

Kaitlyn
O'Conner



Below

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by Kaitlyn O'Connor

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BELOW

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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 Anderson 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. The construction crew seemed to deal with the conditions without any problems. Anyway, 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 hyber-chamber and back again. He'd probably spent two thirds of his life in hyber-sleep, which no doubt 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 mining CREW that we're about to dock. You got that?"

"Yes, sir, chief! I mean, ma'am!" He gave her a mocking salute 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 mining crew who, despite the company's reassurances

about their psychological stability, were an unknown quantity; they were about to be dropped on a rock that was virtually uncharted; were a bare minimum of three months from any rescue team; and Roach was hell bent on stirring up trouble before they'd even been dropped.

She'd been assigned to oversee the work, not baby sit, and certainly not 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?"

They'd dropped low enough they were skimming little more than a few meters above the waves. Victoria saw now that there was an alarming amount of debris bobbing in the water. She focused her gaze 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. The last she'd heard, 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.

"Between Kay and Zeta Station?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Earth."

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. She should have known that.

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 another six on. After that, if she lived through it, she'd be able to pursue her dream, find a quiet little homestead on the back side of nowhere and concentrate on perfecting her skills as an artist—particularly sculpting.

She'd had no confidence she had 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 art no more than a hobby until she could afford to do otherwise. The upside to putting it on hold and building a 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. If she sold anything, fine. If she didn't, she was still going to be OK.

It had seemed worth it to take high risk work that would ensure she could launch her career in art while she was still young enough to dream, but it was a goal she'd shared with no one. Even the mention of 'retiring' before thirty, to pursue a career as an artist of all things, would have landed her in the company shrink's office for a psych evaluation. She might just as well claim she wanted to marry and stay at home to rear children. She wouldn't be considered any more maladjusted.

As far as she was concerned, however, it was not only crazy to consider a full fifty with the company, it was downright suicidal. Whatever they might think, she had no intention of being 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 his inquisitive probing. 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 before it had time to fully form.

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, had posed 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 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 androids 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.

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.

His perfection made it difficult to actually look directly at him, however, without going into a trance-like state of admiration.

He'd noticed she had trouble looking directly at him. Unfortunately, he seemed to have 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, air breathing humans.

As she reached the lower deck, Victoria's 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.

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.

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 disturbing good looks.

His arms and torso were 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.

His male member was just as masterful and just as disturbing, if not more so, but Victoria didn't delude herself that it was in any artistic sense. She couldn't help but wonder if it was by accident, or design, that the coloration that covered his lower body, almost like an elaborate, intricately detailed tattoo, dipped under his phallus, almost seeming to frame it. Certainly, the effect made it impossible to ignore his endowment.

It might be a fluke, but she had a sneaking suspicion that somebody in the genetics lab had a warped sense of humor.... Someone gay, or someone female.

The females hadn't been designed in such a way—their breasts and their sex were 'tattooed', only the males were, apparently, designed for their shock value.

Somehow, however, she'd never really found the other males quite so ... disturbing, perhaps because they weren't quite so well endowed?

The strangest thing about her discomfort, however, was that she didn't recall ever finding herself in a situation where nudity disturbed her. Privacy was only for high pay officers in the company. The grunts who started at the entry level positions more often than not shared group quarters, which did not allow for excessive modesty. By year two, pretty

much everyone had grown accustomed to bathing and showering with, or within view of, everyone else.

Nor was she without sexual experience. She had never really found a partner that inspired a lot of interest in sex for her, but the company required employees to share sexual favors, not necessarily as recreation, but to cut down on emotional stress and mating competitiveness. She had made it a point to participate at least often enough to keep her name off of the antisocial list—a determination to go up in the pay ranks in the company required a willingness to sacrifice individuality for conformity.

Unable to come up with a comfortable conclusion, she dismissed it, prodding her memory for the reason she'd decided to confront Raphael. Her irritation returned with the memory.

"You were probing my thoughts," she said accusingly.

He gave her 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.

True. It's 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....*

Chapter Two

"In your wildest dreams," Victoria responded tartly.

They're pretty wild. Would you like me to show you?

The blush that had barely begun to fade, turned fiery. Self-consciously, Victoria glanced quickly around to see who might have observed the interchange between the two of them. To her relief, most of the crew members were occupied. Roach, however, was dividing a speculative look between her and Raphael.

She was on the point of striding over to him and demanding to know if he was under the mistaken impression that he held a special position on the crew that allowed him to sit on his ass while everyone else worked, but Raphael caught her attention once more.

Why do you call me Raphael? It's not the ... name I was given.

Victoria's head snapped around. For a moment, their gazes locked. With an effort she broke the contact, gazing over his shoulder at the other crew members, who'd congregated at the opposite end of the tank. She wasn't about to tell him how she'd arrived at the name, however. "Names are easier to remember than numbers," she said flatly.

But that's not the reason, is it?

Victoria looked at him a moment before her gaze wandered to the others once more as it occurred to her to wonder if they could 'hear' the conversation between her and Raphael.

They're not listening. It wouldn't be polite.

Irritation surfaced again. "You don't seem to have a problem listening to my private thoughts."

His brows rose. *I thought we were conversing.*

Victoria gave him a look. They both knew he'd been under no such misapprehension, but it seemed childish to bicker about it. "I gave everyone names because ... it's part of who a person is and how they identify themselves."

He studied her consideringly. *This is why you don't like it when Roach over there calls you Tory. It's too ... intimate. Victoria is less approachable, isn't it?*

Caught off guard, Victoria allowed him to capture her gaze once more. To her relief, however, Huggins announced on the inner com at that moment that they were about to dock. "We're docking. You'll have to excuse me."

* * * *

It looked far worse up close than it had from the viewing screen, and she'd thought it looked like hell from several miles out. Victoria stood on the gangplank, surveying the landing platform and the area immediately around it.

Most of the damage appeared to be the ravages of severe weather, but there were at least two scorched areas Victoria was almost certain were from laser fire. She held up one hand as crew members began to crowd onto the gang plank behind her.

"Hold! Roach, get the weapons out."

Nobody moved and after a moment Victoria turned around and looked at them. "Today, people!"

They scattered, moving to the cases that held the lasers. Victoria stepped back up the gangplank until she reached the inner com. "Huggins?"

"What is it, Anderson?"

"Looks like we might have had some laser fire here. You might as well settle in for a game of cards."

"Laser fire?"

"Could be lightening strike, but I'm going to take the crew in to check it out before we begin off loading."

"Keep in touch."

"Will do." She looked up. "Roach, issue everybody a com unit too. We're going to take this by twos. Roach, you and Kitchens. Brown, you can go with Tuttle. Clancy, you're with me."

Trouble?

Victoria frowned. *Could be. I'm not certain yet, but you'd think someone would've come up to greet us, wouldn't you?—I'd just rather be safe than sorry.*

We should check the mine area.

Right. Hang on a minute.

She followed her surface crew members down the gang plank. "Spread out and check the immediate area. I don't want anyone going down, yet, though." She moved to the edge of the platform and looked down, calculating the distance to the surface of the water. *Looks like about 20 to 30 feet, Raphael. Hold for now. We'll check the main structure. When we get done, I'll have the tank lowered and your crew can go in and check out the mines.*

We could make the dive.

No. It's too risky.

It could be more risky to leave three quarters of your team caged and unable to come to your aid.

That's an asinine thing to say, Raphael.

But true.

It's completely unjust and you damn well know it! The containment's for the water, not the crew ... Have it your way! She stalked up the gangplank to the inner com.

"Huggins. I need you to lower the tank. The deep sea crew is going in to check out the mines." She released the button.

"Clancy, give me a hand lowering a case of munitions for the crew. If they do run into trouble, I want them armed."

When they'd removed the munitions case, the gangplank was raised and Huggins moved the ship just off side the habitat. Hovering a few meters above the water, he lowered the containment and released it as Clancy and Victoria watched from the flight deck.

As soon as she saw they'd safely off-loaded, she and Clancy secured the munitions case, wrenched it up over the top of the railing and began lowering it over the side.

The railing wobbled as Clancy climbed up on it to steady the guide wire. Victoria looked at it in alarm. "Get down, Clancy."

He glanced at her. "We need to hold the case free of the structure and make sure it doesn't get tangled on the way down. It's got a little wobble to it, but it's safe enough."

Victoria was checking the railing as the first pair of crew members returned to report in. "Tuttle, find something we

can use to steady the munitions case while we lower it. Clancy, get off the damned rail. It's unstable."

Tuttle returned with a bar, Roach and Brown trailing behind her. The bar had a right angle on one end she used to catch the guide wire. Roach set his laser down and went to the railing, leaning over it to peer down.

"Get off...." Victoria broke off as the railing leaned outward with the grinding shriek of metal. "Grab him. Somebody grab him!" she yelled as Clancy, who'd already begun to climb down, teetered when the railing shifted.

Time seemed to hold its breath, slowing almost to a standstill. She released her hold on the guide wire, leaping forward with one hand outstretched. She managed to grasp a handful of Clancy's clothing, but it was snatched from her grip as he went over with the railing.

"Head's up!" she yelled to the crew below as she watched one whole section of railing break loose and begin to fall, watched Clancy twist, grabbing frantically for a handhold. He caught the edge of the platform. She hit the deck, almost skidding off the edge of the platform herself, trying to stop her slide and grab Clancy's hand at the same time.

One of the crew members grabbed her legs, anchoring her to the deck. Brown grabbed a handful of Clancy's sleeve. He slipped from both their grasps, following the broken railing over the side.

Numbly, she watched as he seemed to fall in slow motion, endlessly. Below, the crate of munitions crashed into the sea. The railing struck the water only seconds behind it. The crew below had scattered to a safe distance when the first shouts

went up. She caught a glimpse of their upturned faces and bare shoulders, bobbing above the water, but she couldn't seem to tear her gaze from Clancy as he continued to fall on and on, his face screwed up as he yelled something she couldn't seem to hear, his body twisting.

He was almost halfway down when something shot from the water like a projectile from a cannon. She realized it was one of the sea crew as he met the falling man midair. The smacking sound of colliding bodies was like a thunder clap. They seemed to struggle for several moments and then Raphael gripped Clancy tightly against him and executed a mid-air back flip. They seemed almost to hover for several heartbeats before slicing head first through the water.

Victoria held her breath, waiting, watching for them to emerge, fearing they'd struck some of the debris below and it had injured both of them.

After what seemed a very long time, two heads bobbed up. "Is he alive?" she shouted.

He's breathing. I don't know how long.

Victoria leapt to her feet and raced toward the ship. It took her ten minutes to prep a pod. Tuttle burst through the hatch and scrambled into the jump seat before she could lift off. Victoria nodded at the medic and punched the button to open the bay door, launching the pod almost simultaneously.

Within seconds, they were skimming just above the reach of the waves. Tuttle threw her restraints off and opened the hatch as they drew alongside the two men. Clancy, Victoria saw as she twisted around for a quick look, was bleeding from the mouth and nose. Raphael was bloody, as well, but she

couldn't tell if it was from his own injuries or if it was Clancy's blood.

"Get in, Raphael. We need to check you out, too."

He shook his head. "I'm all right."

"Damn it, Raphael! Get in the frigging pod!"

A slightly crooked smile curled his lips. "I do love a woman with fire," he murmured. In the next second, he'd disappeared beneath the waves.

Victoria was still gaping at the space he'd so lately occupied when Tuttle sealed the hatch. Briefly, their gazes collided. Victoria turned away, shooting skyward once more with the pod the moment Tuttle announced that she and Clancy were secured.

Clancy was barely breathing when they managed to get him onto an examination table in sick bay. Working together, they were able to get him stabilized after about an hour. They could find no evidence of internal bleeding from his organs. He was suffering from a concussion and several breaks, however, including his collar bone, several cracked ribs and two breaks on his left arm. When they'd set the breaks and stabilized the arm, they bound his ribs and realigned his collar bone, binding him to keep it from shifting again.

Finally, Victoria left Tuttle to keep a watch on him and returned to the deck. Brown and Kitchens met her at the end of the gangplank. "Is Clancy going to make it?"

Victoria drew in a deep breath. "Looks like it." She scanned the area. Roach was sitting on the deck, tossing coins at the wall. It was patently obvious that he was completely unmoved by everything that had just happened, despite the

fact that he could hardly have failed to know that it was his added weight on the railing that had caused the accident. Victoria saw blood. She strode over to him and decked him with her fist on the side of his jaw. He fell sideways. Before she could swing at him again, Brown and Kitchens seized her.

"You damn near got two men killed ... endangered the crew members below. You step out of line one more time, Roach, and you'll be spending the next six months in the brig!"

He rubbed his jaw, grinning up at her, but there was malice in his eyes. "Damn, Tory! That almost hurt!"

Victoria tried to pull free, but Brown and Kitchens had a firm grip on each of her arms. "Tell me you understand what I just told you, Roach!"

He shrugged. "I heard you say Clancy was OK."

"He's NOT OK! He'll probably live, but he's not OK And he wouldn't even be in that good a shape if Raphael hadn't risked his life to save him!"

Roach looked at her blankly a moment, then smiled snidely. "You mean lead tadpole?"

Brown released her, but before Victoria could react, he'd slugged Roach so hard his eyes rolled back in his head.

Victoria glared at the semi-conscious man. "Lock him in the brig, Brown. When you're done, check on Clancy. If it's safe enough to leave him for a little while, bring Tuttle back with you. If not ... I guess it'll just be the three of us making the sweep."

* * * *

Brown and Tuttle had discovered the power station had been blown when they'd made their sweep of the upper deck, which meant neither the lights nor the lift were working. After collecting miner's helmets, Victoria led the way down the stairs.

The upper deck was supported above main operations by a web of steel girders. Victoria examined them as they descended, but could see no obvious signs of damage. She paused as they reached the lower deck, looking out over the railing at the sea below them. She'd heard nothing from the deep sea crew since they'd gone under to retrieve the munitions. She'd tried reaching Raphael telepathically several times, but he either wasn't responding or he wasn't able to 'hear' her over such a distance. The underwater com units didn't appear to work—not really surprising since the ones they were using didn't work worth a shit either. She didn't know whether to put it down to the planet's conditions, or sorry equipment—neither of which would have surprised her.

It made her uneasy that she hadn't heard from the crew, however. She had no way of telling if they'd managed to retrieve their weapons, or if they'd encountered a threat below.

She glanced at Brown and Kitchens. "This could be nothing more than weather damage, so watch it with the lasers. We don't want to shoot any of the good guys."

Kitchens and Brown exchanged a look, but it was Kitchens who spoke. "You think there's a chance there's still somebody alive down there?"

It was the question everyone had been avoiding, but they all knew it was doubtful. Both communications and the power were out. If there'd been anyone left, there would have been signs that attempts had been made to restore the power at least. Beyond that, they had made no attempt at a stealthy arrival. Even if the entire ground crew was huddled below for some reason, they must have heard the arrival of the relief crew.

But it was inconceivable to Victoria that all sixty crew members had been killed.

It would almost have been easier to believe pirates had raided the place except for the fact that there were no obvious signs of an attack—two possible laser blasts, and possibly not—no signs of blood—no bodies. And they'd found a good bit of expensive equipment. It seemed doubtful pirates would've overlooked it.

"We have to assume there are some survivors," she responded finally. "If there are, they could be armed, so watch yourselves."

The door, they discovered, was locked.

Victoria and Kitchens stood back while Brown hit it with a blast of laser fire, then kicked it open before stepping back. Victoria stood away from the direct line of fire. "Replacement crew!" she yelled. "Is anybody hurt down there?"

Her voice echoed eerily down the stairwell. She waited several minutes, listening intently. "This is Victoria Anderson. I'm the mission supervisor with NCO! We're coming down!"

Again, her voice echoed hollowly, as if she'd shouted into a metal can. After waiting for a response and receiving none,

she entered the stairwell, keeping as close to the wall as possible. They made their way down to the first level. The door opened out onto the stairwell, but it was steel, at least, and would protect whoever opened it from fire in the event someone was waiting for them.

She and Brown flattened themselves against the wall by the opening and she nodded for Kitchens to open it. Kitchens grasped the handle and gave it a yank. The door didn't budge. The three of them exchanged a look. "They sealed themselves in," Victoria muttered. It began to look like an attack after all.

There was just one problem.

If someone had attacked the rig, the bolted doors might have slowed them down, but they wouldn't have held off a determined attack. They should have found that the doors had been blasted open. There should have been signs of a fire fight.

Kitchens blew a hole in the lock. Grasping the handle again, she jerked the door open. Brown hailed this time.

When moments passed and they received no response, Victoria eased up to the edge of the door, took her helmet off and flashed the light around the room beyond, expecting any moment that it would be shot out of her hand. Nothing but the same eerie silence greeted them. Finally, Victoria braced herself and dove into the room beyond, rolling to a stop behind a low wall. After a moment, Kitchens and Brown followed her.

"Brown, watch the door. Kitchens, you take that side. I'll take this one."

Unlike the upper deck, the operations floor looked untouched. It was deserted, however. She met up with Kichens and Brown again.

"I found the auxiliary power supply. Looked to me like it ought to be operational."

Victoria frowned. "I don't see how it could be. If it was working, it would be on, right?"

Kichens shrugged. "Maybe they didn't get the chance to turn it on. Or maybe they left it off for a reason."

"Give it a try. I don't see stumbling around in the dark if there's a chance of getting the lights on."

To everyone's surprise and relief, the power supply kicked on, flooding the operations room with light. They discovered, however, that the lift still wasn't working.

Shutting off the lights on their helmets, they moved back into the stairwell and down to the next level. The second level contained the living quarters of the supervisory level employees, the dining hall and kitchen, and the media and recreational rooms. It, too, was deserted, seemingly untouched. The third level was primarily living quarters for the crew and also contained the sickbay. Below that level were three warehousing levels. The ore processing plant was below the warehouse levels. The eighth and final level was about twenty feet above the sea floor and designed for crew access in and out of the rig and for bringing up the raw ore.

It took hours to search the rig from top to bottom. The door on every single level was bolted from the inside. Every level was seemingly untouched. They found no blood, no bodies, no signs of a struggle of any kind ... and no crew

Below
by Kaitlyn O'Connor

members. The lift, they discovered, had been deliberately sabotaged.

Victoria had fully expected to find the remains of the crew on the eighth level. She didn't know whether to be relieved or further unnerved when they discovered that the final level was as devoid of any signs of life—or death—as all the others. There were, however, signs of a battle.

The pressurized access pool had been covered over and barricaded. It was obvious, though, that the barricade had not held.

Chapter Three

"They fled up. What ever wiped them out came from below."

Victoria glanced at Kichens sharply. "Maybe. But it doesn't make any sense."

"How you figure?" Brown asked.

Victoria frowned, trying to add up what they'd found. "Why come in this way when it would've been easier to come in from the landing level?"

Kichens shrugged. "Element of surprise, maybe?"

"They weren't surprised. They had time to build a barricade," Victoria pointed out flatly.

"Maybe the attack did come from topside and the crew evacuated from here?" Brown suggested.

Victoria shook her head. "Evacuate to where? Anyway, you can see it's burst inward. Whoever attacked them broke through the barrier they'd built, and it looks like it must have been a pretty solid barrier."

"Explosives," Brown said, nodding.

"A battering ram, maybe, but they didn't use explosives," Victoria said. "There's no shrapnel. If they'd used explosives to blow it, there'd be a lot more debris scattered around here, and signs of fire—there's not even an odor of smoke—."

"What bothers me the most is that there's no bodies." Kichens said, shivering as she glanced around anxiously.

Victoria glanced around, as well. "What bothers me the most is that there's no blood."

Kichens and Brown stared at her. Kichens was the first to grasp the implications. "They're alive then!"

"Not if whoever it was dumped the bodies in the sea," Brown put in.

"The problem with that, Brown, is that there's no damn blood. They would've been fighting for their lives, wouldn't you think? I can't picture sixty people simply standing by and watching their fellow crew members being tossed into the sea to drown one by one without making a push to save themselves, at least. But except for this room and the flight deck, there's no sign of any kind of struggle at all, nothing that could be interpreted as hand to hand combat, and no blood evidence of it."

The debris littering the access pool abruptly heaved upward. Kichens and Brown brought their weapons up instantly, trained on the moving debris.

"Hold your fire, damn it!" Victoria ordered.

"There's something down there," Kichens snapped.

"We've got crew members outside," Victoria reminded her sharply. "Hold your fire."

They moved back, keeping their weapons trained on the debris in the pool as it continued to shift and heave. After a few moments, whatever it was managed to create an opening and a dark head emerged. Victoria knocked Kichens' weapon aside when she heard the click of the trigger. The laser blast cut a two inch hole in one of the support columns. They were just fortunate it struck the column instead of the bulkheads. Otherwise the habitat might have depressurized, despite the

shielding that had been built into the structure that was supposedly insurance against such 'accidents'.

"Damn it, Kichens! I told you to hold your fire! He's one of ours!"

She turned in time to see Raphael's head break the surface once more. He was glaring at them. Not that Victoria could blame him. She'd have been pissed, too, if somebody had just fired a laser at her.

"You OK?"

Shoving some of the debris aside, he emerged from the pool, lifting himself onto the raised edge. He was followed a moment later by several other crew members. He didn't look at her when she spoke, but rather continued to glare at Kichens, who was staring at him open mouthed.

"Fine."

His voice was deep, melodious and as smooth and rich as aged cognac. It sent a shiver of sensation chasing along Victoria's spine, as tangible as a caress. He stood up at just that moment and strode toward her, however, driving all other thought from her mind.

Victoria gaped at his legs.

They were legs.

"They are."

The words jerked her head up as if it had been attached by a string. It took her a few seconds to realize that she'd been too surprised to block her thoughts from him. "You're not...."

"Fuck me!" Brown exclaimed.

One of the mermaids—female deep water crew members—looked him over and smiled coldly. "Not in this life time."

He gaped at her as if she'd grown two heads.

After a moment, Victoria realized she should not have been so stunned. Galactic law prohibited genetic manipulation that created undue hardship for the recipient and/or irreversible 'abnormalities'. Companies like NCO could create four armed—or four legged—human beings, if they had sufficient data supporting the decision, but they also had to prove that the 'improved' or altered human could be rehabilitated when they'd completed their assignment to blend naturally with the race—they didn't have to prove these humans could afford to pay for normalization, or fund it themselves, only that it was possible.

She'd known the 'mermen' and 'mermaids' did not have gills. A specialized organ had been added to their internal physiology that pulled oxygen from water for them, as gills did for sea creatures—they 'breathed' water—and it was extra—they also had lungs for when the time came to discard the internal gills. Because of her position, she'd been fitted with a prosthesis similar to their 'natural' organ, so that she would be able to oversee the mining operations whenever necessary.

Their legs had appeared to be fused, however, and she'd assumed this would require a surgical reversal to allow the lower part of their body, which functioned in the same manner as a fish tail underwater, to function as legs when they no longer needed them for underwater maneuvering.

Obviously, she'd been wrong.

Raphael nodded abruptly. Victoria wasn't certain whether that was an affirmation of her mental dialogue, or a greeting of some sort.

"The mine shafts were collapsed about twenty feet down. Most of the equipment looks operational, though. There's probably two tons of ore, just sitting on the ocean floor—They mined it, but they never got it up. No bodies—at least not so far. Looks like what ever happened here, they managed to make it inside the rig. I've got some people working on clearing the mine shaft."

"No bodies here either," Victoria said grimly.

His dark brows rose. "Any theories?"

She shook her head.

"What do we do now?" the female crew member Victoria had named Sylvia asked.

Everyone turned to look at Victoria. "The structure seems sound enough. My guess is we'll be ordered to proceed as planned. I'll have to report what we've found to headquarters." She shrugged. "For now, we cool our heels and wait."

"What kind of down time are we talking here?" Brown demanded.

"Shit!" Kitchens exclaimed. "Does that mean we won't get our bonus?"

Victoria held up her hand as everybody started talking at once. "Believe me when I say I'm as anxious to get started as the rest of you. We don't get paid for sitting on our asses. In the meanwhile, until we've got some idea of what the hell happened here, I want everyone on alert. Keep a weapon

nearby at all times. Stay close. Preferably inside the habitat. No exploring.

"Right now, I want a crew in here to get this mess cleaned up and operational. Until you hear otherwise directly from me, make sure at least two people out of every work crew are stationed on watch at all times."

She turned to Raphael. "Can you spare some of your crew to help in here?"

He nodded and turned to Sylvia. She studied him a moment, nodded, and returned to the pool. Diving in, she disappeared from sight.

"I told her to pull a half a dozen people off the mines and bring them to help clear up the debris below that's blocking docking access to the pool. When they're done, they're to come in and help finish up in here."

"Good." She allowed her gaze to move over him fleetingly. "Remind them of the company dress code. While working outside or in the mines, you may do as you please. Anyone working within the habitat is expected to conform to company policy regarding dress. They can find uniforms in the commissary, either here in the habitat or on the ship." She turned to Brown and Kitchens. "You two go ahead and get started here.... Just do whatever you can till you have some more help. Stay alert, but watch your itchy trigger fingers. I don't want any more accidents. We've already got one crew member down. With the ground crew we were supposed to join missing, we're short handed enough as it is."

Brown and Kitchens exchanged a look, but turned and began half-heartedly shifting the debris around. After a

couple of moments, the two deep water crew members who'd emerged from the pool with Raphael and Sylvia began helping them sift through the debris and sort 'recoverable' from 'unusable'.

Raphael studied them for several moments. "Robert—Jeremy, you heard the boss. Uniforms first. Commissary's on level six. Grab some for the rest of the crew while you're there."

Victoria glanced at Raphael. "I need you to come with me. It'll be best, I think, if you give your report on the mines directly. They'll want details."

Raphael gestured toward the elevator. "After you."

"The elevator's out. We discovered it was blocked on the second level. We'll have to take the stairs," she said, starting back toward the stairwell.

Robert and Jeremy proceeded them, jogging up the stairs at an astonishing pace. Despite that, their bare feet pounding against the treads produced surprisingly little noise.

"They didn't tell you."

Victoria glanced back at him over her shoulder as she started up the stairs. His gaze, she discovered, was resting upon her rear. He glanced up at her face as she turned. To her surprise, he neither gave her a suggestive look, nor appeared the least discomfited that she'd caught him in the act. "They didn't know. Communications have been out for several months, apparently. We'll have to transmit from the ship."

"I meant about us."

"Oh." Self conscious now, certain she could feel his gaze upon her ass, she tried to ignore it, resisted the urge to brush the seat of her trousers to see if she'd sat in anything. "They have a way of leaving out important little details like that."

"Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"Not nearly as uncomfortable as your preoccupation with my ass." She glanced back at him again as she reached the first landing. Despite the sarcasm in her voice, one corner of his lips curled up faintly.

"Was I—preoccupied?"

"Weren't you?"

"Yes."

She paused, looked back at him challengingly. "What? Have I got something on the seat of my pants?"

He frowned, leaned forward, lifted a hand, then slid it lightly, slowly over her rump. It was, unmistakably, a caress, not a brush. After that leisurely examination, he dropped his hand to his side once more. The frown vanished. His eyes glinted. "No."

She felt a blush rising that was only partially irritation and immediately returned her attention to the stairs she was climbing.

No. Just like that. No pretense that it was anything beyond an interest in her ass. He'd initiated 'the ritual'. She could take it up—or not. She decided to ignore the opening he'd provided.

"I suppose, if I'd given it any thought, I would have wondered at their reasoning," she continued with the previous subject after an uncomfortable pause. "It's certainly helpful

having a deep water mining crew, but they only chose six topside crew members—not nearly enough to man the station once the occupying ground crew departed. I'd wondered how they expected us to process the ore with three miners to every one processor. Is it uncomfortable for you?"

"In what way?"

Victoria shrugged. "The transition, from water to air—the difference in pressure."

"It takes a little while to acclimatize."

Victoria sent him a wry smile over her shoulder. "I've got a feeling that's an understatement. I was fitted with a prosthesis similar to what you use to extract oxygen from water—to make it easier for me to keep an eye on the mining operations. It works, but I found 'acclimatizing' to breathing underwater a singularly unpleasant experience."

His gaze, she saw when she glanced back, was once more on her ass. She misjudged the distance to the next tread and almost tripped. It wasn't a stumble. She barely scraped the bottom of her shoe, but it was a close enough call to make her heart skip a couple of beats and to cause a color fluctuation in her cheeks. She wondered uncomfortably if he'd noticed. Her hair was closer to brown than red, but her complexion was very fair. When she blushed, it was hideously noticeable and the back of her neck felt hot. She'd twisted her hair into a knot low on the back of her head, however. Surely between that and the collar he hadn't noticed from his position below her?

"Careful. Watch your step."

"It's easier coming down than going back up," she responded a little stiffly.

"You sound a little winded."

She gritted her teeth, suspecting he knew very well that the climb was only part of the problem. She glanced upward. "Only a few more levels. I think I can make it."

They met Robert and Jeremy coming down again when they reached level six. Jeremy tossed Raphael a uniform from the stack Robert was carrying. Victoria continued the climb while he stopped to dress. He caught up with her again before she'd reached the next level, however, and proceeded to follow her the rest of the way up.

She'd thought she wouldn't feel quite as uncomfortable once he was dressed.

She'd thought wrong. It didn't raise her comfort level at all, particularly when she was almost certain he continued to study her backside all the way up.

Captain Huggins met them on the gang plank. "What's the prognosis?"

"Not good. The ground crew's gone," Victoria said grimly.

Huggins came upright, paling. "Dead? All of them? What the hell happened here?"

"Probably ... Missing, presumed dead, at any rate. We found nothing. No survivors, no bodies, no sign of a fight. They've just vanished. And so far we haven't found much in the way of clues that might help us figure it out." Victoria strode past him.

"The company's not going to like this," Huggins commented, following Victoria and Raphael up the gangplank and into the ship.

Victoria's lips tightened. "I feel sure the missing ground crew weren't too happy about it either."

"Any ideas? Theories?"

"None, unfortunately. It's not likely, considering it looks as if everyone must have barricaded themselves into the lowest level when they were attacked, but I suppose it's possible we might find some clues in the work log, assuming we can find it."

"They're not going to like that either."

Victoria sent him an impatient glance over her shoulder, but she knew he was right. The company didn't give a damn about facts, or even logic when disaster struck. They just wanted somebody to blame. They were not going to be happy she wasn't prepared to hand them some names.

They were not going to be pleased that they had no one to come down on, and no one to use as scapegoat when the media got wind of it.

They couldn't just brush it under the rug, however. Most of those who were missing had had friends, family. It was going to be one hell of a mess.

Huggins parted company with them when they reached the control deck.

"See if Grant can get me a secure channel, will you? And have her patch it through to my quarters."

Huggins nodded.

Victoria hadn't realized until Raphael followed her into her quarters just how cramped the space was. She looked around and finally gestured toward her bunk. "Sorry. Only one chair. Have a seat."

Raphael glanced at the bunk and then gave Victoria an inscrutable look. "I'm fine."

"Would you feel more comfortable with the chair?"

He shook his head infinitesimally, leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms over his chest.

She shrugged. "Suit yourself. It might take a while.... If Grant can even get through to them. Kay's atmosphere is like soup—in case you didn't notice during the climb up."

After a brief inner debate, she chose the bunk herself. She'd spent months in hyber-sleep. Racing around the habitat with a gun, to say nothing of pounding up and down that many flights of stairs, was more of a workout than she'd anticipated immediately after debarkation. Propping her pillow against the bulkhead, she sat at the head of her bed, pushed her shoes off and stretched her legs out on the bed before her.

Raphael studied her for several moments, then stood away from the door frame and began to prowl the cramped quarters restlessly, examining her few personal belongings with his gaze, though he touched nothing.

"Any thoughts?"

His brows rose, but he didn't mistake the comment as an invitation. "Whoever did this clearly wasn't after the ore. Otherwise, we'd have had a reception committee when we arrived."

Victoria drew her legs up and began massaging her aching feet absently. "That's the biggest—or one of the biggest problems I have with the situation. No apparent motive. There's some damage, but nothing, except the crew, taken."

"Slavers?"

"I can't believe slavers would be ballsy enough to attack a company facility. Particularly not one so well guarded, or populated ... And that's another thing. As precious as that ore is, I know they had to have had a full company of security officers on the habitat. So why are there virtually no signs of a struggle? Except for a couple of laser burns on the flight deck, we saw nothing else."

"It happened too fast for them to get the chance to fight?"

"But not so fast that—some of them at least—didn't have the chance to bolt every access door on the way down, block the elevator, and pile everything they could get their hands on over the access pool?"

"So, if we eliminate pirates, slavers and competitors, what have we got left?"

Victoria thought on it for some moments before anything occurred to her. "Something indigenous?"

Chapter Four

Without invitation, Raphael joined her on the bed. Taking up a position about halfway down, he propped his back against the adjoining bulkhead. Victoria was still staring at him in surprise when he reached over and grasped one of her feet. After a brief tug of war for possession, he settled her foot in his lap and began massaging it.

The pressure of his hands on her throbbing feet was almost unbearably pleasurable. Caught by surprise, a moan escaped her before she could prevent it. She made a self-conscious effort to pretend she'd been clearing her throat. "I'd prefer you didn't do that."

He studied her a long moment. "No you wouldn't."

Victoria would have liked to argue the point, but he was right. If he was of a mind to do it, she was certainly of a mind to allow it. She knew she shouldn't. It was far too intimate, and despite company policies regarding sexual intercourse between crew members, she'd found that participating in it herself had a way of creating discipline problems for her. Men tended to think sexual favors should extend beyond the bedroom to special consideration regarding work, time off, and bonuses.

The best way to avoid complications that might have unpleasant repercussions on her work record was simply to refuse to take a lover at all except on those few, rare, occasions where she was assigned to a duty where there were officers of equal or higher rank than herself.

She placed her other foot in his lap, hopeful he wouldn't just stop at massaging one.

A faint smile curled his lips.

No doubt he considered this a triumph of some kind—a battle of wills? Annoyance touched her, but she decided it was worth allowing him a small sense of victory to get her feet rubbed.

She found, however, that she was having trouble redirecting her thoughts to the previous subject. "According to the reports compiled from the probes, Kay has no indigenous life forms to speak of, certainly none that are intelligent. In fact, nothing much above multi-celled micro-organisms."

Raphael shrugged. "Which means nothing. A couple of probes could have missed far more than they recorded."

"It took over a year to construct the habitat and set up mining operations. You'd think, in all that time, if there was anything dangerous here somebody would have seen it and reported it to the company."

Raphael gave her a look. "And, if they did, and they had, and it put the operation in jeopardy, do you think it would've appeared in the reports?"

Victoria's heart skipped a beat. Anger surged through her as it occurred to her that he was right. Before she could say anything else however, the com unit let out a burst of static. Snatching her feet from his lap, Victoria leapt from the bed and moved around the desk. Leigh Grant's transparent image appeared above the holo-port. "Did you get through?"

Leigh shrugged. "I've got a connection. There's a lot of interference, though. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold onto it."

"Patch me through."

A wavering image of Wilhem Marks, Chief of Domestic Operations for NCO replaced Grant's image. "Anderson?.... That you?"

"Anderson here," Victoria responded. "The habitat's in pretty rough shape, Marks. The ground crew's missing. No clue what happened here, but whatever it was, it was big."

"... hear you ... crew missing?"

Unconsciously, Victoria raised her voice. If she'd thought about it, she would have realized the absurdity of trying to yell at a man all the way across the galaxy. "The whole damned ground crew's vanished, presumed dead. There's damage. Mostly on the flight deck and the lower level. Nothing that can't be fixed—I think—but we'll have to delay operations until we can investigate the incident thoroughly—Raphael's here to report what he found at the mine."

She moved aside and allowed Raphael to take her place. He'd no sooner begun speaking, however, than the connection was lost.

Victoria stared at the speaker in consternation, then glanced at Raphael. After a moment, she moved around him once more. In the tight space, particularly since Raphael was a large man, passage became an intimate dance of brushing bodies and hands groping for balance. Victoria was more than a little flustered by the time they'd negotiated the second pass.

"Grant?"

"Lost it. Sorry."

"Shit!"

"I'll keep trying."

"When you get them again ... if you do ... tell them I need to get my crew off this damned rock until there's been a thorough investigation of what happened here."

Grant's eyes widened. "They're not going to go for that."

"Tell them anyway. It's worth a try." It was a useless gesture and she knew it. God only knew how much the trip out had cost the company, but if it was more than five credits, they weren't going to listen to any appeals to remove the crew before the crew had earned that five credits back a thousand million times over.

Still, it was possible they would consider the risk of losing another crew versus losing more money—not that human life had a lot of value to them, but the potential for lawsuits by family members would multiply substantially if her and her crew disappeared as well.

After a moment, she shook her dark thoughts off. Raphael, she saw, hadn't moved. He'd lifted his arms over his head, propping against one of the exposed beams that crisscrossed the overhead of her compartment and was staring at the dead com unit as if deep in thought. Realizing he had no intention of moving out of her way, she brushed past him again.

"What now?" he asked when she was chest to chest with him.

When he spoke, she looked up at him automatically and directly into his eyes. It was a mistake. Her mind went

perfectly blank, caught up in the zen meditation that tended to seize hold of her whenever she looked directly at him. It was almost as if he had the ability to mesmerize.

This time her reaction was more pronounced than usual, however. She was far closer to him than she'd ever been before, unprotected by a glass wall, and mere inches separated them. Her heart pounded suffocatingly against her chest wall as his body heat and scent invaded her senses. With a mental shake, she brushed past him, putting some distance between them.

Her mouth and throat were as dry as dust. It took an effort to gather moisture and swallow. "As I said before, we wait."

Before she could say anything else, the com unit erupted once more. This time it was Captain Huggins. "You going to get some crew up here to start off loading?"

"Not until I hear back from NCO about the situation here."

"You know they're going to expect you to proceed as planned."

"I don't know that. And you don't know that, either. We've got a serious situation here, Huggins. I don't want to be stranded here until we have some answers. And there'll be hell to pay if we off load and leave all the supplies behind—which we might have to if we're forced to evacuate quickly."

There was a slight pause. "You've been working for the company long enough to know they're not going to whistle this much money down the tubes, Anderson. They're going to expect you and your crew to pull this together for them."

"If they leave us here and whatever happened to the previous crew happens to us, they're going to be losing a lot more money," Victoria snapped.

"You might have been able to convince them of that—in person—if they'd found out before they launched the newest mission. You're already here now. I'm telling you, they're going to expect you to go forward."

"It's going to go down as a matter of record, however, that it was not my decision to endanger my crew!" Victoria snapped. "No way am I going to be a scapegoat for them."

She switched the unit off before he could think up another argument. "I'm going down. Maybe I can find something in the work logs. You should go check the crew's progress."

Raphael followed her out of her cabin. "You said no one was to be left alone. I'll go with you to check the logs."

Victoria glanced at him, tempted to countermand, but he was right. Until they knew what was going on here on Kay, they needed to stick to working in groups. Instead of heading out immediately, however, she turned her steps toward the brig.

"You're going to release Roach?"

His voice was carefully neutral. Nevertheless, Victoria suspected there was more than a hint of censure in the comment. She nodded grimly. "I see no reason to allow him to sit on his ass—in safety—while everyone else has to work—at risk. Do you?"

"I can't argue with that reasoning. On the other hand, he strikes me as a fairly useless human being, and one prone to creating problems besides."

"My assessment exactly, but I didn't pick the crew. I was assigned, just like everybody else. Any way you look at it, we're stuck with him now, and as much as I'd like to keep him locked up, I couldn't hold him more than twelve hours for insubordination anyway without the union coming down on me *and* the company."

"We're a little out of their reach at the moment," Raphael pointed out dryly.

"I'd like to go home someday, though. Besides, he's not worth the credits I'd have to pay out in fines," Victoria responded with a tight smile.

Roach was sprawled on the bunk in the cell, apparently asleep, when they reached the brig. He didn't so much as twitch when Victoria opened the cell door. She stalked across the room and kicked the metal railing of the bunk. "Up! Beauty sleep's over, Roach. You're needed down on the underwater access level to help with clean up."

Roach rolled to a sitting position. He didn't look like someone who'd just been awakened. Victoria's eyes narrowed.

He grinned at her. "Sure you don't want to join me here for a little recreation first?" he asked, patting the bunk beside him suggestively.

"As tempting as that is," Victoria said dryly. "We've got problems at the moment. Get below. Now."

He favored Raphael with a challenging glance before he swaggered out.

Raphael's expression was stony as he followed her out of the cell.

* * * *

Victoria heard Roach clattering down the stairs ahead of them as she and Raphael started down the stairs toward main operations. He made more noise than both of Raphael's men put together. The heavy issue, steel toed boots might have had something to do with it, but Victoria was inclined to think it was a little more than that—grace for one thing. Then, too, the deep water crew had been developed in pressurized water tanks. It seemed to follow that their muscles were accustomed to more resistance than air.

"Just what is Roach's specialty—besides being a pain in the ass?"

A sense of *deja vu* went through Victoria. She glanced back at Raphael as she recalled thinking much the same thing about Roach. There was nothing in his expression, however, to indicate that he was being deliberately provocative. Perhaps it was only coincidence that he'd voiced her earlier thoughts? Or, just maybe, it wasn't too difficult for any number of people to reach a similar assessment?

"His records show a good deal of off world experience—acceptable job foreman skills. Between the two of us, I think he was just fortunate enough to be born in the right family."

"He was placed?"

Victoria shrugged. "You and I both know it happens. The government can legislate as many fairness laws as they want, but they'll never eliminate corruption altogether. People in positions of power are going to use their power whenever

they feel it's necessary—and my feeling is that someone was anxious to get Roach as far away as possible.”

“Lucky us.”

“Exactly.”

They'd reached the main operations deck. Victoria hesitated once she'd gained the main corridor, glanced to the right and left and finally strode toward the first door along the corridor. The accounting office might have been the best place to start, but Victoria was more interested in the most recent logs and it seemed to her that the chances were good that those had never made it to accounting.

They found Pittman's—the man she was to have replaced—office without too much trouble. They encountered an unexpected problem, however. The password she'd been issued failed to open the files.

Raphael had remained by the door. He was propped causally enough against the door frame, but he was alert. “It would require voice id, wouldn't it?” he asked over his shoulder, sparing a glance at her.

“Unfortunately, Pittman didn't get the chance to turn it over to me. It was supposed to be set up when I got here, though. So, either the chip was corrupted when it arrived, it never arrived, or Pittman never got the chance to install it. The computer's not accepting the override either.”

“They would keep physical copies, though, right? In case of equipment failure?”

Victoria shrugged. “Maybe. It's standard procedure on this kind of operation. Too many chances of equipment failure. But a lot more personnel ignore that little rule than follow it.”

She gnawed her fingertip thoughtfully for several moments. "Let's have a look, shall we? We might be able to break in, but I'd rather not. The company's going to want whatever's still in the computer's memory."

"I could probably bypass the security, if you want me to give it a try."

Victoria shook her head. "You know the company. They have eyes...." She broke off. "The security records!"

It wasn't that difficult to find the office of the head of security. Raphael had memorized the layout of the habitat far better than Victoria had and took her straight to it. The problem arose in trying to discover where the records had been hidden.

Apparently, the company had decided it would work best if no one other than the head of security actually knew about the security records. That way, no one would be able to tamper with them.

They were supposed to be tamper proof, of course, but everyone knew there had never been a device invented for the purpose of security that someone hadn't managed to crack, and these were typically generous souls who liked to share their knowledge.

They found a stack of records locked in the head of security's filing cabinet.

They had better luck accessing the security officer's computer. Apparently, he had a tendency toward memory lapses. He'd taped his password inside the filing cabinet.

The discovery humanized the missing man as nothing else and Victoria felt a touch of humor and her first true pang of

loss. Up until that moment, she'd merely been stunned by the magnitude of the situation. She hadn't, personally, known any of those missing. She'd been shocked, horrified and frightened, but she hadn't felt any sense of loss. Staring at the carefully formed letters, hand written by someone who had vanished without a trace or explanation, Victoria felt a lump of sorrow tighten her throat.

It was a struggle to dismiss it, to step back once more to an emotional distance that would allow her to feel less and think more, but she was able to push it from her mind presently and focus on the immediate problem.

The records, they discovered, were either of poor quality, or had become corrupted by the conditions—or possibly both. Between blips of static, they caught glimpses of the crew going about their lives from various view points around the station, but, as bad as the video was, the audio was even worse and it was impossible to really tell anything about what was happening. The dates indicated that the recordings went all the way back to the current—or what should have been the current occupants'—arrival. There were none that were recent. The last one appeared to be several weeks before the last known communication with the crew.

To Victoria, there seemed to be an air of agitation in the mannerisms of the crew members on the last record, but she couldn't tell whether it was an assessment prejudiced by her knowledge of the disaster that had followed, or if the crew had already been aware of a problem. "Raphael, take a look at this and tell me what you think."

She made an aborted attempt to rise and give him her seat, but he placed a hand on her shoulder, leaning over her. More disturbed than she liked by his proximity, she did her best to ignore it and told the computer to replay the final log.

"They look scared, jumpy, on edge," Raphael commented. Victoria glanced up at him.

"There! Replay that."

Victoria's head whipped back toward the image. She backed it up, staring hard at the crew members displayed. It was a man and a woman, standing in the corridor near the lift, but she couldn't tell which level they were on. They were talking in low voices, but even if they hadn't been, she doubted she could have understood what they were talking about from the blips of static interlacing the audio.

"Look at his lips. Five missing."

Victoria's heart skipped a beat. She reversed the record and played it several more times. "It could be," she said finally. "But even if that is what the guy said, it doesn't necessarily follow that he was talking about crew members. It might be anything."

"He looks a little too agitated to be talking about socks," Raphael said dryly.

Victoria frowned, irritated by the sarcasm in his voice. "I can see they're both upset about something, and it seems probable you've picked up on part of the conversation, but it still isn't much to go on. He could be talking about tools that went missing ... personal items that were stolen. The fact is we don't know what he's talking about and we can't just jump

to the conclusion that it has to do with the missing crew members. We need the work logs."

A sound at the door of the office drew their attention. Roach was standing in the doorway. There was something about the way he was looking at her that set off alarm bells. Irritated at the intrusion, she frowned at him. "They can't have finished the clean up this quickly. What is it, Roach?"

He glanced at Raphael, his expression antagonistic. "I just wanted to put in my request before we settled on room mates."

Victoria felt her stomach clench. She'd hoped to avoid this confrontation all together, or at least put it off for a while in view of their current situation. It seemed useless, however, to point out to him that she felt like demanding a sexual partner now, when their situation was so precarious, was in poor taste, to say the least. Roach obviously didn't feel the least uncomfortable or disturbed about the missing crew members. Doubtless, if she mentioned it, he'd merely point out that the stress of the situation was all the more reason to settle on a partner to assure sexual release from tension. "This isn't the time. We'll discuss this later."

He frowned. "I figured if I waited till a more convenient time, you might come to an agreement with somebody else. I want it as a matter of record that I requested the first two weeks," he said, stubbornly refusing to leave without an answer.

Since there seemed no other way to avoid it, Victoria was on the point of telling him she wouldn't be choosing a room mate for a while—if at all—when Raphael spoke.

Below
by Kaitlyn O'Connor

"She'll be rooming with me."

Chapter Five

Caught completely off guard, Victoria couldn't hide her stunned surprise at the announcement that the two of them had already reached an agreement. Fortunately, Raphael's comment distracted Roach, as well. Otherwise, he'd have known immediately that Raphael was lying and that could've made the situation even worse.

"Like hell!" Roach yelled furiously. "Stick to your own kind!"

Raphael stiffened almost imperceptibly. His eyes narrowed. "What kind is that?"

Victoria jumped up abruptly, knowing Roach was just hot headed enough, and stupid enough, to provoke a physical interchange. Nor had it escaped her notice that Raphael, who normally seemed very cool headed, was showing alarming indications that he was more than willing to take Roach up on his challenge. "Stop it!" Victoria snapped.

Both men ignored her.

Roach spat on the floor as if he tasted something bad. "You ain't figured it out yet? Cold blooded with cold blooded ... warm blooded with warm blood. They paired us up before we left, fishman."

"I said can it, Roach!"

Roach glanced at her then, his look assessing. "You got an agreement with him?"

Victoria's lips tightened in anger—at both men. Now she had to choose. It was no contest really. And, yet, she'd hoped

to avoid a confrontation with Roach, had intended to express no interest in taking a partner, at all, at this time, so that she could avoid having to turn Roach down in the future. She didn't want Roach—at all. But if she chose Raphael now, that would mean she'd either have to agree to Roach when her time was up with Raphael, or risk having—creating—just the sort of incident the company most disliked, battles between males, or females, over sexual favors. “Yes,” she finally answered.

Roach's eyes narrowed. “In that case, I withdraw my offer. I'm not certain I could stomach taking the fish's leavings.”

Insulting as it was—to both of them—Victoria couldn't prevent the leap of hope that entered her chest. She didn't have time to examine it, however. She had to jump between the two men to prevent them from coming to blows, for the words had no sooner left Roach's mouth than Raphael surged forward, his face a mask of barely leashed rage. Grasping Raphael's arm, she put her back to him and faced Roach. “At the rate you're going, Roach, you're going to be spending most of your time in the brig. Get back down below and get to work!”

His lips curled in a sneer. “Yes ma'am.”

When he'd left, Victoria turned on Raphael. “What did you do that for? You know damn well we never discussed such a thing, much less arrived at an agreement.”

“You didn't want him.”

“No, I didn't, damn it! But I'd have liked to handle it myself. As it stands, you've put me in the position of playing

favorites—or accepting him down the line. And neither damn one of those positions are acceptable to me.”

He studied her a long moment, his face taut with anger. Then, to Victoria's shock, he snatched her up against him, hard, grasped the back of her head in one hand and lowered his mouth to hers before she could do more than gasp in stunned surprise. The moment his mouth covered hers in a kiss that was warm, moist and both hungry and possessive, something hot and liquid flowed through her, setting her flesh on fire, pulling the strength from her limbs so that she collapsed weakly against him. The arm he'd slid around her waist tightened. Unaware of anything beyond the feel of his mouth and tongue and the havoc they wreaked with her senses, Victoria weakly sought purchase to prevent herself from falling, grasping his shoulders, then slipping her arms around his neck, tangling her fingers in his dark hair as she responded to his kiss with fervor.

When he released her mouth at last, Victoria's head fell back weakly, lolling against his shoulder. She found she could not catch her breath. It sawed painfully in and out of her chest, her lungs struggling to keep up with the rapid, pounding beat of her heart.

He caught her face in one hand, tipping her head back so that he could look down at her. “Am I too cold for you, Victoria?”

With an effort, Victoria opened her eyes and looked at him blankly. “Wha...?”

A faint smile of triumph curled his lips, gleaming in his eyes, but before Victoria could even decide what it meant or

how she felt about it, he lowered his lips to hers once more. This kiss was far less punishing, but just as possessive, and just as devastating to her already overloaded senses. She felt as weak and insubstantial as water.

"You are mine. I will not share you with another," he murmured when he lifted his lips at last.

Victoria stared at him blankly as his words slowly sank into her mind, slowly began to make sense to her. She stiffened, tried to pull away. He released her. It took an effort to stand upright without his support. "The by-laws prohibit...."

"I don't give a damn about the by-laws," he said grimly.

"Officers of the company are not allowed...."

"I did not choose my position."

"I did!" Victoria snapped. "I've worked too hard and too long to jeopardize my plans because of a ... a testosterone battle between you and Roach!"

His eyes narrowed. "You think that's what this is about?"

"Isn't it always?" Victoria said bitterly. She'd been in much the same position before. It had almost destroyed her budding career, and the worst of it was that neither man had really cared for her. The contest had been between them. They'd become so immersed in trying to outdo one another and claim her as their 'prize' that they'd either not seen, or not cared, that the rivalry between them was wrecking her chances of advancement with the company.

"Choosing a life mate is still acceptable, even in the fucked up universe we live in these days," Raphael said tightly.

Victoria gaped at him in surprise and unconsciously took a step back. "Life..."she said faintly. "Among terraformers,

colonists and the like, certainly, where a partnership is considered desirable and even necessary, but...."

"Isn't that our ultimate goal?"

The comment totally threw Victoria. "Our? How did you...?" But she knew how. Obviously, she hadn't guarded her thoughts from him as well as she'd believed. "Damn it, Raphael! You had no right to ... to...."

"You chose to meld minds with me."

Victoria stared at him uncomprehendingly. "I don't even understand what you're talking about! How could I choose?"

His lips tightened. Something curiously akin to pain flickered in his eyes. "Nevertheless."

Victoria looked away, feeling drained suddenly. "I can't deal with this right now. We have a dangerous situation. I need to keep my mind on keeping us all alive."

Raphael was silent for several moments. "Let's have a look for the work logs, then."

Relieved that he'd allowed the subject to drop so readily, Victoria nodded and they left the security chief's office and began a room by room search to find the logs. By the time they located them, however, Victoria discovered that she'd missed her window of opportunity insofar as using them as leverage to protect herself and her crew.

Tuttle came pounding into the control room, bellowing her name.

Victoria and Raphael exchanged a startled glance, dropped the records and raced into the main operations room with weapons drawn. "What is it?" Victoria demanded.

Tuttle was gasping for breath. "The shuttle—Captain Huggins took off without us!"

It took several moments for that information to sink in ... and Victoria still couldn't believe it. Without a word, she pushed past Tuttle and raced up the stairs. The landing pad, when she finally reached the flight deck, was empty except for the crates of supplies, which Captain Huggins and Grant had obviously off loaded hastily before their departure. She was still staring at the vacant spot the shuttle had occupied in shocked disbelief when Raphael and Tuttle joined her.

"What happened?" she demanded as she turned to Tuttle.

Tuttle shrugged. "He called me in sick bay and told me I needed to deliver a message to you. Said they'd heard back from the company and the orders were to proceed as planned and send a report on the investigation when it was completed. Clancy seemed to be doing OK, so I didn't argue. I had just started down the stairs when I heard the gang plank being retracted. When I turned around and ran back up, the shuttle was already leaving the pad."

"Son of a bitch!" Victoria yelled. "God damn those bastards to hell!"

Tuttle, she saw when she finally turned to look at her, was staring at her wide eyed. "Are we in trouble?"

It took a supreme effort to fight her temper down to a manageable level. "We don't know." Victoria gnawed her lower lip a moment. "Go below. The crew's working on cleaning up the access level. Tell them to knock off for today and get these supplies stowed, then they can choose quarters

and settle in. And tell the cooks to get busy and see what they can come up with to feed the crew."

Tuttle nodded and turned to go.

"Tuttle."

She stopped and turned back. "I'll discuss the situation with the crew after dinner. That's all they need to know right now."

Again, Tuttle nodded and left Victoria and Raphael.

"At least he left the supplies," Raphael said when Tuttle was out of ear shot.

Victoria glanced at him. "I'd have felt better if he hadn't. At least then we'd know he was coming back."

Raphael's expression was grim. "Not necessarily—he could have taken off with our supplies and still had no intention of returning—but I see your point. If we had the communications tower up, we might have had a chance of calling him back. As it stands...." He shrugged.

Victoria shook her head. "He'd ignore any order I gave him, even if we could communicate with the ship. He's been ordered back. He wouldn't have taken off otherwise. Huggins is a company man, through and through. He would not have made this decision on his own. And, unfortunately for us, it would never occur to him to argue with any decision they made."

"So ... what do we do now?"

Victoria turned to look at him. "Try to stay alive."

Chapter Six

The cooks had apparently decided that the desperate situation called for extraordinary efforts on their part. They'd put together a veritable feast for the crew members who presently trooped into the dining hall, tired and anxious, but freshly scrubbed and apparently hungry.

Victoria couldn't help but notice the crew members segregated themselves. Except for Raphael, everyone else that seated themselves at her table were top side crew members. The deep sea crew sat together, separated from her group by several empty tables.

It made Victoria uneasy. They had problems enough without being divided among themselves.

The situation between her, Roach, and Raphael was certainly not going to help matters. Roach was almost universally disliked, but it didn't necessarily follow that that meant the top side crew members would ignore his grievance and, in any case, Roach was the sort to extend his anger to encompass the entire deep sea crew, simply because he had a personal beef with Raphael. It was highly likely that he would be picking fights with any one of them that had the misfortune to come within 'firing' range of his temper. And she had no doubt that he would do his utmost to incite the other 'human' crew members to treat the deep water crew with prejudice.

Victoria found she had little appetite.

She wished suddenly that she'd left Roach in the brig. Perhaps then Captain Huggins would have taken off with him, as he had Clancy, and that would have eliminated at least one of her problems.

A useless thought, but she couldn't help but wonder if it would transpire that Clancy would actually be the luckiest of them all.

When everyone had finished eating, she stood and addressed them.

"I hope that everyone has settled in OK."

"Does that mean we're staying?" Brown asked.

"It does. The company has ... uh ... expressed their confidence in our ability to handle our current situation."

"Meaning they've abandoned us to sink or swim," Roach muttered in a perfectly audible voice.

Victoria pretended she hadn't heard him. "Our investigation into the situation we found when we arrived is ongoing."

"Which means they haven't a fucking clue what happened here," Roach said a little louder.

Victoria glared at him.

"Is that true? You still don't know what happened?"

"Yes. We still don't know. Which means I want everybody to stay alert and the orders I gave earlier stand. No one works alone. No one goes off alone. No crew works without at least two lookouts when outside the habitat. Tomorrow, the mining crew will concentrate on opening up the mine shaft. Top crew will test the processing plant and make sure its operational. Once we're sure we have a go there, we'll

concentrate on the access pool. Raphael says there's several tons of ore mined and ready to process. I expect us to be fully operational within the week, but we're going to have to hump it if we want to see any bonuses.

"Our focus is going to be on getting the mine and processing plant operational so that we can begin making some money, people. Anything non-essential to our project here can wait until we get around to it, or wait for the next crew."

"What about the communications tower?" someone near the back asked.

Briefly, a sense of satisfaction touched her. At least they were willing to participate in group discussions. It was more important than ever that they work as a group. Their survival might depend upon it. "That's essential. I'll have the schedule posted in the morning. Check it and see who's been assigned to what duties. I'll be assigning a rotating crew to go topside and evaluate the situation with the tower and get to work on repairs. We need that operational as soon as possible."

Everyone seemed to take that as a dismissal. They began a general exodus from the dining hall and into the rec room.

Victoria glanced at Raphael. "I need to get the schedules worked out," she muttered, half to herself.

Raphael nodded. "I'll show you our room."

The words sent a shock wave of sensations and emotions through Victoria, but she resolutely ignored it. "I don't suppose Huggins had the grace to leave any of my personal effects while he and Grant were busy pitching our supplies out on the deck?"

"Oh, he was a thorough son-of-a-bitch. I'm just surprised he didn't park Clancy on the tarp before take-off," Raphael replied, rising. Sliding a hand beneath one of her elbows, he urged her toward the door.

Uncomfortable with the 'escort', Victoria straightened her arm abruptly, whereupon Raphael simply slid his hand along the back of her arm and grasped her hand. Victoria frowned. "Public displays...."

Raphael nodded. "Are forbidden."

He released her hand and grasped her arm just above the wrist.

The urge to remove her arm from his grasp was strong, but Victoria decided after a very little thought that that was likely to attract more attention than pretending she was unaware of his touch. Sharing sexual favors freely was encouraged. Emotional attachments were not. Emotional attachments were prone to create ripples of discord throughout a group and the company was against anything that might interfere with work.

"This is considered a show of affection?"

Victoria took a deep breath and decided to ignore the fact that he was reading her thoughts, as well. "Any touch that's more than casual can be construed as a display of affection."

"This is more than casual?"

Victoria's lips tightened. There was amusement in his voice. If she'd doubted before that he was being deliberately obtuse, she no longer did. "Since I'm perfectly capable of walking without assistance, yes."

"Good."

Victoria glanced at him quickly, but since they had entered the rec room and were in full view of everyone who'd remained to look for a little entertainment before retiring for the night, she said nothing, merely quickening her step purposefully. For all that, she didn't manage to 'out run' him. He matched her step for step, guiding her toward the room he'd chosen for them. It was no great distance, being situated about half way down one side of the rec room, but Victoria found her nerves were jumping long before they reached the privacy of the room.

Raphael, Victoria saw when she flicked a glance at him, was studying her with a mixture of amusement and barely concealed heat. Feeling the blood rise in her cheeks, Victoria looked away quickly and made her way to the desk in one corner of the room.

"There's no need to be so nervous," Raphael said quietly.

Victoria didn't turn to look at him. She was busy searching the drawers for pen and paper. "I'm not," she lied.

"You are."

Victoria drew in a deep, sustaining breath, trying to calm her jitters. "If I am, it's because of our situation," she said tightly.

"Partly."

Victoria set the materials down and turned in her chair to look at him. She was more than a little disconcerted to see that he'd sprawled out on the bed and was lying with his head propped on one hand, studying her. "Don't be shy," she said dryly. "Just tell me what's on your mind."

"You."

She hadn't expected him to be quite that forthcoming. Blood flooded her cheeks. She opened her mouth to speak but discovered she couldn't think of a thing to say. Turning away abruptly, she did her best to concentrate on the schedule, starting with a list of names. Her concentration was in shambles, however, and she discovered it was impossible to put names with faces, and abilities and specialties together with hardly any of the crew members.

"I could help."

She hadn't heard him cross the room. When he spoke, directly beside her, she jumped and dropped the pen from suddenly nerveless fingers. He knelt, picked up the pen and handed it to her, but he did not rise. Instead, he placed a hand on her knee. Victoria felt as if it was a firebrand, burning through the thin fabric of her uniform trousers.

"You're anxious, frightened. You've no need to be."

Victoria knew he wasn't referring to their precarious situation on Kay, but she wasn't ready to meet him head on on a personal level. "Of course, I'm anxious ... and scared. We've been abandoned on this God forsaken rock with no clue of what happened to the personnel that was here."

Raphael shook his head slowly from side to side. "You know that's not what I meant."

Victoria studied him, trying to decide how best to handle the situation she found herself in, but nothing came immediately to mind. She was accustomed to handling a variety of work related problems. She was even, somewhat, used to managing men and women seeking sexual favors. The latter created the least problems at all, for she had

merely to point out that she was heterosexual and they usually gracefully withdrew. Men had rarely been a problem for her, as far as that went. In general, her demeanor alone was enough to keep them at a distance and even those who were attracted by the challenge of dominating a dominant female could be routed without a great deal of fuss simply by using her position in the hierarchy and assigning them to work as far away from her as possible.

"It won't work."

She discovered that Raphael was looking at her with amusement. "What?" she asked cautiously.

"Trying to avoid me."

Victoria sighed. "It carries no weight with you at all that I've expressly forbidden you to read my mind, does it?"

He frowned slightly. "I find it difficult not to. We are mind melded, you and I."

It was Victoria's turn to frown. "You said that before. I still don't understand."

His look was wry. "You are not telepathic. We should not have been able to meld at all."

Irritation surfaced. "That explains it so much better."

He chuckled. "You have a quick temper."

"I am perfectly even tempered," Victoria said stiffly.

His eyes gleamed with suppressed amusement, but in a moment, he leaned toward her. Victoria knew he meant to kiss her. She put a restraining hand on his chest, leaning away. "Don't do that! I'll become a mindless mass of quivering jelly and I won't get anything done!"

Instead of looking insulted that she'd pulled away, Raphael laughed outright. "That's what I've always loved about you, Victoria. There is no subterfuge in you."

Conflicting emotions collided inside of her—doubt, pleasure and confusion—and Victoria felt her face turning red. "This is your way of saying, I suppose, that I'm not a woman of mystery."

"You are a complex woman, but you and I are linked—we melded when I emerged from the incubation chamber. No matter where you are, how far away, I know what you are feeling. I feel what you are feeling." His expression became wry. "I don't always understand it, or why you feel as you do, but I feel when you are distressed, angry—everything that you feel."

Victoria wasn't certain she liked the sound of that. It sounded almost as if he was saying they were fused into one being. She found it hard to accept as a possibility. She found it even more difficult to accept in the sense of losing her individuality. Outwardly, she was a conformist, because she knew that was expected, and because advancement hinged on conformity. Secretly, she preferred to think of herself as completely unique. She wasn't at all certain she could share her inner self. She was pretty certain, though, that she didn't want to.

Raphael frowned. After a moment, he rose and moved away, pacing the room. "Quinton and Albert are programmed machinists. They would probably be best suited to work on the communications tower."

Victoria blinked. It took her a moment to realize he'd changed the subject completely. Finally, she nodded and turned to the schedule, writing their names down. "Any others?"

"None specifically programmed to work on communications, but Caroline and Barbara both know electronics and Xavier is an electrician."

Victoria added the names to her list, then frowned, set her pen down and flipped through the files on her crew. "We're hopelessly understaffed without the crew that we were supposed to be joining, but I've worked with Brown and Tuttle before. They know their way around a processor. It shouldn't take them long to figure out the setup here. We'll need some welders to repair the access cover ... and I'd like to beef it up. I think we're going to have to assume that whatever happened here, it's something we're going to have to contend with, as well."

* * * *

Working on the schedules reminded Victoria that, although they had finally found the work logs, she had left them on the upper level when she discovered that Huggins had departed without them.

Once she'd posted the schedules, she decided to go up to retrieve them so that she could study them. Without a word, Raphael fell into step beside her. Oddly enough, she found it comforting, rather than irritating. Distracted as she was, she would have gone up alone, even knowing that it was not safe for anyone to move about the habitat alone until they knew

more about what had happened. Even if she hadn't been distracted, she would not have liked to demand an escort. It was all very well to point out that, logically, every man and woman was at risk. It still smacked of fear to ask, which translated to weakness, which was something she could not afford if she was to retain control of the situation on Kay.

She didn't notice Roach until he spoke.

"And there goes Ms. Tory with her faithful watchdog," he muttered as she and Raphael passed on their way to the stairwell. Victoria stiffened. She would have stopped and confronted him except that Raphael urged her onward.

"Why did you do that?" she snapped as they started up the stairs.

"It'll be best to ignore him."

"If you think that, then you've no understanding at all of the type of creature he is," she responded tartly.

"No, I don't. Enlighten me."

Victoria felt her irritation vanish. It was difficult to get used to the idea that Raphael had so few experiences to fall back on. "He's a bully. Ignoring him, or trying to, isn't going to do any good. He's spoiling for a fight. He's not going to be satisfied until he gets one."

Raphael frowned. "Bullies are generally cowards."

"Bullies are *always* cowards," Victoria responded. "But no two people handle fear the same way, any more than they handle any other emotion the same way. My instincts tell me Roach isn't going to be satisfied until he's convinced his fears aren't unfounded."

"And what do you perceive as his fears?"

There was a touch of amusement in his voice now. They'd reached the landing on the next level and Victoria paused, turning to look at him. "He's not certain he's man enough to control me, but he's determined to have a try."

All traces of amusement vanished from Raphael's expression. His eyes narrowed. "I won't share you," he said flatly.

Victoria was taken aback. It was on the tip of her tongue to inform him that it wasn't his decision to make. Instead, after wrestling with her temper for several moments, she merely shrugged. "Under the circumstances, there seems to be a very good chance that it'll never be an issue."

It was obvious from his expression that her comment was neither expected, nor welcome. He frowned. "That's not an answer."

"I wasn't aware that you'd asked a question. You said 'I won't'. You didn't ask me how I felt about it," Victoria said shortly and pulled the door open, heading for the office where she'd left the documents she sought.

"Because I know you have no desire to go to him."

"No, I don't, but that's beside the point. I make my own decisions, for my own reasons."

"So—decide."

Despite her irritation, Victoria felt amusement surface. Having reached the office, she stopped in the doorway. "You are bossy. You know that? Why do I get the feeling that as long as my decision coincides with yours, you'll allow it?"

His brows rose, but she could see his anger had vanished and amusement once more took its place. "Because it's true?"

She shook her head and set about retrieving the papers. By the time she'd finished, her brief sense of amusement had completely vanished. "It may still be a moot point," she said grimly as she started back. "Unless we can figure out what happened here, and how to prevent it from happening to us, we may not be alive in two weeks to make any sort of decisions."

Chapter Seven

By the time they reached their level once more, the rec room had emptied. Apparently, the crew had primarily been waiting for the schedule to be posted before retiring for the night. The total silence of a complete absence of habitation greeted them the moment they opened the door on the third level.

It hadn't occurred to Victoria until that very moment that she and Raphael were the only personnel in a position to occupy this level. Immediately tense, Victoria did her best to ignore it and strode purposefully toward their quarters.

Raphael forestalled her intentions, removing the reports from her hands and dropping them on the desk. Victoria looked at him in surprise, but before she could object, he'd pulled her into his arms and lowered his head, brushing his lips lightly against hers.

A flush of warmth went through her. "I really should look at the reports."

"They're not going anywhere and neither are we."

He was right, of course, but it seemed wrong to put off anything so potentially vital to their survival.

"Is there anything you could do, at this very moment, besides study them?"

"I don't suppose so."

"Then it'll wait till morning."

Victoria looked down at her hands where they rested against his chest. "I'm nervous," she confessed.

"So am I."

Startled, Victoria looked up at him.

He smiled wryly. "It's my first time."

The comment threw Victoria into complete disorder. "Oh— Oh my God, Raphael! I'm so sorry. It was thoughtless of me."

Smiling faintly, he reached for her tunic, unfastening it.

"Don't worry. I believe it'll come to me." Removing the top, he dropped it to the floor and pulled her against him again, waltzing her backward.

"Where are we going?" Victoria asked, uncertain whether to laugh with him, or cry for him. He was so incredibly sweet it made her heart ache. The thought of all that he'd missed out on, been deprived of, because of what the company had done to him hurt in a way she didn't entirely understand.

"To the bed. Unless you want to try it standing. I can't vouch for my prowess, but I'm wide open to suggestion."

The mattress caught the back of her knees and Victoria fell backward with a little yelp of surprise. Shedding his own tunic, Raphael followed her down, lying half atop her. They gazed at each other for a long moment and then Victoria lifted her arms and draped them around his neck, tilting her face up for his kiss. After a moment, he leaned down, brushing his lips against hers. Victoria gasped at the desire that enveloped her in a hot wave at his first touch, opening her mouth to him. When he did not immediately seize the opportunity she offered him, she thrust her tongue into his mouth, caressing his tongue with her own, tasting him.

Raphael settled closer, focusing completely on the feel and taste of her, fighting the urge to rush, to taste and explore

and possess her completely. When she withdrew, he followed her, thrusting his tongue into her mouth to explore her as she had him. She surprised him when she closed her mouth around his tongue and sucked. The sensation sent such a fiery rush through him that his pulse pounded, making rational thought an impossibility. Feeling that he would explode at any moment, he broke the kiss, gasping hoarsely.

Victoria reached for the fastening of his trousers, gnawing a trail along the side of his throat with the edge of her teeth, kissing his shoulders as she fumbled with the resistant fastening. He pushed her hands away and unfastened it himself, then reached for her, searching for the key to removing her bra. Smiling faintly as she kissed her way down his chest, Victoria unsnapped it and shrugged it off, tossing it to the floor beside the bed.

He pushed her onto her back, grasped her trousers and tugged at the fastening. His fingers, clumsy with desire, he succeeded only in binding the closure fast. Victoria gasped when he ripped it open and peeled away her trousers and panties, throwing them to the floor. She was far too anxious herself, however, to spare more than a moment of concern for the ruined clothing and immediately turned her attention to helping him strip away the last of his own clothing.

She ran her hands over his chest when he settled beside her again, but he held her away when she would have moved against him, examining her body with his hands and his gaze. Noticing the contrast between her pale white skin and his darker skin, Victoria felt a little self-conscious, wondering if he found her as attractive as she found him. He glanced up at

her, his eyes filled with hunger. "You are so beautiful to me, it makes me ache for you. Always."

He leaned toward her, kissed her long and lingeringly. Victoria felt a blinding rush of desire the moment his mouth covered hers, felt as if she was falling into a dark chasm. She reached for him, wrapping her fingers around his cock, spreading her thighs. Waiting might make it sweeter, but she found she didn't want to wait any longer. She was so hot, her sex wet and aching for his touch, she knew instinctively that this time she would find what had always eluded her before, fulfillment.

He moved between her thighs, thrusting his hips as she lifted hers and aligned his cock with her own body. A shudder went through him as he buried himself to the hilt inside of her. When Victoria looked up at him through half closed lids, she saw that he had squeezed his eyes tightly shut, as if he was in pain, his facial muscles taut. He opened his eyes and looked down at her. "My God! I didn't know it would feel this good to be inside of you...."

Heat suffused her, the muscles in her sex clenching in response to the desire his words evoked. Victoria moved her hips against him. He uttered a low, growling groan and began to move, slowly at first and then increasing the tempo, thrusting his cock inside of her and then pulling away in a rhythm that built the ache inside her to a fever pitch so that she was moaning incessantly, gasping, could feel her body hovering on the brink of release.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss, suckling hard on his tongue as he thrust it into her

mouth. It was the impetus that sent them both over the edge into blissful ecstasy. Victoria broke the kiss, crying out as waves of intense pleasure pounded through her, feeling the muscles inside her contracting and releasing his cock.

Raphael groaned, shuttering, his hips jerking as his hot seed spilled inside of her.

Slowly, when the spasms finally abated, he withdrew, wincing as the movement sent fresh needles of sensation through him. With an effort, he dragged himself off of her and collapsed against the bed, staring up at the ceiling through half closed eyes. "I thought melding minds with you was the closest I would ever come to heaven—I was wrong," he murmured.

"Mmm. Mind boggling. I always wondered why everybody was so preoccupied with sex. Now I know."

Chuckling, Raphael rolled onto his side and propped his head on his bent arm, studying her. It might have made her uncomfortable under other circumstances, but she was too wiped out to care at the moment. The only two thoughts that drifted through her sluggish brain was whether or not she felt like getting up again and having a look at the work logs, or if she was too tired to try to make sense of them. After a moment, she decided she didn't and curled up on her side, putting her back to Raphael and felt around for cover.

She remembered then that they'd fell into the bed fully made and she was lying on top of the cover, wondered, briefly, if she felt like getting up and pulling it down and finally decided she didn't.

The thought had barely drifted through her mind when she felt a tug as Raphael pulled the cover back and grasped her around the waist. Pulling her against him, he spread the cover he tugged loose over both of them. Victoria snuggled her butt against his crotch and settled again as Raphael slid a heavy arm around her waist.

Something long and hard insinuated itself between her thighs. Victoria couldn't decide whether to be irritated or amused. "We have to get up early in the morning," she murmured.

She felt the warmth of Raphael's breath as he leaned over and kissed her shoulder. It sent a flock of goose bumps chasing down her arm and made her nipples stand erect. A hand the size of a dinner plate slid upward and covered one breast, pinching the erect nipple between two fingers. It sent currents of pleasure through her, but Victoria decided to ignore it.

"What are these for?" Raphael murmured in her ear.

A smile tugged at her lips. "Holding my tunic out in the front—not that they do much of a job of it."

He squeezed the breast he held experimentally. "I like the way it feels in my hand."

"If it fit your hand I'd have a hunchback," Victoria said tartly.

"Prickly," Raphael observed, nuzzling her neck. "They're perfect, just like the rest of you."

She felt the curve of his lips and knew he was smiling.

"What are they good for, besides holding your tunic out, and feeding our baby?"

Victoria shrugged sleepily. "Nobody does that...." Her eyes popped wide open and she twisted around to look at him.

"What did you say?"

"Feeding our baby?"

Victoria stared at him blankly while her mind sorted a hundred conflicting thoughts, finally those uppermost emerged into coherence. "It was just sex ... very good sex, but we didn't make a baby. I'm on birth control. Besides, I don't have a permit."

Raphael frowned. "You have to have a permit?"

"Of course you have to have a permit! You can't spit without a permit!" Victoria relaxed again, yawning. "Anyway, I don't plan to have any."

Raphael was silent for some moments. Victoria might have gone to sleep except she could tell from the tension in his body that he was debating with himself over something. The 'something' that might pertain to made her uneasy. He'd spoken before about 'their' plans and she couldn't help but worry that he might be working on other plans for the two of them.

"Is it difficult to get a permit?"

Victoria shrugged. "I don't know. Probably. Nothing in this life is ever easy, or uncomplicated."

He pulled her over onto her back and brushed the hair back from her face, studied her a long moment and leaned down to kiss her lightly on the lips. "I love you, Victoria. Remember that," he murmured, then nuzzled her neck.

Victoria stiffened at his words, but before she could think of anything to say, his lips closed over one nipple and she

descended once more into the ecstasy only he had ever given her.

* * * *

Raphael was on his feet the moment the catch was released on the door and striding toward it. He was within three feet of the door when it was snatched open and Roach stepped into the portal. His first instinct was to plant his fist in the man's face. He quelled it, instead placing a palm on Roach's chest and propelling him backwards out the door. "You have a reason for being here?" he asked grimly.

Roach gaped at him, so surprised it took him several moments to think up a response. "Tory hadn't shown today. Just checking to make sure she was all right."

"She is," Raphael responded and shut the door in Roach's face.

Victoria had been swimming upward toward consciousness in a lazy, unhurried manner until the abrupt movement beside her brought her fully awake. She sat up with a jerk as Raphael leapt from the bed, certain there was some threat.

Anger surged through her when she caught a glimpse of Roach trying to crane a look at the bed around Raphael's broad form, but it vanished at his words.

"Shit! I overslept!" she exclaimed, leaping from the bed as Raphael closed the door and turned to look at her.

A wave of dizziness assailed her at her abrupt movement, and she sat back, dropping her face into her hands. She'd only managed to catch a few hours of sleep in between bouts of the best sex she'd ever experienced in her life. At the time,

it had seemed well worth the loss of sleep. In retrospect, it seemed criminally negligent and she wondered how she could have been tempted so far off the track of sane, logical, dependability as to have romped half the night when she should have been resting to face the challenges she knew she must face come morning.

"You should try to sleep a few more hours."

Victoria shook her head. "I'll be fine once I've had a shower and gotten a gallon or so of caffeine into my system."

Rising more slowly, she staggered toward the bathroom and indulged herself in a long, hot shower, more than half expecting Raphael to join her. To her relief, he didn't.

Despite her optimism, she felt very little better after the shower and had to fight the urge to dry off and climb back into bed. Instead, she resolutely left the bathroom with the determination to dress and study the reports she'd put off the night before. Raphael was no where to be seen when she left the bathroom. She wondered at it, briefly, but shrugged it off and looked around the room, wondering where her clothes had been stowed.

Groggy as she was, she found them after only a half a dozen tries and had just finished dressing when the door opened and Raphael entered carrying two cups of coffee. He set both on the desk and went into the bathroom to shower without a word.

Victoria was almost as grateful for his silence as she was for the coffee. Years of getting up before first light had not done anything to adjust her natural sleep patterns. She had always had the inclination to stay awake long into the night,

and sleep well into the morning and she was definitely not a 'morning' person. She was never more than partially functional until she'd been up at least two or three hours and drank several cups of coffee. It was for that reason that she'd made it a habit to do her paperwork in the morning.

True, it was enough, in general, to put her right back to sleep, but by doing it first she had an excuse not to face the crew until she had her wits about her.

Which was one of the things that pissed her off about Roach's intrusion. Not for one moment did she believe it had been concern for her safety that had brought him up to check on her. It had been pure, unadulterated, nosiness and nothing else. They had never worked together, but he most certainly knew it wasn't his place to check on the boss to see if she was up yet.

She didn't know how she was going to do it, but she was going to have to come up with some way to avoid partnering with Roach when her two weeks with Raphael were up.

She would have preferred to stay with Raphael as long as he wanted to room with her, but that wasn't an option. It would be blatant favoritism. Roach was certain to file a grievance when they got back even if no one else did and her whole career could go down the tubes. If it had only been a fine she would be facing, she would have been willing to pay it. She wasn't ready to whistle her career away. She needed to hang on to it at least another year, two at the most, and then she could tell them all to go to hell. No matter what happened here on Kay—assuming she survived—she'd have

enough to buy a homestead somewhere and a nice little nest egg besides.

Fortunately, her career choice hadn't led her to accustom herself to more than the basics, because luxury wasn't in the picture for her, whether she stayed with the company or not.

She supposed, after a little thought, that she might be able to bribe a bi-sexual or a lesbian to pretend to be her lover for a couple of weeks. She'd have to do a little investigating and see if any of the women on the mission fell into one or the other categories and seemed open to the possibility of earning a little money on the side.

She dismissed the thoughts as Raphael came out of the bathroom. His expression, she noticed when she glanced at him, was grim and she supposed he was feeling the aftereffects of little sleep as she was.

"I'm going below to check the progress of the crew in clearing the mine shaft. Would you like me to check on the situation with the communications tower and report back?"

Victoria shook her head. "They probably haven't really had time to assess the situation fully yet. I'll check with them later."

He nodded and left and Victoria turned her attention to the files at long last. She looked at the latest date first and her heart seemed to stop dead in her chest.

The security crew is searching for the five men who disappeared yesterday and to try to ascertain what happened to the others. All mining suspended until further notice.

Chapter Eight

It was late in the evening the third day after their arrival when Victoria went to check on the crew's progress on the communications tower. The crew members assigned to the task had planned a replacement tower around the scrap metal that had been gathered and Quinton and Albert had begun manufacturing parts. Caroline and Barbara had managed to scavenge what they needed in the way of electronics from operations, but they were weeks away from even reaching a point where they could begin testing the possible range of the makeshift tower.

Caroline placed their chances of being able to reach the closest outpost at practically nil. Unless she had miscalculated, their only hope even once the tower was operational was the possibility of reaching a ship cruising the outer rim.

The lift was still out and Victoria paused at the rail to catch her breath as she left the habitat, looking out over the churning waters of Kay's red ocean at the ball of fire settling into the sea. The fiery disk that was Kay's sun had already begun to dip below the horizon. It would be dark soon.

Dragging in a gulp of Kay's thick air with an effort, Victoria moved to the stairs. She was little more than half way between the upper and lower decks when, faintly, she heard a cry from above, almost like the cry of a seagull except that Kay had no birds of any description that she'd seen. It was cut off abruptly.

Adrenaline charged through her and Victoria raced up the remaining steps. When she reached the flight deck and looked around, Quinton and Albert were peering down over the side.

Kichens was no where in sight.

"What happened?" she shouted, dread filling her even as she ran toward the two crew members.

They turned, their faces pasty.

"Kichens went over the side."

Whirling, Victoria raced to the alarm and slammed her hand down on the button. Nothing happened. She hit it frantically several more times before realization coalesced in her panicked brain. It wasn't working. "God Damn it to hell!" she cursed furiously. "Does nothing on this piece of shit rig work?"

Racing toward the stairs once more, she charged down them as fast as she could, nearly falling twice before she reached the lower deck, snatched the door open and raced down to operations. Punching into main communications, she prayed the repairs had been made in the mining area. "Attention! Man down! Man down! Raphael—Anybody in the immediate area of the habitat. We have a man overboard. We need rescuers in the water STAT!"

Raphael responded almost instantly. "Most of the crew's in the mine shaft. I'll go myself."

"It's Kichens. She might have five minutes, tops."

He rang off without another word and Victoria leaned against the console weakly, wondering if there was any chance Kichens had even survived the fall. When she turned

at last, she found that Quinton and Albert had followed her down.

"What happened?"

The two men exchanged a look. "I didn't see. I was bolting a couple of beams together. When I heard her cry out, I glanced in her direction, but she was already gone."

"What about you, Albert? Did you see anything?"

Albert frowned. "Not much more than Quinton. I was holding the beams steady. The last I saw, she'd gone over to grab up another short beam. Then, when I heard her, I looked up just as she went over the side, but I couldn't get to her in time to help."

"Did she surface, at all, after she hit the water?"

Quinton shook his head.

"Not that I saw," Albert said.

Victoria ran a shaky hand over her face. "Get back to work. There's nothing you can do."

Quinton turned immediately on his heel and departed. Albert frowned, looked as if he might say something and finally turned as well.

Victoria stopped him. "You saw something, didn't you?"

He shook his head. "Just what I told you. I just don't understand how she could have fallen. The railing's solid there and she wasn't that close to it anyway. She would almost ... well I can't see how she could have fallen at all. She would have had to be standing on the top rail, or climbing on it. I don't see how she could have fallen between the rails, even if she'd tripped."

Victoria nodded and dismissed him. The temptation was strong to try to contact Raphael, but she knew she wouldn't be able to. In any case, he would call when he had something to report. The wait was nerve wracking, however. She glanced at her watch, saw that five minutes had passed and began to pace.

Kitchens had not been equipped with the prosthesis that would allow her to breathe underwater. If the fall had knocked her unconscious, her chances were slim to none that she'd survive until Raphael found her. She hadn't been in the water yet herself, but from what the crew members said who had, visibility was limited to within a few yards at most.

Her heart jerked painfully when the speaker came to life.

"Victoria?"

"Here. Did you get her?"

"No sign of her. I've pulled the crew from the mines. We're going back to search for her again."

Victoria didn't know whether she felt more like throwing up or crying.

"You there?"

"Yes. Do what you can to locate her." She left off 'body', unwilling and unable to think of the twenty two year old woman in terms of a corpse. She hadn't even been with the company five years.

Pushing the thought aside, Victoria made her way from the operations deck to her living quarters. She was still staring at the blank fatality report when Raphael returned several hours later.

She looked up at him questioningly when he closed the door behind him. He shook his head. "The currents are pretty strong here. They must have carried her ... off.

We brought out the lights, but it's just too dark to keep looking tonight."

Victoria nodded and dropped her head in her hands. "I've never lost a crew member before. I know I'm supposed to file a report, but I can't think of anything to put on it."

She didn't hear Raphael's approach, didn't realize he'd crossed the room until she felt his hands settle on her shoulders, kneading them. "It's not your fault."

"The safety of every crew member on this job is my responsibility," Victoria responded angrily, but she felt too drained for the tender to catch fire. Almost the minute the words had left her her anger died.

"We did everything we could. You did what you could."

"Which was nothing."

"Sometimes there's nothing anyone can do. I'm sorry I failed you."

Victoria glanced at him in surprise. "You've got nothing to apologize for! You responded as quickly as possible!"

"As you did."

Victoria looked away. Raphael squatted beside her. "Come. You need to eat."

"I don't think I could choke anything down to save my life."

"Try."

Thankfully, most of the crew members had already eaten and departed. A few had lingered in the rec room, although

no one seemed inclined to seek entertainment. Conversations broke off as she and Raphael left her quarters.

"Any word about Kichens?"

Victoria turned toward the speaker. It was one of the miners, but she couldn't seem to think of the woman's name.

"Sylvia."

Victoria nodded. "Missing. Presumed dead. I'll need volunteers to go out tomorrow as soon as it's light enough and look for her. Just sign up on the schedule for volunteer search duty."

She managed to eat enough to pacify Raphael and finally pushed her plate away.

Raphael, she saw, had eaten little himself.

"Do you think it's related to the 'incident'?"

Victoria shrugged. "I don't know what to think. Neither of the men with her actually saw anything, but Albert said he didn't see how she could have fallen. She wasn't even near the railing and he vouched for the integrity of the railing at that point."

"But they were busy. I talked to them myself. They can't say for certain that she hadn't gone over to the railing for some reason. Maybe she heard something, leaned out to look?"

"Neither of the men mentioned hearing anything. Surely they would've said something if they had. And they were working pretty closely together, close enough I'd think they would have heard anything she had. Still, I suppose it's possible—doubtful in my opinion, but possible," Victoria said.

Raphael was silent for some moments. "The crew is going to wonder if there was any chance of foul play."

Victoria glanced at him in surprise but said nothing, replaying the images in her mind. Finally, she shook her head. "There was absolutely no indication of any kind of scuffle. You said you talked to the two men. Did you see any signs indicating an altercation?"

Raphael shrugged. "I wasn't looking for one. I assumed it was an accident."

"Me too. But I knew Kitchens well enough to know that there's no way in hell either of those men, or even both of them together, could have managed to throw her over without her leaving a mark on them.

"Besides, we haven't even been here a week. I hardly think that's long enough to develop deadly animosity.

"And, before you suggest self destruction ... I can't buy that, either. She had a psych evaluation before we left planet. If she'd had any kind of emotional problems, they would've caught it. Besides, as I said, I knew her."

Raphael stared down at the cup in his hands. "All the same, the accident is just iffy enough to have the rest of the crew speculating on the possibility that she was thrown."

Victoria sent him a wry look. "Roach."

He nodded.

Victoria frowned. "Ordinarily I'd say a making a very public, very thorough investigation would satisfy everyone. But, if I call Quinton and Albert in for questioning, I'm afraid it'll only cause more talk, not less, maybe even arouse

suspensions where there were none before. I think we're just going to have to play it by ear."

They called off the search after the third day. Victoria made it a point to call on members from both crews to help her check out the accident site, hoping it would forestall the problem Raphael foresaw, but it was impossible to ignore the fact that tensions were building.

Victoria decided overtime was in order. If they were too tired to do more than crawl into their bunks at night, they would also, hopefully, be too tired to stir up trouble.

That seemed to work, to a degree, until the day Roach went missing.

Chapter Nine

Victoria's personal problems should have been the least of her worries, should not have crowded her mind with unwanted thoughts and emotions. She'd lost a crew member—a well liked crew member, who had too many friends who wanted someone to blame for her death.

Beyond that, the habitat was crippled to the point that they had barely begun to limp along in mining and processing ore well into their second week on Kay and topping that was the fact that they were scarcely a wit wiser as to what had happened to the previous crew.

Victoria had had to let up on the crew after little more than a week. The overtime wasn't making the crew too tired to fight. It was making them tired enough that paranoia was beginning to set in and tempers growing short.

She gave them a day off to rest and sent them back to a regular work schedule.

Overall, tensions seemed to ease up a little after that.

Unfortunately, Victoria's stress level only climbed several notches higher.

As accustomed as she was to shelving her personal considerations and concentrating on the job at hand, her intimacy with Raphael had brought out something she'd previously managed to ignore—a strong emotional attachment. That bond only made her situation with Roach even more difficult. Whereas, from the moment she'd noticed his interest she'd felt a combination of physical revulsion, and the suspicion that Roach's interest was predicated on a

personal myth that he would be able to control her once they became intimate, she now had added to that a curious attachment to Raphael that made the possibility of having to bunk with Roach even more repellent.

And Roach was counting the days—publicly—despite his insulting remark about taking Raphael's leavings, he made certain that everyone knew he'd staked a claim on being next in line to bunk with her, and that no one could remain ignorant of the day count.

His preoccupation not only unnerved her, it infuriated Raphael—a singular feat since Raphael was very difficult to ruffle under almost any other circumstance, creating just the situation that the Company had hoped to avoid when they'd established the rule of intimacy—territorial propriety.

Her stress leapt several notches higher when she discovered that her birth control had expired before she'd ever arrived on Kay—discovered it the hard way when Tuttle finally got around to running the routine debarkation check on the crew. It made it worse that she'd had no prior inkling of the difficult situation she was about to find herself in. Though Tuttle's request to speak to her in private after the examination had immediately alerted her to trouble, it had not prepared her for the shock of her life.

"I just wanted to make you aware that your blood pressure is up—too much stress. You're going to have to make an effort to control your stress levels."

Victoria gave her a wry look. "Suggestions?"

Tuttle frowned. "I'd give you something to help, but ... I'd don't know if it would be safe in your condition. I'm just a medic, not a doctor."

Victoria stared at her blankly. "Tuttle, if there's something I should know, tell me."

"Your birth control implant expired six months ago."

A wave of shock went through Victoria. "Expired? But ... wasn't it checked before we left?"

Tuttle shrugged. "Apparently somebody overlooked it."

Victoria's lips tightened. "Or they discovered it at the last minute and decided it wasn't worth delaying launch. Shit! I don't suppose you were issued any since we weren't supposed to be here more than six months?"

Tuttle looked away. "No. But it wouldn't do you any good anyway."

A flash of heat washed over Victoria, followed almost instantly by a flash of cold that left dizziness in its wake. She swayed, looked for a place to sit down. It was the last thing she remembered. When she woke up, she was lying on the floor. Tuttle's concerned face swam into view. "What happened?"

"You ... uh ... fainted."

Victoria sat up with an effort, holding her head. It felt as if it might explode any moment. "Did you say what I thought you said?"

"You don't have a permit, do you?" Tuttle responded.

Anger surged through Victoria. "Why would I have a damned permit?"

Tuttle sat back on her heels. "This is really bad."

Victoria laughed a little hysterically, but there was no humor in it. "Just let them *try* to penalize me for this, damn them! I'll sue them for incompetence!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Now? Is there anything I can do?"

Tuttle sighed. "Not that I know of. To be honest with you, I've never been around anyone who was ... uh ... gestating. It's completely beyond my training."

Victoria thought about their precarious situation on Kay. "You are not to mention this to anyone. We've got problems enough. I don't want everyone panicking because they don't know if they can rely on me. Do you understand?"

Tuttle nodded, her eyes wide now. "It's that bad?"

Victoria calmed herself with an effort and smiled wryly. "Our situation isn't great. I'll feel better when they get the communications tower up and running."

Tuttle helped her to her feet. "You think Kichen's death was connected to what happened here before?"

Victoria shook her head. "At this point, it doesn't seem likely, but it was a freak accident, there's no getting around that. I imagine everyone's feeling about the same way you are—worried that there might be a connection, anxious about what threats we might be facing. That's why it's important no one have the additional concern about my health."

Tuttle nodded, but she grasped Victoria's arm as she turned to leave. "I wouldn't have told anyone anyway."

Victoria smiled. "Thank you for that."

Victoria strode toward the door, anxious to remove herself from the clinic, uncertain of whether she most needed to put

the potentially catastrophic information out of her mind, or if she needed to mull it over and look for a solution to her latest problem.

"Victoria?"

She stopped and turned, trying to keep the impatience from her expression.

"This isn't something you'll be able to keep secret for very long."

Victoria smiled with an effort. "No, but hopefully long enough to resolve some of the other problems we're facing."

* * * *

The moment Victoria had been dreading was upon her. She stared down at the water in the access pool, trying to calm her jumping nerves.

"You don't have to come," Raphael said quietly.

Keenly aware of Roach, who was making his first excursion into the sea, as well, Victoria set her jaw and leapt in. "I have to check the situation myself," she said when she'd caught her breath from the abrupt immersion in the chilly water.

Raphael's brows rose, but all he said was, "Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Victoria responded. Controlling her chattering teeth with an effort, she dragged in a deep breath, ducked beneath the waves and swam in the direction of the lights that indicated the mine area. Instinctively, she held her breath as long as she possibly could. When she began to feel the urge to breathe, she stopped abruptly, panic washing through her. Raphael caught up to her, wrapping his arms around her.

Just breathe.

I can't. I can't do this. I have to go back.

You can. You've done it before.

I'm ... scared.

I know. It'll be all right.

Despite his soothing words, Victoria struggled against his hold, becoming more and more desperate to retreat to the habitat. Finally, when she found she couldn't shake his hold, and she couldn't hold her breath any longer, she breathed. The sensation was indescribable and her panic only escalated for several moments before she finally filtered enough air through her prosthesis that her panic began to subside. She clung to Raphael then, where before she'd fought to free herself from him, finding comfort as she slowly adjusted to the artificial gills.

Finally, she pulled away self-consciously and looked around.

The miners nearest where they were looked away, allowing her the comfort of some doubt as to whether or not they'd witnessed her display of weakness.

Embarrassed as she was, when she looked around and found that two of the miners were holding Roach down while he fought them like a madman, her discomfiture subsided fractionally with the knowledge that she wasn't the only one who'd had difficulty with the transition. Perhaps, she'd handled it a little better as well.

She saw that Raphael was smiling at her. *What?*

For an air breather, you handled it very well. I have to confess we felt more than a little panic when we found ourselves breathing air for the first time.

Victoria smiled back at him but shook her head. *I don't believe you. You're just saying that to make me feel better.*

I said it because it was true. I had to be manful about it because you were watching, otherwise ...

Victoria burst out laughing. *Liar! You were so pissed off because Kitchens fired on you, you forgot all about the transition.* The thought of Kitchens sobered her, and she changed the subject abruptly. *Let's have a look at the mine shaft.*

Roach, she saw, had recovered sufficiently from his distress to assume the cockiness that was his trademark once more. They left him tallying the ore and complaining that there wasn't more of it, and swam toward the opening in the floor of the sea bed.

The mouth of the shaft was huge, perhaps thirty feet by twenty. It began to narrow, however, as they swam deeper, traveling straight down for almost forty feet before branching out in every direction into shafts that ran horizontal to the ocean bed. Long before they reached the branch, Victoria became aware of the fact that she was not equipped to handle the increase in pressure for any length of time. Her chest and head began to feel as if a band cinched them, tightening as she swam deeper.

This is where we found the obstruction.

Victoria tread water and looked around. *Just above the branch tunnels?*

Yes. It's why I needed you to come out with me, to look at it yourself so you could get a better picture of the situation. And also because I didn't want to discuss this on the habitat where we might be overheard—it doesn't look like a cave in. It looks like they deliberately sealed the shafts.

Victoria glanced at him. *Any guesses as to why?*

He shrugged. *Just a feeling ... up until yesterday. Nothing to substantiate it, which is one of the reasons I didn't mention it before.*

And the other was?

We didn't uncover anything that even looked like evidence until we finished clearing the last shaft late yesterday. Rubble had been piled in all four tunnels. These two, he pointed, were obviously speculative ... no sign of the ore, and no indication that any had been pulled from either one. Most of the ore came from a vein we located in this shaft. The other, apparently, yielded some, but petered out. The blockages were specific to these shaft openings, however, after we got the main tunnel cleared enough to come in for a look. I thought at the time that it was a peculiar circumstance that all four tunnels managed to catch enough rubble to block them completely. When we found no bodies, I thought it was even more of a coincidence that none of the miners had been trapped—a welcome coincidence, but still odd. When we opened the last shaft, though, we found things in the rubble that shouldn't have been there if it was just a cave in ... refuse from the habitat, even some pieces of equipment. It looked like they'd run out of dirt and scavenged everything disposable off of the habitat.

They deliberately sealed the shafts? It was a purely rhetorical question, however, as Victoria pursued the implications. *Jesus Christ! Whatever it was that killed them ... they must have uncovered it!*

But they were alive, some of them at least, when they sealed the shafts, Raphael pointed out.

Which means they were too late! Whatever it was ... is, is already free.

Raphael nodded. *We've searched every inch of the shafts. There's no sign of anything in them now.*

You're certain of that?

As certain as I can be considering I have no idea what it might be. You want us to seal the shafts again?

Victoria considered it for several moments and finally shook her head. *If we do, we'll have to explain why and panic is an ugly, dangerous thing. If whatever it was is already free, there wouldn't be any point in it anyway. And then we have to consider the possibility that we could let even more out if we sink another shaft. What we need to find out is what was down here to begin with.*

Raphael nodded. *The problem is, we haven't any marine biologists with us, nobody that would have at least a clue of what to look for.*

Victoria frowned. *I'm no biologist, but it occurs to me that whatever it is couldn't have been completely sealed off even before they sank the shafts. Otherwise, how would it get food? Unless it was in something like a hibernation state and had been trapped after it sought a safe place to hibernate.*

That's a pretty long stretch—underwater hibernators? But if it's a possibility, then we'd certainly not be any safer sealing the shafts—obviously it didn't work for our predecessors.

Victoria shook her head. You're thinking in terms of Earth creatures. One thing you can count on when you've been on as many worlds as I have is that there's never any telling what sort of creatures might have evolved. There might be similarities—there often are, but there are always vast, unpredictable differences too. I can't even begin to guess what sort of conditions might result in an underwater creature that would hibernate, but that doesn't mean there might not have been conditions on this planet that would have produced such a thing. Anyway, it's all guess work. There hasn't been enough studies done on Kay to give us even an educated guess.

What we need to know, fast, is is whatever it is still active? If it is, we've got a real situation on our hands—the weapons the other crew had were inadequate protection against it and we don't have anything different.

Until we figure something out, remind the crew as often as it takes to get their attention that they're to stay alert for trouble at all times. We can't afford to be lulled into a false sense of safety by the fact that it hasn't attacked us yet, Victoria finished, deciding it was time to head back. The place gave her the creeps. It would have if it had been nothing more than a hole. The fact that there was, or had been, some dangerous creature, or creatures, living in the caverns made it that much more creepy.

We also can't afford to assume this is the source of the threat, Raphael said thoughtfully as he followed her back up the mine shaft. It looks like they thought so, but they might have been dead wrong. The crew was attacked from above, not just from below.

Victoria paused as they neared the entrance once more. *You think we're looking for two different threats?*

Possibly.

Victoria thought it over. *It does seem like the most likely scenario. To attack from above, it would have to also have the ability to fly, or climb—besides being able to breathe air or water. It seems the possibility would be pretty remote that one creature would be capable of it. This planet is mostly water ... doesn't seem like there'd be a logical reason for it to evolve in such a way. On the other hand, it's also possible that they were attacked by some local wildlife, sent out a distress call and exposed themselves to predators of a different variety," she pointed out. The survivors of the attack by the creature might have been taken by pirates, as we thought before.*

Raphael frowned thoughtfully, but finally shook his head. *I think the threat's here. And whatever it is it's either more tenacious than anything we've ever encountered before, or it's intelligent enough that it figured out a way in.*

Restraining a shiver with an effort, Victoria checked her watch. *See how much ore you can pull today. Tomorrow, before you send them down, put them on moving the ore up for processing. I want to have a closer look at the shaft and*

see if we can come up with some clue of what we're up against.

They left the cavern then and headed back toward the habitat. Roach, Victoria saw with a good deal of irritation, was no where in sight. She frowned, looking around, more than half expecting to find him sitting somewhere, watching the miners work. She knew they hadn't been down in the mine shaft long enough for him to have finished his tally. He was no where in sight, however, and her irritation increased as it occurred to her that he'd obviously thought up an excuse to return to the habitat. If he spent half as much time working as he did thinking up excuses to get out of work, he would've been a senior supervisor by now instead of just a foreman.

Raphael stopped her as she reached the access pool.
Remember to expel the water before you surface.

She nodded, expelled the fluid and surfaced. The first breath of air she dragged into her lungs burned like fire however, and she still retained enough water to bring on a spasm of coughing. Brown helped her from the pool. "Where's Roach?" she asked when she caught her breath at last.

His brows rose. "I haven't seen him since he went in with you."

Victoria's annoyance vanished abruptly. "You're sure he didn't come back?"

Brown shrugged. "I've been here ever since you left. I guess he might have come back without me noticing," he said doubtfully.

She turned to look at Raphael, who'd emerged directly behind her. "Check with the crew. See if anyone's seen him."

Raphael nodded and dove once more. Victoria stood a little shakily and moved to the inner com unit. "Roach, come back."

She waited several minutes and tried the com unit again. "Roach, if you're in the habitat, come back."

Raphael surfaced. "No sign of him. Taylor said the last he saw of him was when he left the area to relieve himself."

"That moron!" Victoria snapped furiously. "Find him, and when you do I want him in the brig for disobeying a direct order!"

Victoria paced the floor while she waited for word, checking her watch every few minutes. A half hour passed, and then an hour and anger finally gave way to concern. It began to look as if Roach wasn't shirking his duties this time.

Chapter Ten

It didn't take long for word to spread that Roach was missing. It was obviously the topic of conversation in the dining hall for the moment Victoria and Raphael entered, conversation ceased immediately.

"Any sign of Roach?" Brown asked Raphael.

"No," Victoria said, answering before Raphael could. "We'll have a search party out again first thing in the morning."

"Looks to me like the humans here are rapidly becoming extinct," he muttered, returning his attention to his plate.

Victoria didn't have to ask him what he was implying. "Roach, as usual, completely ignored a direct order not to go off alone ... for any reason. He's no rookie. He knows damn well we know next to nothing about Kay and that there could be any number of dangers just waiting for the unwary. Don't make more of this than there is," she said, looking at Brown but speaking loudly enough that everyone nearby could hear her.

"You think he's dead?" Tuttle asked.

Victoria shrugged. "He could be. He might also be injured. Might have fallen into a chasm ... might have run into some of the indigenous life. We won't know until we find him."

"If we find him," Brown muttered.

Victoria gave him a look. "If," she said flatly and went to collect a plate.

Brown waited until they sat before pursuing the matter. "I'm thinking it's a little strange, it being Roach."

Victoria eyed him for several moments. "Why?"

"It ain't no secret he was hot for you and the ... underwater foreman didn't like it. Then, he goes down with you and Raphael, and you two come back, but he doesn't."

"Don't beat around the bush, Brown, just spit it out," Victoria said tightly.

"I didn't stutter," Brown snapped. "I'm saying maybe Roach had help disappearing ... like maybe Kitchens had a little help over the railing."

Chairs clattered as Quinton leapt to his feet, his face dark red with fury. Brown was on his feet at almost the same instant. Before the two men could come to blows, they were seized by other crew members.

Victoria glared at the two men. "Take both of them to the brig to cool down." When the two men had been escorted out, Victoria turned to face the remaining crew members. "Let's not make this any uglier than it has to be, people. We have two crew members missing. It's a risk every one of us faces every time we take a mission onto an uncharted world. You all know this. We can't afford to degenerate to name calling and in fighting. We've got a job to do here, and we've got enough to contend with without fighting among ourselves, or throwing around unfounded accusations."

She looked at them each in turn, waiting to see if anyone else had comments to make. When they remained silent, she sat down again and made an effort to eat, although her stomach was tied into knots. One by one the crew members finished their meals and left.

"It was bound to happen," Raphael said when they were alone.

"What?" Victoria said irritably. "Being accused of doing away with a fellow crew member?"

Raphael frowned. "We are not the same."

Victoria rolled her eyes. "Not you too."

Smiling faintly, Raphael caught her chin in his hand. "We were bred in tanks," he reminded her. "We can't ... interact with the others in the way they think of as 'normal'. We make them nervous. They distrust us."

Victoria studied him a long moment and finally smiled faintly in return. "I couldn't help but notice that I don't seem to fall into either category."

"You don't."

Victoria shook her head. "I'm like everyone else around here—scared. The only difference, if there is one, is that I've never seen that turning on everyone around me helps in any way." She frowned. "You know, I wouldn't put it past that asshole Roach to have gone off hoping it would cause problems."

"You're going to feel remorseful for that remark if it turns out he really is injured."

"No, I won't. If he's hurt, or dead, it's his own damned fault. He was told. The problem with Roach has always been that he's one of those people that think rules were made for everybody else and don't apply to him."

"What about you?"

"What about me?" Victoria echoed.

"Do you always follow the rules?"

Victoria shrugged. "Not always ... mostly ... but if I choose to disregard them, I prepare myself for the possible

consequences. I don't expect exceptions to be made just for me ... hope for them, maybe, like anybody else that gets caught doing something they know they shouldn't have. Roach not only disregards every rule and every order, he is outraged when he's punished.

"I think that's the main thing that pissed me off about Brown's suggestion ... He knows Roach, knows how he is and the truth is he detests Roach every bit as much as I do. If we were going just by dislike, practically everybody on the habitat would've had a motive to get rid of him."

Raphael shook his head. "No. The main reason you disliked the accusation was because it was pointed at me."

Victoria glanced at him sharply, then looked away. "That wasn't it."

"As he said, he didn't stutter. He was pretty pointed about accusing the merfolk of trying to do away with the humans. Quinton and Albert pitched Kitchens over the side ... not sure what their motive was supposed to be, maybe just because she was an air breather. And I removed my rival."

"That's absurd!" Victoria got up abruptly, cleared her place and strode across the room to drop her dishes in the tub provided for them. Raphael followed suit, but stopped her when she would have brushed past him.

"It's not true, but I'm not sure it'll make a difference now that Brown stated it so baldly. It's what all of them were thinking already—Tuttle, Brown, the kitchen crew. They're surrounded, and outnumbered, by freaks they fear and distrust ... and it doesn't help that the two that went missing were with my people when it happened."

Victoria punched him in the chest with her finger. "Don't ever say that to me again. I don't believe that. They don't believe that ... not really. Do you think we've never been around genetically manipulated humans before? I've got news for you, if you think you're freaky ... 'your people' as you call them, are beautiful. You should see some of the horrors the company has come up with in their efforts to design 'humans' for every little project. I've seen them with four arms, eight legs—no noses, or ears ... skin like frogs, or alligators—and most of them are doomed to live like that for the rest of their lives.

"I know that none of you really had any life experience ... but maybe you should consider yourself lucky, after all. This is what we are ... distrustful, unforgiving of anyone that's different. If you'd grown up like we did, you would've already had the luxury of fending off bullies and clawing your way up from lowest man on the totem pole to a position where only the biggest fish in the pond get a shot at you.

"I've worked with most of these people before. As people go, they're good people. When they're scared, they get mean and nasty. If it wasn't you and your crew, it would be somebody else, because they're always going to find somebody to take out their fear and frustrations on."

She pushed past him then, strode from the dining hall, through the rec room and into her living quarters, slamming the door behind her. Raphael followed at a more leisurely pace, bolting the door behind him.

Victoria turned to glare at him. "I've got work to do," she said stiffly, moving toward her desk. He intercepted her, forestalling her intention.

"Not tonight."

Some of the fight went out of her. "If I don't do it tonight, there'll only be more tomorrow."

He gave her a look and a reluctant smile tugged at her lips. "I know what you have in mind, but I'm too tense to have any interest in sex right now."

"I hadn't thought of it, but now that you mention it...."

"Right."

He cocked his head. "If it would help you to relax, I'd be glad to accommodate you."

Victoria laughed. Giving up the fight, she lifted her arms and draped them around his neck. "You are a selfless man."

His lips twitched. "I am," he murmured just before he kissed her. Victoria melted against him, feeling tingles all the way to her toes as he filled her senses with his essence; the lazy caress of his tongue; the silkiness of his hair beneath her fingers; his scent; his taste; his warmth; and the power in the muscles holding her, pressed so tightly against her length she could feel every ripple of muscle, could feel the nudge of his erection at the apex of her thighs. Reaching down, she stroked the length of his cock through his breeches.

When he broke the kiss at last, they undressed each other, caressing every inch of flesh they unveiled in the process with their hands, their mouths and tongues. Raphael lifted her up when they were both naked, guiding her legs around his waist and capturing the peak of one breast in his mouth. Victoria

locked her ankles around him, moaning at the wonderful sensations that emanated from the suction of his mouth through her breast and down into her belly, making her sex pool with the moisture of anticipation. Tightening her arms around him, she moved restlessly against him as he fondled first one breast and then the other, the rough texture of his lower body sending sharp needles of pleasure through the damp petals of her sex as she undulated against him.

She became restless to feel him inside of her, to feel the slow glide of his hardened flesh against the quaking walls of her sex. Anticipation burgeoned inside of her as he moved to the bed at last, but, to her surprise, he settled her on the edge of the bed. When he knelt between her parted thighs, a rush of heat went through her. He spread her thighs wide, moved closer and pulled her to him for a deep kiss that left her weak and breathless before he moved down, suckling each tightened peak of her breast hard. Her heart accelerated as waves of pleasure washed through her, her breath catching in her chest until her lungs labored and her head spun.

She leaned back, propping on her arms as he moved lower, his lips and tongue producing pleasurable quakes inside of her as he made his way down her stomach to her belly, sending flurries of goose bumps racing across her flesh. When he reached her sex at last, he paused, scooped an arm beneath each knee, lifting her thighs, spreading them wider still, studying her, his eyes darkening with desire. He lifted his gaze to hers, lowered his head slowly and ran his tongue along her heated sex.

Victoria shuddered, her eyes sliding half closed as pleasure washed through her. She bit her lip to stifle a moan as his mouth opened over her heated flesh, but she couldn't contain it as he lathed her with his tongue, nudging the center of her pleasure in a way that had her gasping for breath, moaning as the pleasure built to exquisite torture. The muscles inside of her palpitated as the pleasure built to a crescendo, exploded into a flood of fire.

The strength went out of her arms as her climax hit her and she collapsed back against the bed, uttering sharp gasps that bordered on screams as he continued to lick and suckle, pushing her climax to the limits.

She was barely conscious as he moved up and over her, pulled her tightly against him and kissed her. She kissed him back, tasting herself on his lips. It sent a heady rush through her, sent throbbing echoes of remembered passion through her belly, reminding her that she had received but had not given.

She rolled on top of him. Breaking the kiss, she moved down over him in worshipful fashion, caressing his chest with her hands and her lips, tasting him with her tongue, nipping him playfully with her teeth as she worked her way over his body until she reached her goal. Taking his cock in her hand, she looked up at him as she ran her tongue up his cock from the root to the rounded head. He shuddered, gasped hoarsely with pleasure as she teased the ultra sensitive ridge around the head of his cock with her tongue and finally covered the head of his cock with her mouth, sucking.

He clutched her hair, his fingers tightening reflexively as she slowly covered his erection, taking him as deeply into her mouth as she could, then slowly lifted her head once more, allowing him to slip almost free, until only the head remained in her mouth. She suckled him again, feeling her belly clench with pleasure as he groaned under her teasing caress, moving restlessly, clutching at the sheets.

When she had teased him until she felt he was hovering on the verge of coming, she began to stroke him harder and faster with her mouth, pushing him toward climax. Finally, with a hoarse cry, he caught her, flipped her onto her back and moved over her, sinking his cock to the hilt in her flesh. Holding himself off of her with one arm, he slipped the other beneath her hips, pounding into her again and again. Victoria lifted her legs and wrapped them around him as she felt her own pleasure building again with each stroke of his flesh against the quaking walls of her sex.

Gasping, she met each thrust with one of her own as her passion rose higher and higher, until she was hovering on the edge of fulfillment. When he cried out hoarsely as his climax took him over the edge, his cock jerking inside of her with his release, she fell over the edge herself, clinging to him as wave upon wave of pleasure rocked her to her core.

They collapsed in a tangle of arms and legs, weak in the aftermath, shaking, struggling for breath. Finally, Raphael rolled off of her, gathering her close. Victoria snuggled sleepily against him, drifting, wondering if she could find the energy to leave the bed and tackle the paperwork she'd neglected.

Raphael sighed, stroking her. "The only time I have your full attention is when I'm making you moan with pleasure," he said wryly.

Victoria sent him a startled glance and then chuckled. "Serves you right. I told you to stay out of my head."

He stroked her cheek. "I'd rather have a morsel of your time than the undivided attention of a dozen others."

Intrigued, Victoria pushed herself up so that she could look down at him. "Really? Most men would far prefer the harem. Not that that archaic concept is allowed anywhere in the known universe."

Raphael grinned. "You are a harem all to yourself, shy one moment, aggressive the next. I never know which woman I'll find in my bed."

"My bed," Victoria corrected.

"My arms?" he amended meekly.

Victoria tweaked his nipple. She might have tugged a hair, except that his body was smooth and hairless, making it an impossibility. She skated a hand over his chest, enjoying the sleek feel of his flesh. "I hope you're not suggesting I have schizophrenic tendencies."

He chuckled. "No. Only that you are always a ... delightful surprise." His amusement vanished, and he studied her seriously. "Stay with me, Victoria."

Victoria found she couldn't hold his gaze. She looked away, shrugged. "It's not my choice. You know that."

He caught her cheek with his palm, made her look at him. "I want to know what you want."

She sighed. The problem was, she didn't really know what she wanted. At the moment, she couldn't think of anything she wanted more than to wrap herself up in Raphael and ignore the troubles of the world she found herself in, but she cared too much for him to toy with his emotions. He'd said he loved her. Perhaps he did ... or maybe he didn't know any more than she did, but she couldn't bring herself to risk wounding him deeply.

He smiled faintly. "I'll accept that ... for now."

Victoria shook her head, but found she didn't give a damn about that particular rule. Raphael was the only thing that offered her comfort and relief. She needed that if she was to have any chance of getting any of them through this alive. She'd deal with the consequences later. Leaning up, she kissed him briefly. "Sleep. God only knows what we'll find tomorrow."

When tomorrow came, they discovered something no one had noticed during the turmoil Brown and Quinton's near confrontation had caused. One of the searchers hadn't returned.

* * * *

Slowly, he became aware of his surroundings.

It was dark, but he knew he wasn't in his quarters.

He felt strangely detached, but he knew he wasn't sleeping.

Around him, as he pondered the curious circumstances, the waters lightened, showing him that he was in the sea ... drifting. He frowned, realizing that something wasn't quite as

it should have been. He could see movement, but he couldn't feel it.

He realized then that he could feel nothing at all and fear surged through him. Why could he feel nothing? Why could he not lift his hand, his arms, his legs? He struggled for a while, willing his body to respond to his mind, trying to sit upright.

Slowly, inexorably, pain began to spread through him. At first, he was almost relieved. He thought it meant that the strange paralysis was wearing off, but he found he still couldn't move any part of his body. He couldn't move away from the pain that became steadily worse until he felt as if he was on fire with it.

When he felt that he couldn't bear it any longer and live, the pain ceased almost as abruptly as it had begun. A sense of peace flowed through him, and relief.

But darkness flowed in the wake of it and he found he was afraid of the dark. He struggled against it.

Abruptly, he felt his head lifted up. He opened his eyes, tried to focus. Slowly, his sight cleared.

And then he screamed and kept on screaming, because he could see where his body should be, but it wasn't there.

Raphael cried out, coming awake with a jerk. His heart felt as if it was beating a hundred miles an hour and he clutched his chest, massaging it.

Victoria complained sleepily, but roused enough to notice that Raphael was sitting up in bed. "What is it?"

Raphael turned to look at her, but already the images were fading from his mind. "I dreamed I was someone else," he

said slowly. "I was there, I could see, but it was as if I was looking through someone else's eyes."

Victoria sat up, looking at him in concern. "What did you see?"

Raphael shook his head, trying to remember. "I can't remember. Only that it was horrible."

Victoria lay down again, pulling him with her and snuggling against him. "It was just a nightmare," she murmured, rubbing his chest.

"A nightmare?"

"Bad dream. They always seem scary at the time, but when you wake up you either can't remember what you dreamed, or it seems ridiculous that it scared you to start with."

Raphael shuddered. "I don't think it was a dream."

* * * *

The transition from air breather to gills was a little easier to bear when Victoria joined Raphael the following morning, not much, but somewhat. They divided the miners into two groups, one to handle moving the ore, the rest they broke into three smaller groups and sent out to search for Roach.

Victoria stood at the opening to the mine shaft for several moments, looking down and finally glanced at Raphael.
Ready?

He nodded, his expression grim. *If we run into trouble....*

Victoria shook her head, knowing what he'd been about to suggest. She held her weapon up. *We go in together. We come out together. No heroics.*

Raphael lifted his brows but neither agreed nor disagreed, merely stepping off the rim of the opening and allowing himself to drift downwards. Victoria dove head first, clutching her laser rifle at the ready and using only her feet to propel her forward. As she passed Raphael, he bent double, twisted and, with a flick of his tail fin, shot past her, leading the way. He settled on the lip of the tunnel they had come to investigate, waiting until she caught up with him before he moved inside.

Lights had been secured into the ceiling of the shaft every ten feet or so. They bathed the walls with a dull yellow glow, chasing most of the shadows away. Victoria examined the walls in a cursory fashion as they made their way deeper into the tunnel, but could see nothing that seemed even a little irregular or out of place. They'd been traveling down the tunnel for nearly twenty minutes when Raphael stopped, looking around.

This is where they stopped excavating.

Victoria stopped, as well, glancing around at the ceiling, the walls, the floor of the man made cavern. *It just stopped abruptly here? Who was in here first?*

Me.

You didn't see any sign that they might have dug something other than ore from the walls?

He shook his head. *It looks like the same tools were used to excavate this part as the rest. I suppose they might have run the tunnel into an existing cavern, but if they did I don't see any sign of it. You didn't notice any mention of anything like that in the reports?*

Victoria flushed uncomfortably. *I haven't had the time to go through all of the reports. I decided to start with the last and work backwards, but I haven't gotten very far.*

Raphael nodded without comment. *It doesn't look like we'll find anything here.*

Victoria looked around the cavern again and finally moved closer to one wall, reaching out to touch the surface. The pressure field that supported the tunnel against collapse yielded as she pushed against it until her hand was resting on the rock surface. She found a small, round hole about two inches in diameter. *What's this?*

Raphael moved closer, looked at the almost perfectly round hole with a frown. *I don't know. I hadn't noticed it before.*

None of the equipment would have made anything like this?

He shook his head. *Nothing we have. Nothing I've seen that the crew before us might have been using. Maybe they set up some kind of pole system to support the tunnel until they had the pressure system up and running?*

Victoria looked around and finally shook her head. *There'd be a fairly regular pattern if they'd done anything like that. I don't see any other holes like that around here.* Turning back in the direction from which they'd come, she scanned the tunnel as she moved through it slowly. *I counted almost a dozen,* she said as she reached the mouth of the tunnel once more.

You think it's significant?

Victoria shrugged. *I don't know. I didn't see anything else.*

Raphael frowned. *I can't imagine that anything small enough to fit through one of those holes would be much of a threat.*

Victoria glanced at him. *A fairly large sea snake? Something like an eel? Piranha aren't large fish, but they can eat the flesh from a large man in minutes. Or, it might be nothing more than air holes for something much larger that burrows into the sea bed.*

This deep?

Unfortunately, we can't limit our thinking to what something on Earth might do.

As they stood considering the possibilities, the ground beneath their feet began to shake slightly. Victoria glanced back over her shoulder, noticing with more than a little alarm that the lights in the tunnel were flickering. *Quake!*

Launching herself from the tunnel, she swam for the mouth of the main shaft as fast as she could, fearing the quake would knock the power out. Without the pressure unit, the walls of the shaft might well collapse upon them.

Raphael caught her around the waist and shot through the tunnel at blurring speed. Behind them, Victoria could see the lights winking out, one by one. She blacked out as they shot out of the mine shaft.

Chapter Eleven

The next moment that Victoria was aware of, she was heaving water from her lungs, choking. When the spasms finally passed, she felt the warmth of Raphael's body as he pulled her tightly against him. He was trembling, as if he was freezing. Or maybe it was her? It filtered through her mind, finally, that they were laying on the floor of the lower level of the habitat beside the access pool. "What happened?"

"I pulled you out too quickly," Raphael said apologetically. "The pressure...."

Victoria nodded. Her head still felt as if it might explode. She discovered, to her embarrassment, that her nose was bleeding and pulled away from him. Leaning over the access pool, she bathed her face until the bleeding stopped.

"Thanks," she finally said shakily.

"For almost killing you?" Raphael asked tightly.

She glanced at him. "For saving my life. Did the shaft collapse?"

Raphael shook his head. "I didn't take the time to assess the damage. A shock wave hit me as we came out of the shaft, though, so my guess is, yes."

"Guess that's what happened before, huh?" Brown asked.

Victoria glanced at him. She hadn't realized until he spoke that they had an audience. She looked away. "Maybe."

"I sent for Tuttle. She's coming down to have a look at you now," Brown said.

Victoria shook her head. "I'm all right."

"You'll let her examine you," Raphael said coolly.

Victoria looked at him in surprise. Before she could inform him that she didn't take orders from him, however, Brown spoke again.

"It's procedure."

"Fine!" she snapped irritably and lay down once more, massaging her pounding head.

When Tuttle arrived, she checked Victoria's vitals. "I need to get her up to sick bay to give her a thorough examination," she said, glancing from Brown to Raphael.

"I'll carry her," Raphael said.

Victoria looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Up four levels? I'll travel under my own steam, thank you. You need to go check the progress of the searchers and assess the damage to the mine."

He scooped her up. "As soon as I deliver you to sickbay."

Brown trailed after them. "I can help."

Raphael paused, studied him a long moment and finally nodded.

Fighting the darkness that threatened to descend once more, Victoria held her head up with an effort. "You're both crazy. You'll both end up in sickbay if you try to carry me all the way up!"

Brown and Raphael exchanged a grin and ignored her protest. Locking their arms beneath her, they formed a 'chair' between them. Each time they reached another level, Victoria informed them that she was better and thought she could walk the rest of the way. Brown was breathing noticeably heavier and sweating by the time they reached the fourth level, which contained the crew quarters and the sickbay.

Dismissing him, Raphael took her the remainder of the way, shouldering his way into the room and settling her on a gurney.

"I am better," Victoria said, somewhat petulantly. "Thank you," she added stiffly.

"There's a difference between being strong and just plain bull headed," Raphael said coolly when she dismissed him again.

Victoria opened her mouth to give him a blast of temper, but Tuttle grabbed Raphael and pushed him toward the door, closing it behind them. "Wait here. I'll let you know how she is once I've run some tests."

Raphael nodded and Tuttle left him pacing the hall and went in again.

Pushing the gurney over to the examination chamber, she helped Victoria shift onto the padded table within, closed the clear panel, and punched the code for a thorough examination on the buttons on the antiquated piece of equipment. She frowned as the data began to spill across the screen, comparing the data to Victoria's healthy norm and finally concluded that Victoria was more shaken than anything else. She didn't appear to have any serious damage from the abrupt change in pressure.

When the computer concluded it's assessment, she helped Victoria from the chamber onto the gurney once more.

"Well?" Victoria asked as Tuttle moved to the supply cabinet and took a syringe from it.

Without a word, Tuttle moved back to her, jabbed the syringe into her upper arm and depressed the plunger. "You'll be fine. You just need a little rest."

"What'd you give me?" Victoria asked, feeling a strange lethargy creeping over her.

"Something to *make* you rest."

"Damn it, Tuttle! I don't have time for this!"

Tuttle smiled faintly. "Somehow I knew you'd say that. That's why I didn't ask."

As she started to move away, Victoria grabbed her wrist. Tuttle paused and glanced at her questioningly. Victoria bit her lip. "Am I ... did I ... abort?"

Tuttle gave her a reassuring squeeze. "I think it weathered the shock better than you did. It seems to have dug in with real determination."

Victoria smiled faintly at the comment, trying to decide whether or not she was relieved. She found, however, that she was far too tired to consider it at the moment.

Having reassured Victoria, Tuttle moved to the door, opened it, and ushered Raphael in. "She's fine. A little off the norm, but not dangerously so."

Raphael glanced at Victoria and then at Tuttle. "She's unconscious."

Tuttle smiled faintly. "Not yet, but she will be ... for several hours. I gave her something to make her rest."

A look of alarm crossed his features. Tuttle studied him a moment before realization dawned. "She told you?"

He shook his head, studying Victoria. "I knew."

"I keep forgetting you're telepathic." She smiled faintly. "It won't hurt her or the baby. I'm no doctor, and I know my limitations, especially since I'm completely unfamiliar with this particular situation, so I checked the medic files so I'd know what I could give her and what I couldn't."

Raphael nodded and moved to stand beside the gurney, caressing Victoria's cheek.

"Insubordination," Victoria muttered, her speech slurred by sleep. "Throw you all in the brig."

Grinning, Raphael glanced at Tuttle. "She's all right," they said in unison.

* * * *

Victoria woke sometime later to the clank of metal on metal. Opening her eyes with an effort, she saw that Raphael had set a tray of food on the metal cabinet next to the bed. She stared at it blankly for several moments and finally sat up. "What's this?"

"Dinner. You missed lunch."

Victoria stared at him, torn between irritation, amusement, and an odd sort of warmth at his thoughtfulness. "I'm not an invalid."

His smile was a little crooked. "No, but you had me worried for a little while."

"I did?" Victoria asked, warmed inexplicably by the admission.

He nodded and sat on the edge of the bed, taking her hand. "You're such a strong person, it hadn't occurred to me

before that you were strong in spirit ... not necessarily physically."

Blood rushed into her cheeks. She made a rude noise. "I'm hardly delicate!"

Raphael smiled faintly. "You are exactly that. No one's ever noticed, though, have they?"

Victoria glanced away uncomfortably. "I'm starved. Have you eaten?"

"I thought I'd wait for you."

"Let's go into the dining hall, then."

"You're sure you don't want me to coddle you?" he asked pensively.

Victoria laughed. "I'm afraid I might get attached to it ... which would be a bad thing since you'd get tired of it in a hurry."

He rose, helping her from the bed. "You don't know me nearly as well as you think if you believe that. I have infinite patience."

"Do you?"

He nodded. "It comes from being part fish."

Victoria glanced at him sharply, but saw that he was teasing. "And fish are patient?"

"They have to be. They're on the hunt constantly for food."

"Single minded," Victoria said succinctly, picking up the tray he'd just deposited.

He took it from her. "That too."

She was taken aback when she reached the dining hall. All conversation ceased abruptly as everyone turned to look at her, but not nearly as disconcerted as when a cheer went up.

Blushing profusely, she struggled against a strong urge to retreat to her room once more. Mastering it, she bowed to the assembly and thanked them before taking her seat.

To her relief, everyone returned their attention to their food.

What was that about?

Raphael glanced at her in surprise, but in a moment a look of pleasure crossed his features. *They're glad you're all right. They were worried, too.*

That pleases you? she asked him curiously.

Yes. But it pleases me more that you addressed me telepathically. Except for when we're in the sea, you hadn't done that since....

Since?

Since we became lovers.

She glanced at him, studied him for a long moment. *I can't help it. I need to keep at least a part of myself for me.*

I know.

Victoria studied the food on her plate for several moments and finally began to eat. "What happened while I was out of it?"

"I'll give you a full report as soon as we've eaten."

Victoria gave him an indignant look.

He shook his head slightly. *It'll be best if we're alone.*

The comment made her uneasy, but she could see his point. Everyone seemed far more relaxed than they had in a while. It didn't seem right to risk taking that away from them by discussing bad news where they might hear.

Mentally shrugging it off, she focused her attention on her food. When she'd finished, she cleared her place and headed for the room. Raphael followed her, closing the door firmly behind him.

"Now. Tell me what happened," Victoria said, facing him.

Raphael frowned. "I'm not sure that what we felt was a quake. Something showed up on the readings, but it didn't read like a quake."

"What then?"

"I wish I knew. We had a power spike, which shut the system down just long enough that we had several collapses along the shaft ... not as much damage as one would expect, but it'll set us back at least a day in the clean up."

"All right. What do you *think* it was?"

"I haven't got a damned clue. But I will tell you one thing, if that wasn't a quake, then that wasn't a shock wave that hit us as we emerged from the shaft. It was *something*."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing ... just like we've seen since we've been here. Not a thing!"

Victoria frowned. "A belch of gases, maybe? Some sort of sonic wave?"

Raphael began pacing. "It could have been anything, I suppose. I felt it, I know that. We both did. Did you see anything? Feel anything at all?"

Victoria thought back to her last moments of consciousness. "Heat. Or warmth anyway. I thought it was just the blood pressure surge, though. It might have been, for that matter. Internal, not external."

Dismissing it, she asked about the search for Roach.

Raphael shook his head. "Still no sign of him. We found his tablet, though."

"You think he could still be alive?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I've no idea of what the limitations might be on the artificial gill."

Victoria frowned. "I should know, but I can't remember. It was only intended for limited use, assuming we would have to be in the water a few hours occasionally. Our skin's not like yours. Even with the wet suit, prolonged exposure of the unprotected skin areas would cause problems. Then, too, there's the pressure to consider, lack of food and water, exposure to temperatures below our norm.

"I'd have a better idea of his chances if I could get into the computer system. I think it's time I took you up on your offer to hack in."

* * * *

After several hours of trying to hack in, Victoria began to lose hope that he would actually accomplish it. She glanced at her watch. "I should get back down and take care of my paperwork. I'm a day behind already."

Raphael nodded. "I'll stay with this a while longer. If I can get in, I'll patch it through to the computer in your quarters."

Victoria shook her head. "The rule stands. No one goes off alone."

"I'll escort you down then."

She gave him a look. "That applies to you, too."

He studied her a long moment and finally shrugged. "In the morning, then."

Victoria supposed she should have been suspicious at how easily he gave in. Raphael was patient, and even tempered, but he was also stubborn.

He sprawled on the bed as she settled at her desk to work and appeared to be sound asleep when she finally joined him several hours later. He was gone when she awoke the following morning, but she thought little of it. He often rose before her in the morning.

Climbing from the bed, she showered, dressed and went down to the dining hall to grab a cup of coffee. It wasn't until she returned to her desk to finish up the work she'd left the previous night that she discovered the note he'd left her.

He'd hacked in.

Victoria stared at the note blankly, but even as groggy as she was the implications were clear—contrary to her specific orders, and despite the risk ignoring that particular order carried with it, Raphael had only waited until she'd gone to sleep and had gone back.

Anger surged through her. She should have known this would happen. The last time she'd been fool enough to allow a man prolonged intimacy he, too, had considered that gave him the right to ignore her commands. It was the main reason she had avoided it ever since, the main reason she'd been determined not to allow Roach to bunk with her, because she'd seen he would become a discipline problem if she allowed it. She would never have thought that Raphael would.

After a moment, she sat down at her desk, deciding she needed to drink her coffee and wait until she was more fully alert to decide how to handle the problem.

It couldn't be ignored. It was absolutely essential that she retain command at all times. If she allowed anyone to disregard her orders, they would all begin to question them, which could put everyone in danger as well as the project itself.

By the time she'd finished her paperwork and her coffee, it occurred to her that Raphael had at least been discreet. He'd gone up while she was sleeping. No one but the two of them could possibly know. It made her feel a little better.

It also occurred to her that she could pretend she had no idea he'd acted against her orders. If she didn't ask him, she wouldn't have to do anything about it, because it also occurred to her that there was only one thing, really, that she could do, and that was to ask him to remove himself to other quarters.

She found that she was very reluctant to do that. She was disturbed by how deeply reluctant she was.

Finally, she decided to dismiss it for the moment and concentrate on the work at hand. She needed to look at the files. She also needed to go over the physical files she'd collected from the security office. She'd spent hours doing paperwork the night before, however, and two additional hours since she'd gotten up. She decided to check on the projects in progress before tackling more paperwork.

When she arrived at the flight deck, she saw that Quinton and Albert had almost completed the erection of the new

communications tower. "How long before it'll be operational?" she asked them as she reached them.

"We'll have the tower done by tomorrow at the latest," Albert responded, "but you'll need to ask Caroline about the transmitter."

She located Caroline and Barbara on the main operations level. They were still trying to scavenge some of the parts they needed, but expected to have the transmitter ready, if the parts could be located, by the time the tower was finished.

For the first time since they'd been stranded on Kay, Victoria felt a surge of hope for their chances of survival. She knew very well that the odds were against them being able to make contact with anyone, even if they succeeded in getting the transmitter operational, but a ray of hope was better than what they'd had before—none.

"Good," she said. "When you get it on-line I want you to begin transmitting a distress call, immediately. If you manage to get anyone, explain the situation we found on arrival and tell them we need immediate evacuation. If you can't pick anyone up, try alternating with SOS."

Caroline and Barbara exchanged a look.

"Are we in immediate danger?" Caroline asked.

Victoria studied her a moment. "I think the longer we're here the greater risk, and the less likely any of us are to leave. Stay with it."

She paused when she reached her level once more, feeling an unaccustomed indecisiveness. She'd left her quarters with the intention of checking all of the projects in progress. She

wasn't particularly anxious to tackle more paperwork, but found she was also reluctant to check out the mines.

It occurred to her finally that her indecision arose from a reluctance to allow anything to dim the hope the news from the communications crew had given her.

Shaking it off, she made her way down to the access level, stopping in the locker room to don her wet suit. They were bringing up a load of ore as she arrived at the access pool. "Where do we stand, here, Brown?" she yelled above the noise of the machinery they were using to haul the baskets up through a pulley system to the warehousing levels above them for processing.

"We processed the last of the ore the previous crew pulled yesterday. This is the first load our crew's pulled. Sylvia said they were up to quota yesterday before the cave in. I don't know if they've pulled any today or not."

Victoria nodded, waited until the basket had cleared the pool and leapt in. It was a little easier adjusting than either previous attempt. It was not something Victoria foresaw as ever being easy, or natural seeming, but it gave her hope that she would learn to endure better as time went on.

If they remained on Kay for the duration.

She very much hoped they wouldn't. It was one thing to take a high risk, high yield job. It was another matter entirely to take on a job that had wiped out everyone who'd tried before. That wasn't risk. That was suicide.

She hoped the crew's projections were right and the communications tower was up and operational soon. She meant to have someone on the transmitter day and night

sending out a distress call. No way was she staying on this rock any longer than it took to be picked up.

No one was in the operations shack when she arrived. Frowning, Victoria debated briefly and finally decided to go down for a look herself. When she reached the main shaft, she could see the miners below her, steadying a load of rubble. Stepping back from the opening, she waited until they'd reached the top.

Sylvia was among them.

Victoria swam to her. *Where's Raphael?*

Sylvia nodded toward the main shaft. *Overseeing the clean up in the tunnel. I could tell him you need to speak to him when I get back down.*

Victoria shook her head. *I'll go down.*

Sylvia stopped her. *Are you sure you should? So soon after the accident?*

The truth was, Victoria would have just as soon not gone down into the mines, ever, again whether it was a particular health risk for her or not, but she'd made it a policy never to ask anyone to do anything she wasn't willing to do herself. She smiled. *Tuttle would have told me if she'd thought there would be a problem.*

Sylvia shrugged and returned her attention to helping the others maneuver the cart to the area they were using to dump the rubble. After watching them for several moments, Victoria shook reluctance and dove into the tunnel. Raphael looked up as she made her way to the end of the tunnel. He frowned, but then looked away, concentrating on his task.

Victoria waited until the crew had finished up and started out of the tunnel. *You made quick work of the clean up. It must not have been too bad.*

Raphael shrugged. *Bad enough we've lost half a day's work. We should go up. They need to get the equipment in here and get started.*

Victoria frowned, grabbing his arm as he moved to pass her. *Is something wrong?*

He stopped, studying her a long moment, but finally shook his head. *Not that I know of.*

You seem ... distracted. He seemed remote, but she couldn't decide why she felt that way.

We're running way behind schedule, he said and turned away again.

After a moment, Victoria followed him out. She saw the miners were waiting just outside the tunnel opening with the equipment and hurried to catch up to Raphael and get out of their way.

I need to pull the rest of my crew off of search detail. We're not going to make quota this week if I don't, he said as they reached the main entrance once more.

Victoria studied him, but somehow she doubted that was why he was behaving so coolly. It was possible, but she didn't buy it. Before she could probe further, however, a telepathic shout interrupted them.

We found him! We found Roach.

On the heels of that telepathic call came a sound that Victoria felt certain she would never forget, the rumbling growl of the mine as the shaft collapsed.

Chapter Twelve

Cave in!

Victoria whirled, too stunned for several moments to do more than gape at the belch of silt that rose from the mouth of the mine shaft like smoke from a dragon's throat. Around her, miners raced toward the shaft and dove in. She followed them, appalled at the amount of rubble that blocked the entrance to the tunnel they'd so lately occupied.

Who was in there? She asked as she fell in beside them and began digging rocks from the rubble and piling them into a bucket someone had lowered.

Richard and Linda, someone said. Samuel, Kevin and Melinda, someone else supplied.

Shouldn't we get some heavy equipment in here to move this faster?

They might be under the rubble.

Victoria nodded and kept digging. It took them an hour to clear an area large enough for someone to squeeze through, if they were small. *I'm going in.*

Raphael grabbed her, dragging her back. *Wait until we clear it.*

They might not be able to wait that long, Victoria pointed out.

They wouldn't have breathed up the oxygen in the water this quickly.

Victoria glared at him, but quickly realized that they did not have time to argue the matter and returned to helping with the digging.

A few minutes later the first of the victims trapped behind the wall of debris, alive and relatively unscathed, climbed through and Victoria relaxed as the others followed behind him. *Is this everyone?* She asked Samuel, who was the last to climb through.

Samuel nodded. *There were only the five of us.
You're certain of that?*

He looked a little hesitant. *I think so ... unless someone was behind us. The five of us all went in together.*

Everybody outside for a quick head count.

Raphael counted them twice and finally frowned. *Liam's missing.*

Oh God! Victoria thought. *Has anyone seen Liam?*

He was with us when we went out to search for Roach, one of the searchers said.

Did he come back with anyone?

The searchers all looked at each other but none of them said anything.

When was the last time anyone saw him?

After some discussion, they arrived at the conclusion that Liam had not been seen since they'd gone to search for Roach the day before. Victoria didn't know whether to be relieved to discover that Liam couldn't possibly have been trapped beneath the rubble, or unnerved about the fact that the search party had recovered one man only to lose another.

She sent them out again to look for Liam.

* * * *

They had to fashion a makeshift gurney to carry Roach up to medical. He was muttering incoherently, as if he was delirious. Victoria waited until the computer had scanned him and Tuttle had analyzed the data it collected.

"What are his chances?"

"He seems to be stable ... for the moment, at least. He broke his ankle when he fell into the ravine. He's dehydrated. I'll need to keep a close eye on him for at least twenty four hours, but I think he's going to recover."

Victoria nodded, her lips taut with anger. "When he's well enough to move him, put his ass in the brig."

Tuttle blinked at her in surprise. "I said he'd be out of danger. It's going to take him a while to recover."

"He can recover in lock up. He ignored a direct order. No one is to go off alone, ever, for any reason whatsoever. We've lost another man searching for his sorry ass. As soon as he's out of danger, lock him up."

Returning to her quarters, Victoria showered, changed and settled down to study the files. Since Roach had been found, it didn't seem imperative to look into the computer files at once, so she concentrated on the files she'd retrieved from security.

From what she could tell, there'd been no real problems until the arrival of the mining crew. The construction crew chief had reported several accidents, but only one fatality during their stint before the arrival of the miners.

There was nothing particularly unusual in the fact that an accident had claimed the life of one of the construction crew members, particularly on a project this size. Despite every effort to provide safety, statistically speaking, the company expected 1.5 deaths per three construction projects. Construction was dangerous work. Construction on an uncharted planet was hazardous beyond that because of the uncertainty of conditions. Nor could she tell from the report that the accident might have been other than an accident.

It had taken almost a month for the newly arrived crew to get all of the equipment set up and operational. The first crew member disappeared within two weeks after excavation began.

The security chief had suspected foul play. There'd been an 'incident' between the missing man and one of the other crew members shortly before the disappearance. The security chief hadn't been able to come up with anything more than a hunch, however, and had finally released the suspect.

There were four more disappearances over a two week period. Three crew members had decided to go off to do a little exploring on their day off and had not returned. A three day search had turned up nothing and they had finally been reported as missing, presumed dead. The fifth crew member to disappear was one of the searchers who'd failed to return.

Three months into the mission, the power failed and the main shaft collapsed, trapping the majority of the miners fifty feet below the surface. The construction crew had gone in to rescue them, but they were unfamiliar with the equipment. By

the time they managed to dig the rubble out the miners had run out of air.

Victoria felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach. She set the report down, fighting a wave of nausea.

It explained why the company had launched into such a drastic genetic program, developing Raphael and his crew en-route to the project. It also made it clear that the company had known about the incident, even though it hadn't shown up on any of the reports.

There'd been no mention of any other problems, so she assumed the communications tower had been intact at that point and if it had been, then the accident would certainly have been reported.

The company had been well aware that she and her crew were flying into a disaster area. They might not have been aware of the full extent of it, but they'd certainly known her crew wasn't prepared for what they would be expected to handle.

She'd been with the company for nearly ten years. Nothing they did, or failed to do, surprised her any more, but it still pissed her off.

Dismissing the fruitless anger, she thought back over what the report had said about the power outage being responsible for the collapse. The power had failed when she and Raphael had been down in the mines. Was there a connection to what had ultimately happened to the crew on Kay? Or could it be nothing more than faulty equipment?

She made a mental note to tell Raphael to put together a power backup unit and to have someone monitoring both the

main power and the backup at all times in case it wasn't the equipment at all, but some sort of electrical interference. She'd have felt better if they'd had some good, old fashioned bracing to put in the mines so that they weren't dependent entirely upon the electronic pressure system, but she doubted they had the materials to manage it even if they scavenged parts from the habitat.

That being the case, she thought it might be a good idea to rotate the workers so that the bare minimum were exposed at any one time. Raphael's crew was not in danger of running out of air as the previous crew had, but they could certainly be crushed to death if they had a major collapse.

Victoria realized quite suddenly that her head was pounding. She checked her watch and was surprised to discover it was mid-afternoon. She'd missed lunch. Rising, she stretched the kinks from her back and went in search of something to hold her until dinner. Grabbing a can of fruit and a bottle of water, she headed back to her quarters.

She stopped dead still on the threshold. Raphael had turned at the sound of her approach, his arms laden with his belongings. She stared at him without comprehension. "What are you doing?"

He focused his attention on what he'd been doing. "It's two weeks. I thought I'd move my belongings to my quarters."

Victoria was so stunned she couldn't even think. "Two weeks?" she repeated blankly.

He nodded without looking at her. "Company rules."

Moments passed before Victoria realized she was gaping at him like the village idiot. With an effort, she collected herself

and moved back to her desk, doing her best to ignore the activity behind her. Thankfully, he did not linger long. When the door had closed behind him, she turned to stare at it, trying to comprehend what had just happened. It was useless, of course. Her brain simply could not put the puzzle pieces together.

Had she misunderstood him when he'd said he wanted to stay with her? She frowned, thinking, but try as she might she couldn't recall the exact conversation that had passed between them. Maybe they'd been speaking at cross purposes?

It still didn't seem to fit because she couldn't think of anything he could have said that would have made her believe he wanted to stay with her if that wasn't what he'd meant.

She wondered if it wasn't something else. Had she said, or done, something that had made him change his mind? What, she wondered, could she have possibly done to have brought about such a change in him?

It was almost as if he was a completely different person—one who looked like Raphael, and spoke in the same voice, but who was someone else entirely.

She realized quiet suddenly that she was shaking, that she had been holding herself and rocking mindlessly. It was the pain she was trying to comfort herself from, the pain that was so acute she had gone numb from the shock of it. Now that the shock had begun to wear off, it crept through her in slow, agonizing waves.

A sound erupted abruptly from her tight throat, shocking her so that she jumped, clamping a hand to her mouth. Fearing someone would overhear, she leapt from the chair and ran into the bathroom, turning the water wide open. The face in the mirror didn't even look like her own. It was pale, her eyes red and swollen from the tears streaming down her cheeks. Scooping up handfuls of cold water, she dashed it over her face, but it did no good. The tears continued to flow, on and on.

Why was she crying? She never cried. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd cried ... certainly not since she'd been a child.

More importantly, why could she not make herself stop? She climbed into the shower finally, fully clothed, hoping the water would somehow soothe her, help her to regain her self control. She wept until the hot became warm and the warm became cold. Finally, exhausted, freezing, she climbed out again, peeled her wet clothing off, dried herself and found dry clothes.

She returned automatically to her desk, sat and picked up the reports. She could not make any sense of them, however. It was almost as if she'd forgotten how to read. Finally, she decided she was just too exhausted to think. Dragging herself from the chair, she dropped onto the bed and was almost instantly asleep.

She awoke several hours later to the sounds of movement outside and sat up with a jerk, listening. It was the crew, coming in for dinner. Scrambling from the bed, she rushed into the bathroom to check her appearance. To her horror,

she saw her eyes were still red and swollen. She splashed cold water on her face again and finally, in desperation found a cloth, soaked it in cold water and held it to her eyes for several minutes. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to help. It only made her vision blur.

Giving up on it, she decided she'd just skip dinner. She wasn't particularly hungry anyway. Besides, she'd never eaten the fruit she'd gotten earlier. Looking around, she discovered she'd left the can on her desk.

She needed to finish going over the reports anyway.

Her heart skipped a beat when someone tapped on her door. "Yes?"

Brown opened the door and stuck his head in. "Just checking to make sure everything was all right."

Victoria threw him a quick, distracted smile over her shoulder. "Thanks. I'm fine. I just need to get through these reports."

"You're not coming to dinner?"

She held up her can of fruit without turning to face him.

When he finally closed the door again, she set the can down and covered her face with her hands. She was being ridiculous. She couldn't stay holed up in her room. Everyone was bound to begin imagining all sorts of things if she did. Besides, Raphael was her second. She couldn't avoid him. He would be sharing the same floor with her, even if not the same room, and she would have to discuss the job with him.

She didn't have to see him tonight, though, now, when she was afraid anyone who saw her face would know immediately that she'd spent hours crying like a wounded child.

Returning her attention to the reports, she began reading again. She had to read them over and over before they began to make sense, but finally she managed to focus enough attention on them to understand what she was reading.

In the end, it was one line that totally grabbed her attention.

We buried the dead in the tomb they'd dug for themselves and moved to the secondary location to start the new mine shaft.

She stared at the words, read them again and finally, slowly, it sank in. They hadn't found any sign of whatever it was the miners had unearthed, because they'd been looking in the wrong place.

* * * *

Quelling the temptation to race up to main operations and take the place apart until she discovered the surveys, Victoria focused on the logs once more, searching for other possible clues.

The company had issued orders that the senior officer was to induct as many of the construction workers as possible as miners to replace the men they'd lost. The senior officer had offered pay raises and bonuses, but no amount of money could convince the construction workers to go back and work the mine that had collapsed. With great reluctance, because the original mine had had such a rich vein of ore, the senior officer had decided to excavate a new mine. Apparently, he had originally intended to leave the first mine open though.

The surviving miners had nixed that idea, insisting that the mine was haunted by some sort of 'evil' spirits and that the mine should be used as a tomb for the miners who'd died. The senior officer had finally agreed because it looked as if they might have rioting on their hands if he didn't.

Victoria frowned, wondering what could've aroused so much superstition. In general, miners tended to nurse a few antiquated superstitions, maybe more than the average person, but they were minor things—the bad luck of the number thirteen; lucky seven; or tossing spilled salt over their shoulder to appease the 'little folk'. No one she'd ever met even bore a serious paranoia about such things, though, quoting them more for amusement than anything else.

Either they'd been exposed to some sort of hallucinogen, or their fears had had nothing to do with superstition and the senior officers had simply ignored their complaints and put them down to absurd folk lore.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she became that that had to be the case. The miners were afraid of something that was really down there, but they hadn't been able to convince the officers that there was a threat.

She still couldn't see how anything they might have aroused below the surface of the ocean bed might have presented the threat from topside, but the senior officer had mentioned the threat of rioting. Maybe the threat became so great and fears rose to such heights that there *had* been rioting?

She frowned, realizing that wouldn't explain the lack of any bodies.

She decided to shelve it. Later, when she'd found every little puzzle piece that she could find, she would sit down and try to put them all together and see if they fit.

She scanned the remaining logs.

Apparently, problems escalated rapidly after that. The workers were somewhat appeased by the decision to seal the original mine, but tempers were still short and discipline became an increasing problem. There were an alarming number of accidents on the new project, which management put down to the lack of skills of the trainees. Missing men were considered AWOL. There were fifteen men and women on the list.

"Jesus!" Had Johnson been completely incompetent? Insane? Kay was totally uninhabited. No one in their right mind would just 'quit the company and walk off the job', not here.

She realized quite suddenly that the logs had been doctored. Management had expected the probability of a full investigation and had been trying to cover the company's culpability here. And either they'd had no imagination, or things had gotten so bad they hadn't been able to come up with a more believable lie to use as a cover up.

Setting the files aside, she doodled absently on a piece of paper while she tried to sort the useful information from obvious lies.

Mine collapse: accident? Or 'evil' spirits? Was there any chance, she wondered, that it had been deliberate? She decided she couldn't rule it out. It seemed outrageous, to say the least, to consider that anyone would have blown it, risking

so many lives—causing so many deaths, but she didn't think it was completely impossible. She found, however, that she was leaning more in the direction of an accident caused by whatever it was they'd found down there ... by workers stampeding away from it, or by the creatures chasing them.

Frowning, she wrote: *Intelligent?* She decided she could rule out a higher intelligence than animal. There'd been no sign of any sort of weapons or tools, other than their own. But if it was a predator by nature, then it was a hunter, and it would have to be more intelligent than the grazers. Hunters were usually territorial, though, and worked alone, and she couldn't believe the loss of life here could be put down to a single creature.

They uncovered something: Unless she considered the possibility that all of the activity below had drawn the interest of a scouting predator, that seemed indisputable. All the problems had started after the first excavation. Moreover, the mention of the 'evil' spirits seemed to indicate that the miners, at least, figured the danger came from the excavation. The problem was, she had not found one single mention of anyone having been attacked by anything or having seen anything.

She thought about it for some time and was finally forced to conclude that management, for reasons unknown, had either decided to omit mention of hostile/dangerous life forms, or those who'd encountered these life forms hadn't lived to tell about it.

Deaths: accidents; disappearances. There'd been thirty men and women caught in the collapse ... which in itself was

criminal negligence. There should never have been so many miners down in the tunnels, even if they had four tunnels going at once. Counting the construction worker who'd died during construction of the habitat—which predated the problem—and the ten that were killed outright or fatally injured during their attempt to excavate a new mine, that accounted for well over half of the missing workers. When she eliminated all those listed as missing, that left maybe a couple of dozen who'd retreated into the habitat for their last stand.

It seemed irrefutable that the alien life form, or forms, had been picking them off almost from the time the mining crew had arrived. Something had triggered a massive attack, though.

What? Try as she might, she couldn't think of anything the crew might have done. Maybe it had been planetary conditions? Something had happened to drive away their normal food source and hunger had driven the creatures to take the next available thing—the crew.

The habitat looked as if it had been through one hell of a storm when they arrived. Maybe the storm had not been recent, but had occurred before the attack on the habitat? She'd made it a point to question the workers below about any life forms. None had caught more than a glimpse of a few, small swimming things. She'd assumed the activity must have driven the indigenous life further away, but what if it was a combination of the storm and the creatures higher on the food chain hunting their food out?

Dropping her pen to the desk, she rubbed her eyes and then massaged her temples. The headache was back, probably as much from lack of food as from the hours she'd spent pouring over the reports. She was tempted to walk up to sickbay and beg a painkiller off of Tuttle.

That thought prompted another possibility—that the information she was searching for regarding encounters, or sightings, of the creature might be in the medical reports.

Bringing up the computer, she began scanning the list of files, wondering if Raphael had broken the system security completely, allowing her access to everything, or if he'd merely unlocked the log-on.

She stopped when she reached MANAGEMENT studying it, wondering if she dared access it. Clearly, it was Johnson's files, but she could always argue, if it came into question, that she was higher management on site. Brushing aside her sudden nerves, she opened the file and scanned the files inside. One stood out. Like the button marked 'do not push' its title alone was enough to draw her in.

EXTREMELY SENSITIVE MATERIAL!

She opened the file and read:

Glitch regarding geneoid construction 18945: Further tests have led us to conclude that the particular combination of traits implanted in the crew are not reversible at this time. Since this violates penal law, this is a situation that must be handled with utmost delicacy. The attempt to terminate the experiment en-route failed.

Recommendation: The crew must be kept on Kay until and unless we are able to unravel the problem. Use whatever means necessary. Geneoid's expendable.

Further to the defect in geneoid construction: The accelerated growth hormones have failed to level out per expectations. Expected limitations regarding their ability to withstand normal human conditions are exceeded. Prolonged exposure to breathing air expected to result in serious health complications. Calculations of maximum exposure narrowing from 12 hours maximum to 10 within the first month of release. However, if the growth hormone continues to accelerate maturity, this time frame will be further limited as it progresses. It is considered a strong likelihood that the geneoids will progress beyond the point of being able to tolerate normal human conditions, which will render them useless except as miners on KAY2581.

It was her second shock of the day and by far more stunning. Victoria stared at the screen in dawning horror as the meaning began to slowly sink into her sluggish thought processes. Black specks gathered and began to swim before her eyes as she struggled to force herself to breathe.

Something, some sound or movement, drew her attention toward the door and she turned. Raphael was standing in the opening, watching her.

Moments passed while she struggled to force herself to speak. "I didn't know," she finally said faintly. "I swear to you I didn't know."

He studied her for a long moment. "In the end, does it matter?"

Victoria swallowed with an effort, unable to think clearly. One thought, or perhaps emotion, emerged, however. "It matters to me that you know that I didn't ... wouldn't have anything to do with this ... this...." Words failed her.

"Glitch?"

Shame and guilt brought the blood that had rushed away from her head at the discovery flooding back in a hot tide. She realized it was useless to try to explain that it was shame and guilt by association, not because of anything she'd done directly, but because she worked for a company guilty of such an atrocity. It wouldn't matter to him. All that mattered was that he'd discovered they had been betrayed by the people who had created them and they were to be abandoned on this rock as if they were nothing but an embarrassment, to be swept under the rug.

Before she could think of anything to say, he was gone.

* * * *

Victoria stared at the door for several moments. The urge was nearly overpowering to go after him and try to explain, to try to make him understand that she would never have betrayed anyone in such a way, and him least of all. Her pride held her where she was.

He had to know how she felt. He must. If it made no difference to him, how could it make a difference if she swallowed her pride and went to him? What could she say, or do, that would make him feel differently?

What if she swallowed her pride only to have him trample it by refusing even to listen?

She thought about it for some moments and finally realized that she'd recover even if he did. She wasn't so certain she would ever be able to forgive herself if she didn't even try.

Rising, she left her room before she could change her mind, entered his without knocking. He looked up when she entered, his expression guarded. "Did you need something?"

She nodded. "You."

He didn't move, but she sensed his withdrawal. "Leave it."

"I tried. I discovered I couldn't. You told me something. I want to know if it was true, or just pretty words you thought would please me."

Something flickered in his eyes, but his expression hardened. "Don't."

"Why?" she cried. "You have to know I knew nothing at all about that. You have to! As many times as you've entered my thoughts, wouldn't you have learned it?"

He stood abruptly and moved away from her. "I never thought you did."

"Why then? Why have you withdrawn? Why are you so cold?"

"Because nothing I believed I could have can be mine!" he said angrily. "Not you. Not the life I wanted. It's pointless to pursue something you know you can never have!"

"You said you loved me," Victoria said quietly.

"I will always love you, Victoria." He said, almost tiredly as his anger subsided, then smiled wryly. "But my always will not be nearly as long as I thought."

"You don't know that!"

"You read it. We've become a glitch, not human, geneoids."

Victoria thought for several moments that she would cry. She mastered the impulse with an effort. "You are not a glitch—none of you are. You're just as human as the rest of us ... and I don't give a damn what it said. They were wrong before! What makes you so certain they're right now? I've seen nothing, in any of you, to lead me to believe they know what they're talking about."

"The whole point is, they don't know. What if the acceleration ages us ten years for every month of life? Or twenty? And even if they're wrong about that, what if we reach a point where we can no longer even leave the sea? I will not be human then, even if the aging stops. I can not have a life with a human woman when I must live in the sea. And if none of it is true, and they're wrong, we will never leave this place. The company would terminate us first." Raphael scrubbed his hands over his face, dragged in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I suppose I'm a coward, but, knowing what I know now, I thought it would be best for you if I left you alone. Before it mattered to you. Before you could be hurt."

Victoria smiled with an effort. "Too late."

She moved toward him, stopping only when she was toe to toe with him. He stiffened, but he didn't pull away. "Aren't you going to ask why?"

He shook his head. "You should have just left it alone, Victoria. You should go now."

"If you love me as you say you do, don't do this to me. Don't push me away. Stay with me now."

He stared at her a long moment. "If you cared for me, you wouldn't want to give me more pain than I can bear."

It was an inarguable truth. It would, ultimately, be nothing but selfishness to take all he offered, perhaps to make it that much harder for him, knowing that she would be taken away from him when and if a ship came, and that he would be left behind. And still she felt the selfish urge to insist until he gave in. It took an effort to turn and leave.

Chapter Thirteen

Slowly, inexorably, rage filtered through Victoria. She wasn't going to let the board of directors get away with it. They'd gotten away with too much, too long. They had grown so wealthy and powerful they believed they were beyond the reach of the law.

It was no accident that Johnson had left the file. He'd hoped it would be found and used to give those who'd lost their lives justice. She knew very well that he would've been given standing orders to destroy any file marked EXTREMELY SENSITIVE once he'd accessed the information.

Rifling through the drawers of the desk, she found a recording chip, deleted the information from it and began reading through Johnson's files, selecting any that contained information regarding the company's efforts to cover up the disaster on Kay and recording them on the chip.

It was almost three AM by the time she was satisfied that she'd collected as much evidence as there was to be had. Rising, she strode from her living quarters and made her way up to Tuttle's quarters, rousing her. "I need you to implant this for me."

Tuttle, still fuddled with sleep, merely stared at her blankly. "What is it?"

"Something I can't afford to lose. Can you do it?"

"Now?"

"Right now."

Nodding, Tuttle stumbled from her bed and into the bathroom. She looked far more alert when she emerged some minutes later and the two of them went down to medical. "Mind telling me what this all about?"

Victoria stared at her a long moment. "Criminal negligence and conspiracy among the company's board of directors."

Tuttle looked as if she might faint for several moments. She moved closer. "If what you say is true, it's worth more than your life to them," she whispered, glancing nervously around as if she expected security to leap out at them at any moment.

"I know. That's why I asked you. You're one of the few people I know that I'd trust with my life."

Tuttle gulped, nodded jerkily. "Where do you want it implanted?"

Victoria thought about all of the more usual places and discarded them. She removed her tunic. "Here, above my heart."

Tuttle blinked, and then a slow smile curled her lips. "Like a heart monitor, or a neuron chip?"

"Exactly."

Tuttle was frowning as she worked, however. "It won't fool the company. They have your records."

"Security won't have access to my medical records. All I need to do is get it past them."

"All," Tuttle said faintly. She shook her head as she finished sealing the edges of the incision with the laser. "Is it really worth the risk?"

Victoria thought it over, but decided she couldn't give Tuttle any more information. The mining crew was telepathic. They probably knew too much already. Otherwise, Tuttle couldn't divulge information she didn't have. "It's worth it," she said simply, climbing off the table and pulling her tunic on once more. She stopped Tuttle as she turned to go back to her quarters. "Promise me something."

Tuttle looked terrified, but she nodded.

"If you make it and I don't, promise me you'll retrieve the chip if you can and hand it over to someone you trust to do the right thing."

Tuttle swallowed with some difficulty. "Raphael?"

The name sent agony flooding through her. She shook her head. "Raphael will never leave this planet."

* * * *

Returning to her quarters, Victoria ripped the work schedule from the board and posted a meeting the following morning. She slept little. The murmur of voices woke her a few hours later. Rising, she showered, dressed and went out to face them.

They began pelting her with questions the moment she emerged. She held up her hand for silence. "Is everyone here?"

Everyone looked around. "Pretty much," one of the miners volunteered.

"Pretty much isn't everyone. Round them up while I grab a half gallon of coffee."

Tuttle, looking tired and anxious, was the last to arrive.
"Roach is awake and demanding to talk to you."

"Later," Victoria said shortly.

"He said it was important," Tuttle said hesitantly.

"He thinks everything that concerns him is important. I'll talk to him later. Has he been moved to the brig?"

Tuttle nodded. "Late yesterday."

"Good. He won't be going anywhere until I've had a chance to talk to him."

She looked out over the assembly. "I called everyone here because I've finally had the chance to review all of the information we gathered regarding the incident that preceded our arrival. I've determined that the threat is ongoing."

"What kind of threat?"

"What is it?"

"What are we going to do?"

Victoria held up her hand. "I don't know *what* it is."

That comment stunned everyone to silence for about five seconds.

"I thought you said you'd determined there was a threat?"

"How could you know there was a threat and not know what it is?"

Victoria pounded her hand on the table. "If you'd rather just discuss this among yourselves, I'll leave you to it! If you want to hear what I know, or think, shut up, damn it, because I'm not going to try to shout over you!"

At that, an almost deafening silence fell. Victoria studied them a long moment before she tried again. "I know it's ongoing, because there wasn't a living soul here when we

arrived. If they'd even managed to fight whatever it is off, there would have been some survivors. I knew this from the start.

"Unfortunately, I can't find any reference to whatever it is, nothing to identify it because it seems no one who saw it survived to talk about it."

Tuttle raised her hand. "I don't think I follow."

"There's nothing in the reports. They were picked off, one by one, while everyone decided those who went missing had just had an accident, or wandered off, which means those left had no warning."

"You think it's some kind of animal?"

"Some kind of predator, yes. Probably something territorial that was stirred up by the activity here. From everything I've gathered, it looks like the miners might have dug it up. The disappearances began after they'd sunk the first mine shaft."

"So what's your assessment?" Raphael asked.

Victoria glanced at him and then looked away. "It's fast. It's either small, and travels in numbers, or it's big and has some sort of natural camouflage that makes it hard to see. Red maybe. Everything on this godforsaken place seems to be red. Visibility is poor and very limited. It blends extremely well with its surroundings, moves fast, and attacks swiftly—fast enough nobody seems to have been able even to cry out and alarm anyone near enough to hear."

Brown was frowning thoughtfully. "What about something like a jelly fish? Kinda clear?"

Victoria's brows rose. "Maybe—certainly something that would be very difficult to see."

Brown looked as if he might say more, but he was interrupted by one of the miners. "What are we going to do?"

Victoria looked at them for a long moment. "We're going to hunt it down and kill it."

The comment caused an uproar of debate. Victoria studied them for a moment and finally sat down to wait them out, listening to the arguments as she drank her coffee. When they finally subsided, she addressed them again. "This isn't up for debate ... or a vote. We can wait for it to come and get us as it did the others, or we can go out and find it first."

"But ... we don't even know what we're looking for."

Victoria shrugged. "So we kill everything that moves."

Everyone gaped at her in stunned silence. It was Tuttle who finally spoke, however. "It's against the law to ... to maliciously destroy indigenous life on any world."

Victoria gave her a look. "Would you prefer to be the alien life form the indigenous life form wipes out? This is survival, people. We don't have a choice. We're stranded. We have the right to protect ourselves, with malicious force if we deem it necessary. Everyone goes out on this hunt ... everyone. Nobody's going to sit back in the habitat and straddle the fence, just so they can claim innocence while everybody else risks their lives to protect them. We'll take motion sensors and every weapon available. Once we've cleared the area, we'll set up a grid of motion detectors all the way around the habitat in case another predator decides to claim the territory.

"Air breathers, suit up. You won't be any good to us in the Cat." She turned to look at the cooks, who'd been listening

from a position inside the kitchen. "This includes the four of you. Short shifts—I know none of you are familiar with underwater gear, but no one is excluded, for any reason."

As everyone began filing out of the room, Brown approached her. Victoria looked at him questioningly. "What is it, Brown?"

"I don't know, but I thought I ought to mention it."

Victoria nodded, trying to contain her impatience. "And?"

He shook his head. "When we started processing the ore, we found something. I didn't think much about it at the time ... thought it was like sea weed or something. Now I'm not so sure."

Victoria got up abruptly. "What did you do with it?"

"Scraped the shit off and kept working."

"Show me." She looked around the room and finally spied the person she was looking for. "Tuttle, you're coming with us."

* * * *

Despite the vast number of lights that crisscrossed the ceiling, the bins containing the raw and processed ore, and the equipment, combined to block out a great deal of light, leaving heavy shadows. It was chilly and damp in the room, far cooler than on any of the living levels, primarily because the company hadn't seen fit to consider the comfort zone of the workers. As long as it was adequate to keep them from freezing to death, it was sufficient.

The refuse bins were full of the slimy material. It had the appearance of mucus. Revolted, Victoria merely stared at it

for some moments, finally she reached to touch it. Brown grabbed her hand, stopping her. "Don't!"

Victoria looked at him in surprise. "Why not?"

"Makes you go numb where ever it touches bare skin. But it burns like a son-of-a-bitch, too. That's why I asked about the jellyfish. I got stung by one when I was a kid. I've never forgotten it. This stuff even looks a lot like one."

Victoria felt a jolt of both excitement and fear as she studied the glutinous mass again. Finally, she looked around for something to use to collect a sample of it from the trash bin. Finding nothing ready to hand, she stepped out of her shoe and used it to scoop up a specimen. "Take this to the lab, Tuttle. See if you can figure out what the hell it is, and, more importantly, what's in it that causes the numbness and what might counteract its paralyzing characteristics. I've got a feeling this is how the creature managed to snatch so many people when there were others close enough they would have heard them cry out.

"It would also explain how it is that these things seem to have managed to get in despite of all the efforts to stop them. They're invertebrates. They could probably slip through the crevices under the door."

Brown frowned. "But ... how would they have gotten the bodies out?"

"The access pool. Let's just suppose they have some means of reaching the top of the habitat—maybe they were able to climb, maybe they have the ability to fly, or soar, or even leap to great heights. They attack the habitat from

above, driving the crew down to the lowest level, and there the majority of the pack are waiting.”

Tuttle shivered. “Wouldn't that mean they'd have to be a higher life form? Intelligent?”

Victoria shrugged. “Only in the sense that some creatures on Earth do much the same thing—surround their prey and use their greater numbers to overpower it, like a pack of wolves or a pride of lions.

“This would also explain why no one's ever seen it. As poor as the visibility is down there, being virtually transparent would make them almost impossible to spot.

“When Raphael and I escaped the collapse of the mine, some force struck us. Raphael assumed it was a shock wave, at first. If it wasn't ... if it was one of these things, then they're huge ... probably at least the size of a grown man, maybe even bigger.”

“Are we still going out to hunt it?” Brown asked.

Victoria thought about it. “Tell Raphael there's been a delay. I want everybody to make a sweep of the immediate area, though, and set up the motion grid. Tuttle, take that specimen and let us know what you can find out as soon as possible. I'm going to have a talk with Roach.”

Chapter Fourteen

Victoria stared at Roach through the bars for a full five minutes before she finally unlocked the door and entered. If she'd hadn't known it was Roach, she wasn't certain she would have recognized him. He was curled up in a tight knot on the bunk, rocking, staring into space with haunted eyes.

"You wanted to talk?" Victoria prompted, subduing a welling of pity with an effort.

Roach looked at her for several moments as if he'd never seen her before.

Victoria might not be a psychologist, but she recognized pure terror when she saw it. Roach had almost certainly seen their monster.

"Roach! I don't have time for any of your games. Do you want to talk or not?"

Roach blinked. "I s-saw s-something."

"What?"

"D-don't know."

Victoria sighed. Pity was very rapidly giving way to irritation. "That's not much help, Roach. Where? What did it look like? How big? What was it doing?"

He stared at her for so long she thought he wouldn't answer. "Kitchens."

The single word was like a punch in the solar plexus. "You're sure?" She knew the moment she said it that it was a stupid question. They were the only humans on the planet. If

it looked like Kitchens, it must have been. She just couldn't seem to accept it.

She frowned. "They must have found her body...."

She saw that Roach was shaking his head.

"You think it wasn't an accident? That one of them got her while she was up top?"

"I don't know. I don't know! But ... there was something about the expression on her face, you know?" He shuddered and began rocking again.

Victoria knelt before him. "I've got to know everything you know, Roach."

He seemed to make an effort to pull himself together. "I figured, long as I was out, I'd have a look around. So I waited till nobody was paying any attention and headed out."

"Which direction?"

"The other side of the habitat from the mine ... straight out, I think. That was what I meant to do, anyway, so I couldn't get lost. I thought I saw something once I got on the other side, though. I was trying to get a better look at it. I wasn't paying too much attention to where I was going.

"The habitat ... I mean it's huge ... lights all over it. It never occurred to me I wouldn't be able to see it for miles. I wandered around ten minutes, maybe fifteen tops. Never got any closer to whatever it was, but then I got to looking around and I couldn't see the habitat. Scared the shit out of me. I panicked. I was going in first one direction then another. Next thing I know I hit something, or something hit me. I flip over, ass over appetite and then I'm falling ... it must have been a hard down draft, pulling me down. That

must've been when I broke my ankle, 'cause I couldn't get up for a minute or two.

"You fell into a hole? Like a cave?"

Roach frowned, scratched his head. "Could've been, I guess. If it was, it was huge. Looked a lot more like a valley, only deep. The sides sloped. Finally, I got up, but my ankle was hurting like a son-of-a-bitch. I couldn't swim. Couldn't walk either. I didn't want to go any further down. I wanted to find my way back to the habitat, but I couldn't fight the current, so I decided to just go with it and see if it'd sweep me up the other side.

"Then I got to noticing these little shallow ... like pits. And I thought, weird, 'cause they looked like little craters. I wasn't really interested, though. I was hurting like hell, scared shitless. But then I saw ... movement. That's about the only way to describe it. I couldn't see any *thing*, not really, not at first. But the movement caught my attention and I got to looking real hard at the spot.

"The current carried me away before I could get a good look at it, but I was focusing on the pits then. That's when I caught a look at Kitchens ... what was left of her."

Victoria frowned, remembering the 'nightmare' Raphael had had. "You think maybe it just got lodged there?"

He shook his head, looked for several moments as if he was going to throw up. "Whatever it was, it was eating her."

A shiver went through Victoria. She stood up abruptly. "You'll have to show us where it is."

He gaped at her as if she'd lost her mind. "No way am I going back out there!"

Victoria grabbed the front of his tunic, jerking him toward her until they were almost nose to nose. "They'll come in here, moron!" she said through gritted teeth. "What do you think happened to the others?"

She thought for several moments that he was going to cry. His chin wobbled. "But ... we could barricade ourselves in. Wait for the next ship."

Victoria released him, stepping back. "That's been tried already. It didn't work for them. And, as for waiting ... it could be six months ... maybe never. What do you think's most likely, Roach? The company finds out they've sent nearly a hundred people down on an uncharted world that they've only half-assed checked out, most of them are killed and they rush to save the last survivors? Or they cook up a shipping disaster, blame it on the captain and sweep it under the rug as missing, presumed dead?"

Roach whimpered. "They wouldn't just leave us here! Look at all the money they've sunk into this project!"

"Think of all the money it's going to cost them if we get out of here and there's an investigation. The penalties and settlements are likely to cost them more than they've already shelled out. I'm thinking they'll decide it's better just to cut their losses."

Roach sniffed. "I told you I was lost. I don't know if I can find it again."

"You found your way back," Victoria said tightly.

Roach gaped at her a long moment and finally got off the cot.

* * * *

Victoria summoned Raphael as soon as they were in the water. When he arrived, she told him Roach was going to lead them to the creatures. *He's been there. He should be able to find it again.*

Raphael looked at Roach questioningly. After a moment, Roach nodded a little jerkily.

He says he's pretty sure he can find it again. Raphael told her. His tone was skeptical.

He's been there. That increases our chances. He also said they were everywhere. No idea what sort of count we're talking about, but I think we need to leave a detail here to act as back up if we discover we have to retreat. I'd also like your input as to which level you think would be most defensible if we have to retreat into the habitat. I don't want a repeat of what happened to the last crew.

Raphael frowned, considering it. *The habitat is pretty wide open up through the warehousing levels. The lift has the elevator shaft pretty well blocked already. I'd say the officer's deck would be best, if we had to manage a prolonged siege, the crew level if we can't make it that far.*

Victoria nodded. *Good. Pick your detail and see what you can do to make it as secure as possible. Use whatever you can find to block the elevator shaft on both levels and make sure there's plenty ready to hand to block the door once we're in. From what I've heard, I'm thinking they're invertebrates. I've heard an octopus can squeeze itself through the neck of a bottle ... so if water will flow through it, block it ... the*

ventilation system too. And put motion detectors anywhere you think there's even a possibility of these things getting in.

Tuttle's on your crew. Tell her to make sure there's plenty of medical supplies on both levels, just in case—and food and water. Caroline and Barbara are up in main operations. Tell them to rig up an automatic distress call if they can and get down here with everyone else.

She stopped, wondering if she'd covered everything.

You stay. I'll take the hunting party out, he said.

No.

Then I'll go with you.

I need you here, damn it!

I need to be with you! he said.

Despite the fact that her nerves were on edge, Victoria felt a smile tug at her lips. *What?*

Raphael gave her a narrow eyed look. *I need to be with you.*

And this is because?

I'll go out of my mind waiting here.

Victoria smiled. *Close enough. Pick the team and relay the message I just gave you to Brown and Quinton. I want Brown up top, Quinton leading our back up.*

Raphael's brows rose. *Roach is third in rank.*

Victoria gave him a wry look. You really want Roach watching our backs?

You have a point.

Exactly. Besides which, he's the closest thing we have to a guide. Brown's a good man, but he'd be hampered by his suit. Quinton won't and Quinton is telepathic. He'll be able to

communicate with everyone. The com units don't work worth a damn in these conditions.

When Raphael returned nearly fifteen minutes later, Barbara was with him. *We made contact.*

Hope surged through Victoria. *Who? Are they coming?*

Barbara looked distressed. *We couldn't make it out. The signal's too weak. But they responded to the distress call.*

The disappointment was acute, following so closely upon the heels of the surge of hope. *We don't know if they're coming, though, do we?*

Maybe we should just go back to the habitat and wait?
Raphael said.

Victoria considered it. She wasn't particularly happy about the task at hand. Finally, however, she shook her head. *If we knew for sure that they were coming, or even had some idea of when, I could see taking a chance that they might get here before we lose anyone else. As it stands, they might never come. We need to at least try to eradicate the threat. Otherwise, they'll be picking us off one by one until there's nobody left.*

Raphael nodded. *Let's do it, then.*

* * * *

To Victoria's surprise, the 'valley' was just as Roach had described it ... right down to the current. Despite the fact that she'd more than half expected it, she was very nearly carried over the edge. They paused, looking down.

Ask Roach which direction, Victoria told Raphael.

Raphael glanced at Roach and Roach pointed.

How far?

He's not sure. He says the first he noticed were about a half a mile down slope, maybe a mile.

Check your weapons. No wild shots. No squandering fire power. Keep an eye on the man next to you and make damn sure you don't cut across our line with fire. If your weapon drops below 75% firepower, yell out. Retreat on my orders and not before. Got it? Victoria said, glancing down the row of men and women. They nodded as her gaze touched them.

Form a line, no more than an arm's length between anyone. We're going to do a sweep. You're responsible for the man next to you. Anyone goes down, grab them.

They formed a ragged line and started down the slope at an angle, watching the surface for any sign of the depressions Roach had described.

Victoria halted abruptly when she spotted the first pit, scanning the area around it. At first, she could see nothing. Then, slowly, as she concentrated, her eyes focused on the faintest of movements. It was the general shape of a manta ray, flattened, almost saucer shaped, but so nearly transparent, or so well camouflaged, that it appeared as nothing more than the ocean bed around it.

Her heart skipped several beats as she stared at it, then she slowly moved her gaze across the landscape. As far as she could see there were identical pits, approximately a meter in diameter and probably no more than three meters between them. She didn't need to see them to know a creature lay in each one.

Oh my God! It's a nesting ground!

The thoughts had scarcely formed in her mind when the creature nearest her turned bright red, rising menacingly from its nest.

Fire! Fire!

* * * *

There was no sweep. The moment they stepped within the territorial range of the creatures, they rose like a swarm of bees and attacked aggressively. Victoria pulled her group into a turtle formation, only vaguely aware of the two men on either side of her and those at her back. The color the animals turned when threatened made them marginally easier to see and they were not proof against the fire power of the lasers. She cut five in half in two seconds.

The problem was, there were hundreds of them. As quickly as she killed five, ten more swarmed toward her. She realized very quickly that they didn't have nearly enough firepower.

Fall back! Keep the circle tight!

With the current flowing against them and the creatures swarming, it took them almost twice as long to reach the summit once more as it had taken to move down it.

Once they'd cleared it, Victoria halted for a head count and discovered they had three men down ... which translated to six because the injured had to be carried.

Raphael, try to reach Quinton and warn him we're coming his way.

Albert check our heading. I don't want to waste time looking for the habitat.

I can't reach him, Raphael told her after a moment.

Keep trying. I'd like to be sure they know we're between them and these things when the censors go off.

They began moving once more, covering as much ground as possible before they were forced to halt again by the circling creatures. Once they moved beyond the tug of the current that dipped into the valley, the water around them turned murky with the fluids of the animals they killed and Victoria couldn't decide whether she was having difficulty breathing because of the effort of fighting and retreating, or because the creatures had released their poisons into the water at death.

I'm down to 20%, the man beside her said, then yelped as one of the creatures brushed against him. Victoria shot it as it arched away, grabbing for the man as he sank slowly toward the ocean floor. Tugging him behind her, she kept moving, kept firing.

It was with a great deal of relief that she saw the habitat come into view once more, for she'd begun to realize that she was almost certainly sucking poisons inside her with every gasping breath. It was becoming harder and harder to breathe. They'd been cut nearly in half, and the few still able to move were each carrying a man as well as fighting.

To her relief, their backup swam out to meet them, helping to pull the downed fighters to the habitat and up through the access pool.

It was all Victoria could do to pull herself up to the edge of the access pool. She hadn't the energy to climb out. Raphael grabbed her, pushing her up onto the lip of the pool before following her up.

"Head count," Victoria gasped.

Quinton took the count. "All present and accounted for."

Victoria nodded. "Seal the access pool. Raphael, did you get any kind of count?"

He shook his head. "Maybe a couple of dozen were still with us when backup arrived.

She smiled wryly. "That's what I thought. I was hoping it wasn't just wishful thinking."

Roach glared at her. "You stupid bitch! You just had to go out and stir them up! Now we're all going to die on this shit hole planet!"

It took more of an effort to get on her feet than she would've thought possible, but Victoria managed it. When she'd steadied herself, she kicked Roach squarely in the jaw. His eyes rolled back in his head.

Satisfied, she turned to look at the rest of the group. "Let's get these people up to medical."

* * * *

Guilt swamped Victoria as she stared out over the eight sheet draped figures lying perfectly still on the floor of the sickbay. "Are they ... comatose?"

"Not in the strictest sense of the word," Tuttle said grimly. "These Kaymons produce some sort of poison similar to some species of wasps. They paralyze their prey, but the paralysis doesn't seem to affect the internal organs to a great degree ... at least it hasn't caused death at this point. They're still alive, quite possibly aware of their surroundings, but unable

to move or speak. The problem is, I don't know *if* they'll come out of it, or when."

Victoria glanced at her sharply. "Kaymons? You've identified them?"

Tuttle gave her a wry look. "No. These monsters are exclusive to Kay. I was calling them Kay Monsters, but Kaymons is easier."

Victoria nodded, but a look of revulsion crossed her features. "They looked very much as if they were nesting. There were little pits all over the sides of the 'hills' of that valley. And in each one, one of these ... Kaymons. There were hundreds. We probably killed a couple of hundred, but I doubt we diminished them by half. It was impossible to get a very good look at them, but they looked almost disk shaped, and they moved like manta rays. I'm guessing they can move through the air the same way they move through water—One thing I don't really understand, though, is that they attacked us without provocation."

"They were nesting," Raphael said grimly. "It's mating season."

Chapter Fifteen

Victoria glanced at him sharply. "You saw young?"

Raphael shook his head. "Remember the sleeping vision I had? You said it was a nightmare? It wasn't a nightmare. He reached out to me telepathically. I wasn't certain at the time. I took your word for it, because it was easier to accept that it was a disturbing dream than something that was actually happening.

But, when Tuttle explained the way the poison works, I knew. They paralyze their prey and leave them in their 'nests' to feed the hatchlings when they emerge. It's to preserve the 'meat', to make sure it's still fresh for their young. Apparently, food is scarce ordinarily and, in the past, they had to hunt over a wide area to find enough food—which is why they developed the ability to paralyze and preserve the food.

But then the company set a smorgasbord right in their backyard.

That's why there's so many. Last season, they had more than enough to feed their young. This season, we're on the menu."

Roach, who'd been nursing his head on a cot nearby, made a sound that was somewhere between a whimper and a laugh. "You're just guessing!" he said angrily. "You're just trying to help cover her ass because she screwed up!"

Raphael turned and glared at him. "Let's have your theory."

Roach gaped at him, looked around at the rest of the crew, who were watching him. "I don't know. And neither do you!"

"We all know that's why the last crew went missing," Raphael pointed out grimly. "You saw Kitchens. You said...."

"No!" Roach covered his face. "Don't! I don't want to think about it."

"It's not going to do any of us any good to pretend it isn't happening. But I don't think anybody here is qualified to question Victoria's judgment on how she handled the threat. Those things *are* a threat to our survival. I'm guessing, whether we'd gone out or not, they would've been coming for us ... just like they came for the others.

At least going after them gave us the chance to increase the odds in our favor a little bit. We know where they are now. We can identify the threat and we know what they'll be using against us."

Victoria studied him, wondering if he *had* said it to make her seem less negligent, but the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. "We upset the eco-system," she said thoughtfully. "They'd almost hunted out the area—that's why we didn't see anything else, not because they'd moved further away because we'd invaded their territory, but because there was next to nothing to begin with. These things—Kaymons—must have been on the verge of extinction ... until the company provided a new food source for them."

Raphael shrugged. "That's my guess."

Victoria frowned. "So why weren't they hunting us from the time we arrived?"

"If we accept the theory we've developed so far, they would have had to survive on very little food. Maybe you were on track before. Maybe they hibernate for long periods of time—or something like it. Maybe that's how they were stirred up by the first crew ... maybe that's how we got them stirred up."

Victoria looked around. "Anybody else want to volunteer any theories here? Remember anything you saw, but didn't think much about it at the time?"

"I'm more interested in what we're going to do about it," Sylvia said. "You've got everything you need to survive, assuming we can keep them out—but from what Raphael has told us, we'll die if we're out of water more than twelve hours and we might not even have that long."

Victoria blushed. "I didn't consider that we might be trapped here indefinitely."

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Sylvia said quietly. "You've always looked out for us. I'm just saying, regardless of what Roach seems to think, we never had the option of just hiding and hoping we wouldn't be one of the hunted. Caroline said they'd made contact—somebody may or may not be coming to rescue you and the others, but nobody's coming for us."

Brown leapt to his feet. "What does she mean by that?"

Victoria glanced at Raphael and then away. "The company...."

"Fucked up," Raphael finished. "We were supposed to be primarily human, with aquatic traits that would allow us to work the mines for extended periods of time ... traits that

could be reversed per the law. Instead, they've found the traits aren't reversible, and the accelerated growth hormone seems to have upset the delicate balance they thought they'd achieved. We're becoming progressively more aquatic and less human. Which means we wouldn't be able to leave, because we can't survive the conditions you require to live."

Brown stared at Sylvia a long moment before his face contorted with rage. "Those fucking bastards! You're not going to go along with this shit, are you Anderson?"

Victoria's lips tightened. "We don't leave our people behind. You shouldn't have felt you had to ask. You know me better than that!"

Sylvia got up. "Stop it! This isn't going to help anyone. Let's just focus on right now or there might not be a later for anybody!"

As if her outburst were their cue, the alarms connected to the motion detectors went off.

"They're back!"

Victoria raced to the command station they'd rigged up, which had a feed from the security videos. At first, she didn't see anything at all. When she used the control to zoom in for a closer shot, however, she could see the cover to the access pool was moving ever so slightly. After a moment, she realized it wasn't the cover that was moving. "Shit! They're slipping through the cracks!"

"I thought you said the damn things were as big as a grown man?" Brown snapped. "How could they get through without breaking the cover?"

"They've done it!" Victoria snapped. "You, you and you," she snapped, pointing. "Grab your weapons and get over to the elevator shaft. Raphael, Quinton, we've got the door. And set the lasers on low!" she added as an afterthought. "We don't want to burn anymore holes for them to slip through."

They waited tensely, watching the clothing that had been stuffed under the door, hardly daring to blink. Quite suddenly, the door latch rattled. Victoria's heart seemed to stand still. Her eye lenses seemed to focus in on the latch, like the zoom on a camera. It was then she saw to her horror that it hadn't been locked. She leapt forward, throwing her shoulder against the door just as something bumped the door and it widened a sliver.

Something was wedged in the door. She couldn't get it closed. She pounded the door with her shoulder a couple of times, trying to force it closed. Next to her, Raphael threw his shoulder against it, as well. The obstruction cleared and the door slammed to. Victoria flipped the lock and looked around. Quinton was aiming toward the ceiling, following something with the site on his rifle.

Grabbing up the rifle she'd dropped, Victoria squinted her eyes, searching. The overhead lights glinted off their still damp bodies and she spotted three swooping, dipping closer and closer to the crew members huddled near the floor. She fired. Around her she heard the high pitched whines of several other lasers as Quinton and Raphael fired. The Kaymon she'd fired on dropped on Tuttle. She screamed, threw it off and dashed for cover, scrambling under a table. Victoria leapt toward the downed Kaymon, blasting it twice

more for good measure, then kicked it. When it didn't move, she turned to look for another target. To her relief, she saw that Quinton and Raphael had taken down the other two.

"I think we've got them on the run," Brown said, watching the screens.

Victoria moved to stand beside him. "More likely they had to go back. They probably can't survive out of the water long."

She turned away from the video screens. "Who left the god damned door unlocked?"

Everyone stared at her wide eyed, but no one spoke up. After a moment, she set her rifle down and scrubbed her hands over her face. "We'd probably have to weld the doors shut to keep those damned things out." Her shoulders slumped.

"What now?"

Victoria massaged her tense neck muscles and glanced at her watch. It was mid afternoon. "It'd be nice if the kitchen staff would round us up something to eat," she said, smiling wearily at the kitchen staff.

Clarence, the head cook, perked up at once and scrambled to his feet. "You heard the boss," he said to his three man staff. "Let's get to work."

Victoria looked around and finally spotted Barbara. "Anything else from the contact?"

Barbara shook her head. "It's gone dead. Something must have happened to the lead. You want me and Caroline to run up and check on it?"

Victoria thought about it for several moments but finally shook her head. "Too risky right now. Later maybe.

"Quinton?" She turned to look for him. "It looks like it's clear right now. Get these carcasses out of here. I'm not completely satisfied they're dead—and if they're anything like jellyfish, they could still sting after death, so don't touch them with your hands. Brown, take a couple of people and see if you can come up with something better to seal the doors with."

Brown looked at her a little doubtfully. "You want us to weld the doors?"

Victoria was on the point of shaking her head, but it occurred to her that the elevator shaft could be welded. They couldn't use that anyway and it would eliminate one point of entry. Of course it was also leave them with only one escape route. On the other hand, there didn't seem to be much point in having two exits when they were likely to be besieged at both. "You know where an arc gouge is?"

Brown looked surprised, but he nodded.

"Get it. Then weld the elevator shaft only. If we have to get out that way, we'll have the arc gouge handy to cut a new exit. But find something else for the door. I'd rather not be completely shut in until and unless we find it necessary."

When they'd left, she slung her rifle over her shoulder and went into sickbay. Tuttle was checking the vitals on one of her patients. "Any change?"

Tuttle shook her head. "If this works anything like wasp venom, though, they might begin to come out of it in a day or two."

Victoria looked at Tuttle, then glanced down at the young man she was standing by. She'd named him Richard. It was odd how young he looked, caught in the unnatural sleep. As the others did, he'd appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties. She'd supposed that was their physiological age. It certainly wasn't their chronological age. If he'd been allowed to develop naturally, he would not even have been born yet. She brushed his hair from his forehead, then looked up at Tuttle self-consciously. "They might not have that long. You'll have to watch them for tissue degeneration due to prolonged exposure."

Tuttle bit her lip. "What'll I do if I see it?"

Victoria rubbed her neck. "I don't know. I'll have to think of something."

Sylvia poked her head in at the door. "Chow's ready."

"You go," Victoria said, looking at Tuttle. "I'll keep an eye on them while you eat."

She didn't realize Sylvia was still standing in the doorway until she looked up as Tuttle left. "It's a habit with you, isn't it?"

Victoria lifted her brows questioningly.

"Watching over us."

Victoria wasn't certain how to take the comment. "I'm senior officer," she said noncommittally.

"It wasn't that, though, that made you feel the need to name us, to check our progress, was it? You do realize we're only here because of you? If you hadn't been so determined to make sure nothing went wrong, they would have terminated us en-route."

Victoria bit her lip. "I guess you all hate me for that."

"You'd be guessing wrong," Sylvia said, smiling faintly.

"Don't get me wrong, I think most of us, when we first found out, thought we would've been better off if we'd died before 'birth', but then we realized we were angry because we wanted to live and we were afraid that would be taken away from us. So, why be angry with you for working so hard to give it to us?"

"You don't ... hate me, then?" Victoria said hesitantly.

"None of you?"

Sylvia's smile widened. "Raphael loves you ... we all do." She thought about it for several moments. "Not the way he does, of course. Sort of ... like you were our mother."

Victoria was taken aback. She didn't know how she felt about that comment.

"It makes you uncomfortable."

Victoria smiled wryly. "No. Yes. It makes me feel a little strange, that's all. You're all ... grown, physiologically around my own age."

Sylvia frowned thoughtfully. "The care giver. The one who nurtures and guides. Isn't that what mother means?"

Victoria looked at her in surprise. "I'd never thought about it, actually."

Sylvia nodded. "I just wanted you to know ... well, just in case I don't get another chance. Thank you."

A hard knot formed unexpectedly in Victoria's throat, making it difficult to swallow. "We're going to get out of this."

Sylvia nodded. "If anyone can do it, I know you can."

Victoria stopped her before she could leave. "You're sure Raphael doesn't think of me as ... uh ... as his mother?"

Sylvia laughed. "Does he act like it?"

Victoria blushed. "No!"

"He'll kill me for putting that idea in your head," Sylvia said wryly.

"I'll have to keep him from finding it, then, won't I?"
Victoria responded, both relieved and amused.

Sylvia shook her head. "You didn't really understand when Raphael told you he'd mind-melded with you, did you? You are as two halves of a whole, together in mind, body and spirit. He's been trying to release you. That's why he withdrew. That's why he seems so distant. He's trying to sever the tie so that when you go you'll not feel as if you're no longer whole."

"Strangely enough, that's not what I want," Victoria said, controlling the urge to burst into tears with an effort.

"But it's what's best for you," Sylvia said gently. "That's what you do when you love someone, isn't it? You try to do what's best for them?"

Chapter Sixteen

Victoria was thoughtful as she ate, trying to push personal considerations to the back of her mind so that she could concentrate on the problems at hand. It was not something she had ever had to do before. In general, she was completely focused on her job.

She'd cleaned her plate before anything useful occurred to her. "Brown, do we have any kind of explosives?"

Brown looked at her in surprise. "I don't know. The construction crew might have. We use the laser cannon on the mines. What're you thinking?"

"The CAT's air tight. I'm thinking it's doubtful those things could get inside of it."

"The seals are rubber," he reminded her. "They might be able to push past them."

"It's worth a try though."

"What's worth a try?" Raphael asked.

"Using the CAT to get close enough to blow the damned things to hell," Victoria said. "The construction crew would've had explosives to blast out enough rock to set the foundation for the habitat. The laser cannon is great for precision work, but slow. If there's enough left, we can use the CAT to plant a row of explosive on either side of that valley and blow it. Between the explosions and the cave in, we should be able to take care of most of the damned things."

Brown frowned. "Sounds like a plan, but we'd have to go outside to get the Cat, rig it outside, too."

"They keep retreating, though. I'm thinking they don't want to leave their young, or their eggs, for very long. They chased us all the way back to the habitat, then withdrew. They didn't try again for several hours. I think we'll be able to count on at least a small window of opportunity after the next attack. Have we got anyone who knows anything about explosives?"

She looked around.

"I could probably figure out how to wire it if I had a manual," Xavier volunteered.

"See what you can find in the computer. Brown, take a half dozen volunteers and scour the habitat. See if you can locate the explosives."

He looked at her a little sheepishly. "They're in the warehouse. Level three." At the look she gave him, he stammered, "I just figured you'd give up on the idea if we couldn't find explosives."

"You don't think it'll work?"

He shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I'm not sure it's worth the risks involved, that's all. What if the seals on the CAT doesn't keep those things out?"

"That's a chance I'm willing to take."

Brown glared at Raphael. "That's exactly what I figured you'd say. Tell her she can't do it."

Victoria looked from one man to the other, then frowned. "What're you talking about?"

Raphael shrugged. "If I say no, she'll do it in spite of hell."

Victoria glared at him before returning her attention to Brown. "Get the explosives. We'll worry about who's going if

and when we get the CAT rigged. Xavier's already volunteered. The CAT holds four."

Brown and his group managed to retrieve the explosives, but they had to fight a running battle to get back as the Kaymons came at them in a fresh wave. By the time the second battle was finished, Victoria had to concede that the possibility of getting to the CAT and setting it up was about nil considering night was falling.

When she'd caught her breath, she walked around the room and tapped four on the shoulder. "First watch, second, third, fourth. Everybody else, find a room and get some rest. You'll have to double up. There are only six suites on this level."

* * * *

Victoria was standing under pelting hot water when she sensed she was no longer alone. She opened her eyes slowly and met Raphael's gaze for a long moment, then, without a word, she stepped toward him. Placing her palms on the ripple of muscles that formed his abdomen, she slid them slowly up his chest, over his shoulders and finally locked her fingers behind his head, swaying closer as she did so until her skin brushed his. Lowering her head, she kissed his shoulder, his throat and then brushed her lips lightly against his.

His arms came around her, tightened almost painfully a moment and then relaxed fractionally as he opened his mouth, covering hers, plunging his tongue into her mouth. The heat of his mouth warmed her. His taste and scent were as heady as strong wine, sending a wave of languor through

her. The caress of his tongue along her own, the brush of his flesh against her flesh, made moisture gather in her sex.

She broke the kiss at last, wanting to taste and touch him everywhere at once, to feel him inside of her, to feel him wrapped around her. He lifted her, carrying her in the room, laying her on the bed and following her down. She shivered at the chill of the air on her wet skin, but his lips and hands chased the chill away, quickly replacing it with heat.

Spreading her thighs, she welcomed him. "Now," she whispered. "I want you inside of me."

She moaned as she felt the head of his cock nudging the flesh of her sex, parting her slowly, slipping through the hot moisture that had gathered there to ease his way inside of her. He went still when he had embedded his rock hard cock to the hilt inside of her, pulling away from her so that he could look down at her as he slowly withdrew and then pushed into her once more. She lifted her hands to his shoulders, gazing up at him as she countered his rhythm, then looked down, between them to the point where their bodies joined. Raphael followed her gaze, moving slowly as he watched their flesh meld, separate and join.

A shudder went through him. He hesitated a long moment, groaned and began moving again, faster, plunging deeply inside of her. Victoria dug her heels into the mattress, meeting each hard thrust of his cock with one of her own, clutching his shoulders more tightly until he lowered himself so that her breasts rubbed against his chest with each thrust of his body. The stimulation sent a flood of heat through her, sent her careening toward fulfillment. She pulled his head

down and thrust her tongue into his mouth. When he closed his mouth around it and sucked, her body convulsed, the muscles in her belly clenching around his cock, milking him of his seed. He groaned into her mouth, and finally pulled away, gasping, spent.

Victoria tightened her arms around him, wrapping her legs around his thighs and holding him to her. She didn't want to let go. She realized she never wanted to let go.

Finally, gently, he disentangled himself from her and lay beside her, pulling the covers up over them.

The sheets were damp, but she found she didn't care. She moved against him, demanding silently that he hold her close. He slipped his arm around her, stroking her back. She was half asleep when he spoke. "I shouldn't have come."

She nuzzled against him and kissed his chest. "I'm glad you did."

"I wanted to ask you to do something for me."

Victoria pulled away and looked up at him. "What?"

He frowned. "I understand that it was never part of your plans and it's a lot to ask, but I'd like for you to keep this." He caressed her belly.

Victoria stared down at his hand for a long moment before she realized what he was talking about. "Raphael...."

He put a finger to her lips. "Shhh. I know you need to think about it, that you haven't decided. I just wanted you to consider it. It would ... please me to think that my son was with you."

Victoria flipped over, putting her back to him. "Don't talk like that. I can't accept that nothing can be done."

He placed his hand on her arm, leaned down and kissed her shoulder. "Stubborn. I've always loved that about you."

Victoria sniffed. "I find that hard to believe."

She felt him smile against her shoulder. "That's because you never understood that I love everything about you."

She swallowed with some difficulty. "We still have the containment. We could retrieve it, use it to transport everyone."

Raphael sighed. "It was specially designed for the ship that brought us. You know as well as I do that the odds are astronomical that it would fit in the hold of another ship, even assuming they would be willing to jettison their cargo to accommodate us. And what is the likelihood that the ship would be equipped with a pulley system that would work to hoist it? If you think I want to accept this, you're mistaken. I'd like nothing more than to go with you."

Victoria sighed and turned over. "I don't want to talk about it. I want you to make love to me until I can't think of anything at all."

* * * *

The Kaymons attacked again just before dawn. They were caught off guard, for this time the creatures found their way through the ventilation system. A half a dozen managed to slip in before the motion sensors went off and Quinton, Caroline and Sylvia were struck down as they ran from their sleeping quarters.

Roach managed to shoot Brown in the leg with the laser rifle before the last of the Kaymons were brought down.

Roach threw his rifle down when he saw what he'd done and rushed to see how seriously he'd injured his coworker, whereupon Brown did his utmost to choke the life out of him.

When Tuttle and Albert finally managed to separate the two, both men were in need of medical attention.

Gasping, as much from the adrenaline rush as the expenditure of energy, Victoria rushed to the monitors, watching closely until she was certain the surviving Kaymons had retreated from the general area. "Let's move it! Now people!" she yelled at the group that had been hand picked to outfit the CAT.

Grabbing up weapons and equipment, everyone raced for the door, paused to check the stairwell, and then pounded down the stairs. They arrived at the lowest level somewhat winded, checked it cautiously, and waited while Victoria checked with Barbara to make certain the Kaymons were still in retreat.

At the all clear, the cover was lifted from the access pool and they dove, swimming toward the mines, where the CAT had been parked. Victoria had reckoned without the effects the water would have on their speed. It took them nearly twice as long to outfit the CAT as she'd calculated.

She kept a close watch of the time, alternating by checking the long range sensors.

Raphael swam to her, gripping her arms. *We're ready. Donna and Carol have volunteered to go with me and Xavier. Don't fight me on this, Victoria. You're needed here.*

Victoria studied him a long moment and finally nodded. She looked at her watch. *They're liable to be swarming again before you're done. Be careful.*

He pressed his lips to hers briefly. *I'll see you when I get back*, he said when he pulled away.

She nodded, watching as he and the others climbed into the CAT and started it up. When the CAT had vanished in the murky depths, she called the workers together and returned to the habitat to pace and wait.

Minutes ticked into hours. Victoria kept glancing at her watch, wondering if they'd reached the site in the time calculated, and then, if they had managed to set the charges in the time they'd calculated. Periodically, she checked the video feed and the sensors. Finally, she realized she was making everyone jittery with her display of nerves and retreated into her quarters.

The projected time of detonation came and went. Victoria discovered that she'd chewed her nails down to the quick and began pacing again.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. A noise, like a deep moan echoed hollowly through the habitat. It shivered. In a moment, the faint waver had become hard shaking and every proximity monitor went wild.

Victoria snatched the door open and raced into the rec room. The video feed from beneath the habitat showed billowing clouds of silt. Tumbling through it, Victoria could see a dozen or more Kaymons. "They were too late," she said as the proximity sensors topside let out a sharp cry of warning. Dimly, she saw the outline of the CAT as it rolled to a halt

beneath the habitat. "Stay put," she muttered. "Just stay put."

To her horror, she saw the doors opening.

"Shit! They're coming in! I need four people, now!" She yelled, grabbing up her rifle and heading for the door without waiting to see who would follow.

Reaching the access level, she started hauling on the wench to lift the top from the access pool. As soon as it had risen a foot, Raphael, Donna, Carol, and Xavier squeezed through and rolled from the lip of the pool. She released the wench and grabbed her rifle up. "The sensors are going crazy. They must be everywhere," she said as she turned and led the way back to the stairwell.

Raphael fell into step beside her, then pushed ahead of her, grasping the door first and pulling it open. They scanned the stairwell and started up. They were nearing the third level when they heard the distinct sound of a door opening.

"Hello the habitat!"

Victoria exchanged a glance with Raphael, hardly daring to believe someone had come for them. "We're here!" she yelled. "Coming up!"

"Make it fast! There's a hell of a storm blowing up here! We need to get off this rig before the ship's damaged by flying debris."

"We've got wounded," she yelled back. "Give us ten!"

She pounded on the door of the officer's level when she reached it. "Our ride's arrived," she said when the door opened and Brown looked at her in surprise. "Grab a stretcher. Let's get these people up there."

Brown grinned. "I think I can make it under my own steam ... even if I have to crawl."

Victoria grinned back at him, feeling giddy with relief. "I'll give you a hand. You might crawl too slow to suit them."

The wind snatched the door from her grip when she opened it onto the lower deck, slamming it back against the wall. She staggered, almost falling with Brown. Regaining their balance, they leaned into the wind and struggled to climb the exposed stairs that led to the upper deck.

Finally, they reached the upper deck, however, and staggered toward the open bay doors of the ship that awaited them. Victoria was on the gang plank before she recognized it. Looking around, and then up, she met Captain Huggin's gaze. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

He smiled wryly. "I hope you can properly appreciate the fact that I just threw away a forty year career," he said as she came even with him.

She studied him a long moment. "We'll see. After I get through with them, you might find they're anxious to do the right thing."

His brows rose, but he dismissed whatever questions rose to mind. "We need to get everyone in here as quickly as we can. We're not going to be able to take off if the wind gets much harder."

Victoria nodded and released Brown. Turning, she waved the others up, urging them to hurry. Roach brushed past her and kept going. Tuttle scrambled up the gangplank behind him, nearly falling twice. Behind her, Clarence and his kitchen

help struggled to make their way into the hold, leaning against the pelting wind.

It was then that Victoria discovered none of the injured had been brought up. Raphael, Xavier and Barbara stood near the stairwell, watching, but unmoving. She stared at Raphael with a mixture of surprise and anger. Placing her hands around her mouth, she shouted at him to bring the injured.

Captain Huggins gripped her shoulder. "We can't bring them."

She glanced at him. "You're out of your fucking mind if you think I'm leaving any of my people on this hell hole of a planet!" she said furiously.

"We can't take them! We don't have the containment!"

"We'll retrieve it!" Victoria said furiously.

"We can't! Not in this." He paused, saw she wouldn't listen and added, "I'm under orders not to bring them off planet for any reason," he said angrily. "If I did, you can be damn sure we'd never make it back to any port."

"They won't know if you don't tell them," she said through gritted teeth.

"Victoria!"

She turned, saw that Raphael had come to stand behind her. "Bring everyone up. We're leaving."

He shook his head slowly, smiling faintly. "I know you think you can do anything, but you can't fight this."

"I'm not leaving you!"

"No. You're being taken away," he said and pulled her close, pressing his lips to hers. Victoria threw her arm around his neck, holding him tightly.

Below
by Kaitlyn O'Connor

"We can do this," she said. "I've got the weapon I need."

He caressed her cheek, touched her neck. Something shot through her, like a static charge. It was the last thing she remembered as darkness claimed her.

Chapter Seventeen

Victoria felt herself shaking. She frowned, then realized that she was being shaken. With an effort, she opened her eyes. Brown was standing over her.

She blinked. "Where am I?"

"We're on the ship. Leaving our people, that's where we are. What're you going to do about it?"

Victoria jackknifed into a sitting position. The sudden motion made her head swim. "What the hell was I hit with?"

"Damned if I know. Raphael touched you on the neck and the next thing I know, you're falling into a limp pile in his arms. Captain Huggins dragged you up the gang plank and pulled it."

Victoria got up. "I need a weapon. How long was I out?"

Brown produced two pistols, handing her one of them.

"Too long."

Huggins glanced around when Brown and Victoria entered the cockpit, then returned his attention to the controls. "I'm sorry, Anderson. I would've done something if I could, but my hands are tied." His heart skipped a beat when a cold, round metal object settled on his temple. He didn't have to look to know what it was.

"I'm sorry, too, Huggins. I want you to know I will deeply regret splattering your brains all over Grant over there, but I'll do it anyway if you don't turn this ship around.... right now."

Huggins slid a sideways glance at her. "You're bluffing."

"Are you willing to bet your life on it?"

"You're not qualified to pilot this ship."

"You really think I'm going to worry about a little thing like a license after I've murdered you?"

He paled. "What I meant was, you don't know how."

"I'm a fast learner. But I don't have a lot of patience right now. I'm going to give you to the count of five."

Huggins hesitated.

"One."

"All right!"

"You're going to set it down right where you dropped the containment."

He threw her a startled glance. "That's over the water. I can't hold it there in this weather!"

"I've got confidence in you." She turned to Brown. "I'm going below to get everything situated. Let me know when to open the bay. If either of these two try anything, shoot them." She thought about it several moments. "On second thought, I believe I'll take Grant with me. She might decide to play with the transmitter."

Grant threw a frightened look in her direction. "I won't. I swear I won't."

"She's my navigator. I need her."

"You'll get by without her," Victoria said, grabbing a fistful of Grant's tunic and hauling her out of the seat.

"You'll get life for this," Huggins muttered.

Victoria ignored him, shoving Grant toward the exit. They headed for the brig once they'd gained the corridor. Victoria shoved Grant into a cell and locked it.

"We came back for you!" Grant yelled.

Victoria studied her a moment, then moved closer. "We lost three people because you and Huggins abandoned us on that rock, knowing something had wiped out the entire crew that was supposed to be there to meet us," she said through gritted teeth. "Do you honestly think I believe you came back out of the goodness of your hearts? You came back because we were bouncing that distress signal across the universe and you got to worrying that your boss might not cover your ass if we were rescued and got the chance to tell what happened. In fact, you realized that the company would most likely throw you to the wolves as the perfect scapegoat."

Grant's eyes widened. She licked her lips. "That wasn't it! We realized you were in real trouble."

Victoria gave her a look. "How far did you get before it occurred to you that we 'were in real trouble'?"

Grant looked away. As Victoria opened the door to leave, she said, "You're not going to get away with this."

Victoria patted her chest. "I believe, in my heart, that I will."

* * * *

The storm had abated somewhat Victoria saw when she opened the bay doors. Whitecaps still peaked in excess of six feet, but the wind was not gusting nearly as hard as it had been. Victoria hit the com unit. "Brown?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going down to hook up. Tell him to hold it steady."

"Are you going to be able to handle it by yourself?" Tuttle asked worriedly.

Victoria glanced down at the waves. "I'll manage. Just watch the wench."

Tuttle gave her a thumbs up. "See you when you get back."

Victoria nodded, grabbed the heavy chain and held tightly while Tuttle lowered her. As she reached the water, she expelled the air from her lungs and began breathing through her artificial gill without even thinking about it.

She spotted the containment less than four meters from where she touched down. That was one thing she could say for Huggins. He was a hell of a pilot, with a memory like an elephant. She cupped her hands around the com unit. "Found it. Give me some slack."

The words were garbled because of the water. She had to repeat the words over and over, slowly, tugging on the chain before, finally, Tuttle gave her the slack she needed.

She was securing the last chain when she became aware that she was no longer alone. Grabbing her rifle, she whirled.

Raphael tread water near by. Surrounding him were the other miners.

We came back to retrieve the injured.

Victoria stared at him a long moment and finally gestured toward the containment with the rifle. *I came back for my people. Get in ... now. Or I'll throw the lot of you in the brig for insubordination.*

Epilogue

Victoria sighed. Dropping her chin to her hand, she stared dreamily out of the porthole at the view. The company had been right about some things, but not everything. Raphael had continued to mature, not at an accelerated rate, and not to a degree where he was less human than sea creature. But he was a beautiful merman and sometimes when she studied him, or when she looked at her beautiful castle in the sea, she felt as if she was living a fairy tale.

A tap on the other side of the glass brought her out of her state of meditation. She blinked and then smiled at the two faces on the other side of the glass.

I thought you were working?

I am ... was. I finished.

Good, because Dante is hungry and I think he's going to start eating me if you don't feed him soon.

Victoria laughed. *You should bring him in then. It's time for his nap anyway.*

She was waiting for them when they emerged from the access pool. Raphael handed her the wailing infant and climbed out. She tossed him a towel and wrapped her son in one, crooning to him as she climbed the stairs to their apartment. She was curled up in the middle of the bed with the baby at her breast when Raphael reached the second floor.

He studied her for a long moment and finally strode across the room and climbed on the bed as well, sprawling on his

side behind her and propping his head in his hand. He stroked the baby's cheek.

Dante frowned, his hand waving a little wildly. Finally, he gripped Raphael's finger. Raphael chuckled.

"Shhh!" Victoria admonished him. "He's almost asleep."

Raphael retrieved his finger and sat up. Pulling her back against him, he lowered his head and sucked a love bite on the side of her neck. Victoria closed her eyes, savoring his nearness. "Where is it?" he whispered in her ear.

She gave him a look, but pointed toward the ceiling. Taking the hint, he left her and went up to her studio.

She joined him when she'd settled the baby. "What do you think?"

He held out a hand to her and pulled her into his arms. "Aren't you tired of doing me?"

Victoria let out a gurgle of laughter and turned in his arms, putting her arms around his neck. "Not yet. Maybe in a hundred years."

He reddened slightly. "I meant the sculpture."

"I know what you meant," she said, still chuckling. "And the answer is, no. And neither are my customers. They love the figurines I do of you. Of course, I'm not stupid enough to think they buy them because they're so good. They buy them because they can't have you."

Raphael's blush deepened, but he smiled, shaking his head. "Your sculptures are beautiful. That's why they buy them. And we don't need the money ... What're you going to call this one?"

Victoria turned to study the figure. It depicted a merman seated on an outcropping of coral, studying the face of the child in his arms, his magnificent tail fin curled around the base of the outcropping for balance. "The merman and his son."

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