave, threatening and dangerous. She realized, as much as she hated it, that she was going to have to deal with the situation.

"If she isn't careful that alligator mouth of hers is going to overrun her canary ass," Sheryl muttered, just loudly enough Kelly heard her very distinctly.

Kelly thought about ignoring that remark, too, but decided doing so might encourage them to become braver. She wasn't about to stand like a stone and allow them to run over her.

Plunking her hands on her hips, Kelly turned and gave Sheryl a narrow eyed glare. "So bring your scrawny ass over here if you think you can make me shut my mouth."

Sheryl glared back at her, but she didn't get up. "I wouldn't lower myself to fight like white trash!"

Cracked ribs or not, Kelly got up from the bed and strode across the room. "You *are* white trash, and worse, you're all mouth. You say one more word to me or about me and I'm going to knock those perfect white teeth of yours down your throat."

Sheryl's eyes widened, but she said nothing else ... until Kelly strode back to her own bed. "Bitch," she muttered.

Kelly took a deep breath, counted to ten, but then she realized that if she did nothing it would only encourage them. Besides, she'd already taken more than she was willing to take off of anybody.

Whirling on her heel, she stalked back across the room with blood in her eyes. All four women looked up. Their eyes widened. Their jaws went slack. Kelly reached over and grabbed a handful of Sheryl's hair, dragged her off the bed, and across the room. The three still on the bed set up a chorus of screeching, in counter point to the shrieks emanating from Sheryl's mouth. When Kelly grew tired of dragging Sheryl around the room by her hair, she slammed the woman's head against the floor and sat down on Sheryl's chest, hard, one knee on each arm. Grasping a handful of hair on each side of Sheryl's head, Kelly lifted the woman's head and began pounding it on the floor. "I ... told ... you ... to ...

leave ... me ... the ... Hell ... alone," she said slowly, emphasizing each word with another head slam.

Abruptly, she was seized by both arms and lifted off of Sheryl's chest. She came away with two handfuls of hair. She was deposited none too gently on the bed she'd lately occupied. Still more than a little furious, anticipating an attack, Kelly bounced back up the moment her butt hit the mattress, her arm drawn back, her fist clenched.

It was Tau.

Kelly felt her jaw go slack. She sat down again.

Tau glared at her a long moment. "No more fight!"

Kelly glanced at the other women, then back at Tau, tempted to inform him that Sheryl had started it. It occurred to her, however, that it would not only sound like a very childish excuse for doing something she shouldn't have, but he probably wouldn't believe her.

"I was through anyway," she said tightly, holding a hand to her ribs while she struggled to breathe, too furious to feel much pain at the moment.

He studied her a moment more and finally moved to the fallen woman, helping her to her feet. She wept all over his tunic.

Kelly gave her the evil eye all the way back to the other bunk, then while Tau lectured them about fighting, she made sure she caught each one's eye and allowed them to know she would kick their ass too if they messed with her anymore.

When Tau turned back to look at her, she looked down, studying her hands. Curly red hairs were stuck to her fingers. She picked them off one by one and laid them in a row on her

mattress. Altogether, she counted fifty. By the time she'd finished counting, Tau had left.

No one said anything after Tau left. The only sound for several minutes was Sheryl's caterwauling, but finally that quieted to an occasional snuffle.

"Poor Sheryl."

"She shouldn't have done that to her."

"Shhh!"

"I had no idea she was so ... violent! She always acted like such a lady. Just goes to show...."

Kelly got up abruptly, stalked across the room and dropped the ball of hair she'd collected. "You lost this, Sheryl," she said with an evil smile.

"Don't you dare touch me!"

"Not even with somebody's else's hand," Kelly assured her. "I just wanted to make it perfectly clear that I do not give a damn how any of you feel about me, but I will not tolerate anyone insulting me, or threatening me, and I damn sure won't be anybody's door mat. I don't care what Tau said."

She returned to her own bed then, climbed up on the mattress, and folded her legs Indian style as she had before, dropping her elbows across her knees. Her ribs were killing her after that little bout of exercise, but she wasn't about to let on. They were like a wolf pack. One scent of weakness and they'd all be on her.

It grew quiet in the room after a while as the women got up one by one to seek their own beds.

She braced herself when she noticed out of the corner of her eye that one of the women was walking directly toward

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her. When she looked up, she saw it was Maggie, and for the first time a sense of defeat descended on her. She'd thought Maggie, at least, was a friend.

Maggie stopped beside her bed, shifting nervously. "Can I sit down?"

"Sure," Kelly said immediately, but she watched the other woman warily.

"Look. I'm sorry about that. I tried to tell them I knew it couldn't possibly be true."

Kelly studied her doubtfully. "Which part?"

Maggie blushed. "They're just scared, that's all."

"And I'm supposed to excuse them for being complete assholes because they're scared? I don't think so."

"Aren't you scared? Even a little?"

Kelly gave her a look.

Maggie looked down at her hands, twisting them in her lap. "None of us really think badly of you. It's just ... The only thing that makes us feel even a little safe, or a little less scared, is that we were chosen as mates. Everybody's just scared of losing their man and what'll happen to them if they do."

Kelly stared at her a long moment. She supposed she couldn't blame them for wanting to fight tooth and nail for survival, but why attack her? It wasn't like any of them were in any danger of being ditched for her. It wasn't her fault that they felt threatened by the fact that she was a free woman. "You're wrong if you think I don't understand. I do. Perfectly."

Maggie smiled. "You forgive us?"

Kelly smiled back at her. "When hell freezes over."

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* * * *

Even after five years, Tau still found it hard to accept that his world, his people, had been reduced to so few. It was at council meetings that Tau always felt the worst sense of defeat, the near impossibility of starting over. The small building they'd erected to hold meetings was filled to capacity, with every living soul present. And there were not even enough of them to have made up one of the tiniest towns on their home world.

As long as they were scattered, going about the business of surviving, he could almost convince himself that there was some hope for them, that they would rebuild and life would be as it once was, but not at times like this.

When they gathered and he knew every face, every name and every skill each possessed, he thought of all they'd lost, all of those who were missing, all that could never be again because those with the knowledge and skills had been lost.

New Ducran was nothing like their home world. It was as beautiful, in its own way, untouched by civilization of any kind, abundant with every raw material imaginable, but it was raw, primeval ... and they had little in the way of tools to take what they needed from it, to build new. Much of what they had once known would have to be re-invented if they were ever to have it again.

Standing at council meetings was like watching the last gasp of a dying man who hadn't yet realized that it was his last.

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He'd come reluctantly, knowing what he must do—and late. They were well into their discussions of what they'd discovered on the mission by the time he arrived to deliver his own report. No doubt he'd been passed over once already. All of the other members of the expedition appeared to have spoken already. The elders frowned at him as he made his way to the podium.

He looked out over the group and finally focused on his notes. "The preliminary data I collected indicates a strong probability of a genetic compatibility between our two species, although I'm sure, since most of you were there to greet us on our return, you know that there are traits we do not share. There is no way to tell, for certain, given current knowledge of genetics, the equipment available to us and the lack of studies, that we are completely compatible insofar as reproduction. Abnormalities could appear in offspring generated by cross breeding that we can not anticipate due to the limitations of our knowledge.

"I'm sure most of you are aware that early experiments in cross breeding two different species with animals of a lower order, prior to the loss of our home planet, were not successful—in the sense that the new species created was not capable of reproduction. On Earth, similar experiments had been performed in the past and their results were no better than our own.

"Currently, the females who were selected according to our strict criteria have been impregnated. We will be keeping a careful watch on them during the gestation period. Once the cubs are born, we'll be able to run tests on them to determine

whether there will be any point in further contact with their species."

When he'd concluded his talk, he returned to his seat, waiting for the question and answer session to end, feeling butterflies gathering in his stomach the closer the time approached when he would be able to speak with the elders. He knew his decision was the only one he could have made. He wasn't completely certain of how he felt about it other than that it was morally right, but he knew he no longer had a choice in the matter. After the last of the audience had filed out, he approached the elders.

"I'd like to know what was decided on the disposition of the dark female we brought back with us."

The senior elder frowned at him. "If you'd seen fit to grace us with your presence when the meeting started you'd know what was decided."

Tau bowed his head respectfully. "I ... was delayed. I apologize for my tardiness."

"Very well. According to Nal, the fetus the female was carrying died as a result of the ... incident on board shortly before your arrival. Under the circumstances, and since reports also indicate that the female in question is prone to create disharmony, we agreed that we should consider it an opportunity for closer study of the species. The female was turned over to the science department. Once you're finished running tests on the remains, we'd like a full report."

Tau stared at the Elder, wondering if he'd heard him correctly. "Study?"

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The Elder looked at him quizzically. "Are you all right, my boy?"

"Yes. The study?" Tau said sharply.

The Elder shrugged. "The fetus probably wasn't sufficiently developed to be of any use to us, but you might as well check it out. And we could certainly use a little more information regarding the reproductive process in these humans."

Chapter Eight

The morning following their arrival, the crew members arrived to collect their women. Kin-ko was the first and Kirstin gave a squeal of delight when he arrived, flying across the room and into his waiting arms. Despite her animosity toward Kirstin, Kelly couldn't help but be a little envious. Kirstin at least appeared to be happy.

As the day wore on, the other members arrived and one by one the women departed until Kelly was alone.

It was late in the afternoon when a Ducran Kelly had never seen arrived for her. He spoke no English at all, merely gestured to her to rise, grasped her arm and led her from the building. The sun was setting as they left. Kelly gazed at it in awe, wondering if it was the atmosphere that made the orb look almost green, as the earth's atmosphere often made it's setting sun appear orange. The sky, too, was magnificent, awash with colors she'd never before seen in a sunset.

To Kelly's surprise she was not directed toward a vehicle. Instead, the Ducran

led her from the area on foot. Kelly was a little puzzled by that until she realized there seemed to be no vehicles at all, none parked and none in motion. Despite the fact that the walking jarred her sore ribs, she decided she was glad to get the opportunity to see a little more of the world the Ducran's called home. She'd seen very little on her arrival and nothing since but the walls of the holding cell she'd been led to.

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The city had been built upon a rise, with the landing field at the peak. It wasn't a vantage point that allowed her a clear and unobstructed view of the city since it was not a sharp rise. Nevertheless, few of the buildings were more than two stories tall, which allowed her to glimpse bits and pieces of the city that lay in front of her as far as the jungle. The forest rose like an impenetrable, purple-green wall around the circumference, as if the land the city had been built upon had only just been hacked from it and the vegetation only awaited an opportunity to reclaim it.

The street they followed was well packed dirt, but she saw none that seemed to be paved. The buildings on either side of the narrow throughway were small, squat, and constructed out of some sort of stone. Not one building they passed wore a weathered look that told of the passage of time. Most looked as if they'd only been recently completed.

They passed no one, which was also odd and more than a little eerie. One would have thought there would be children outside playing, at least ... talk about rolling up the sidewalks at dusk!

After about a ten minute walk, they turned off the road and approached a building that had the look of an official structure. It was two stories high and somewhat larger than the other buildings surrounding it. The Ducran led her up a short flight of steps and inside.

Kelly looked around curiously.

Something about it reminded her forcefully of a hospital; the complete utilitarianism of it, the smell of chemicals, the muted sounds, the complete absence of color.

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Uneasiness crept up her spine, but she tried to dismiss it, deciding she must have been brought there so that they could examine the injuries she'd sustained prior to landing. She would've told them it was totally unnecessary, that she was well on the way to being fully mended, but neither the Ducran who'd escorted her, nor the one she was turned over to appeared to speak a word of English.

She supposed that was why none of the Ducrans who'd brought them back from Earth had spoken much English. They had not had time to learn the language, had just heard it for the first time when they arrived on Earth.

When questioning them in English failed, Kelly wracked her memory in search of words she'd learned from Kin-ko that might help her to find out what was going on, but her grasp of their language was so minimal as to be almost completely useless.

The man, who was wearing a loose jumpsuit that might have passed for the surgical gear of his Earth bound counterparts, led her into a tiny room and handed her something that looked like a loose shift. He then departed. Kelly looked at the thin gown for a moment and finally shrugged. Evidently, she'd been right. She was to be examined. She didn't particularly want to be, but obviously objecting wasn't going to help.

When she'd removed her jeans and shirt, she held the gown up again, trying to decide which side was the front and which the back. It looked as if it had been designed to open in the front, but she'd never seen a hospital gown that did. On the other hand, it wasn't likely she was going to find anything

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she was used to on this world. Shrugging, she decided to put it on the way that seemed most likely to be correct.

Discarding her panties, she pulled the gown on, tying it in the front. When she'd finished, she tried to decide whether she should go out and look for the doctor, or wait until he returned for her. Finally deciding on the latter, she perched on the small bench against one wall where she'd placed her folded clothing after she'd removed it, thinking about what she'd seen of the city and wishing she'd had the chance to see more of it. Maybe they'd take her back to the jail, or whatever that place was, by another route? She doubted it, but there was always a chance.

She didn't have long to allow her thoughts to wander. The Ducran returned, grasped her arm and led her from the dressing room and down a short corridor. There was a table inside ... in fact pretty much everything one would expect to see in a hospital examining room, a bright overhead light, cabinets containing various jars, a tray with some really weird looking instruments.

He helped her on to the table and indicated that she was to lie flat.

Kelly had her first inkling that something wasn't quite as it should be when he strapped her ankles to the table. She sat up abruptly, trying to pull her ankles free, clawing at his hands with her fingernails. He ignored her and finished securing the straps, then pushed her flat. Kelly fought harder, but she was no match for his strength. He caught her arms and tied first one wrist and then the other, despite her frantic attempts to pull free of his grasp.

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Looking completely unruffled by the struggle that had left her winded, he untied her gown and folded back the sides, leaving her completely exposed. Reaching behind him, he took up something that looked like a marker, studied her heaving body for several moments and then leaned over her, drawing a line carefully from her throat all the way down the center of her body to her pubic bush. After studying it a moment, he drew a second line across her lower abdomen. Apparently satisfied, he turned away and moved to the cabinet behind her. Kelly craned her head around, trying to see what he was doing.

It wasn't until he turned around that she saw he'd been preparing a syringe.

A surge of fear and anger went through her then and she screamed and kept on screaming as he came at her with the needle.

Abruptly, the door burst open. Tau paused on the threshold, pale, looking almost as terrified as she was. For the space of a heartbeat, he seemed frozen in place. Then a look of rage crossed his features. He lifted both hands, balling them into fists and unsheathing his razor sharp claws. Roaring something Kelly couldn't understand, he leapt toward the stunned doctor, who'd frozen as the door flew open, his face a mask of stunned surprise.

With one swipe, Tau took the Ducran's hand off at the wrist. The hand, still clutching the syringe, fell to the floor. Gasping, his eyes nearly bulging from their sockets as he stared down at the stump, the doctor grasped his wounded

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arm and fell back, watching in frozen horror as Tau advanced on him purposefully and grabbed him by the throat.

Kelly, who'd been stunned to silence at Tau's entrance, screamed in horror as blood shot from the doctor's wrist, splattering her face and chest.

Her scream halted Tau in his tracks. He froze, his hand raised to slash the doctor's throat, glanced toward Kelly. Sheathing his claws, he slammed his fist into the man's jaw hard enough Kelly heard the bone crack. The man went down like a felled tree.

Tau stared down at him a moment. When the man showed every indication of being unconscious, he turned toward Kelly, unsheathed his claws once more and slashed the straps that bound her. Scooping her into his arms without a word, he turned and strode quickly from the examination room, increasing his speed until he was almost running when he burst through the doors that fronted the building.

There were Ducrans walking the streets, Kelly noticed when they erupted from the hospital. The crash of the doors as they flew back and struck the sides of the building, stopped everyone in their tracks. Dozens of pairs of eyes homed in on them as Tau leapt the steps and landed on the ground with Kelly still clutched against his chest, then made his way to a beast that was calmly feeding on the grasses in front of the hospital.

Kelly stared at it as Tau strode toward it. It looked like nothing so much as a giant bird—that had been plucked. Its hide was a deep maroon and pitted, which made Kelly wonder if it actually had had its feathers plucked. Its beak and legs

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were blue. A half dozen or so thin, white feathers protruded from the top of its head, its tail, and the edges of its stubby wings.

There was a saddle on its back and a bridle in its beak. Tau tossed her onto the saddle and leapt up behind her. Taking the reins, he pulled the animal's head up and around, turned the beast toward the jungle and kicked it into motion.

* * * *

The animal moved with amazing speed. Kelly had never been on the back of a horse in her life, but she doubted a horse could've matched the beast for speed or endurance. Within moments, they had cleared the streets of the city and were racing along a narrow trail that looked as if it had been hacked through the jungle with nothing more than machetes. They'd been riding nearly an hour by Kelly's best calculation when the trail ended abruptly. The sun had set and the light was fading fast. Kelly more than half expected that they would stop for the night.

Instead, Tau slowed the animal and urged him through the brush. As they moved deeper into the vegetation, it gradually grew thicker and thicker until the beast was slowed to a walk, forcing its way inch by inch through the tangle of growth.

Tau had not spoken since he'd taken her, and Kelly, knowing there was little chance of receiving an explanation for what had just happened, kept her peace. In any case, her thoughts were focused inward as they progressed. She was in pain, and it seemed to increase with every jostling motion of the beast. She'd been too shocked at first to pay it a great

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deal of attention, but slowly it had forced its way into her awareness, growing sharper and stronger, pushing her shock and fear to the background of her mind.

It wasn't until she felt a sticky wetness between her legs, however, that she realized what the pain meant. Unfortunately, she didn't know how to go about telling Tau that she didn't think she could bear the continual jostling much longer, that she was afraid she was having a miscarriage.

As the dimness beneath the jungle vegetation slowly grew to absolute darkness, Kelly ceased to worry about distracting Tau from the business of escape and clutched her belly, hoping the counter pressure would lessen the cramping. It had no appreciable effect.

"Soon, Kel-ly. Promise," Tau said quietly.

Kelly realized she'd been moaning in pain. She nodded, but she no longer thought it would help to stop. She doubted anything would help short of putting her out of her misery.

She was scarcely even aware of stopping when they finally did. It was too dark to see anything. Dimly, she wondered how Tau had managed to guide the beast, but finally decided his eyes must function more like cat eyes than human, for he hadn't seemed to falter at any point. Perhaps, he'd known exactly where he was going, but she knew even if she had known she would never have been able to find her way through the jungle they'd just traversed in broad daylight, let alone in the dark.

"Stay," he said as he got down. She didn't argue. She was just grateful the lurching and bumping had ceased. She was

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vaguely aware of movement around her, but couldn't see well enough to tell what Tau was doing.

After a time, a spark of light appeared. Despite her pain, it caught Kelly's attention as it leapt to life and grew brighter and stronger, illuminating stone walls on either side of it that led upwards into darkness.

Tau moved to the beast and reached up for her. Kelly put her hands on his shoulders as he swung her down but as her feet struck the ground, her knees buckled. He caught her, lifting her into his arms and carrying her toward the fire he'd built and laying her on the ground perhaps a yard away from it. She turned on her side immediately, drawing her knees up and discovered he'd fashioned a bed of sorts for her, throwing a blanket over a mound of vegetation that rustled as she turned over on her side.

Tau stood over her for several minutes, staring down at her. Finally, he sat down, braced his back on the stone wall behind him and pulled Kelly into his lap. It was only then that Kelly realized they must be in a cave. The warmth of his body seemed to help ease the pain fractionally, but as time passed nothing filtered through it or soothed it. Toward morning, when the fire had burned itself out, the pain finally stopped and Kelly drifted to sleep.

Sunlight woke her the following morning. Kelly was reluctant to release her hold on the peacefulness of sleep, but something about the light tugged at her mind until finally she opened her eyes and sat up, looking around groggily.

Warmth filled her slowly along with the realization that the passage of time as marked by the revolution of the world

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around a sun was something she had not experienced in a long time. She'd had no idea how much she missed feeling the heat of the sun on her cheeks, smelling air that had not been recycled.

That, then, was why she'd been filled with a sense of well being, the knowledge that her life had regained a tiny focal point of normalcy. It was not the same, but it was familiar enough to give her a sense of hope.

She saw that, contrary to her thoughts the night before, they had not slept in a cave, but rather in a fairly shallow indentation in the side of a rocky slope. The 'cave' was no more than a ten foot by six foot crevice, fully open on the front side to a wide, rocky ledge that fell away gradually into the jungle below. Before her, she could see the tips of other mountains above the tangle of jungle growth that seemed to stretch forever.

A sound caught her attention and she glanced toward it. Tau was climbing the slope, a small, freshly killed animal in one hand. It looked like it must be some sort of rodent, about the size of a rabbit.

Nausea washed through her and she looked away. That was when she realized that the whole lower half of the shift she was wearing was covered in dried blood. Suddenly self-conscious, she pulled the blanket across her lap, but a wave of weakness washed through her. She'd thought when the pain had ceased at last that the crisis was over. Evidently, it had been, but not the way she'd thought. She'd miscarried. She had to have lost the baby for there to be so much blood.

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But, what had happened to the fetus she must have expelled? Or was she not far enough along for there to have been evidence of miscarriage beyond the blood? She knew nothing about it at all except that she could not have bled so profusely and still be carrying the child she'd conceived.

As Tau busied himself building a new fire, Kelly lowered the blanket, staring down at her belly. She knew she couldn't have been far along, but her belly had already begun to pooch with the growth. It seemed smaller now, not quite normal, but diminished. She placed her hand on her stomach, pressing slightly. It was gone now and she hadn't even fully accepted its presence to begin with, not consciously, anyway.

A wave of inexplicable loss washed over her. She didn't know why she should feel so sorrowful when she had not really welcomed pregnancy in the first place, except as it pertained to the possibility of her own survival, but she did.

When she looked up, she saw that Tau was watching her.

She looked away, staring at the distant view. "Why did you help me?" she asked, though she didn't really expect an answer.

"Protect my cub."

Kelly glanced at him sharply, but she couldn't hold his gaze. He'd risked ... god alone knew what, to protect his unborn child and now it would never be born! She found she couldn't bring herself to tell him that he'd wasted his time. Partly, it was because she didn't think she could talk about it at present without bursting into tears, but it was also because she realized in that moment that he could just as easily abandon her in this alien wilderness as he had saved her to

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begin with and he might if he found out there was no child to protect.

She couldn't even allow herself to contemplate the possibility of being left alone in this wild, alien environment. It would've been bad enough on Earth, but there, at least, there was a possibility of finding her way out of the woods and back to civilization. Here there *was* no civilization, except one that, apparently, thought she'd be more useful to them dead.

After a moment, she wrapped the blanket carefully around her shoulders and stood up. She staggered slightly as blackness almost engulfed her, but steadied herself by blindly throwing out one hand to brace herself on the rock face.

Slowly, the blackness receded. She didn't look at Tau, but made her way carefully outside and looked around. The sound of trickling water caught her attention and she turned toward it, tracking the source, picking her way carefully over the rough stones that jabbed her bare feet and pushing past the brush that blocked her path. The sound grew louder as she walked until at last she pushed a limb aside and found she was standing near the edge of a small pool of water.

She stared at it for several moments, wondering if she dared get in. It was unnerving enough to consider getting into a wild body of water on Earth, where she knew what sort of wildlife she might encounter. She had no clue of what sort of animals, deadly or otherwise, might inhabit the tiny pool. For that matter, she had no idea that the clear liquid rushing from the side of the mountain was actually water. It looked like water, but looks could certainly be deceiving. Studying it and

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the area around it, she finally noticed that there were small tracks nearby. Some sort of animal had been here to drink so perhaps it was safe enough.

She found, when she tested it with her fingers that it was icy cold. She jerked her fingers back and examined them, but saw it hadn't damaged her and decided it must be nothing more than very cold water. Dropping the blanket, she pulled the soiled gown off and squatted on the edge to wash the dried blood from it. She had not, unfortunately, been wearing panties when she'd been 'rescued', or shoes, nothing but the hospital gown. There was no sense in whining over it, however. She was alive. She was fairly certain she wouldn't be if Tau had not come.

When she'd cleaned the gown and spread it over a bush to dry in the sun, she moved closer to the pool and began splashing water over herself. The cold made her stomach clench painfully, but she persisted until she was satisfied she was reasonably clean for someone who didn't have so much as a bar of soap or cloth to wash with.

Rising, she turned to retrieve the blanket she'd left draped over the limb of a bush, jerking reflexively when she saw Tau was standing not two yards from where she'd knelt to bathe.

For a long moment, he held her gaze with his own, then slowly his gaze traveled downward over her body. Kelly found she was holding her breath, waiting, though she had no idea for what. For him to point to her belly and denounce her? For him to rush over to her, throw her to the ground and have sex with her? For him to offer comfort for the loss of their baby? Her chin wobbled at that last thought despite her best

efforts. Without a word, he turned away and started back to their camp. She watched until he had disappeared through the brush and finally shook herself from her stupor and pulled the blanket around herself.

The smell of roasting meat assailed Kelly's nostrils long before she reached the camp once more and her stomach set up a clamoring for sustenance. Despite her reservations about eating anything completely unidentifiable, Kelly closed her mind and ate every morsel she was allowed, licking her fingers when she'd cleaned the bones.

It was incredibly uncouth, of course, but she couldn't think it was any more uncouth than wiping her hands on the blanket she'd wrapped around herself. When she glanced self-consciously at Tau, however, she paused. He was staring at her fingers as she sucked them as if mesmerized.

He looked away when he realized she'd noticed his scrutiny.

Kelly stared down at her exposed toes for several moments, but the silence was becoming more uncomfortable by the moment. "What do we do now, I wonder," she muttered.

"Live."

She glanced at him, a little surprised that he seemed to have understood her. "We can't go back, can we?"

"No."

Kelly studied him for a long moment, certain she shouldn't voice her doubts, but just as certain she had to know if she would look around one day and find that Tau had left her. "I can't. You can."

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He held her gaze for several heartbeats and then looked away. "No."

Kelly frowned. "You'd be punished? For helping me get away? But, why would they care? Nobody down there wanted me. What difference would it make?"

He stood up abruptly, unsheathing the claws of one hand and holding it up.

Kelly's eyes widened and she scooted back.

"Forbidden. I used on Ducran."

Kelly's jaw dropped. "What would they do?"

He sheathed his claws, turned away. "If Osit die, I die."

Chapter Nine

"You didn't kill him!" Kelly gasped, feeling outraged, although she didn't stop to examine why.

He threw a disgusted look at her over his shoulder. "Left to die."

Kelly digested that. It occurred to her, forcefully, that she should just let well enough alone. Why should she care if it was guilt that kept him with her, so long as she wasn't alone? She found, somehow, that she couldn't. "People saw us leave. There's no way they wouldn't have checked to see what happened inside. He was in a hospital, for god's sake! He didn't die. You haven't killed anybody."

"No hospi-tal. Laber-tor."

A laboratory? Despite the fact that Kelly had guessed as much, it made her feel faint just thinking about how close she'd come to being dissected. She'd walked into it perfectly willingly too. That was almost worse than anything else, the fact that she'd had no inkling what she was walking into so blithely, that she'd put up no resistance to save her life until she'd lost all chance of doing so ... like a lamb to the slaughter, literally, but she wasn't about to allow herself to start thinking in that direction.

It had been incredibly stupid of her to have let her guard down with people she knew nothing at all about. Obviously, they could not view her as a species of any great importance or they would not have considered such a thing. She should have *expected* something of the sort. She knew very well that

the chances were about a hundred to one that if their roles had been reversed and Tau, or any of the other hadens, had been captured by her own kind he would've found himself on a dissection table.

And she'd *still* walked into it like a complete moron!

"Don't get me wrong, I'll be forever grateful that you got me out of there when you did, but I'm not comfortable that you sacrificed so much...." She stopped. He had made it very clear that he hadn't done it for her. She just wished it made her feel better knowing it wasn't her fault.

She'd gotten them both into a hell of a mess by deciding he needed rescuing, but how could she have known he was probably as strong as all those men put together? He hadn't looked alien in the dark. He'd looked as human as she was.

"Protect cub," Tau said obstinately, refusing to look at her.

"I know. I'm just sorry, that's all." It wasn't like she was arguing his right to protect his unborn child. She was just sorry she'd gotten pregnant and put him in this predicament. In the end, she supposed it *had* ensured her survival, but she hadn't expected it to turn out this way, hadn't intended to cause him any more trouble than she had already.

She decided, finally, that she probably couldn't have explained it to him even if he'd been able to speak perfect English, or she his language. He was a male, after all. Their concept of emotion was very straightforward and basic. Testosterone didn't seem to be a good conductor for complex emotions and, truthfully, her own emotions were so convoluted she couldn't make sense of them herself.

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He strode from the campsite shortly afterwards. He left the animal, so she assumed he meant to return. Finally, she decided he'd either gone on a nature walk, to look for more firewood, or to hunt.

It was just as well. She'd discovered she had an embarrassing problem to deal with.

She had nothing to wear but the clothes on her back, a flimsy gown that was the next thing to transparent, but as insubstantial as it was, it was better than nothing at all. As bad as she hated it, she saw no hope for it. She was going to have to sacrifice at least part of one of the two blankets they had with them.

She was trying to chew the edge enough to tear it when Tau came back with a load of wood. Dropping it next to the fire, he took the blanket from her, unsheathed his claws and cut three slashes. "More?"

Kelly felt like her face was on fire. She nodded, refusing to look at him. He slashed six more strips, handed the blanket back to her and left again.

Kelly covered her head with the blanket.

Tau was gone so long that time, she knew he was waiting for her to take care of her problem, which, it turned out, was easier said than done. She finally managed to fashion something that was ungodly uncomfortable but seemed to work reasonably well. She tried not to think about the box of tampons in her bathroom cabinet at home.

When she'd finished, she left the campsite and went back down to the pool.

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It was nearly dark before Tau returned, this time with two of the animals he'd killed before. Kelly had spent the time trying to make their campsite more comfortable. Both blankets had dried blood on them. She took them to the pool and washed them, then laid them out on a bush to dry and returned to the campsite. Gathering the bedding Tau had arranged for her the night before, she burned it, then went to look for more. She found a large patch of it only a few yards from the camp. It took her several trips, but by the time she was done she felt she had enough to provide at least a little padding between her and the hard floor.

The next problem was whether to make two pallets or one. They had only one and a half blankets now. It seemed only practical to make one large enough for both of them so that they could use one blanket to cover the moss padding and one to cover themselves. Warm as it was by day, it had been very cold the night before.

On the other hand, she didn't particularly like the idea of arranging the bedding into one pallet. She was in no condition, at the moment, to enjoy sexual advances even if Tau offered. She doubted, in any case, that he would, which brought her to the heart of her anxiety. She wasn't currently feeling up to having her pride trampled on. She didn't want Tau getting any ideas that she was offering, or worse, begging.

On that note, she arranged two narrow pallets, one on either side of the campfire. She left then to fetch the blankets and look for something she could use to carry water. When she returned with the blankets, she stopped abruptly. Both

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piles of moss were on the same side of the fire and Tau was busy skewering the meat on a branch for cooking.

She stared at his profile for several moments, trying to decipher his expression, trying to decide why he'd moved the two pallets together. Convenience? Did it mean she'd have to figure out some way to put him off without explaining that she was in no condition, at the moment, for sex because she'd just lost his baby? Did it mean that he had now decided to claim her as his woman?

She found she didn't feel up to trying to figure it out. She didn't really know how she felt about any of the possibilities that had presented themselves except that she was afraid to tell him about the baby. If he tried making sexual advances, she was just going to have to pick a fight with him, because she didn't dare let him discover her condition.

Without a word, she spread the blankets out and left again to see if she could find anything that would hold water. She'd seen some sort of shells near the pool. She approached them carefully, half afraid they were occupied by something she'd rather not encounter. With relief, she discovered when she flipped them over that they weren't. She supposed it must be something like turtle shells, except these looked a bit more rounded, rather like a helmet. It offended her sense of hygiene to consider using some dead thing's shell, but the alternative was to walk all the way to the pool every time she wanted something to drink.

Laziness won out. She squatted by the pool and scrubbed the shells with the grainy soil that surrounded the pool and a wad of moss, thinking as she did that it was a hell of a thing

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to have to wash one's drinking vessel with dirt and weeds. All the same, the shells didn't look, or smell, nearly as disgusting when she'd finished. She sniffed each one, studied it minutely and finally used one to scoop up water. She wasn't certain, for several moments, that she could force herself to drink from it, but finally just closed her eyes and did it. She discovered that as long as she closed her eyes and held her breath, it wasn't bad at all.

Dipping it once more, she filled it to the rim and then took the other shell. That one, she discovered, was cracked. It began to drip water immediately. Apparently what ever had eaten the animal that once lived in the shell had cracked it with its teeth. She tossed the broken shell back, took the one that worked, and headed back to camp.

Tau looked at her crude vessel doubtfully, but he didn't object when she held it out and offered the water.

There was something oddly pleasurable about sharing their meal under the stars. Kelly realized she hadn't felt as relaxed and comfortable in a long time. When she'd finished eating, she sat staring up at the sky, feeling a sense of wonder as she watched the moons begin to rise. There were four of them, all traveling at different velocities all, apparently orbiting at vastly different altitudes from the planet. The largest looked to be about twice the size of Earth's moon, or was much closer, and was orange, like the fall harvest moon. The twins rose first, though, seemingly identical, traveling almost side by side as if they were tied together, shedding silvery light on the planet below despite the fact that they were either very small or very distant. The fourth was blue,

and almost seemed as if it might be a satellite of the larger moon.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said dreamily.

When Tau didn't answer, she glanced at him. He smiled wryly. "Unstable."

She lifted her brows at his comment, but chuckled. "Just like a man. Show him beauty and he picks out the flaws."

Tau studied her a long moment, then frowned, transferring his attention to the moons. He gestured with his hands, patting the ground beside him, then pointing to the glowing orbs above them, and then making sounds like an explosion. "Make planet unstable. Shake. Too pull big water. Make flood, must to settle here, in mountains."

Kelly nodded. "The gravitational pull ... like on Earth, controls the tides. I hadn't thought of that." She sighed deeply. It really was a shame when you couldn't just enjoy the beauty of something like that without having to think about their destructive forces. "They're still beautiful. What do you call this world?"

"New Ducran."

Caught off guard, Kelly laughed. "Sooo original!"

He smiled faintly, but there was such sadness in his eyes that Kelly felt badly for laughing. She hadn't been laughing about the loss of his home, but she could hardly explain.

"Lose home. Wanted same. Not same, though."

Kelly felt a stab of yearning for her own home, wondering what everyone thought about her sudden disappearance. Her parents were probably frantic, probably certain she was dead by now. She'd tried not to think about them, or any of her

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family or friends. She didn't want to think about them now. There was no point in yearning for something beyond your reach. It just made it impossible to find joy in what one did have. She was alive and she was young enough and hopeful enough just to find joy in that. "What was your home like?"

He thought about it. "Like Earth, much. Many cities. Very big cities."

She frowned thoughtfully, trying to remember what she'd learned about space in school. "Bigger or denser though. It must have been for hadens to be stronger than humans."

He glanced at her in surprise, but nodded. "Pull harder."
"Gravity."

"Tink yes."

Kelly bit her lip, suppressing a smile. She couldn't help it. His accent was cute, especially when he was so serious. After a moment, however, her thoughts took a new direction. She knew it was bad manners to question him about the catastrophe that had left the hadens homeless, but she couldn't help but wonder. "I don't want to make you feel bad or make you think about things you don't want to, but it seems so ... unreal that your whole world could be gone so ... abruptly. What happened?"

He was silent so long she thought he wouldn't answer.
"War. Kill all. Almost."

She stared at him, aghast at the magnitude of a war that could destroy a whole world. A shiver chased its way along her spine. It made her grow cold all over just thinking about it. How many times had everyone on Earth hovered on the brink of the same sort of catastrophe? She supposed, no

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matter how civilized everyone believed they were because of all their technology, deep down they were still nothing more than animals that were a little smarter than the other animals, which meant they tended to kill on a larger scale—because they could.

She might have asked how they had managed such a horrible thing, but it was obviously not something he wanted to discuss at all. She changed the subject. "If this place is so unstable, why choose it?"

"No choose. Only place find can live, not taken."

"Oh." She thought about it several moments, wondering how many worlds they'd been to in search of a new home. It was hard to grasp that they'd flown around the universe looking for a likely spot like she might've driven around town looking for rental signs. She wondered how far ahead of humans the hadens of Ducran had been. Obviously not so far that they'd evolved beyond their basic animal instincts for survival. If they had, they would never have been able to make the transition back to the primitive way of life they must have had to endure to build their new colony. As a people, they were pretty damned impressive all the way around. Under the circumstances, they couldn't have had time to gather much to take with them to help them rebuild and yet they'd managed to cut the jungle away and build a small city in only a few years.... A modern city of stone, with running water and a power supply, not crude huts and out houses. "You didn't find others like you?"

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He got up abruptly and left the campfire, striding off into the darkness. Kelly stared after him, wishing she'd just kept her curiosity to herself. It had been a stupid question anyway. Obviously they hadn't. They wouldn't have been looking on Earth if they had.

But Tau had not wanted to settle for humans.

How many others had felt as he did? Not all of them. Some had to have felt enough kinship with humans to consider them as possible mates.

After a while, Kelly got up, put more wood on the fire and lay down on the pallet with her back to the wall. She would have far preferred to put her back to Tau in silent reproach, but they were in the wilderness. She hadn't seen any animals yet aside from those Tau had killed, but she wasn't exposing her back to the possibility that one might be brave enough to ignore the fire. She waited until Tau returned to give him her back.

She had a feeling, however, that he was immune to the snub. He lay down beside her, turned his back to her and, apparently, went right to sleep.

* * * *

Kelly woke to a tickling sensation on the tip of her nose. Thinking, dimly, that it must be an insect, she wiggled her nose a couple of times and finally opened her eyes to a golden brown blur. It took her several seconds to realize she had her nose pressed against Tau—almost. It was his breathing that had caused the tickling sensation. Each time his chest rose, her nose brushed against him. It took her

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several more moments to realize they were lying in a tangle of arms and legs and that it was going to be difficult to extricate herself without waking Tau.

She lifted her head slightly to assess the situation. Tau was curled around her as if she was a body pillow, an arm and leg over her ... make that impossible.

There was no way to get loose without waking him. She could remain as she was and hope he'd roll over, or she could slip out from under him, which would almost certainly wake him. After several minutes passed and she began to feel numbness seeping into her muscles, she decided on the last, hoping even if he did awake, he'd be too disoriented from being wakened to realize she'd been stuck to him as if she'd been pasted there.

He rolled away the moment she began trying to extricate herself, making her wonder if he'd been awake after all. His eyes were closed when she turned to look at him, however, and she finally decided he must still be sleeping. She left for the pool.

When she returned, Tau was gone. He didn't return until mid-afternoon. While he was gone, Kelly assessed the situation.

She didn't waste any of her time dealing with the past. It was all too easy to get caught up in 'wish I'd done'. She didn't spend a lot of time thinking about the future either. Considering her situation, that would be almost as big a waste of time, and as much an emotional drain. She could not, she realized, afford to think much beyond the next day and the next week. She might just as well go find a cliff and

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take a leap if she allowed herself to, because she wasn't going to survive on what if, maybe, or I can't.

The campsite was all right for a few days, but it wasn't going to do for any long term arrangement. They needed something more permanent, or at least she did. Tau was going to figure out fairly soon that she was no longer carrying his child. He might stay with her anyway, because of the trouble he'd gotten into in rescuing her. Or, he might not. She didn't believe the man he'd attacked had died, regardless of the seriousness of the injury. Tau might decide it was easier to accept whatever punishment they decided on so that he could live with his own people. Particularly since he had never wanted to accept a human, in general, or her in particular, in the first place.

She didn't want to think about that either.

She needed—pretty much everything. She had, pretty much nothing; a thin shift, one and a half blankets, an animal shell.

Casting her mind back to her childhood, growing up with her brothers, she decided she would have to pretend she was an Indian again. Her brothers and their friends had always made her the Indian anyway when they were playing cowboys and Indians. Of course, her main role in their games had been to run, or being tied up at the stake, but they'd learned a few useful tricks in rambling around in the woods. The lord alone knew how she was going to apply the childhood lessons from tramping around the woods and bayous of Mississippi with her brothers to this place, but surely some of it would be helpful. The rest—she'd just have to learn as she went.

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She spent most of the day searching for stones that looked like flint and for young trees that were strong and supple. She didn't know how likely it was that she'd find flint. She didn't know anything about geology in general or the geology of New Ducran in particular, but it had been the favored stone of southern Indians for just about everything.

She'd managed to saw the root end off of a likely looking bow when Tau returned. He looked at her curiously, but as usual, said nothing, focusing his attention on preparing his kill.

He showed no inclination to leave after they'd eaten, which surprised her.

When she grew restless with the silence between them, she asked, "Do you think they'll follow us?"

He glanced at her. "Tau look. No see."

Kelly was surprised, but realized that must be why he was gone so long each time he left camp. He was checking to make sure they hadn't been followed.

"How long, do you suppose, before we can be sure they won't try?"

He held up his hand, showing her all five fingers. "Light this many, safe. No find place we pass."

She was hopelessly lost by that effort at communication for several moments, but then enlightenment dawned. Five days. It made sense. The hadens must certainly know they would have no chance of catching up to her and Tau if they didn't move fast. In a few days they wouldn't even be able to see the beast's tracks.

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It was what cops would have done on Earth, come after them as fast as they could. She didn't know why it hadn't occurred to her that it was purely logic and the hadens would most likely work the same way.

Maybe both of them spent too much time thinking about the differences between them and not enough time thinking about the things they had in common? Maybe, although she hadn't considered it before, she was just as prejudiced in her own way as Tau was?

She looked over at him, trying to study him objectively. She found it was impossible. This man had been inside of her. He had filled her with passion. He had given her pleasure like she'd never known before. She couldn't think of him as anything at all but a devastatingly handsome man. How could he, after being inside of her, after impregnating her with his child, think of her as ... as unacceptable?

She looked away, sighing deeply. "On the ship when Tin ... uh ... when he was talking to me, he said you were against taking humans as mates."

Tau studied her for a long moment, wishing he'd succeeded in killing Tin, the hell with the consequences. "Tin no know Tau tink," he said tightly.

Kelly glanced at him quickly. "But he said he overheard you talking to Kin-ko."

"Human not same ting Haden."

Kelly frowned thoughtfully. "I suppose not. Not exactly the same. But not that different either."

"Tink different. Behave not same. Look not same. Different."

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Kelly picked up a stick and began doodling in the dirt. "That's understandable. We come from two different cultures, two different races, two different worlds. It would be more strange if we were the same than it is that we're different. But humans are just as intelligent, just as good as hadens all the same."

"Tau no say dis ting! No say Haden better. Say different. Not same," Tau said angrily.

Kelly looked at him. "There's no need to get so pissed off about it. I was just curious to know why the others had chosen mates and you hadn't."

Tau looked away. He thought about lying. He could just say his mate had only recently died and he wasn't ready—which was true—and let it go at that—which would be a lie, because it wasn't the real reason he hadn't wanted to take a human as mate. "Lose all. Kel-ly unner-stan? All ting. No past. No future. Hate see haden all gone. Forever. Not hate human. Just want ting not have no more."

It was odd, really, that she had come to understand Tau so well when he had such difficulty speaking her language, but she realized after a moment that she did understand, maybe even better than many of his own people did. It made her feel better to know that he didn't despise her for who she was, but it made her feel sad at the same time because she could never be what he wanted, one of his own kind.

Racial pride—it was a good thing, and the saddest thing in the world to realize that it would vanish from existence. It made her think of the classic 'The Last of the Mohicans'. She'd cried when she had read it.

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She felt like crying now, which was why, she supposed, that she fully understood why Tau hurt to think of his own people being swallowed up and diluted into another race that was only part haden. She cleared her throat. "I understand, really. I think I just hadn't thought of it that way. Anyway, I'm such a mongrel myself, it's a little hard for me to really identify with just one people."

Tau looked at her curiously. "What mon-grel?"

Kelly sniffed but chuckled. "My grandfather always said we were black Irish, through and through. It's where I got the green eyes from, the Emerald Isles." She touched her dark hair, distracted momentarily by the realization that it had grown well past her shoulders since the last time she'd had the chance to trim it, in her other life. "Most of them are fair. The ones with dark hair like mine, and usually darker skin, they're the black Irish. Probably from raiders way, way back that came to rape and pillage, because I think they're mostly fair, the Irish. Anyway, the truth is, we had a lot of that in us, but others too. Indian, Creek, I think, though nobody seems to know where or when it came into the family. In the old, old days, it was shameful to have Indian blood and nobody would claim it. No telling what else, though. Probably a little bit of most everything."

"Different humans?"

"Different races, different peoples from all sorts of places. The truth is, there's probably no such thing as anybody who can claim to be purely of one race, not on Earth. If there is, they're a lot more rare than the people like me. I think it makes us a little more interesting, though. In a way it's really

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sad to think there could come a time when everyone is so mixed they can't claim to be a specific race, but there's always a good side to everything. It brings new blood into the mix, seems to bring more good traits than bad ones." She chuckled, but there was little humor in it. "Then, too, once everybody gets to be the same, they won't be able to fight over their race anymore. But they'll always find something to fight about. It's not in the nature of the beast to get along."

They both fell silent, but it was a more comfortable silence than before, the silence of understanding and empathy. After a while, Tau got to his feet. Instead of simply walking away as he often did, however, he held out his hand to her.

Chapter Ten

After a moment, Kelly placed her hand in Tau's and he helped her to her feet. "Come. Tau show tings can eat."

Kelly smiled up at him. "Good idea! I never like to complain when somebody else is buying, but, being a mostly Irish kind of gal, I'm kind of a meat and potatoes sort of person. Meat's good, but it needs a little something with it." She stopped as they reached the edge of the woods and rushed back to the campsite, gathered her 'turtle' shell and returned. "Just in case."

They'd been walking for a while before they came upon a thicket of brambles covered in berries. Tau picked one and popped it in his mouth. Kelly watched him doubtfully. She wasn't exactly an au natural sort of girl. She liked to wash her food, thoroughly, before she ate it. After a moment, however, she plucked a berry, put it in her mouth and bit down—then shuddered. It was tart enough to draw a pucker.

Tau laughed at the face she made. "Good, huh?"

Kelly was still trying to make a straight face. She shuddered again, swallowed convulsively several times. "Mmm. Delicious," she said wryly.

Tau mimicked the face she'd made. She punched him playfully on the shoulder, but laughed. "Are you sure these are edible?"

He nodded, picking several handfuls and dropping them into her shell. Kelly almost thought she'd rather eat dirt, or grass, but she picked berries until the shell was almost full.

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When they'd gathered what they could, Tau started off again. Kelly hesitated, looking around to memorize landmarks, wondering if she could find the place again if she had to come alone. She was relieved to discover she could see a glimpse of the campsite above them through the trees. It was then that she realized that Tau had led them in a widening circle from the campsite, always keeping it in view.

It was a clever way to keep from getting lost, but it also made her wonder how 'alone' she'd been when Tau was away, of if he'd been just as careful when she wasn't with him to keep an eye on her and the campsite.

Somehow, she didn't think Tau was staying within sight of the camp because he had any concerns about getting lost.

Tau stopped again shortly after they'd left the berry thicket behind. Pointing down at the ground, he showed her a good sized hole. Reaching into the shell, he grabbed a handful of berries and dropped them in front of the hole. He then began to walk in wider and wider circles, searching the ground. Finally, he found a second hole. He took the shell from Kelly and set it inside the second hole, blocking it. Then he went back to the first and squatted down beside it to wait, his nails extended and poised. Kelly found a spot a little distance away to sit and wait.

Perhaps twenty minutes passed. Kelly felt her muscles beginning to cramp from the position she'd assumed, but she knew the slightest sound could scare away whatever it was Tau was waiting for. Finally, when she thought she couldn't stand it any more, she heard a faint snuffling noise. Immediately, her attention focused on the hole again. She

could just see the tip of a twitching nose. Slowly, cautiously, the creature crept out, closer and closer to the berries Tau had left to entice it. When it poked its head out of the hole, Tau severed it in a lightening strike.

Kelly felt her stomach clench.

Dragging the carcass from the hole, he gutted it and skinned it, all with amazing efficiency.

It was a damned shame she didn't have nails like that. She could think of several ways it would've been handy.

When he'd finished, he stood, looked around for a moment and finally motioned for her to follow and struck out through the woods. In a few moments, they reached a narrow, trickling stream. Tau knelt beside it and washed his kill, then his hands.

Kelly followed the direction of the stream with her gaze and realized it must be the run off from the pool where they got their drinking water.

She knelt beside him, took his hand and studied it. He'd retracted the nails. He allowed her to extend them. "Handy little defense mechanism," she said a little uneasily. "Does everyone from Ducran have these?" She realized the moment she asked that it was probably a stupid question, but he surprised her by shaking his head.

"Once. No more. Old ting. Now all not have. Dis why forbidden."

Kelly nodded, understanding.

"Make Kel-ly ... afraid Tau?"

She shrugged. "Let's just say I'd rather not piss you off."

"What piss off?"

"Make angry."

He studied her thoughtfully for several moments. Finally, he twisted his hand, grasping hers and slowly pulled her close, putting his arms around her. "Never hurt Kel-ly. No afraid Tau. Only ... to protect female."

As much as she was enjoying the comforting embrace, the last comment intrigued her. She pulled away. "Females don't have these?"

"Tra-clau." He extended them, indicated a point about half the length of his own. "Some have dis. Most none."

Kelly gave him a look. "So unfair! Why is it the male always gets the best stuff to play with?" she asked rhetorically.

He looked confused. "Best stuff?"

Kelly bit her lip. Now was not the time to point out that his male member made pissing in the woods a hell of a lot more convenient. She shook her head. "Never mind. What are we going to do with that?" She distracted him, pointing to the animal he'd killed.

He released her and stood. After a brief search, he found a branch that looked to his notion and used it to skewer the carcass, then anchored one end on the bank and left the carcass in the water. "Keep cold. Hunt oddur."

Kelly nodded. "I was hoping we were going to have two. I'm starving."

"Starve—Hunger?"

He grasped her upper arm, showing her he could encircle it with his thumb and forefinger. "Need meat on bones," he said, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

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She knew he was teasing, but pursed her lips. "I've got plenty of meat on my bones, thank you. I'm a woman. I'm not supposed to be built like a ... body builder or a football player."

She got up and started back the way they'd come. After a moment, Tau followed her. He cast her several anxious glances as they walked side by side. "Insult?"

Kelly smiled slightly. "It damned sure isn't a compliment."

He was thoughtful for a moment. "Kel-ly beau-ti-ful."

She chuckled, but held up one hand. "No. Too late. You've already insulted me. You'll have to work to get back into my good graces now."

"How make better?"

She thought about it, but unfortunately, the one thing she could think of that she'd *really* like wasn't an option at the moment. "Show me where to find something that tastes better than those sour berries."

Over the next several days, Tau took Kelly out with him each morning, showing her the plants that the Ducran had identified as safe food. Kelly had to wonder if haden taste buds just weren't the same, or if the Ducran had merely identified what they needed for survival, understanding they had to eat to live, not vice versa. As she learned to identify the roots, greens and berries that were edible, she gave them a one to ten scale rating, with ten being the absolute worst and one being barely tolerable. Food that fell in the five to ten range were in the upchuck category. They might be safe, but she couldn't swallow them, let alone keep them down.

* * * *

Survival was a full time job. Kelly realized she'd never fully appreciated the hours of relaxation and the time allowed for the pursuit of entertainment that the modern civilization she'd left had allowed her. Before, it had seemed there were never enough hours in the day. It had seemed she worked most of her life, either earning her living or taking care of her personal needs between times.

From the time she and Tau arrived at their campsite, however, Kelly found there was no time for anything beyond sleeping, searching for food or firewood, and eating, and she didn't get enough of the first or the last.

She found that Tau's companionship made it bearable, however ... right up until the night he made his first sexual advance.

After their first night together, when Tau had established that he expected to sleep with her, but made no attempt toward anything more intimate, Kelly decided that the decision was based on the need to share warmth and found that it wasn't at all difficult to become very comfortable snuggling against Tau at night while they slept.

She was certainly not against intimacy between them. She, in fact, spent a great deal of time hoping it was something they would be able to renew in the not too distant future. If not for her condition, and her fear that Tau would discover there was no longer a baby to protect, she might have initiated intimacy between them herself. As it was, she was relieved she didn't have to find an excuse not to.

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She awoke one night about a week after their escape, however, to discover something very long, and very hard, pressed against her belly. It took several moments to figure out what it was. Her first, groggy, assessment was that she'd rolled onto a rock, or maybe a piece of wood. Still more than half asleep, she'd reached down to brush it away.

By the third attempt to remove the intrusive object, Kelly was no longer groggy. She came wide awake when she realized she was holding Tau's cock in her hand. She released it abruptly, looking up to see if he was awake.

He was, and the look in his eyes was telling.

"Uh ... sorry. I thought it was a stick." She turned over on her other side, controlling her breathing with an effort, stiff as a board as she waited to see if he would press the issue, afraid that he would and she would be forced to rebuff him when she didn't really want to.

He moved closer, pressing himself fully against her back, wrapping one arm around her waist.

Kelly sucked in her breath as his hand grazed her breast. After a moment, she took his hand and placed it around her middle. His hand drifted downward, brushing her belly and making her stomach muscles quiver. She caught it, moved it up to her waist again and held on to it that time.

She was just beginning to relax when his cock, like some prehensile limb, began to work its way between her thighs. She tensed, squeezing her thighs more tightly together, hardly daring to breathe.

When she felt his hot breath along her neck, she nearly jumped out of her skin. She did leap to her feet.

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He looked up at her in surprise and not a little irritation.

She stared down at him, trying to think of something to say. "Uh ... I've got to go. Nature call."

Ordinarily, she wouldn't have had the nerve to leave the campsite after dark. As it was, she was half way to the pool before it even occurred to her to worry about running into any of the local wildlife. She was too focused on the wildlife she'd just left to think of much else.

She sat by the pool for a while, wondering how long it would take him to fall to sleep again, shivering as much from nerves as from the cold night air.

She wasn't certain how much time had passed when she heard the snap of breaking underbrush, but it sounded like a shotgun blast in the stillness.

She was on her feet in an instant, looking around for the source. Two eyes blinked in the darkness no more than ten feet from where she was standing. Kelly felt the breath go out of her.

The two yellow eyes were quite large and at least four feet off the ground. "Tau?" she said weakly, knowing it wasn't him, but hopeful nevertheless.

Abruptly, something grabbed her from behind. Kelly screamed, clawing frantically at the arm around her, but the air went out of her lungs as she found herself airborne. They landed on a tree limb at least ten feet above the ground. By that time Kelly had ceased trying to free herself and was holding on for all she was worth. Tau peeled her hands loose and positioned her arms around the trunk the limb she was standing on protruded from. "Hold," he said sharply, then

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leapt from the limb again, landing in a half crouch where she had been standing only seconds earlier, his arm raised, his Tra-clau extended.

Almost instantaneously, the creature that had watched her from the underbrush leapt toward him. Tau slashed it across the throat. In the moonlight filtering through the trees overhead, Kelly saw streams of black liquid spurt everywhere, steaming in the chill night air. Tau rolled from under the thrashing beast. Gaining the upper hand, he slashed at it again and again until it ceased moving. The tension went out of him. Bracing himself up with his arms splayed on the dead beast's back, he fought to catch his breath.

He climbed off the beast at last, stared down at it for several moments, and finally grasped it by one leg and began dragging it away to the far end of the pool. When he reached the natural spillway that formed one end of the pool, he rolled it into the stream at the bottom of the dam, allowing the flow of the water to carry it downstream.

Still in a state of frozen shock, Kelly watched as he dove into the pool to wash the blood off. When he emerged, he collapsed on the side of the pool for several minutes before he finally turned and looked up at her.

Wearily, he climbed to his feet and leapt up to the limb where he'd left her. Peeling her death grip from the tree trunk, he caught her around the waist and leapt to the ground. The impact when they landed jarred Kelly from her dazed shock.

"My god! What was that thing?"

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Tau caught both her shoulders in his hands and shook her, gritting his teeth at her. "Ting kill, Tau not come."

Kelly grasped his arms and burst into tears.

He stared at her a long moment and pulled her close, wrapping his arms tightly around her.

"It was as big as you! It could've killed you! Why didn't you just stay in the tree with me?"

"No kill. Come back. Hunt Kelly for eat. Know smell human."

Kelly shuddered, but finally pulled away. "It was a stupid thing for me to do. I don't know why I did it."

Tau stared at her a long moment and finally released her. "Tau know."

Kelly stared at him in dismay, unable to think of anything to say. She didn't want him to think what he obviously did, but she couldn't very well say it was all right, either.

He caught her hand and began to lead her back to the camp. "Kelly safe. Tau no touch."

Kelly stared at his profile, fighting the urge to cry.

* * * *

Tau was gone when she woke the following morning. Kelly leapt to her feet the moment she discovered she was alone and raced out to look for the beast. To her relief it was grazing contentedly near the campsite.

It took every ounce of courage she could muster to leave the campsite and go about her daily chore of searching for food. She flinched every time she heard the faintest sound,

certain one of the creatures that had tried to attack her the night before was stalking her.

Tau returned around mid-day with meat. He didn't look at her, but went straight to the fire, built it up and arranged the meat over it to cook. Kelly glanced at him miserably several times, trying to think of something she could say to explain her behavior that wouldn't involve telling him she was indisposed from miscarrying his baby.

To save her life, she could think of nothing, even though it occurred to her that her rejection the night before could just as easily lead to Tau deciding to leave as the knowledge that he was protecting something that no longer needed protecting, his 'cub' as he referred to it.

It occurred to her later that it was stupid in another entirely different sense. If she'd kept her wits about her, she could have taken care of Tau's needs without actually allowing penetration, and discovery. If she hadn't been caught off guard, if she hadn't been so paranoid that he was going to find out something she had been at great pains to hide, she could have behaved more sensibly and not given him the impression that she'd die rather than let him touch her.

She wondered how long she was going to be treated to the cold, silent treatment before he was approachable enough she could try to make amends.

To her surprise, instead of leaving as soon as they'd eaten, Tau merely sat for some time, staring off into the distance. Finally, he turned and faced her. "Tau must go back."

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Despite her earlier thoughts, Kelly felt her heart drop to her feet. She couldn't say anything for several moments, couldn't think of anything say. Finally, she merely nodded that she understood. She wanted to scream at him, hit him over the head with something, but what was the point? She couldn't make him stay. She might beg, but even if it worked, it would only be out of pity, and that wasn't something that was likely to last long.

He studied her face closely and finally shook his head. "Tink bad tings. Need tings."

She frowned at him uncomprehendingly.

He got up abruptly and picked up the blankets she'd rolled up. "Tings." He spread his arms to encompass the nothing in their little camp. "No tings. Need much."

She allowed herself a ray of hope. Maybe he really hadn't meant that he was going to leave her and not come back—Or maybe he just didn't want her to know she was being abandoned? She tried to banish the image of a dog being taken far enough from home it couldn't find it's way back and left to fend for itself, but she couldn't completely banish the empty feeling in her belly.

She rather thought it would be preferable to be considered some sort of intelligent pet than to be abandoned. Pride was all very well, but it wasn't going to be much comfort when she was forced to eat grubs or something equally horrible to survive.

She decided after a moment to simply ignore her fears and pretend he meant what he was saying, that his only intention was to go back for supplies they needed.

She could certainly agree with him on his assessment of the situation. She wasn't so certain raiding the city would be a good idea, though, particularly within days of escaping. "We should wait a while longer, don't you think?"

"Tau go. No safe for Kel-ly. Move fast, come back."

Kelly nodded, swallowing against the knot of uneasiness in her throat, feeling the empty space grow a little wider. It had been worth a try, throwing that 'we' in there, but he wasn't going for it. "If we both went, we could carry more," she suggested hopefully.

"Stay. Safe," Tau said, his expression uncompromising.

Kelly wasn't sure she could agree with him that she was going to be safer here, in the wilderness, by herself, than if she went with him. "What if ... one of those things from last night gets after me?" she asked tentatively.

"Tau kill Sark. Sark no share place. Only."

Kelly looked at him more than a little skeptically. She grasped the fact that the beast was territorial, but even territorial animals had mates.

"If you killed the male, the female will be around here somewhere."

He frowned. "Kill female. Female have cubs belly. No allow male stay."

Kelly blushed in spite of all she could do, wondering if he was comparing her to the mating habits of the Sark ... who evidently chased the male off as soon as he'd impregnated her. "Oh." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Tau turned and pointed to the fire. "Keep big when dark. No beast come. Kelly stay with fire. Dark, no go pool."

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She knew that, but decided it would be a little difficult to explain that she'd left the fire, knowing predators roamed at night and the only safe place was near the fire. She tried to look surprised and relieved at the information.

"Go now. Get tings. Come back when big star come back."

It took Kelly several moments to interpret. Finally, she realized he wanted to raid after dark and expected to be back by morning. It was a comforting story, at least. If he meant it, she would only have to get through one night by herself. She nodded. There wasn't much she could do but agree anyway.

He rose and moved to the beast, which they always kept tethered in they grassy area nearby. Kelly followed him, trying to guard her expression.

When he'd untied the beast, he stood holding the reins for several moments, studying her.

She forced a smile. "Be careful."

"Tau come back soon."

Kelly nodded. "In the morning. After sunrise."

Instead of mounting the beast, he dropped the reins and strode toward her purposefully. Placing one hand on either side of her head, he pulled her against him and covered her mouth with his own. Kelly was too stunned to react and he'd released her before she could. She stared up at him, feeling a little weak in the knees.

"Promise, Kel-ly."

She smiled her understanding, fighting the sudden urge to burst into tears as he mounted the beast and turned away. She stood watching until he'd disappeared. Finally, she turned

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to look at the campsite. The fire had burned low. She dashed the tears from her cheeks and began to gather up something to feed the fire. If she let it go out, she'd be sitting in the dark come sundown.

Chapter Eleven

Meat eating predators tended to roam at night. It was all very well to say he'd killed the Sark, but how was she to know there weren't other meat eaters out there, maybe even bigger? The planet reminded her strongly of artistic concepts of prehistoric Earth. She'd more than half expected to see dinosaurs roaming the place since her arrival, but the fact was, up until she'd had the close in counter with the Sark, she hadn't seen much wildlife of any description. She knew very well that that didn't mean there were none around, however. She saw plenty of tracks when she went down to the pool. She'd seen the Sark. Anything could be lurking in the woods, waiting a chance to eat her alive.

That thought made it impossible for Kelly to sleep. She moved her pallet around to the back side of the fire, propped against the back wall and guarded the fire.

She watched hopefully for Tau when light began to brighten the landscape. Finally, weariness got the best of her, however, and she fell asleep. When she woke the fire wasn't much more than a pile of ashes. Galvanized, she leapt to her feet and rushed around for more sticks to feed it. When she finally had a small fire going, she turned her attention to watching hopefully for Tau again.

By late afternoon, she'd ceased to leap to her feet every time she heard a sound.

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He'd decided not to return, or he'd been captured, or ... it didn't bare thinking on. In any case, it seemed she was alone now, completely.

She hadn't eaten since the evening before. Tau had left enough meat for that, but not enough for the next day. He'd either planned to have returned by now, or expected she would realize she would have to fend for herself. After gathering enough brush and sticks that she was fairly certain she'd be able to keep the fire burning through another night, she went down to the pool. She'd rarely been so late in the day. From the tracks she found every morning, she knew it was a popular watering hole in the area. Most of the tracks were small, but she'd seen a few that indicated larger animals and up until the other night when she'd suffered some sort of brain malfunction, had decided it would be safest just to steer clear of the pool in the late evenings.

She didn't have Tau's advantage of having been born with Tra-clau that she could use to hunt, but she'd managed to fashion a crude spear. She hadn't given up on the bow and arrows, but she'd come to realize it wasn't something she was going to be able to successfully fashion without a great deal more effort. She wouldn't be around long enough to complete the project if she couldn't figure out a way to find food. Meat was the pretty much the only thing she could eat. She was surrounded by vegetation, but it was rather like someone stranded in the ocean, surrounded by water they couldn't drink. Plants on Earth tended to be toxic, some deadly poison. Other than those Tau had showed her, which she could

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scarcely choke down, she had no idea which, if any, of the plants around her would be safe to eat.

It was possible she could get an animal that was also poisonous to eat, but she thought her chances were better if she just stuck with meat and godawful berries until she'd had time to observe some of the animals' feeding habits. Maybe what they ate wouldn't kill her. Maybe it would actually taste good. Unfortunately, she didn't currently have the luxury of looking for eating pleasure. She'd have to make do with staving off starvation.

There were creatures living in the water. She'd caught glimpses now and then when she'd come down to bathe and drink. Some of them at least appeared fish like. She waded into the shallows, braced her feet wide for balance and stood as still as she could with the spear poised. After about ten minutes one of the creatures swam between her ankles. She stared at it, waiting, hoping it would move so that she had a direct shot straight down. Slowly, but surely it worked its way along the bottom of the pool. She stabbed at it, grazing the side. It took off, disappearing into the deeper end of the pool.

Her shoulders slumped. She was fast, but not terribly accurate. After nearly an hour, she gave up and returned to the campsite. The fire had burned low. She fed it and settled down to spend another night on guard, forcing herself to choke down a handful of the sour berries. She didn't bother to look for Tau. When the first rays of dawn lightened the sky, she laid down and slept. The sun was at it's highest point when she woke. Taking the spear, she marched down to the pool determinedly. Two hours later she returned to the

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campsite, weak with hunger, but carrying a good sized, fish-thing. She'd cleaned it at the pool. She might have thrown up except she had nothing in her stomach. Her mantra 'just do it, don't think about it' hadn't helped that much, but she thought if she practiced it long enough it might. Either that or she was going to get used to killing things and gutting them.

Oh, for a meat market where everything was cleaned and cut up and presented in nice neat little packages!

It didn't taste like fish. It didn't taste like chicken, either. Kelly ate it anyway, because she was starving and it didn't taste so awful she couldn't force it down her throat. In actuality, without salt, it was pretty much tasteless which was more than she could say for the berries.

She slept that night, rising with the sun the following morning. Paranoia had set in the day before. She'd been afraid to move from the spot, just in case Tau did return, but it finally occurred to her that he knew right where to find her, which meant the others could make him show them the way if they were interested enough in studying her to go to that much effort.

Resolutely, she bundled the little she'd collected in a blanket and started toward the pool. It wasn't really safe to stay very close to the water, but she didn't intend to stray far from it unless she happened on another source of drinkable water. Dropping her bundle on the bank, she walked the circumference. The pool spilled away in a tiny trickle that wandered downhill through the jungle. It originated in the hillside, however.

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After some thought, she decided her best bet was to climb up and see if she could find a real cave.

As she reached the first outcropping of rock, however, she found something she hadn't expected to find. At first, she merely stared at it uncomprehendingly. But the tiny mound of stones were not there by accident. They'd been carefully arranged in a small pile.

Abruptly, tears filled her eyes and Kelly went down on her knees beside the tiny grave and weeping uncontrollably, for the tiny thing that had never actually lived, but mostly for herself. She wondered if it had been far enough along even to have looked human, or hadn't. She wondered if it had been male or female.

Tau had known all along that he'd risked everything for his unborn child and she'd lost it.

If only she'd realized he knew! If only she hadn't pushed him away! If she hadn't given him the idea that she wanted nothing to do with him, maybe he wouldn't have gone!

Finally, when she'd wept herself dry, she got to her feet and went to the water to bathe her heated face and swollen eyes. She wanted to just curl up in a ball and drown herself in self-pity. Instead, she got up, moved back toward the rocks and began climbing.

It was not a difficult climb, for which she was grateful, but it was steep enough she felt fairly certain there probably weren't many animals around that could, or would, climb it. She discovered that the water was spilling from inside the mountain, as she'd surmised, through a crack that looked to be less than six inches wide. When she finally reached it,

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however, she saw it was wider than she'd first thought, maybe as much as a foot, certainly wide enough for her to squeeze inside.

The space began to widen almost immediately, terminating in a cavern room that was perhaps twelve feet in diameter and fifteen or twenty feet high. The crack in the rock face traveled all the way up, curving across the top. She stood staring up at it for a while and finally climbed out again and returned to the place where she'd dropped her bundle. "The roof needs mending," she muttered to herself. "But otherwise it's a great little fixer upper." Best of all, it had running water, for the water spouted from a hole about three feet up the back wall and flowed by way of a narrow trench that divided the cave roughly in half to the opening before spilling into the pool below.

Climbing up with one hand full was a real treat, but she decided the inconvenience of furnishing her new home was a small price to pay for the comfort of knowing she'd be relatively safe from wildlife.

She had to rest between trips, but by late in the afternoon, she'd moved firewood and moss up to her cave. She'd fashioned a torch, of sorts, with a stick and a tightly wound bundle of moss. It didn't burn terribly well, but was still smoldering by the time she managed to climb up the rocks with it. After perhaps thirty minutes of desperate huffing and blowing, the fire caught and she flopped down on the cave floor, fighting for breath.

She hadn't eaten, hadn't spared the time even to try to catch anything, but she was far too tired to feel like the

effort. She wanted to crawl over to her moss bed and just collapse, but there was one last task she didn't dare leave until morning.

Wearily, she climbed down again, found a dead branch and began scraping over her footsteps very carefully as the sun dipped behind the horizon and disappeared. She smiled faintly to herself. "When I think of all the years I whined and complained about not having any sisters! I just didn't know how lucky I was to have three hellion brothers! I think I'm going to start calling myself Chief Big Balls."

She was too tired for a war whoop or a rebel yell, however. Tossing the branch aside, she climbed up the hill one last time and collapsed on her moss bed.

Kelly had been scraping marks on the cave wall for several days before it occurred to her to wonder what the point was. She chuckled and then started laughing. "I've been watching too many movies," she muttered.

Within a week, Kelly had accumulated an impressive arsenal of weaponry. It impressed her, anyway. She'd managed to fashion a bow and a handful of arrows, a spear, and a sling. Her accuracy was also improving, and thus meals were more frequent.

She was sitting beside the baby's grave about two weeks after Tau had left, telling the baby stories about her brothers, when she heard a sound that was out of place. Snatching her bow off her shoulder, she knotted an arrow in place and jerked the gut taut, sighting down the shaft of the arrow as she scanned the area around her.

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Her heart leapt in her throat with fear when she saw a man step from the woods and into the clearing near the pool. She'd already released the deadly missile before she realized it was Tau. "Look out," she yelled.

He jumped at the sound of her voice and the arrow whipped by him by inches, imbedding itself into the tree beside him.

She stared at him a long moment disbelievingly before she thought to look to make certain he was alone. She saw no one else.

Tau, she saw when she looked back at him, was staring at the arrow. He tore his gaze from it at last and turned to look at her again.

Slowly, cautiously, Kelly made her way down the slope until she was standing across the pool from him.

He was glaring at her. Because of the arrow? Probably. "Where?" he demanded. "Look for Kel-ly. Much days."

"You didn't come back," she said flatly.

He stared at her for several moments and finally shook his head. After a moment, he dove into the pool and began to swim across. Kelly sat down to wait for him, laying her bow and arrows close to hand and watching the other side of the pool ... just to be sure he was alone. She might have been reduced to talking to herself, she might go crazy as a loon living out here by herself, but she damned sure wasn't going to be a lab rat.

When he emerged, he approached her purposefully, coming to a halt only when he was towering over her. Realizing she was at a distinct disadvantage, Kelly got to her

feet, staring up at him. He gripped her shoulders. "Scared!" he said angrily. "Crazy. Look. Look. No Kel-ly. Tink very bad."

"Sorry. I thought you were somebody else."

"Thought were dead, Kel-ly," he said, shaking her, his face twisting in anguish.

From no where tears filled her eyes. "I thought you weren't coming back."

He stared at her a moment and finally pulled her against him, engulfing her in a tight embrace. "Promise, Kel-ly."

He held her close for long moments and finally, almost reluctantly, pulled away.

"What happened?"

He looked embarrassed, smiled wryly. "Tau caught."

"I thought you might have been, but ... I didn't know if you would get away. I suppose that means you didn't manage to get anything?"

He grinned. "Much tings. Caught three time."

Kelly stared at him for several moments. "Third? You mean you went back three times? Are you crazy! No wonder you got caught!"

He laughed. "Remember oddur ting, go back. Three time ... third time, caught."

Kelly grinned. "I hope that means you got some really good stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Things."

"I show Kel-ly. First, show Tau where stay now."

"Up there," Kelly said, pointing.

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Tau looked up, frowned, looked at her questioningly. "No see."

Kelly smiled. "That's the best part."

She turned away and started up the rocky hillside. Tau, still looking puzzled, followed. He looked around in surprise once they'd entered the cave. Kelly smiled, pointed up. "Chimney hole. Fireplace slash kitchen, window over there over the door. No glass, but it lets in plenty of light—rain, too, so it doubles as a shower sometimes. Running water. Bedroom over there. Arsenal."

He moved to the pile of weapons Kelly had devised and looked them over carefully, picking each up and examining it. "Old haden weapons. You learn, how, Kel-ly?"

Kelly stared at him blankly for several moments and started laughing. "Old human weapons. My oldest brother, Keith, was a huge fan of anything Indian. My mother told us we were part Creek Indian, and he was so taken with the idea he collected every spearhead and arrowhead he ran across. When we were really young, we all played cowboys and Indians. We pretended we were soldiers some of the time, too, but mostly Indians."

"What means brother?"

Kelly thought about it, but she didn't think he knew enough English for her to explain. Finally, she got down on the floor, took a stick and started drawing crude stick figures. Tau watched with interest, grinning when she drew breasts on one of the larger ones, a dick and balls on the other large stick figure and three of the small ones. "There. Male.

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Female. Children. Mother, father, Kelly, brothers, Keith, Conner, Ashley."

Tau's smile faded as he studied the picture.

Kelly drew a circle around them. "All together, a family."

Tau stood up, walked to the opening of the cave and stared out for a while. "Family think Kel-ly dead."

Kelly sighed. "Probably. I'd rather not talk about it, though, OK?"

He turned to her. "Tau sor-ry, Kel-ly."

Kelly shook her head. "Don't be. I don't blame you. It's not your fault. It's mine. I know that."

"You no help Tau, no take."

Kelly glared at him. "I know. Just drop it, OK?" She pushed past him and began the climb down.

After a few minutes, Tau followed. He'd left the beasts tethered near their old campsite. He'd brought two more back with him, both so loaded Kelly was surprised they could carry so much. They led the beasts back to the cave before they began unloading. Thankfully, rope was one of the supplies Tau had brought. They used it to haul the bundles up. When they'd finished it was nearing dusk. Kelly went to the pool to fish with her spear. Tau came to watch. She speared three in quick succession and handed them over to Tau. Tau built a fire when he'd cleaned the first. When she'd handed him the third fish, Kelly dropped her spear beside the pond, untied her shift and dropped it on the bank, then dove into the water.

Tau had brought back soap and she was anxious to use it. When she surfaced, she moved to a stone near the edge of the water where she'd left the soap, then waded back in until

she was waist deep and lathered her hair. It was after she'd rinsed her hair and began to rub the soap over her body that she became aware that Tau had ceased all pretense of doing anything besides watching her.

Curiosity? Boredom? Interest?

It took an effort to continue as if she hadn't noticed, particularly since she wanted to know just how interested he was. After a moment, she dipped the bar into the water and finished soaping her breasts and arms, then ran the bar along her belly, dampened it again and rubbed it into her pubic bush, lathering the hair, slipping her fingers between her thighs to clean the folds of flesh surrounding her sex.

A splash close by startled her. She looked up quickly and saw Tau advancing on her purposefully. She held out the soap. He took it, pitched it over his shoulder and pulled her roughly against him, dipping his head at the same moment and capturing her lips.

Heat rushed through her with his first touch, collecting in her lower belly and forming the first droplets of dew as he opened his mouth over hers and delved inside her mouth with his tongue. The rough texture of his tongue awakened every nerve ending to tingling awareness, in her mouth, throughout her body. His taste, his scent flooded her with the sweet pleasure of remembrance of passion shared. Her breasts, flattened against his chest, throbbed with sensation as each slightest movement rubbed her bare flesh against his. Her nipples tightened into almost painfully hard nubs of sensory perception, sending quakes of pleasure through her.

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Entranced, Kelly lifted her arms, sliding her palms along the bulging muscles of his upper arms, his shoulders. Finally, she entwined them around his neck to hold herself upright as the strength went out of her knees.

As he possessed her mouth with his own, he skated one hand down her back and up again, along her spine, then over to brush the soft side of her breast before moving down along the curve of her waist, the bow of her hip and finally cupped her buttock, pulling her hips more snugly against him. Engorged, his cock, granite hard with his own desire, nudged her thighs, then worked its way between them until it was rubbing against her clit.

Kelly gasped, moving her legs apart to accommodate him.

He slid the hand that had cupped her buttock into the crevice between, seeking with his fingers the dampness he'd created. Finding it, he caught one thigh, lifting it to his waist so that she was open to his questing fingers when he returned to delve inside of her.

Abruptly, he ended the kiss and scooped her into his arms. Carrying her to the side of the pool, he knelt, laid her back against the softly abrasive soil and followed her down, kissing her once more as he cupped a breast with one hand, kneading it. In a moment, he broke the kiss and moved down to cover the nipple of that breast with his mouth, sucking on the distended tip, nudging it with his tongue.

Kelly moaned in desire as heightened, pleasurable sensations shot through her, cupping the back of his head with her hand to hold him close. When he released her nipple at last and moved to caress and stimulate her other breast

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with his mouth and tongue, Kelly began to move restlessly against him, anxious to feel his full possession.

Reaching between them, she cupped his testicles, massaging a groan of ecstasy from Tau. Then, moving upward to grip his cock in a firm hold, she massaged the length of it, sliding the foreskin up and down rhythmically until he began to labor for breath. He pulled away from her, sitting back on his feet.

Kelly gazed up at him languorously, opening her thighs wide and, as his gaze followed the movement, parting the folds of flesh of her sex in invitation. His face hardened with desire. He grasped her, slipping one arm under each thigh, lifting her hips off the ground and tugging at her until her sex was aligned with the head of his cock. Slowly, watching as their bodies connected and merged to become one, he nudged her body's opening, pushed inside inch by inch until his cock was buried to the root in her body. Just as slowly, he withdrew, until only the head of his cock was inside of her.

He looked up at her again then, caught her gaze with his own. Lowering her hips slowly, he followed her down, covered her body with his and thrust all the way inside of her again, hard this time, penetrating deeply, his gaze still holding hers. Kelly's lips parted on a moan of gratification, her eyelids sliding half closed. As she felt his hard erection deeply embedded inside of her, her muscles clenched around him, holding him tightly, as her hand had only moments before.

He gritted his teeth, caught his breath and held it for a moment, and then released it abruptly as his body seemed to move beyond his control and began to slide rhythmically in

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and out of her. Kelly wrapped her arms around him, caressing his back, his shoulders. Bending her knees until the soles of her feet were flat against the ground, she lifted to meet him with each downward stroke, feeling the waves of pleasure that ran through her each time, building, becoming harder, closer together, until she was panting for breath.

Rapture seemed to gather in her belly, building, growing in that one confined little area until it could no longer be contained. When she reached the point of most exquisite sensation, it seemed to fragment, sending out sharp explosions of pleasure along every nerve ending to the furthest points of her body. She bucked, felt her breath grind from her chest in a long, drawn out groan. Her whole body went taut, then shuddered as the waves moved outward in a mind shattering rush.

Tau tensed all over as her sex tightened and relaxed around him, milking him until his seed exploded from his body. Shuddering, he pumped his hips until his body ceased to convulse.

He held himself above her for long moments and finally shifted and collapsed on the ground beside her, struggling for breath.

Kelly lay weakly, so sated she could not find the energy to move, but as the cooling evening air drifted across her damp skin, a shiver went through her. With an effort, she struggled up, moved to the pool, bathed quickly and climbed out again. She glanced at Tau as she dried herself. He hadn't moved. He was watching her, his expression guarded.

Chapter Twelve

Kelly smiled tentatively. "You going to let me starve?"

He glanced toward the cook fire and smiled ruefully.

Getting up, he tossed more wood on the fire, washed the fish he'd prepared, then left lying on the moss, and placed the skewered meat over the fire to cook before he went into the pool to bathe.

The soap had floated away. He chased it down and scrubbed himself thoroughly before he emerged. By the time he'd dried and dressed, the meat was cooked and ready to eat.

To Kelly's eternal gratitude, he'd brought salt. It was comforting to know hadn't had the same need for salt humans did. It seemed one more link between the two species.

As she ate, Kelly thought back to his comment about the weapons she'd made, and his assumption that they were from his own world. American Indians had certainly not been the only humans to craft such things. Races all over the world had crafted similar weapons. Apparently, evolution on his own world had progressed similarly. Maybe there was just sort of a road map that higher animals followed instinctively on the road to 'civilization', where ever they happened to be from? Then again, maybe it was simply practicality? There were really only two ways to kill something if you were looking for food—blunt object, or sharp projectile—and a sharp projectile that could be thrown meant being able to kill from a distance,

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which was certainly preferable in her book to walking up to a ferocious animal and clubbing it to death, or chasing a small one.

Shaking those thoughts, it occurred to her that as intimately as she knew his body, she knew next to nothing about the man Tau was. After some thought, she corrected that. She knew he was intelligent—he learned fast. He was brave in the face of danger, protective, gentle, thoughtful and he had a good sense of humor. In short, he was the next thing to perfection, but she wanted to know more. She wanted to know everything there was to know about him.

“What were you before? I mean, on Ducran, what did you do to make a living?”

He looked confused for several moments, translating her words into his understanding. “You call doctor. Science—find stuff to make better sick.”

“Research?”

He thought it over. “Yes. Doctor first. Later become research. What Kel-ly?”

She smiled wryly. “Cop. At least that's what I was about to be. I'd just finished at the academy, got my first job in Atlanta, but I never made it to the first day on the job. Guess that's a bust.”

“Cop?”

“The people that guard the laws on Earth and protect people from each other. Police, actually. Cop's slang.”

He regarded her curiously for several minutes. “Protector,” he murmured musingly.

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Kelly shrugged. "That's part of the job description. Mostly it boils down to catching the bad guys *after* they've done the dirty deed, on the theory that that'll stop them from doing it again. Sometimes it does. Sometimes not. But they have to break the law before you can do anything. It's the only thing that really works in a free society. Can't go around arresting people just because you don't like their looks and think they might be thinking about breaking the law."

He frowned. "Kel-ly protect Tau with ... vehicle?"

Kelly burst out laughing. "Hey, we were badly outnumbered. Anyway, it worked for Dirty Harry. I figured it was worth a try."

"Dirt Har-ry?"

She shook her head. "Never mind. It was an old movie."

"What mov-ie?"

Kelly tossed her stick aside and launched herself at him, pushing him flat to the ground. "Shut up and fuck me senseless, big guy," she murmured, reaching down to cup his cock. "I love the way you use this magic wand."

* * * *

It was morning before they began to unpack the supplies Tau had stolen for them to sort them. It was like Christmas. Tau had brought cooking vessels, utensils—pretty much everything they could possibly need in the way of household goods. He'd also brought food. Naturally, Kelly couldn't identify any of it since it was Ducran food, but it was 'domesticated' rather than wild and it tasted far better than

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what they could find in the woods. Just looking at it made her mouth water with anticipation.

He'd also brought clothing for Kelly and himself, several changes ... and something to cover her bare feet. Kelly was more than a little relieved that he'd thought of it and hugged him in gratitude. The shift she was wearing was already ragged from snagging it on brush and brambles. She would have found herself stark naked before much longer, or forced to cover herself with animal skins.

Tau blushed faintly when he handed her the last package in the first bundle. She looked it over curiously for several moments before she figured out what it was—feminine pads. Blood flooded her cheeks. She looked up at him quickly, but he'd turned away. She was more than a little tempted to just set them aside and change the subject—she didn't need them at the moment. But she was bound to need them later and it had been incredibly thoughtful of him to think of her needs. She couldn't have gotten one of her brothers to fetch something like that for her for a king's ransom in bribery money ... and Tau had risked capture to get them for her!

She touched his arm. When he turned to look at her questioningly, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you. I appreciate your thoughtfulness more than I can say."

He smiled wryly. "Got caught."

Kelly stared at him a moment, torn between the urge to laugh and cry at the same time as she realized what he'd gone through to get them for her. "Oh, Tau! I'm so sorry!"

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He shrugged, looked away uncomfortably. "For Kel-ly. Done now."

She allowed the subject to drop, but she felt warmed by the fact that he'd gone to such lengths for her. Flowers and a box of candy paled beside such an offering.

The last bundle, the one they'd left below, contained tools. Kelly looked them over, wondering why he'd brought them.

He pointed up to the cave. "Good job. Make better now. No climb up."

She simply stared at him while that slowly sank in. "Build a ... a home, you mean? Here? For me ... and you?"

He studied her. "Kel-ly want—Tau stay."

Kelly uttered a squeal of delight and launched herself at him, hugging him tightly around the neck. "Yes!" she exclaimed kissing him all over the face. "I really hated being alone. I know I'd be a basket case in a month. I'd already started talking to myself."

He chuckled but pulled her loose and set her away, giving her a stern look. "Work first. Oddur later."

She punched him playfully. "Oddur what?"

He grinned. "Fuck Kel-ly senseless."

She laughed but shook her head. "Dirty language. Say make love ... not fuck."

His brows rose. "Same ting?"

Kelly shrugged. "Pretty much."

"What pretty much?"

Kelly smiled and returned her attention to sorting the tools. "Where are we going to build?"

"Build here."

She glanced at him. "What about the animals?"

His look was uncomprehending. She pointed to the tracks in the soft ground. "Animal foot prints. Lots of different kinds come here to drink."

"Build strong. Good place." He pointed to the water falling down the side of the hill. "Catch water come down, better to wash."

Kelly stared at it, feeling a welling of enthusiasm as she realized what he meant. "Running water! Oh, how I've missed in-door plumbing! Great idea!"

It was probably the hardest work Kelly had ever done in her life, but she found once they'd leveled an area and began to search for stones suitable for building that she felt both a sense of accomplishment and a thrill of happiness as it slowly began to take shape. After searching the immediate area, Tau found the materials they needed to mix the mortar to hold the stones together. She suspected it was not nearly as strong as real mortar, but Tau assured her it was the same material they used to build in Lan-tet, the only haden city on New Ducran.

The bird beast, which Tau told her they called a Loc, was indigenous to New Ducran and had been captured and domesticated by the Ducrans, who'd arrived on their new home world with very little they needed to build. Tau fashioned a crude sled they could use to load stones and had the Loc drag it to the site, but it was still hard work loading and unloading, and progress was slow. Kelly was so weary after a few days, it took all she could do to force herself to make the climb to the cave when night encroached. When she

reached the point where she was almost ready to drop where she stood, despite the threat of being eaten alive by some predator on it's way to the pool, Tau picked her up, carried her to the shade of a tree and set her down. "No move."

"You can't do it by yourself."

"Need rest, Kel-ly."

She felt like she should argue, but found that she just didn't have the energy. "Just a little nap, then," she murmured.

She woke later to the smell of cooked food. She discovered when she opened her eyes than Tau had knelt beside her and was waving a skewered 'rabbit' under her nose. He grinned when she looked at him. "Thought food wake. Kel-ly like eat, huh?"

She chuckled but gave him a look as she sat up. "Are you suggesting I eat as much as you do?"

His grin widened. "Eat like Loc. Tau hunt food most time."

"Very funny. Ha ha."

"Kel-ly get...." He stopped, apparently couldn't think of the word and motioned with his hands.

"Round? You mean fat!" she demanded indignantly.

He nodded. "Better. Too...." He shrugged and sucked his cheeks in.

"Now you're saying I'm too skinny? All right, that does it. If you're going to be insulting, no nookie for you!" She saw she'd lost him. "Tau say bad things to Kelly and insult her, Tau no get..." She made a hole with one fist and poked her finger in it.

He studied the motion a moment and started laughing.

She glared at him.

He looked contrite. "Tau sorry. Get...." He mimicked her motions. "Now?"

She laughed but snatched the food from his hand. "I don't know. I'll think about it."

He snatched the skewer back and stood up, holding it out of her reach, laughing.

Kelly knew this game. It was the big brother 'keep away'. She jumped to her feet. Instead of trying to jump high enough to grab the skewer from his hands, however, Kelly dug her fingers into his ribs. His eyes widened. When he convulsed, relaxing his guard, she snatched the skewer from his lax fingers and ran with it, scaled the nearest tree and straddled a branch. He glared up at her, his hands on his hips. "Cheat!"

Kelly laughed. "Tickling isn't cheating any more than holding it out of my reach was, you ass!" She bit off a piece of meat, rolled her eyes. "Mmmm. Good!"

He chuckled but pointed to the ground. "Down!"

Kelly shook her head slowly, provocatively, sucking the juices of the meat from her fingers with slow deliberation.

Tau focused on her fingers, watching as she slipped them one by one in her mouth and sucked.

When he realized she was taunting him, he turned away and returned to the fire. Taking a seat, he presented her with his back and began to eat his food.

"Spoil sport," Kelly muttered. She finished her meal, but it wasn't nearly as good as it had seemed when she was teasing him with it. When she'd finished, she decided to climb down.

Either Tau hadn't heard her or he was still sulking because she'd won.

She studied his back for a long moment and finally decided to creep up on him. Just as she was about to grab him, he whirled, grabbed her and pushed her to the ground, rolling halfway on top of her. Kelly stared up at him in surprise. In the next moment, however, she convulsed with laughter when he started tickling her. She caught her breath with an effort. "O.K.! O.K.! You win!"

He propped on one elbow, a half smile on his lips. "What this?" he asked, digging a finger in her ribs.

Kelly laughed but pushed his hand away. "Tickling."

"Make laugh."

Kelly nodded.

He sighed deeply. "No laugh, long time."

Her amusement vanished. "Me either."

"Feel good laugh."

Kelly nodded.

He leaned toward her, brushed his mouth lightly across hers. "Feel much good," he murmured.

"Mmm. Yes, it does."

He kissed her deeply then. Kelly kissed him back, hungrily, pulling at his shirt. They stripped each other hurriedly, touching, caressing, but Kelly was in no mood for prolonged foreplay. As soon as they'd discarded their clothing, she spread her thighs, urging him to possess her. He needed no more urging. He moved between her legs, pushing his hard cock against her sex, penetrating her with one smooth thrust. She lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist as he

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began to move in and out, urging him to move faster. Within moments, he was pounding against her jarringly. Kelly bit down on his shoulder and sucked hard as she climaxed. The clenching muscles of her vagina set off his own culmination. Sated, they collapsed in a tangle of arms and legs, breathing heavily.

When Kelly finally caught her breath, she chuckled. "That's called raunchy sex. Sweaty, grimy, hard and fast." She slapped his buttock. "Bathe now."

He rolled away from her, looking at her questioningly. "Not good?"

She laughed. "You're just fishing for compliments. I'm dirty. You're dirty. It was still great sex."

Rising, she moved down to the pool, took the bar of soap from the rock where they'd left it and dove into the water. It was freezing, as usual. She didn't think she'd ever get used to bathing in icy cold water, but diving in at least helped her acclimate to the chill faster. After a moment, Tau followed her, watching while she bathed herself. Instead of handing him the soap when she'd finished, she started bathing him, paying special attention to his cock. He shivered when she slowly massaged it.

"Kel-ly still have hunger?"

She looked up at him questioningly.

"Try eat Tau," he said, smiling faintly as he pointed to the mark she'd left on his shoulder.

She smiled back. "It's a love bite ... but now that you mention it." She dropped the soap and started rinsing the suds from his skin. After a moment, he grasped her shoulders

and pushed her down into the water, dipping down himself to rinse, as well.

When they stood once more, Kelly moved close and began to nibble her way down toward his cock, which was standing hard and erect, rubbing against her. He jumped when she took his cock into her mouth, sucked it, then ran her tongue around the sensitive rim of the head of his cock. Gripping her shoulders, he pulled her away after a moment, reluctantly. "Forbidden."

Kelly raised her eyebrows. "You're kidding, right?"

"Law."

She studied him a moment and finally shrugged. "Well, far be it from me to break the law. It's against the law where I come from too, but nobody pays it much attention. Consenting adults do pretty much anything they like when they're alone. If it feels good, we do it." She cupped his cock with her hand, massaging it.

He groaned. "Feel good. Oddur better."

Kelly hid a smile, nibbling along his chest. "Which other?" She looked up at him innocently.

His eyes narrowed. He bent and scooped her into his arms and carried her out of the pool. Settling her on a bed of moss, he followed her down, kissing her. "Forbidden better," he murmured.

"Mmm. It's a shame, really."

"What call this?" he asked, kissing her again.

"Kiss."

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"Like kiss. Human do tings hadn not. Interesting," he murmured, his eyes gleaming with both passion and amusement.

"Is this research?"

A slow smile curled his lips. "Yes. Research human."

She rose up, pushing him to his back. "If you're going to research human mating habits, I'm going to have to show you everything."

He lay back, crossing his arms behind his head. "Show."

Chapter Thirteen

Kelly came up on her knees. Running a finger lightly down the center of his chest, she stopped when she reached his navel, circled it, then skimmed her nail lightly across his hip and down one muscular thigh, across to the other and up again and finally traced a light circle around his genitals. He was, she realized, a beautiful specimen—haden, human—it didn't matter. To her he was Tau. It made her wet just looking at him—the way he walked, his smile, the way his eyes gleamed with desire, or amusement, the sweat glistening on his muscular body when he worked, the play of muscles with every movement. She was hot and wet for him before he so much as touched her, mindless with desire with every kiss and each new caress.

She placed her palm flat against his bare flesh and caressed his thighs, his belly, his chest.

She supposed, initially, the attraction had been purely chemical—potent, but no more than a physical and chemical reaction to him as an attractive male. That first time, she'd been totally pissed off about being tied up, and scared, but almost the moment he walked into the room and she knew it was him, she'd gone wet just thinking about having his cock inside of her.

She was wet now, just thinking about it, caressing his body. She could feel her heart rhythm speeding up with excitement. Her whole body felt hot, languorous and tense at the same time.

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She leaned over him, inhaling his scent, tasting him with her tongue, then moved across his abdomen, pausing occasionally, sucking a row of love bites on his lower belly, teasingly close to his cock. Shifting, she moved lower, nipping his inner thigh with her teeth, then sucking, caressing his belly and chest with one hand while she supported herself with the other. Finally, she nuzzled his testicles, then gently sucked first one then the other into her mouth, teasing it with her tongue.

He tensed, as if expecting pain, but relaxed at her gentle ministrations before a new tension made his muscles go taut. When he began to move restlessly, she sat back. Capturing his gaze with her own, she grasped his cock with her hand and slowly lowered her head, covering the rounded tip of his cock with her mouth and sucking on it. His eyes closed. His face contorted as every muscle in his body went taut and hard with pleasure.

Settling herself, more comfortably, she pushed her mouth down over his cock, taking as much of him as she could into her mouth, then slowly lifting her head again, allowing his cock to slip almost completely from her mouth until she held on to the head, sucking it.

He groaned. Pulling his hands from behind his head, he ran one along her back, cupping her buttock.

She put his cock in her mouth again, all the way in, then out again, slowly at first, and then faster, then slowing the tempo, stopping now and then to suck the head of his cock, tease it with her tongue.

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He held his breath, held himself still, his muscles straining with the effort. Finally, unable to bear it any longer, he threaded his fingers through her hair, cupping the back of her head as he tried to control the rhythm of her movements. She didn't try to resist, instead closing her mouth tightly around his cock and allowing him to set the movement most pleasing to him.

When he began to groan and thrash, and she knew he was about to come, she released him, straddled him. Grasping his cock in one hand, she impaled herself on his hard shaft, pushing back against him until her buttocks settled against his belly, until she could feel her clit rub against him. He groaned hoarsely as his cock penetrated her, his shoulders coming up off the ground convulsively. She grasped one of his hands as she moved her body over his, sucking a long finger into her mouth even as she pushed back and down, engulfing his cock, her muscles clenching tightly around it before she leaned forward, allowing his cock to slide from her body until only the head remained inside of her. She repeated the process, over and over until he was groaning, moving continuously beneath her. He sat up abruptly, catching her waist, lifting and then pushing her down several times in quick succession, so hard her flesh slapped against, finally crushing her down to the hilt of his cock, wrapping his arms around her tightly as he convulsed with his orgasm.

She was gasping, unfulfilled, but so delighted with his explosive climax she didn't care.

Breathing raggedly, he kissed her open mouthed, his tongue ravishing her mouth, possessing it. In the next

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moment, he released her mouth and tipped her onto her back on the moss, covering one taut nipple briefly, then the other, sucking hard, drawing a cry of pleasure from her. He moved down then, covered her clit with his mouth. The faintly abrasive texture of his tongue sent her into mindless ecstasy with the first brush as he ran his tongue over her pleasure nub. He sucked her clit, lathed it with his tongue. Kelly bucked, clutched his head, feeling her body rushing toward climax. Within moments culmination thundered through her so hard she screamed and still he licked and sucked her clit until she convulsed on and on in climax and finally begged him to stop.

He dropped down beside her, bending his arm and propping his head in his hand so that he could study her. Slowly, Kelly regained her senses, caught her breath. She smiled faintly when she managed to open her eyes and saw that he was looking at her.

"Forbidden fruit is always the best," she murmured.

He touched her cheek caressingly, but a slow smile curled his lips. "Know why forbidden now."

"Why?" Kelly asked dreamily.

"Much oddur, kill Tau. Heart stop."

Weakly, she pushed him back and laid her head on his chest. "Still beating. Sounds fine," she said teasingly.

He put an arm around her, threading the fingers of his other hand through her hair.

"Beat for Kel-ly," he said quietly.

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Kelly stiffened slightly, but then forced herself to relax. She didn't look up at his face. She was afraid he hadn't meant what it sounded like he was saying.

* * * *

The day they began securing the poles to the roof, Kelly was so excited she could hardly sit still long enough to eat. The cabin they had built was tiny, but Kelly had never seen anything more beautiful, couldn't have been more excited if it had been a mansion.

Tau had fashioned a small fireplace so that they would be able to cook inside. He'd also built a basin to catch the water he'd piped in with some sort of vegetation that looked similar to reeds, or perhaps bamboo. There was only one window opening, but two door openings, one in the front and one on the side. A bathroom was next on their list of 'to-do' and would be joined to the original structure by way of the side doorway.

Perhaps it was because Kelly had ceased, long since, to think in terms of time, or perhaps it was only that she was so focused on the construction, but it wasn't until they began to thatch the roof that it dawned on her, quiet suddenly, that she had not had her cycle since she'd left Earth. She shrugged it away at first. She'd bled for several weeks after she'd miscarried and decided it must have interrupted her natural cycle.

She hadn't been counting the hours of the days or the days of the week since she'd been on New Ducran. For one thing, she had no way to tell how many hours in a day, or

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days in a year for that matter. For another, time had little meaning unless one had somewhere specific to be and a particular time to be there. Since their escape from Lan-tet, the only thing of importance was knowing when the sun rose and when it set, because darkness was the time when they barricaded themselves in from predators, and daylight was the time that they became the predator.

It began to weigh on her, however, that she could not remember how many days had passed and to wonder when she should expect her cycle to begin again. The great moon of New Ducran was the only one of its satellites that seemed to go through the same phases as Earth's moon, in approximately the same length of time. Counting back, she recalled having seen four full moons since her miscarriage.

She decided that couldn't be right.

When she realized Tau had noticed her preoccupation, she dismissed it and returned to work, but it continued to nag at her thereafter. Finally, one evening after supper when she customarily took her last nature stroll, Kelly decided, instead of heading straight back, to find a quiet spot near the pool so that she could think without worrying that Tau might be wondering what was going through her mind. If she had time without distraction, she was sure she could think up enough events to associate with the time that had passed so that she could calculate it.

Since she had counted nothing, it took a great deal of thought even to recall landmarks that she could use, but she did remember that the great moon had been full when they had fled the Ducran city, Lan-tet. It was halfway through

another phase when Tau had returned at last. She was fairly certain she recalled at least two beyond the first after Tau's return ... and now the moon was full once more.

She looked down at her belly, certain now that Tau's child grew there. What she wasn't certain of was how she felt about it. Stunned seemed her most dominate emotion. She placed her palm over her belly, noticing the roundness of it, wondering how she could have been so focused beyond herself as to have failed to notice the changes in her own body. She must be many weeks into her pregnancy, but how many? In terms of gestation, how far along? She couldn't count months when she didn't know how many days were in the months on New Ducran. How was she to calculate the weeks until it's birth?

She was so self-absorbed, she didn't notice that Tau had come to stand behind her until she felt his arms surround her. He placed his hands over hers, bent his head and kissed the side of her neck. A quiver of sensation rushed through, part pleasure, part anxiety.

"Kel-ly?"

He knew. How long had he suspected when she hadn't even noticed herself? Had she truly not noticed, or had she simply refused to accept it? And, if the latter, did she know in her heart that she didn't want it to be true? "What?" she said finally, trying to understand how she felt about the fact that she was pregnant.

"Soon Kel-ly round, cub grow big," he said, making a motion with his hands to describe a pregnant body. "Tau...." He stopped. "Rejoice Kel-ly mother Tau's offspring."

Her heart skipped several beats. She glanced up at him.
"You're ... happy?"

He caressed her cheek. "Yes."

"But ... it won't be haden. It will be half human."

He sighed deeply. "Wish had more En-GLISH. Know no words explain. Half Kel-ly good. Know this. Make strong male cub."

Kelly bit her lip, trying her best not to chuckle. Tau looked offended when he saw she was amused. He started to pull away, but she held him. "What if it's a daughter?"

He frowned.

"Girl child? Female?"

His brows rose, but a faint smile curled his lips. "Tau make male cub."

Kelly chuckled, patted her belly. "You hear that, Carol Anne? He thinks you're a male child!"

"Ca-rol not good name for male, Tau think. Name Tan-uk for Tau father."

Kelly studied him a moment. "I'll consider it, IF it's a boy. If it's a girl, we'll call her Carol Anne, after my mother."

"Next Ca-rol. This male. Name Tan-uk."

"You like to argue, don't you? I never noticed that about you before. Are you sure you weren't a lawyer before?"

His brows rose. "This insult?"

Kelly laughed. "You are so astute! And what makes you so sure there'll BE a next one?"

"Kel-ly like fuck Tau, much," he said simply.

"What you mean is, Tau likes to fuck Kelly," Kelly teased.

His eyes gleamed. "Same ting, yes?"

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Kelly turned away, wrapping his arms around her. Looking up at the sky, she could almost imagine one of the stars above them was Earth. "Yes. I'd love it if you made love to me forever and ever."

* * * *

Kelly decided it was just a little bizarre being given a pelvic examination by the father to be. She wanted to know how far along she was, however, and how much longer she would have to wait. She wasn't a patient person and as soon as she realized Tau was pleased about the situation, she knew she was also pleased.

She wasn't so certain she believed him when he'd checked, however. By his calculations she was almost half way through her pregnancy.

"That can't be right."

"Is correct."

"But ... I'm hardly even showing. No belly, hardly. See."

Tau smiled. "Kelly hollow. Big cub. Hide inside."

"Ha ha!"

"Feel..." He fluttered his fingers.

Kelly frowned, thought about it. "I thought it was ... uh ... something else."

"Feel?"

She nodded.

"Big moon round...." He held up four fingers. "Cub come den."

Kelly sat up, suddenly convinced. "We have to get ready then!"

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Tau sat beside her and took her hand in his. "Must go Lan-tet. Get tings for Kel-ly."

Fear coursed through her. "I didn't mean that! I meant, we have to finish the house, make a place for the baby. You can't go now! What if they caught you again?"

Tau sighed. "Need much. Have no tings. Go now, get back before cub come."

Try though she might to fight the hysteria rising inside of her, Kelly simply could not prevent the desperation from creeping into her voice. "Take me with you then."

Tau thought about it for several moments, but finally shook his head. "Catch both, no know what happen. Protect cub. Safe here. No safe Lan-tet."

"Then stay. Why take the risk? We have plenty. There's nothing there that we need. We've got water, shelter, all the meat we can catch. The nuts and berries you found. Roots, even greens. Plenty!"

"Much need dere. Need oddur food. Kel-ly carry cub, need more dan meat, nuts, berries. Need oddur, make strong cub. Need medicine when cub come. Need tings no here. No get here."

Kelly realized, finally, that arguing was useless. He was right. The supplies he'd brought to balance out their diet had been exhausted weeks ago. There was little beyond meat that they could forage for in the jungle and as unappealing as a steady diet of little more than meat was, it was far more than just a case of whether or not it was appetizing. It wasn't a healthy diet for a pregnant woman. She had to think of the baby, not just herself.

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Tau was a doctor. He knew what she needed to have a healthy baby. He also knew she would need medicines when the baby came.

Truthfully, it was scary to think of having a baby with nothing at all for pain. But it was far more scary to think of having a baby with nothing for the pain and no one there to help her.

Once she accepted that it was something that had to be done and couldn't be avoided, she became anxious for Tau to go so that he could collect what was needed and come back. He would not go, however, until he'd completed the cabin, making sure she had a stout shutter over the window opening and strong doors.

Kelly thought it would have been better if she'd just stayed in the cave while he was gone. She knew she was safe up there from pretty much any sort of predator, two legged or four legged. Tau became angry, however, at the suggestion. It might have been funny, since he was unable to come up with enough words in her language to give her a thorough dressing down, except that the fact that he couldn't express his anger as he wanted to was extremely frustrating to him and only made him more angry. He withdrew into a cold silence that was worse than if he'd exploded and verbalized his feelings on the matter.

Language barrier or not, he managed to make it abundantly clear that he would be fit to be tied if he caught her trying to climb up to the cave. Kelly thought he was being completely unreasonable. She was barely even showing yet. She was a long way from being too clumsy to make the climb.

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She refrained from trying to make him see reason, however, deciding, no matter how he might feel about it, and no matter how angry it might make him if he found out she'd gone up to the cave, she'd damn well go there if she felt threatened in any way before she'd try to barricade herself into the tiny cabin.

As she watched Tau go the following day, though, she found herself wishing they had not parted in anger. She wondered as he made his way from the clearing and disappeared into the jungle if he would come back, or if she would once again be alone.

Chapter Fourteen

It had been months since Tau had been to Lan-tet. It seemed unlikely that a watch would be on the lookout specifically for him, so he didn't expect to run into any trouble, but he preferred to err on the side of caution. Now, more even than before, he could not afford to be caught. His anxiety the first time he'd come had been that Kelly would not be able to fend for herself. He'd more than half expected to find her dead when he had finally managed to escape and return to her. He'd been relieved beyond measure when he discovered she had done quite well on her own, disconcerted to find she was far more self-sufficient than he'd realized, but immeasurably relieved.

She was in no condition now, however, to fend for herself for any length of time. He would have been anxious and concerned if she were hadn, carrying their first child. She was not hadn, however. She was human and although she seemed to suffer no anxieties herself over the possible complications that could arise from their cross breeding, he harbored more than enough for both of them.

He'd discovered on his last visit that another of the women they had brought back with them had miscarried. He would have felt better if he could have observed the pregnancy up until that point, if he could have assured himself that it was a problem with the patient, not the pregnancy, but he had not had that opportunity. And, as many times as he had told himself that Kelly's miscarriage was a predictable result of

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Tin's attack on her, he couldn't completely convince himself that she would have no problems with this pregnancy.

Since his main anxiety was to secure the medicine and instruments he would need to monitor Kelly's progress, he decided to make the infirmary his first stop, collect what he needed and stash it where he'd left the Locs before returning to collect the other items on his list of needs.

He almost stumbled over the watch as he made his way around the back of the infirmary to the side door. The man was sleeping on duty and had found himself a comfortable seat in the alley between the infirmary and the building next to it. Pausing only long enough to be certain he hadn't disturbed the man's rest, Tau stepped over him and continued, pausing now and then as he worked to pick the lock to make sure the man still slept.

Once inside, he went to his own lab first, since he was familiar enough with it to find what he needed quickly. He discovered, however, that his lab had been cleaned out. Cursing under his breath, he paused to think where his instruments might have been moved. No quick answer presented itself, and he was forced to search room by room, ever aware of the passing time and the possibility that the watch might rouse from his nap to check the building once more.

In the third lab, he discovered what he needed. Loading instruments and medications quickly into a bag, he made his way out of the building cautiously. The watch, he discovered, was gone. He glanced around uneasily, and finally decided to take a circuitous route back to the Locs since it occurred to

him that he might be walking into a trap if he tried to use the more direct route he'd come by.

It was nearing sunrise by the time he made it back to the area where he'd tethered the Locs. He debated briefly, but finally decided it was too risky to return again. He would have to wait for nightfall once more.

He spent most of the day pacing. The thefts from the infirmary were bound to be detected almost immediately, which meant the watch would be on guard now, expecting him to return. It was a dilemma he could find no quick or easy answers for. If he left now, he would at least have what he needed in medical supplies. But he had not had the chance to gather food, and without a proper diet the medical supplies would be virtually useless. In themselves, they could not insure a healthy pregnancy. The medical supplies would only allow him to observe any problems that arose, correct some perhaps, but Kelly would be little better off.

If he made another raid and was caught, she would be completely alone until, and unless, he again managed to escape. And he didn't delude himself into thinking a second escape would be as easily managed as the first. He'd caught them off guard the first time. This time they would be expecting him to attempt to escape.

By the time he'd finally arrived at the conclusion that he had no choice but to risk capture and try another raid, it was late in the afternoon. He sat down to rest for a few hours and wait for dark, trying not to think what must be going through Kelly's mind when he did not return as he'd planned.

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In truth, she had no reason to trust in him. If he had not been so immovable, and so vocal against introducing a new species into their gene pool, the council might never have arrived at the decision to use her for scientific investigation in the first place. They might have seen that it was wrong even to consider such a thing with another intelligent life form. His speciest attitude had been a strong influence on the community at large, convincing them that they were superior to humans and need not consider them as equals.

He realized that he had done no more than to tap into their own deep seated prejudice, but he had brought into the open what might have been pushed to the background when considered against the alternative.

Even so, if he had claimed her as he should have when they had taken her.... But he had been angry at the circumstances that had thrust them together, angry that he felt an obligation to her when he didn't want one. He had convinced himself that he had done enough to repay her act of kindness when he had prevented them from killing her. She had interfered when she should not have. She was equally to blame for the situation, if not mostly to blame. He should not be obligated to pay for her misguided attempts to help, when he had needed no help, by taking her as his life mate.

Far from helping matters, the fact that he was physically attracted to her had only made matters worse. He could not come near her without losing all logical brain function, and that had prompted him to keep his distance to try to maintain his objectivity. That, as much as anything else, had led to

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Tin's attack. It had also contributed to her death warrant upon their arrival.

It seemed probable that if she understood his role, she would never have trusted him at all. He supposed, under the circumstances that he had no right to expect trust, respect or love, but he wanted them. If he proved to her that he could be trusted, and that he had learned that his prejudice against her kind was just that, that he'd learned to respect and admire her for what she was, instead of despising her for what she wasn't, then perhaps she would come to feel that he was worthy of her respect and admiration.

If he was captured, if he let her down again, he might never get the chance.

But, if he did not risk capture, she might well die.

* * * *

As much as he would have liked to have gone to his own place for the supplies they needed, there were two very good reasons not to. The first, naturally enough, was that he knew they had to have discovered the theft of the medical supplies. He had picked the lock, not broken in. He had been careful to leave everything as he'd found it, but supplies of the nature of those he'd taken were more valuable than anything else the Ducrans possessed, because they were all that remained from their home world and almost impossible to replace in their new circumstances. Regardless of how careful he'd been, the supplies were checked regularly. He couldn't delude himself into thinking they wouldn't be missed very quickly.

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The second obstacle was that they would be expecting him there. Once the supplies were discovered missing, they would know it had to have been him who'd taken them.

In any case, he'd pretty well cleaned out the supplies on his previous raid.

The problem was, the security around the main supply depot was always stringent and would be even more so now.

He discovered, to his disappointment, if not surprise, that he had correctly assessed the situation. Guards walked the perimeter, and were also stationed on top of the building.

It was insane to try. He might be able to fight his way in. He would not be able to fight his way out again burdened with supplies.

The alternative was to go back virtually empty handed, or to break into someone's domicile on his way out of the city and take what he could. He finally decided that he would try the latter if the opportunity arose, but would take no unnecessary risks. He had to get back to Kelly. He could allow a little time to pass and try another raid.

They were waiting for him when he returned to the Locs.

* * * *

It was unfortunate, Tau thought wryly, that the men waiting for him were friends and family of Osit, the man he'd injured when he'd rescued Kelly. Osit had lived, to Tau's relief. They had even managed to reattach his severed hand, but he was not 'as good as new'. The reattached member was only partially functional.

Tau regretted it, to an extent. He'd worked with Osit for years. He had had nothing personal against Osit until he'd come upon him on the point of putting Kelly to sleep, permanently, as if she were of no more significance or importance than any other lab animal.

He supposed it would be most accurate to say that he regretted that Osit had put him in the position of nearly killing him.

In any case, Osit's family, and his close friends, had taken the attack very personally. Tau had been prepared to fight for his freedom. He hadn't been prepared to be put in the position of having to fight for his life. If it had not been for the fact that some of the men had once considered him a friend as well, he would not even have had the opportunity to face a trial.

As it was, he had spent time in recovering from his capture. How much time, he couldn't begin to guess, but he saw very quickly that escape wasn't an option.

When he was finally able to get up, he began to harass the guards to allow him to speak with Kin-ko. He was told, to begin with, that Kin-ko had no desire to speak with him. Another week passed, and then another while Tau paced his cell like a caged animal, becoming more and more desperate.

Finally, Tau was allowed to speak to a representative for his defense. He knew very well, however, that he had no defense. It didn't make any difference that he had found himself in a position of not being able to follow accepted protocol. Kelly would have been long dead if he had demanded an audience to hear his objections to the

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disposition. He hadn't claimed her, so he'd had no right to her, which meant he couldn't even claim extenuating and extreme circumstances.

He would be tried and sentenced to imprisonment. It didn't matter how brief, or how long the sentence was. He would not be able to help Kelly.

That being the case, he concentrated instead on persuading his representative to see to it that he was allowed to speak with Kin-ko.

The day before his trial, Kin-ko arrived at last. Tau was so relieved he felt dizzy with it.

"Kin-ko! I thought you wouldn't come!"

Kin-ko glanced around. "They wouldn't allow it. They were certain you'd sent for me to help you escape and they were afraid I would help you. I have to tell you, as much as I'd like to, there is nothing I can do."

"I didn't expect there would be," Tau said, but he was disappointed nevertheless. "I need you to go to Kelly. She's carrying my cub."

Kin-ko looked at him doubtfully. "You want me to bring her back? Tau, you know what they will do to her! She is an outsider, and unclaimed. She has no legal place in the community. With supplies so limited, they will make no allowances. They can not when it deprives members of the colony from the things they need that are already in short supply."

"No! I know what they would do to her. I must file an appeal with the council to reverse their earlier decision before she can be brought here. And I can not do that until the trial

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is over. But she is alone, and growing heavy with my cub, without food except what she can hunt. She will die if I can not send help to her. Go to my father. Tell him I have claimed her and that I beg him to send supplies to her. At the very least, you can do that for me!"

Kin-ko nodded. "I'll take them to her myself and make certain she has all that she needs. But, I must tell you everyone is demanding you be imprisoned for no less than a year for the assault charges, maybe more for the thefts, certainly more for escaping before. If I can not bring her here, I can make no promises that I'll be able to protect her until you're freed. I can only say I will do my best. Tell me how to find her."

Chapter Fifteen

"She is a drain on the resources of the colony. I harbor no ill will toward the female, despite the fact that I was maimed on her account. But we must look to our own first. So long as she lives, Tau will take from us to provide for her. And, even with the supplies they brought back from their raid to Earth, there is barely enough for us until we can send out another party. He should have claimed her if he wanted her. Arrangements could have been made then to see to it that additional supplies were brought to take care of her needs.

"Frankly, I think we need to consider the turmoil her very presence has created. We have had no crime to deal with to speak of in all the time we have been here. And now Tin has been punished for assault and attempted rape, only because she flaunted herself before him and then changed her mind.

"I have been assaulted and maimed, when I was doing nothing more than the job I was trained for, and ordered to do. Tau has stolen from us to give to her. Where will it end if we do nothing?

"Ran-gor overheard Tau telling Kin-ko how to find their camp. All we need do is go get her and it will end the problem," Osit finished, pausing at last from his restless pacing back and forth across the main room of his home and facing the group of men he'd invited into his home so he could speak with them and, hopefully, convince them to help him.

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Tin said nothing, waiting to see what Nal and Ral-o had to say about the matter. The two men exchanged an uncomfortable look, but it was Nal who spoke. "I can't be a party to this," he said flatly. "It may not be illegal to do as you say and bring her here to use her for studies. It might even be in the best interests of the colony as a whole to do so since we know so little about their species, and it's inarguable that supplies must be guarded carefully. Morally, it's wrong. Ran-gor heard Tau claim her. She belongs to Tau. She's carrying his cub. Beyond that, she is not an animal. She is as we are, maybe not haden, but not a lower life form. My Maggie may annoy me often, but she is a being of value and importance. Her species is. I'll have nothing to do with destroying one of them merely so that you can study her! I wouldn't even if I did not call Tau friend."

He rose abruptly and departed, slamming the door behind him.

Ral-o rose as well. "He's right. As uncomfortable as I was with the idea of taking them against their will, I at least had no intention to cause harm and understood that no others did or I'd have nothing to do with it in the first place."

Tin looked at Osit when they'd left. "I expect they'll go straight to the council."

Osit banged his fist against the door. "There is nothing malicious or immoral about my suggestion! The council will agree. If we take her for study, we could prevent other problems that might arise from this insane notion to breed freaks off of another species in the blind hope that it will be the salvation of our own. Your woman has already lost her

cub, and it might well have been a blessing. What if the others bear offspring that is deformed, sickly, more of a drain upon us?"

Tin shrugged off-handedly. Osit knew very well that his woman had lost her cub because their love play had gotten a little out of hand, but it was something known only between the two of them and better, he thought, to voice no reminders. There was no sense in giving Osit the idea that he would be allowed to use the information against him. "It's the council's decision."

Osit began pacing the room. "They will almost certainly reverse their earlier decision once they learn that Tau has had qualms and decided to claim her."

"There's no love lost between Tau and me ... nor the woman, for that matter. I would be willing to go with you to capture her. As you say, she's far more valuable for study. In the end, we could be looked upon as heroes. Whether you discover inherent physical anomalies that would prevent cross breeding or not, you're bound to discover a great deal of very valuable information."

"We'd have to move fast," Osit said, brightening immediately.

"Then we shouldn't be here talking, should we?"

* * * *

Kelly managed to run the gamut of emotions on almost a daily basis. She was afraid Tau had been captured, or worse, killed trying to get what they needed. She was afraid he'd decided, this time, not to return. She was furious that he'd

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taken the chance when it hadn't been absolutely necessary. She was, in turns, weepy and angry that he'd decided, after all, that she wasn't worth the trouble and abandoned her without even having the courtesy of just telling her so.

She was also worried about her baby now that it appeared that Tau, for whatever reason, would not return. Like everyone else, she'd been more inclined on Earth to watch her weight than to simply let nature take its course. She hadn't been skinny, by any means, but she hadn't had a great deal of fat reserve either. How could she have foreseen that having a fat reserve might make the difference between surviving and not?

When days passed and Tau had not returned, she had indulged herself with a major bout of self-pity and finally picked herself up again and settled down to consider her predicament.

She could do nothing about her condition except hope for the best. If nature didn't take its course and present her, in due time, with a perfectly normal birth and a perfectly healthy and normal child, she was probably going to regret not taking the easy way out by ending it all before she had to face the worst. She considered herself a realist, however, neither an optimist or a pessimist. Realistically speaking, she had at least a 50/50 chance that everything would go as it should, at any time, in any given situation. Her chances, she considered, were better than even, however, due to the fact that she was in excellent health.

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She decided to put that problem aside and not think about it. If it wasn't something she could fix, it wasn't something she should be investing time in.

The situation that needed to take priority was her continued good health, which meant enough food for now, and enough to see her through an indeterminate period when she probably wouldn't be able to go out and hunt or gather.

It would've been helpful if she'd had some means of food preservation, or refrigeration. She had none of the modern amenities, unfortunately, but it did occur to her that the pool was certainly cold enough to slow the process of deterioration. All she had to do was to figure out a way to use it that would not involve feeding her food to the fishes.

After studying over what she did have, she finally decided she would have to sacrifice part of the cabin for the purpose of refrigeration. Tau had already piped the icy cold water into a basin inside. All she needed to do was to dig a well. The ground would insulate the water and keep the temperature from rising too rapidly.

It took her several weeks to dig a pit she felt was deep enough. She built a low stone wall around the rim and then used the tools Tau had brought to make a door to cover it.

When she was finished at last, she went out to hunt. By the process of trial and error, she discovered the well would preserve meat almost a week if it went in raw, at least a week to two weeks if she cooked it first.

She began then to mark her food reserves so that she always took the oldest out for consumption and always had at least a week in advance of what she would need. In between

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hunting trips, she gathered every berry, root and plant she found that Tau had taught her was safe to eat.

It occurred to her occasionally that it was ironic that she'd been reduced to a point where food was her one and only pursuit in life. When she thought about it, the life she'd had before coming to New Ducran seemed more of a dream than reality. Even the life she'd had in the months she'd spent with Tau began to seem like something that had happened to someone else, but she realized it was far better to focus on something constructive than to allow herself to wander off down the road of 'might have been' or 'the way it used to be'.

Her survival and her baby's depended upon her constant search for food, and she discovered as time went by that it became more and more of a challenge just to do that much the more the baby grew.

It had become so difficult to walk for great distances, to stand, waiting for game to come to her, to chase it if necessary or run if that transpired to be the preferable option, that Kelly had begun to concentrate primarily on fishing for her dinner. It was something that could grow very old very quickly, however, and she finally decided she simply had to try to find red meat.

She'd been sitting in the brush for hours before she heard the first sounds of passage. From the sounds, it seemed it must be one of the larger animals that roamed the area. The closer it came to her, the bigger it sounded. Kelly was debating whether to find a tree and try to climb it or remain where she was when it suddenly occurred to her that the

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sounds she'd been hearing were, quite possibly, the sounds of a man.

Her heart leapt into her throat the moment it occurred to her that it must be Tau, at long last, escaped, come back to her. She'd already tensed to leap to her feet when some instinctive sense of danger stopped her. Instead, she knotted an arrow and rose slowly, peering through the underbrush in the direction of the sound. She glimpsed a tiny patch of color, the pale golden tan of a Ducran. Shoot to wound? Or to kill?

She debated only briefly. If it was not Tau, it was one of the others and they would kill her if she didn't kill them first.

She pulled the drawstring back taut, sighted down the arrow, waiting, forcing herself to breathe slowly, evenly.

When he stepped from the brush she saw immediately that it wasn't Tau. She launched the arrow and whirled to flee. If the arrow hadn't found its mark, she wanted to put some distance between her and the Ducran. But, even as she whirled, she heard the snap of a branch behind her. She caught a glimpse of another Ducran just before something slammed into her jaw and everything went black.

* * * *

Kelly slowly became aware of movement. Her head throbbed with so much pain, however, that it took her long moments after consciousness had returned before she could force her eyes open to see what was going on around her. When she did open her eyes, she was still so dizzy and

disoriented that it took moments more for her brain to analyze what she was seeing and interpret it.

She was moving, she finally realized, along the trail she and Tau had taken when they had fled Lan-tet. It could have been any trail, of course, but as it was a trail, it seemed certain that they were bound for Lan-tet. Her throbbing hands drew her attention next and she saw that they had been tied together around the saddle horn of the Loc beneath her. With an effort, she lifted her head, looking around. Tin was mounted on the Loc in front of her. Beside her, on a third Loc, a man was tied face down over the saddle. She couldn't tell whether he was alive or not, but it was the man she'd shot. Her arrow was protruding from one shoulder.

She stared at him dispassionately, watching the blood drip from his fingertips. If he wasn't dead now, it seemed unlikely he'd be alive when they reached Lan-tet. Not that it mattered as far as she could see. Going back was a death sentence for her either way.

She should have felt guilt, she supposed. She didn't. After considering it for several moments, she decided she must not have been very civilized to begin with if she could become a complete savage in so short a time.

Her vision blurred. She blinked her eyes several times and finally turned her head and wiped her eye on the shoulder of her top. When she finally managed to get her eye open, she saw that bright red blood streaked the fabric and wondered what Tin had hit her with. His fist? A tree limb? Whatever he'd used, it had split the skin, but she didn't think there was any

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more damage. The whole side of her face throbbed, but she thought it must have hurt worse if he'd broken any bones.

Looking down at her hands again, she leaned forward, trying to reach the cord with her teeth. Try though she might, she couldn't. Her belly had grown far too big to bend as much as she needed to. Sitting upright again, she looked around behind her, wondering if she could scoot back far enough on the saddle to allow her to reach the cord. There was very little room. Perhaps it would have been enough if Tin had not tied her ankles, as well, but he had.

Balked of that relatively easy out, Kelly began to work her hands in the hope of loosening her bindings. After a few minutes, it seemed to be working, but she wasn't sure whether the cord was actually becoming looser or if it was the blood from her wrists that made it seem as if it was working loose.

She was still working at the cord when she heard a noise that drew her attention. When she looked up, she saw that they were entering Lan-tet. Nearby, a woman screamed. Within moments, a crowd gathered, muttering menacingly, trailing them as they made their way through town.

* * * *

Kelly thought for several unnerving moments when she was dragged from the Loc that she was about to be thrown to the crowd. To her relief, she was marched into a building near the center of town. There was little light inside. It took several moments for her eyes to adjust to the dimness.

"Kel-ly?"

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Kelly turned toward the sound, feeling a rush of gladness when she saw Tau. The door to his cell was unlocked, she was thrust inside, and the door slammed shut again. She staggered, almost losing her balance. Tau caught her, squeezing her tightly for many moments before he finally, reluctantly, pulled away to look at her.

His face contorted with such rage then that she took a step back. He caught her chin, tipping her face up. "Who strike, Kel-ly?"

More than a little relieved that his anger wasn't directed at her, Kelly shrugged her shoulders. "Tin, I guess. Truth is, I didn't see it coming. Otherwise I'd have ducked."

"Tau kill!" He strode to the door, pounded it with his fist and began yelling a string of word in his own language that Kelly suspected was either threats or cussing. The guard tried to look unmoved, but he shifted a little further away.

Finally, after pounding the door futilely one last time, Tau turned away. "Kill when get out," he muttered.

Kelly plunked her hands on her hips. "It's not going to do me a hell of a lot of good if you get yourself killed!"

He glared at her. "Tink Tin beat Tau?" he demanded.

"I think YOU are crazy if you think you can take on everybody! When we get out, IF we do, you can beat him senseless with my blessing. But somebody is going to have to take care of the baby and I've got a bad feeling it isn't going to be me."

The fight seemed to go out of him. "Why here?"

She shrugged, too tired and in too much pain to feel like arguing with him. "They dragged me here."

"No. Here," he said, pointing to the floor.

"Ah. You know that guy you had the fight with? I shot him with my trusty bow."

"Kill?" Tau asked, obviously horrified.

"Maybe," Kelly said indifferently.

He grasped her shoulders, giving her a little shake.

"Important. He die...."

Kelly rolled her eyes. "What? You think they can kill me twice? You know as well as I do they plan to slice and dice. On second thought, though, I suppose lethal injection appeals to me a little more than some of the other methods of extermination. You wouldn't by any chance know the usual method of execution?"

"Not funny," Tau said angrily.

"I'm not joking," Kelly responded tartly.

Tau fell silent, thinking. "No execute Kel-ly," he said finally, but with conviction.

Kelly resisted the urge to point out that he was hardly in a position to prevent it. "My head hurts," she muttered, looking around. There was a single bed in the corner. She moved over to it and sat down. After a moment, Tau followed her.

"Good thing, bring here. Trial."

"I'm glad you think so," Kelly muttered.

Tau put his arm around her, pulling her tightly against him. "Better dan oddur. No use for study. Trial."

"Yes first they'll try me, then they'll execute me, then they'll dissect me. Not that it'll matter then." Kelly placed her hand on her belly, feeling the infant kick. "Poor baby, but at least it won't know."

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Kelly didn't realize until Tau brushed them from her cheeks that tears were streaming from her eyes. "No cry, Kel-ly. Protect cub. Law. No ... punish for protect cub."

Despite everything, Kelly felt a ray of hope surge through her. "You think?"

"Know."

After a while, Tau lay down on the bed with his back to the wall and pulled Kelly down, snuggling her back against his belly, and placed an arm around the rounded mound that housed their child. "Try learn En-GLISH, Kel-ly. Tongue no work much."

Kelly sniffed but smiled. "You probably speak English worlds better than I could ever speak your language. Anyway, you usually get your point across. That's all that really matters."

He raised up, propping his head on one hand so he could look down at her. "Need say much, can't find words."

Kelly felt her breath catch in her lungs. She said nothing, however, afraid that he would stop.

He took her hand, tugging until she lay on her back, looking up at him. "My fault. All this."

She shook her head. "Not your fault. I got myself into this by sticking my nose where it didn't belong. I always had a bad habit of doing that."

He placed a finger on her lips. "Mine. Should have claim Kel-ly. No happen if claim."

Kelly felt like crying. It took an effort to choke them back, but her throat hurt from swallowing against the hard, painful

knot. "I'm not going to blame you for not wanting me, either. The others chose. You didn't get the chance."

He frowned, frustration evident in his expression. "Want. Always. Just ... angry ... felt...."

"Trapped? You were, but it wasn't my fault either."

"No fault. Happen. But angry, no claim. Think many want claim when we get home. No problem for Kel-ly."

In spite of everything she could do, Kelly felt her chin tremble. She knew if she said one word she was going to burst into tears. Instead, she sniffed and nodded her understanding.

A hunted look crept into his expression. "No say good. Knew no say good."

It took a supreme effort of will, but Kelly managed to say, "No. I understand what you're trying to say. I really appreciate everything you tried to do to help me."

He took her hand and laid it against his temple. "Kel-ly here, all time." He moved her hand over his heart. "Here. Hurt see Kel-ly hurt. Happy see Kel-ly happy. Know no word." He put the side of his hand against hers. "Only half, no Kel-ly."

Kelly studied him for several moments, feeling his words sink into her understanding, feeling warmth chase the chill from her bones. She knew what he was trying to hard to say in the only way he could. She threw her arm around his neck, buried her face against his chest and burst into tears. "I love you, too. I was so afraid you didn't love me. When you didn't come back, I thought ... that maybe you just couldn't bear to be away from your people."

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"Tau love you, Kel-ly. Feel same no oddurs. Need Kel-ly. Only Kel-ly. Tell already. Heart beats only for Kel-ly. No Kel-ly, no want live."

Chapter Sixteen

The building Tau and Kelly were taken to on the day of Tau's trial differed little from any of the buildings around it except in size. It was harshly utilitarian, without ornamentation of any kind, without regard even to the beauty a talented architect could achieve with simple lines and angles. It made Kelly curious. She wondered if this was a case of necessity, or if the hadens had built on New Ducran as they had built on the home world. Was it, like the homes of humans, a statement of who and what they were? Or was it only that no designers of beauty had survived the cataclysm on their home world?

Even cave men and women had ornamented their abodes with drawings depicting their exploits in battle, the history of their clan, though. It seemed, despite the hardships they'd endured in their struggle to survive and rebuild, that some, at least, would have felt the need to recapture the feel of their home world in the structures they erected.

She hadn't seen any of the homes, however, only the government buildings. It was possible she had not really had the opportunity to see what hadens were really like.

She dismissed her musings as they reached the building Tau had described as the structure where meetings were held, laws passed, and justice meted out.

Once inside, she saw the building had apparently been erected as one huge room. Like an auditorium, the floor sloped forward to a dais where the law givers sat. Benches

had been built to seat those who came to observe the proceedings, but, like the building itself, they were hard, purely functional, built neither for comfort nor for beauty. At the front of the room, just below the dais, an area had been left clear—she supposed for the representatives to pace as they spoke to the audience, or the justices, the Elders.

To the left of that open area, a small, elevated platform had been erected. A short flight of steps led up to it. The platform was surrounded by a short wall, but contained no bench for seating. Tau and Kelly, as the accused, were led up the steps and left there, where they could be viewed by both the audience and the justices.

Kelly, naturally, understood very little of what was transpiring since her knowledge of their language was so limited, but to her view the proceedings seemed very similar to a courtroom on Earth.

There appeared to be no jury. Rather, the council elders stood as both judge and juror. There were seven of them, the seventh being the High Councilor. Kelly decided he must be the tie breaker in the event that the decision was divided. She wondered if it ever was or, in fact, if they had ever had an actual trial since they had settled on New Ducran. Perhaps their main function was to write the laws? Or to oversee the smooth running of the colony?

Kelly didn't know whether to be relieved or more anxious when she saw that, like Earthly courtrooms, the Ducrans also had one representative for the accused and one to represent the accusers. Tau's English was so broken it was impossible to tell whether he was articulate in his own language—and if

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he was not, then he certainly needed representation. On the other hand, it seemed to her that everyone in the colony was against the two of them and she couldn't help but wonder if the man chosen to represent Tau would actually do his best to help.

Despite the seriousness of their situation, she found, as they began to speak, that she could not keep her mind from wandering since she understood almost nothing that was being said.

She couldn't help but notice that the crowd gathered to watch seemed far more focused on her than on Tau, however, and uneasiness settled in the pit of her stomach. Obviously, she had not merely been brought because they wanted both prisoners kept together. She had the distinct feeling that Tau's trial would be a short one, followed by her own. And she doubted hers would last long at all.

* * * *

"The charges against Tau D'Agü are as follows; two counts of deadly assault upon a fellow Ducran. One count of use of the forbidden Tra-clau." The representative of the people unsheathed his nails, extending his arm up and displaying them to the audience and the Elders. He nodded as members of the audience began to mutter among themselves. "One count theft of community property. One count escape from justice.

"I intend to show that Tau D'Agü assaulted Osit Neel without provocation and with the intention to kill, willfully causing permanent disfigurement and loss of function.

On the account of theft, he willfully took from his community irreplaceable supplies beyond those allowed for him as a member of the community. On the second count of assault, Tau D'Agu attacked a fellow officer while en route from Earth to New Ducran, also without provocation, and was confined to his quarters."

Tau's representative stood up. "I move that the second count of assault be dropped immediately. Justice was served in that incident when Nal sentenced Tau D'Agu to serve time restricted to quarters."

The Elders discussed the argument and finally nodded. "The second charge of assault is dismissed."

The High Councilor studied Tau for a long moment and finally focused his attention on his representative. "How does the accused plead on the other charges?"

Tau's representative nodded, looked at each of the seven members of the Council for a long moment. "On the account of deadly assault—not guilty by right. On the account of theft—not guilty by right. On the account of escape from justice—not guilty by right."

The audience erupted into angry argument even as their representative leapt to his feet to object.

The Elders said nothing, merely looking out over the disruptive crowd until, one by one, they settled on their benches and became quiet.

The High Councilor spoke then. "The charges can not be dismissed on the grounds of right. There is no evidence to support the claim. Tau denied the woman. He can not claim his right to protect."

Tau's representative stood his ground. "With your indulgence, High Councilor—Tau exercised his right as chosen, not vice versa."

Tau stiffened, glanced at Kelly.

"What?" Kelly whispered. "Is it over?"

Tau frowned, motioning her to silence.

At the councilor's comment, the audience erupted once more. The High Councilor stood. "Be silent!" he roared. "Or I will have the room cleared."

Shocked speechless, the members of the community returned to their seats abruptly, but their expressions were angry and resentful.

The High Councilor sat once more. "Continue."

Tau's representative paced the open area, scanning the audience and then the men seated on the dais. "I'm not going to point out to the council, and members of the community that Tau D'Agú is one of only three physicians in our community. I'm not even going to point out that Tau D'Agú is the only qualified and experienced physician we have in the area of gynecology. These have no bearing on the current situation, even though I'm sure everyone realizes that his value as a member of this community is immeasurable," Tau's representative began.

The High Councilor gave him a look. "Thank you, Dor-al, for *not* pointing that out," he said dryly.

Dor-al bowed slightly, looking completely unperturbed by the High Councilor's remark. "The fact is that—and this is well known—in the course of their mission to recruit new colonists for our community, each of the members of the crew carefully

selected companions for themselves. Science Officer Tau D'Agu, declined the opportunity to do so."

The representative for the people stood. "By his own words, he admits there could be no right. Tau D'Agu declined, and at no time did he state before witness that he had reversed his decision!"

"It was not his decision!" Dor-al stated loudly. "The female selected Tau! This was witnessed by several other members of the crew. Science Officer Tau was on his way back to the rendezvous, at which point he was surrounded by seven humans who indicated their intent to assault him with bodily harm."

He turned and pointed to Kelly. "The female, Kel-ly, drove off his attackers, captured Tau and returned with him to her domicile. By ancient Ducran law, this represents a non verbal commitment as life mate. Kel-ly had the right to claim. Tau went willingly with the female, acknowledging her claim by right of battle."

"This is absurd!" the representative for the people shouted furiously. "He can not evoke that right for the female! She is human, not haden! Our customs do not apply to her!"

The High Councilor looked at Tau's representative. "Have you argument to support your claims?"

The representative shrugged, opened his arms wide. "The Council decreed that humans taken from Earth for the purpose of mates were to be absorbed into the community as full members. By decreeing that these humans were no longer beings of Earth, but fully accepted members of our colony, does it not follow that they are given the same rights,

and accountable to the same laws, as other members of the community? I realize that the law is an ancient one, but it was never discarded from the books. And, if I might add, the circumstances of our exile from our own world has forced us to re-enact the ancient laws due to the primitive conditions that we now live in."

The Elders withdrew into a discussion among themselves. The High Councilor remained aloof throughout, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the points under discussion. Finally, a decision was reached.

The High Councilor spoke to the representatives and the audience. "The Council is in agreement. The Law of Induction, designed by this council and voted upon by the community, is specific. All captives returned to this community are to be a part of this community and are to be given the same rights and privileges. Tau D'Ague was chosen by the female as mate, and he acknowledged her choice by his actions. It was not necessary to verbally acknowledge her claim. Viewed in this light, we feel charges must be dismissed on the grounds of right."

The people's representative jumped to his feet. "I object! How are we to know the female chose him! We have nothing but the word of his representative!"

The High Councilor turned and looked at Tau and Kelly. "Kel-ly have you chosen Tau as you life mate?" he asked in his own language.

Kelly stared at him, realizing he'd spoken directly to her. She had no idea what he'd asked, however.

"Say word Tau say," Tau whispered.

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Kelly glanced at him, nodded infinitesimally to show him she'd understood.

"*Ra Kel-ly Scott cart haden Tau nid tra-clatou pur pla mateau.* I, Kelly Scott, spied the haden, Tau and did battle for him as my mate."

Kelly carefully repeated the words, slowly, but clearly. "What did I say?" she whispered.

"Tell later. *Ra tina timpter pur mateau pla cirtzen.* I sensed in that moment that he was the mate of my heart."

Again, Kelly repeated the words Tau prompted. She couldn't help but notice the High Councilor's eyes had begun to gleam, however, with some emotion she couldn't quite identify.

"*Pla cirt, pla hazen ti nin bundr pur pla mateau.* My love, my passion, is boundless, for my mate."

In the audience, someone laughed, then coughed. The High Councilor waved her to silence and returned his attention to the people's representative. "As you see, she has publicly announced her devotion to her mate."

"But ... even if the others are accepted, the female was not chosen to become a member of the community."

"That is immaterial. She was taken."

"She did not *choose* to come!"

The High Councilor smiled wryly. "None of the women chose to come."

"He denied her!" the people's representative exclaimed. "The entire crew can attest to the fact that he denied her as his mate!"

Nal stood up. "Permission to speak?"

The High Councilor nodded.

"It is true that Science Officer D'Agu denied the female as his mate. However, when the question arose of her suitability, he chose to impregnate the female. This action superseded his verbal denial."

Again, the High Councilor nodded agreement. "Under the circumstances, it can be argued that Tau D'Agu's actions could not be deemed against our laws. The ancient law of right was invoked when Tau D'Agu was chosen by the female. The ancient law states that any male has the right to defend the life of his female and the cub she carries, with deadly force if necessary."

The room erupted once more, although there were far fewer who voiced angry objections than previously.

The people's representative held up his hand to object. "The female was not carrying his cub at the time of the assault. D'Agu was well aware that the pregnancy had been terminated at the time of the incident aboard ship. He was NOT protecting his cub. His cub was dead!"

Suddenly furious, the High Councilor stood abruptly. "This has no bearing on his right to protect! By our own laws it is not only his right, it is his duty to defend his mate to the death if necessary! There was no theft! Tau took supplies intended for his mate. Whether he asked permission or not beforehand, they were for her health and survival and his right to take! The assault upon Osit Neel was for the protection of his female. The escape was not from justice but for the protection of his female who had been abandoned to

fend for herself when he came for her supplies and was wrongfully imprisoned!

As it is clear that the people of this community are reluctant to accept the humans brought among us as full members of the community I would remind everyone that the decision was based upon our own survival! You will accept all, or the council will rule to overturn the previous decision. The humans will be returned to their own world and we will accept our fate as a dying race!"

He stared out over the audience angrily, waiting for comments. The crew members of the mission to Earth stood up immediately. "We will not give up our mates! If necessary, we will take our mates and leave this community to start our own!"

There was a good deal of angry muttering, but the members of the community finally settled once more, offering no objections.

The High Councilor waited until there was silence in the room. "Since I hear no objections, the former ruling stands. Humans are to be fully accepted members of this community and as such entitled to all the rights and privileges of hadens.

"The charges against Tau D'Agua are dismissed!"

The representative stood up immediately. "The people of Lan-tet charge the Earth female, Kelly with one count of deadly assault with intent to kill!"

The High Councilor stared him down. "Dismissed!"

"But...! You have not heard the people's argument!"

The High Councilor pointed to Kelly. "She is blatantly with child, representative! She can not be charged with deadly

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assault when it is clear she was exercising her right to protect her cub! Dismissed!"

* * * *

Kelly watched in anxiety as people began to file out of the room. A number of angry glances were cast their way, but no one made any move to seize them. "What happened? Is it over now?" she whispered to Tau.

Tau turned to her, a slow smile curling his lips. "Over."

Kelly scanned his face. "Good news? They're not going to put you in prison?"

"No prison."

Kelly licked her lips nervously, but felt gladness fill her. "I'm so glad you won't be punished!" She threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "You're free! I'm so relieved! I was so afraid!"

Tau smiled. "Tau and Kel-ly free."

Shock went through her, followed by a tentative sense of relief. "They're going to let me go? Really? They're not going to use me for study?"

"No," Tau shook his head, his eyes gleaming now with suppressed amusement. "Tau only study Kel-ly. Study forbidden mating Earth humans."

Kelly chuckled, feeling almost faint with relief. "We can go home now?"

Tau nodded, but turned to look back at the dais. The High Councilor was watching them. After a moment, Tau took Kelly's hand, helped her down the stairs and led her over to the dais. He stopped when he neared the Elder. Taking Kelly's

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hand, he reached for the Elder's hand and placed Kelly's hand in his. "My mate, Kel-ly."

The Elder studied her for several moments, then turned to look at Tau. "You are fortunate that you stumbled upon a female intelligent enough to overlook your stupidity and accept you for the excellent qualities only a female could sense."

Tau flushed, but grinned. "Yes." He hesitated a moment, then threw his arms around the Elder, hugging him tightly. "Thank you, Father."

The Elder hugged him back, but pushed him away after a moment and patted his shoulder, obviously uncomfortable with the display of affection. "Just protecting my cub," he said, smiling faintly.

Chapter Seventeen

Kelly looked from Tau to the older man questioningly. Tau grinned, lifting a hand and caressing her cheek lightly.

"Father, Tan-uk."

Kelly's eyes widened in surprise. "Your father? Tau! You should have told me!" She touched her hair self-consciously, then blushed when it occurred to her that her appearance was the least of her worries. "He must think I'm a terrible person!"

Tau spoke to his father.

A slow smile curled Tan-uk's lips. He held out his arms to Kelly. She looked at him a little doubtfully, glanced at Tau. Tau gave her a little push and she moved into Tan-uk's embrace, still confused.

"Wel-come, dau-ter," Tan-uk said, giving her a light, affectionate squeeze before he released her.

Kelly blushed when he released her, leaned toward Tau. "He thinks we're married?"

"Are," Tau responded, his eyes gleaming with suppressed laughter.

Kelly looked at him blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"Tell later. Say bye Father."

Tau spoke briefly with his father and then escorted her from the building. To Kelly's surprise Nal, Kin-ko and Ral-o were waiting outside, holding the reins of two well packed Loc's and a third that was saddled.

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There were grins and back patting all the way around, a brief discussion, which Kelly didn't understand and then Tau lifted her onto the saddle and climbed up behind her.

Turning the Loc at last, Tau urged it into motion and they were galloping toward the trail that led to their home in the deep woods, the two pack Loc's trotting along behind them.

To Kelly's surprise, several people smiled tentatively and waved as they passed. Tau waved back but didn't slow the Loc.

When they'd cleared the city, Kelly turned to Tau. "Now tell me."

He gave her a look of innocence. "Tell what?"

"What was it you told me to tell the High Councilor, your father?"

"No remember," Tau said, his eyes gleaming now with suppressed mirth.

"Yes you do!"

"Many words, hard."

"Tau!"

"Ra Kel-ly Scott cart haden Tau nid tra-clatou pur pla mateau."

"In English!" Kelly said.

"I, Kel-ly Scott, spied haden, Tau. Battle to take my mate."

Kelly blushed. "I said that!—I did no such thing!"

"Did," Tau said, chuckling. "Told Council."

"I told them what you told me to tell them!"

"No change mind now. Done."

Kelly thought about it for several moments. "What else did you tell me to say?"

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Tau's amusement faded. He looked at her seriously. "*Ra tina timpter pur mateau pla cirtzen. Pla cirt, pla hazen ti nin bundr pur pla mateau.* This mean—Kel-ly know Tau mate of Kel-ly heart. Love, passion for mate boundless."

Kelly felt her cheeks redden. "I said that! You told me to say that! In front of everyone!"

Tau pulled the Loc to a halt. Lifting one hand, he caressed her cheek and leaned toward her, kissing her on the lips. "Say words from Tau heart. Words should have say long time pass. Say word make legal my mate."

Kelly's eyes widened. "Married? This is why your father called me daughter?"

"Kelly no mind?" Tau asked a little worriedly.

She thought about it and finally smiled. She slipped her arms around his waist. "Actually, I don't mind at all."

* * * *

Panting for breath, Kelly flopped back against the bed, exhausted, but happier than she had ever been in her life. In a few moments, she heard the sound of a baby's wail. "What is it?" she asked tiredly.

The waiting had been difficult, the last weeks pure misery. Despite the improvement in their circumstances as a whole, Kelly's baby had grown so heavy in the last month that walking was difficult.

The citizens of Lan-tet, anxious for access to their doctor, had built a road almost to their doorstep and traffic back and forth between Lan-tet and their homestead had picked up considerably.

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Tau had helped Maggie deliver a strapping baby boy. Kirstin had also had a boy and Lovey had born a daughter, all within weeks of each other. The community had breathed a collective sigh of relief when the first infants were born, healthy strong and beautiful. And plans had begun at once for another raid to Earth by those males clamoring to snatch their own brides.

Kelly had heard the news with a great deal of relief of her own. She hadn't wanted to voice her fears to Tau, but she had had them to deal with all the same.

Impatient despite her fatigue, Kelly struggled to sit up.

Tau was frowning in concentration as he worked. He looked up at her finally, a broad smile curling his lips. "Is Carol Anne."

Kelly laughed happily, holding out her arms for the squalling infant. After wrapping it carefully, Tau placed the baby in her waiting arms and Kelly looked down with love at the tiny face. "She's beautiful."

Tau nodded. "Like mother."

Kelly looked up at him quickly, but smiled wryly. "I doubt I'm beautiful at the moment, but it's nice to know you think so."

"Love Kel-ly. Beau-ti-ful in Tau's eyes."

Kelly rolled her eyes. "Thanks!"

Tau frowned. "No good say?"

"Never mind. As long as you think I'm beautiful, that's all that matters."

Enlightenment dawned. His eyes gleamed with amusement. "All think Kel-ly most beau-ti-ful. All envy Tau."

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"Yeah, right! I noticed nobody chose any dark haired females! All the others had blond or red hair."

"Zact-ly! Kel-ly only one of kind. Very rare. Most precious."

The End

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Dear Readers:

I hope you enjoyed reading THE LION'S WOMAN as much as I enjoyed writing it! My passion for science fiction pre-dates even my love for romances, making it a special pleasure for me to combine the two, to explore new and fascinating worlds and peoples from across the universe.

If you enjoyed THE LION'S WOMAN, I hope that you will be looking forward to my next release, BELOW, due out later this year. I've pasted a short excerpt of the book to give everyone who's interested a sneak peek of the upcoming release.

Happy Reading!

Kaitlyn

BELOW

BY

Kaitlyn O'Connor

Chapter One

It might almost have been Earth. The globe below them was awash with ocean—80% to be precise—but the glow from the red sun that sliced through its atmosphere gave the waters below the eerie look of blood....

"An ocean of blood."

Victoria glanced sharply at Captain Huggins. Seated before her at the console, his back was to her as he divided his attention between the viewing screen and the readout from the vessel's probes.

After a moment, she realized he wasn't telepathic. It was only a coincidence that he'd voiced her own thoughts. An involuntary shiver skated along her spine as she returned her attention to the viewing screen.

"Creepy, eh, Tory?"

It took an effort to keep her upper lip from curling in distaste, but Victoria was a firm believer in self discipline. She kept her expression impassive. She didn't turn to the speaker. There was no sense in encouraging the man. Not that he could be discouraged. "Chilled," she lied succinctly.

However much she would've liked to dispute it, even to herself, she found the prospect below them unnerving.

"Right. Takes a bit to get the blood pumping after such a long hyber-sleep. I could warm you up a bit, if you'd like."

This time Victoria didn't bother to hide her distaste. "Do you mind?"

"Eh?" Jim Roach's look was hopeful.

She gave him a plastic smile. "I'd like to hear the report." She moved away from him, closer to the console where the captain was pulling up a report from the computer. "What's it look like?"

He frowned, but didn't turn. "A bit more than tolerable, I'd say."

Victoria's lips flattened. She could see enough of the report to tell that barely tolerable might be an understatement.

"They said the conditions were acceptable."

Captain Huggins threw her a quick glance before returning his attention to the report. "It's livable, if not hospitable. You knew the information the company had was sketchy."

A flash of anger, quickly quelled, went through Victoria. He was right. She'd accepted the assignment, knowing how the company was ... knowing they hadn't seen much beyond the find of the century. The crew's survival was important to them, but only in terms of whether or not they survived long enough to mine the precious mineral that resided a scant 50 feet below that deceptively threatening surface.

It was deceptive, she told herself. Granted, this tiny system was at the very edge of the outer rim, light years from the beaten path. But several probes had been diverted to the planet to gather as much information as possible before the first landers were dispatched.

"You pick up on the beacon yet?" 'Hugs' Huggins asked his communications officer, Leigh Grant.

"Nothing ... too much interference. Wait."

"You got something?"

"Yeah. Faint. There's.... Yes. Definitely. Looks like about 60 degrees starboard. Maybe 50 clicks. Good job, Hugs! You sat us down practically on top of it."

'Hugs' looked anything but huggable, Victoria thought wryly. He was built in the general shape of a water bug ... a pear shaped torso, arms and legs like skeletal remains ...no doubt from 40 years of shuttling around the galaxy and doing little beyond moving from his console to the hyper-chamber and back again. He'd probably spent two thirds of his life in hyper-sleep, which presumably accounted for his youthful appearance. He didn't look half his 68 years.

One would've thought the compliment would've pleased him, but he didn't show it. In fact, he looked faintly alarmed.

Victoria felt another prickle of uneasiness as he glanced over his shoulder at the ground crew assembled behind him. His gaze finally settled on her. "You heard Grant. We'll be docking shortly. Maybe you'd like to get your gear together."

No way was Victoria going anywhere, but she could see his point.

"Roach. Get the crew below and ready the equipment for off-loading."

For a moment, he looked as if he would argue. Finally, he shrugged and gestured the crew out. He stopped as he reached the portal. "What about the tadpoles?"

Victoria's lips tightened. Her eyes narrowed. "The what?"

He grinned, showing two rows of teeth in serious need of good hygiene ... or maybe they were beyond that. "You know. The slugs. Fish."

She strode over to him. "That's not only distasteful, it's stupid," she said, keeping her voice low. "They're human beings...."

"Half," he corrected, obviously unrepentant.

Victoria gritted her teeth and counted to ten. "Genetically altered—"

Again he cut her off. "To be half fish."

Victoria counted to twenty. "We have to work as a team, Roach, or this isn't going to work at all. Once this crew leaves, we're on our own, and we'll need everybody ... EVERYBODY to work together if we're going to survive. I don't give a damn what your personal opinion is of the project, or genetics in general. They're telepathic, you fool. So you put that shit out of your head right now, and go down and tell the deep water CREW that we're about to dock. You got that?"

"Yes, sir, chief! I mean, ma'am!" He saluted her and marched out.

Victoria glared at his back as he left. Where the hell the company had dug him up from was a mystery to her. If he had any kind of specialty at all, it was in being a royal pain in the ass.

It was hell trying to work with morons. There were half a dozen surface crew members, including her and Roach; almost four times that number of genetically engineered deep water crew who, despite the company's reassurances about their physiological stability, were an unknown quantity; they were about to be dropped on a rock that was virtually uncharted, and a bare minimum of six months from any

rescue team; and Roach was hell bent on stirring up animosity before they'd even been dropped.

She'd been assigned to oversee the work, not baby sit, and certainly not as referee. Six month's duty began to seem like a long, long assignment.

Dismissing it, Victoria turned her attention to the more immediate problem, returning to her observation position. She knew they must be getting close to the rig by now. "Any response to the hail?"

Leigh shot a look at the captain. A silent communication passed between them. "Nothing yet," she responded finally.

The by-play between them set Victoria's teeth on edge. "I'm in charge of the mission. Do me the courtesy of responding directly to my questions."

Again the silent communication between the two at the console. Apparently, they'd been flying together so long, telepathy wasn't necessary.

"Dead air," Captain Huggins replied shortly.

"Could they all be down below?"

"Not likely. There's supposed to be a surface crew on duty at all times, unless a storm forces them under. The sky's clear though."

Victoria studied the sky skeptically. The atmosphere looked like mud from where she was standing. Dimly, in the distance, she caught a glimpse of shining metal. "There!"

Captain Huggins glanced at her and then followed the direction of her pointing finger. He frowned. "Looks like debris. Maybe they had a blow?"

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They'd dropped low enough they were skimming little more than a few meters above the waves. Victoria saw now that there were an alarming number of bits of debris bobbing in the water. Victoria kept her gaze focused on the horizon. "That's it! Jesus Christ! What the hell!"

The habitat/mining rig had been under construction for over a year. The construction was to have been completed months ago. At the time of the last report she'd received, it had been reported 95% complete. Even from this distance, she could see it was a hell of a long way from that. Briefly, she wondered if somebody had just hedged on the numbers, or if it was even the main habitat she was looking at, but she realized fairly quickly that the size alone was evidence it could be nothing else.

It was the main rig all right, but something had battered the hell out of it.

Leigh shot a panicked glance at the captain. "Hurricane, you think?"

He shook his head. "Can't tell at this distance."

"They didn't report anything!" Victoria demanded.

"We haven't heard from the ground crew since mid-way," Captain Huggins said reluctantly.

Victoria fought a round with her temper. "You're saying we haven't heard from anyone on the rig in six months and you didn't think it was important enough to wake me up and tell me about it?"

Huggins spared a moment to glare at her. "It was reported to the company. The company checked it out and gave me a go."

"Where's the report?" she asked tightly.

"In your quarters."

Victoria strode from the cockpit and down the corridor to her cabin. A ten minute search unearthed the one page report—make that one paragraph. 'Communications tower down. Proceed. Report repairs.'

Victoria wadded the report into a ball. They didn't have a damned clue of what they were walking in to.

The company had already sunk billions into the project and had yet to pull the first ton of ore. It wasn't likely they were going to pull the plug for something that could easily be explained away as equipment malfunction.

They could've diverted a damned probe, though. If they'd bothered to, they would've seen it was a hell of a lot more than equipment failure. The communications tower wasn't just down. It was gone.

Feeling a fluctuation in speed, Victoria took a deep breath and dismissed her frustration. Purposefulness took its place. They were going to be caught up in repairs for months. If there was any money to be made, she was going to have to get the crew into high gear the moment they off-loaded.

And there would be money. She was determined on that. With her pay plus the bonus they'd offered for every ton she brought in over quota, she'd be able to retire from the company within two years if she could make it through two tours here. Six on, six off and then she'd be able to pursue her dream, find a quiet little homestead on the back side of nowhere, raise just enough food to get by and concentrate on

perfecting her skills in the arts—particularly her favorite, sculpting.

She was all too aware she didn't have the talent to become a successful artist, which was why she'd accepted the fact that she'd have to earn a living and consider her art merely a hobby until she could afford to do otherwise. The upside to putting it on hold and building her retirement nest egg first was that it wouldn't matter whether she was talented enough to make a living at it or not. She could do it for the sheer joy of it.

And she wouldn't be stuck working for the damned company until they managed to get her killed on one of their low budget high yield enterprises.

As usual, her focus on her ultimate goal brought her roiling sense of frustration under control. Leaving her quarters, she made her way down to the lower deck to check the crew's progress.

As she strode along the upper corridor, something skated through her mind, almost as if someone had caressed her.

Victoria paused, looking around, certain at first that someone actually had touched her. She was alone, though.

Except in her mind.

Raphael.

Irritation surfaced. With an effort, she closed her mind to the probe. He had no right to intrude on her private thoughts, but he was beginning to do it with increasing frequency. She wondered if that meant he was growing stronger, or....

She dismissed the thought.

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The project had hinged on a revolutionary genetic experiment. Genetic manipulation was almost as old as space mining and colonization. It was the most practical way to go about both mining and terraforming. A 'perfect' world was one in a million, or maybe a billion. Most of the worlds they'd found were fairly close to useable, but certainly not prime real estate. Genetic manipulation allowed the companies to 'acclimatize' miners and terraformers to the conditions, which minimized the danger to the workers and, purely coincidentally, also lowered the company's expenses, since they didn't have to supply the workers with environmental suits. It also enabled workers to produce better since they weren't hampered by bulky suits and oxygen tanks, another plus on the side of the company, who seemed to suffer no moral or ethical qualms about the fact that the workers that underwent the genetic manipulations were generally doomed to live out the remainder of their lives on the planet they were designed for since very few ever earned enough money to pay to be acclimatized to Earth's conditions once more.

KAY2581, or Kay as they called the planet they were about to mine, was a unique challenge. The ore they'd discovered was only to be found beneath the planet's oceans. That in itself was not the only problem, or even the main one. The planet was so far out it would've been economically unfeasible to mine due to the cost and time involved in getting workers and equipment to the planet.

Someone in the company had hatched the brilliant plan of developing the deep sea crew in vitro, en route. They'd accelerated the growth beyond anything ever attempted

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before, and arranged to 'install' education and behavioral modification via computer through minute chips implanted in the embryos' brain stems.

Victoria was appalled. They might be genetically enhanced, but they were still human beings. It was just plain wrong to grow them completely in a tube, without any human contact whatsoever, without even the opportunity to 'grow up'—no childhood, no family, no friends—no life experiences. They might have been nothing more than robots for all the consideration that was paid to their innate humanity and the rights they should have been able to expect.

Six months into the trip, they were to be turned out to begin learning to interact—but only with each other. Her and her crew would still be in stasis.

How could they be expected to be able to interact with humans that had not been genetically altered as they had, or even relate to them, under such circumstances?

Their psychological profiles were to be carefully monitored, but that had given her little comfort. She'd insisted her chamber be set to wake her periodically so that she could observe their progress herself, but she was a long way from being convinced that the company's decision had been a wise one.

Her first few attempts to communicate with them had been stonewalled. They were supposed to be able to communicate with each other and the ground crew via telepathy, but she'd come to the conclusion that that little part of the experiment had been a complete bust ... until she'd noticed Raphael.

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It was hard not to notice Raphael. That wasn't his 'real' name. The company, obviously deficit in the imagination department, had merely numbered the workers. But the moment she'd seen him she'd been captivated by the sheer beauty and symmetry he represented ... on a purely artistic level, naturally. The master, Raphael, one of the greatest creators of beauty of all time had come instantly to mind and from that moment on she had thought of him only as Raphael.

It made it difficult to actually look directly at him without going into a trance-like state of admiration.

He'd noticed she had trouble looking directly at him. Unfortunately, he'd completely misinterpreted the reason for her discomfort. Somehow, she suspected that was one of the reasons he made no effort to hide his interest in her. He enjoyed making her squirm and, eventually, his preoccupation with her had led her to realize that the deep water crew was perfectly capable of communicating via telepathy. They simply had no interest in communicating with the two-legged humans.

As she reached the lower deck, her gaze went automatically to the tank that took up the majority of the space. Glass surrounded most of the holding tank where more than half her crew had been packed in like sardines in a can.

She stopped abruptly at the thought, realizing it was a poor choice of metaphor under the circumstances.

It's the right metaphor, said an amused voice in her head. Her heart seemed to trip over itself. Raphael. He glided to the glass, his lips curled faintly.

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Victoria allowed herself a brief glimpse of him before she focused her gaze on a spot below his chin. She couldn't help but wonder where they'd gotten his root stock. She had never in her life seen a man so perfectly, flawlessly the persona of male beauty. His facial features were lean, sharply detailed, almost angular, from the classic lines of his nose, to his high, prominent cheek bones, to the clean line of his jaw. The one, tiny imperfection was a noticeable cleft in his chin, but even that seemed to enhance his face.

His arms and torso were just as magnificent. He'd been designed for strength and stamina underwater and there was little doubt in her mind that he was muscular enough to handle pretty much any situation he was likely to encounter.

It took an effort to block his telepathic probing, but she had found that she could, so long as she was warned ahead of time that he would intrude. And, if he was looking at her, he was almost certainly probing her thoughts.

"You were probing my thoughts," she said accusingly.

His expression became a look of innocence, but his eyes gleamed with amusement. *Not I. One of the others, perhaps?*

"I know it was you. I ... uh...."

The amused gleam was replaced by another emotion, one Victoria was at pains to ignore. *Recognize my touch?*

To her surprise and discomfort, a blush mounted her cheeks. "It's hardly a touch," she said sharply.

Its far more intimate than a touch, he countered.

The comment made her careless. *How would you know?*

A slow smile curled his lips. *You could always prove me wrong....*

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