



Midnight Showcase

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Aldairian Ecstasy

**Forbidden
Desires**

Mae Powers

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SPECIAL EDITION

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By

Mae Powers

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE

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Aldairian Ecstasy: Forbidden Desires

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Beyond today there is a new world, one filled with all kinds of possibilities. We bring you an adventure and love story that will never end.

ALDAIRIAN ECSTASY
Forbidden Desires
By
Mae Powers

"Warning: unusual foreplay"

While in disguise and on a deadly assignment, Prince Dalharan Demmonarris of Aldairia and Admiral Rieka Hahl, of LAW, find that their dangerous desires grow to an all-consuming need. With all their turmoil and troubles, can the two find a way to share in the love of the Aldairian Ecstasy?

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Dedication

For all the warmth love and heart aches and constant support, I want to thank the two most important people in my life, my children Ree & JJ. Many thanks too goes out to my publisher Jewel Adams and editor ZQ. Importantly, as well as many thanks to my special dear friend and critique partner Lanette Curington. Also to a sweet honey of mine, Steve. I love you all. Thanks for helping me with my dreams and sharing in them. Also, a special thanks to all my writer and reader pals (fans like Cathie, Pam, Terri, Wendi, “K”, and Meg).

See ya in the next galaxy.

Happy reading and writing. Mae

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CHAPTER ONE

The Planet Krithnar: 2655

From the first caress of the mind scan, the sensual aura captivated him.

On the second level of the enormous open ballroom, Dalharan perused the crowd of alien races below him when the mind-probe startled him. He realized from the onset that the probe was not meant for him to pick up. His mentor long ago taught him how to differentiate the various mental scans. Perhaps because he was troubled by personal problems or just plain bored with the evening, he inadvertently picked up on the faint psychic waves. He did not doubt the person meant for the scanning to be subtler.

An odd notion occurred to him that the person's thoughts were interrupted. He felt a quick, unusual heat of interest. In that instant, he knew it to be a female. As if the frequency was just on him alone, he sensed he now became the focal point of the probing. It caused him to look down towards the lower half of the ballroom and survey the crowd below, while his conscious mind dwelled on his immediate surroundings. This was the first time the Legion of Allied Worlds Commerce held their annual summit on a neutral planet, such as this world, Krithnar.

Of mixed Gehennan and Aldairian origins, the Krithnarans belonged to neither federation. With the Krithnaran's usual flair for ostentatious melodrama, they opened the conference ball with a masked ensemble. Dalharan had slipped away from his personal entourage to escape the smothering life of his royal duties. Most everyone dressed to the hilt for the festivities. The simple white gold robes and matching mask were enough of a costume to complement the theme and décor of the conference.

Just after the probe ended, he automatically sent out a return mind sweep around the vicinity. His eyes followed where his inner mind led. His mind and gaze suddenly stopped when he noticed a

particular, tantalizing beauty. His psychic intuition told him the mind sweep came from her. Dalharan guessed her to be of Krithnaran origin because the race bore varying shades of vivid yellow-gold hair, rich golden skin-tones, and bright violet-blue eyes. Dalharan sensed something different about the woman, something he could not pinpoint, she was not the norm for a Krithnaran.

With *all* senses tingling and preparing to slam into hyper-drive, Dalharan took in every prominent detail of female that he could see from his position above. Finely sculpted muscles did not in any way take away from the woman's femininity. The gold, skimpy pant-dress she wore only emphasized the ample curves of her graceful, athletic body, her broad shoulders, and her long, shapely legs. Long waves of lustrous yellow-gold hair accentuated the loveliness of her oval-shaped face with its high cheekbones, firm chin, and steady gaze. He needed to meet this woman who sent his pulses reeling and his manhood feverishly aching.

Abruptly, her generous mouth curved into a deliciously wicked grin. From the first moment her unrivaled smile formed, waves of luscious, erotic pleasure roared up Dalharan's long spine. That unforgettable smile caught at his heart, and he became aware of a desire for her to be part of his destiny. Never before had such blatant sensuality hit him with such raw force. He psychically felt and saw women's desires for him, but no woman ever gave him such an aching hard-on before. His body heated like a star gone nova. Dalharan needed to know if this unusual woman felt the same erratic sensual awareness that washed over him.

He studied her for a few more seconds before he realized she stared directly back at him. Then, as if she became conscious of his scrutiny, she moved away. Dalharan's breathing deepened in an unsteady rhythm and he found himself walking toward the wide staircase leading to the lower room. He could not let her disappear out of his life. He would meet this startling woman who sent his pulses reeling and made his groins ache feverishly with need. Keeping her in his line of vision, he nodded or mumbled to others along the way as he moved towards her.

Dalharan's steps quickened. By the time he reached the bottom of the stairway, she stepped out onto a veranda, which led deeper into unkempt gardens. Moving swiftly, he was relieved no one tried to stop him. Pausing just outside the patio doors, he took a deep breath.

The night air held scents of all kinds. People on the veranda looked at him curiously, and Dalharan headed farther into the gardens.

Ahead in the soft red glow coming from the jewel-bright Rubyan bushes, native to this world, he saw the Krithnaran woman hurry down a dense garden path. For a few seconds, he lost sight of her as the long, protruding vines of the plant blocked his view. Dalharan let out a curse when his foot caught in a rut, making him stumble. After righting himself, he quickly continued along, careful to watch for other snags in the cracked brick path. The cloying scent of the bushes became stronger as he stopped in a tiny clearing.

A small, serene waterfall spilled softly into a man-made pond. Dalharan found her sitting on a triangular wooden bench on the bank of the moonlit pool. Quietly, he moved nearer. When he stood a few feet from her, she astonished him by jumping up and whirling around into a fighting stance.

“Do not be alarmed. I mean you no harm.” He held up his hands in a stopping gesture. “Your mind probe attuned us empathetically. I *felt* we *had* to meet.”

“You should not have followed me here.” She did not move away.

“I sensed your strong interest. I could not help myself.” He studied her response, but did not move towards to her.

“Your empathic powers are astute. No one has ever read me in the manner you just used.” He felt she regretted the personal disclosure.

“I think you hardly let anyone know your feelings.” Her nearness enflamed his senses.

“I needed to get away from you.”

Though taken aback by her frankness, he moved slightly closer to her. “Why?”

Instead of answering him, she edged closer herself. In the moonlight, he saw her lovely face more clearly. He looked deep into her haunting blue-violet eyes and saw bold, blatant hunger. Intense raw desire that armed all his mental and physical senses.

“I...understand.” His breathing felt ragged as he answered his own question. Years of instinctive duty, alerted him to the danger, screaming that this woman would cause nothing but turmoil to his heart. He silenced the inner warning. Just once, he would do as he pleased before duty claimed him and he had to marry that damn

foreign Gehennan princess. "I desire what I see in your eyes and feel in your closeness."

"Shall we leave this place?"

He wanted to pull her luscious body up in his arms right then and there. "You are a bold woman. No introductions, no nothing?"

Her lips curled ruefully. "I want you to know more about me than just a name."

A slow growl of fire escaped his lips, and a fire raged within him to be near this incredible woman. He would do it and enjoy a night of heated passion and escape that her eyes, body and words promised.

"Names can come later. I want to experience what your eyes promise."

"Then follow me," her accented, sensual voice enticed him to do anything she asked of him.

When she turned and moved away, he did not hesitate to follow. She glanced over her shoulder and grinned his way before quickening her steps. Though surprised at her agility, he willingly played the game of pursuit as he trailed after her through thick jungle-like foliage. Her pace accelerated, and, though he was sure she did not do it on purpose, Dalharan felt his blood pumping to keep up with her. He felt she was anxious for them to be together as he was. Vines and branches slashed him in the face and whipped at his clothing, and he temporarily lost sight of her. He dashed onward, stronger in his need of her.

A startled cry quickened his pace. He stopped as soon as he saw the precipice looming ahead where the tall trees ended. His unique beauty apparently did not see it. She had one hand wrapped around a vine, floating off the slippery bank, while her other hand flailed around, groping for something to hold on to. He rushed to her. Kneeling at the edge, he grabbed her wrist and jerked her to safety.

Once they were away from the dangerous precipice, he placed his free hand on the small of her back to steady her. She regained her composure and drew away from his hold. He tightened his large hand around hers, imprisoning her hand against his. Still intent on learning more about her and to prevent her from running away a second time, he grasped her other hand, firmly lacing his fingers with hers.

The moment their palms touched, Dalharan psychically and physically felt a raging, uncontrollable burst of bioelectric sensual energy race through both their bodies. It soon manifested itself physically between them. His body's sensory instincts empathically

and physically picked up her reactions. The initial blast of the *Charj*, an Aldairian's natural mating energy, was fierce and spectacular. Brightening like a newborn star, it worked its way from their hands and spiraled up their arms. The *Charj* worked its magic, engulfing their entire bodies in coruscating brilliance.

It hit them both with a turmoil onslaught of emotions, a raging tempest forcing them into an emotional ride on a whirlwind. The psychic and physical aspect of the *Charj*'s effects started to change from its first brilliant and confusing storm on their senses to an even more intense ecstasy.

Shimmers of physical desire winked rapidly out of control. His cock pushed against her thin clothing. A wave of vibrating heat emanated from her womanhood, soaking the head of his shaft with fevered need. The glittering sparks of sexual and emotive energies ran amok between their bodies. Dalharan never felt anything so forceful and intoxicating in all his life.

Her hips moved instinctively against his. Flashes of light and desire mingled and flickered around their bodies. His mind and body sensed her fierce need. Then she moved her hips back from his and the rhythm in the *Charj* shifted and crackled with unease.

Just after the effects of the *Charj* started changing, Dalharan heard very faint voices in the distance. So did the woman. All his natural and paranormal intuitions urgently warned him to leave the area before someone found out what just happened, but the *Charj* had yet to complete its full course. His instincts warred with the newfound ecstasy that held the promise of fulfillment. She must have picked up on his internal struggle because she snatched her hands away from his, breaking the flow of the *Charj*.

The Krithnaran woman staggered groggily away from him as the voices became more distinct. Dalharan's mind and body grew more heated with confusion, anger, and need. *Run now*, his mind warned. The Gehennans would take great umbrage if they found out he just pre-mated with a woman after signing a contract to marry their princess. Without thinking coherently, he advanced on the woman. Even growing frenetic with desire, he felt her distress and her weakness. She swayed forward. Dalharan quickly caught her up in his arms, stopping her fall. Instinctively, his feet moved and he headed away from the area.

He was not sure how, but he was thankful that he reached his quarters without anyone seeing them. After he shut the door behind

him, he secured the locking mechanism of the incombell to his suites. He knew his court-assistants would not bother him once they read his do-not-disturb message. He went immediately to his bedroom. Dalharan didn't like the bright colors of the gaudily furnished room, but he found the large bed with its soft satiny sheets quite comfortable. Somehow, he was cognizant enough to perform routine functions, though the emptiness and frustration of discontentment still roiled within him. Dalharan laid the woman on the sleeping unit. He found some cleansing cloths and wiped the dirt off her face where it accumulated from the fall. Dalharan unzipped the front of her pant-dress down to her waist and cleaned the dirt trailing though her cleavage and on her abdomen. After disposing of the cloths, he lay beside her.

"Lighting for soft sleep mode," he said to the room's automated voice-activated sensors.

The illumination in the room immediately dimmed to his command. Dalharan leaned on one elbow, gazing down at the woman on the bed. Earlier, his only thought had been to cleanse her. Now, he inhaled deeply, observing her natural beauty and ample curves.

Her breasts were a bit more than a handful for his large hands, but even as she lay in quiet distress, they jutted upwards to tease and tempt him to explore their rounded silkiness. Her dark nipples puckered into a sweet tempting moue. He could only imagine how tight the aureoles were when desire made them harden. The anticipation of tasting them made his cock harden painfully. How could he have waited so long before wanting a woman this deeply?

He lowered his head and let his sight follow his dark hand as he made a pathway of exploration down the middle of her desirable body. Her satiny light-gold skin was exotic and appealing next to his darker body. He traced a finger along her abdomen, stopping at the small indentation on her stomach. He wanted to take his tongue, delve into the tiny indent, and see if it affected her senses. Would she allow him to?

He glanced back up at her lovely face. The alien beauty was still dazed from the effects of the *Charj*. Unlike himself, her body's genetics did not know what to expect from his race's natural, emotional-sexual abilities. Despite the fact that her body responded to his sexually, he also knew that she would have no control over what his inherent mating power could do to her. It would be up to him to enlighten her as to what passed between them and to show her

ultimate fulfillment. He could only do that by letting her experience the *Charj* in its entirety this time, both physically and emotionally. Otherwise, like him, her sanity could slip at any moment. An Aldairian never knew for certain if he or she would go mad if the *Charj* was not completed. What little rationale was left him was all that kept him functioning now.

Despite the Krithnaran beauty having Aldairian ancestry, and according to most recorded Aldairian history, the *Charj* was just something that usually only full-blooded Aldairians could experience. The strange occurrence weighed a bit heavily with him, but experiencing the *Charj*, as was his natural wont, did not. Subconsciously, he had experienced what came about before the *Charj* hit an Aldairian couple—the sudden interest in each other, body signals, emotional awareness, and fluttering eye glances. Most humanoid cultures experienced these symptoms when they fell in love. For Aldairians, these senses escalated immediately, followed by an instant, psychic awareness that the person they found so incredibly attractive and emotionally pleasing would be their soul mate. The only being a single Aldairian would *Charj* and spend the rest of their lives with.

People from his world were raised to believe the opposite gender would feel the same. Dalharan had nothing else by which to compare his experience. He could not recall any record of an Aldairian *Charjing* with an off-worlder. Therefore, the alien woman beneath him could have felt as if her mind, body, and soul were being entered by force. He wanted and needed to show her he meant her no harm, that the *Charj* could be an all-consuming, wonderful experience. No emotional or physical aspect of the *Charj* was meant to be violent. He was thirty-eight and waited longer than most to experience this ecstasy. In the natural order of life, most Aldairians *Charjed* by the time they were in their late twenties. Fate just did not let it happen for him, before now.

He must make a choice. He could have what he expected and wanted all his life, the ecstasy of the *Charj* his natural mating heritage. Or he could let this opportunity pass, and not force himself and his warring desires on the woman.

She stirred beside him, her head tossing from side to side, no's and gasps of fear emanating from her lovely throat. His empathic senses were in overload and picked up on what she was going through, and Dalharan knew what she felt and experienced while

going through the *Charj*. For her, it had been a bloody nightmare, an emotional hurricane that scared the living hell out of her. She did not want it to be completed for fear of it sending her over the edge. Suddenly, she lay still, and he saw that she had finally fallen into a deep, exhausted slumber. Dalharan groaned, then rolled away from her.

He could not push the *Charj*'s intensity upon her again. It would be tantamount to rape since the woman was not Aldairian. Though the *Charj* psychically linked them for a short while, he did not believe she would understand he meant her no harm by completing the joining. He jumped from the bed and headed for the bathing pool in the next room. Dalharan would not force himself on the woman. When she woke in the morning, they would talk. He needed to make her understand what might happen should they not find completion.

Either one of them could go mad or die within two months or less if the *Charj* were not fulfilled. Instances of insanity and death from the incompleteness of the *Charj* had been recorded through the centuries of Aldairian history. Dalharan did not want to go mad or die. He wished only for the fulfillment, if just once. He prayed to whatever fates there were that she would allow him to feel the completion of the *Charj*.

CHAPTER TWO

Admiral Rieka Hahl woke with the worst hangover she'd ever experienced in all her space-faring years. Scooting to the edge of the wide bed, she sat up to look over her strange surroundings. Blinking several times, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Rieka realized at once that her mask was off and she was partially naked.

A loud groan from behind her caused Rieka to turn around. She drew in her breath and gaped at the big man lying there. He was quiet, shivering slightly, and sweat rolled down his back. He was half a foot taller than her own seven-foot frame, and the handsomest man she'd ever beheld. Rigid muscles rippled over his mocha-honey colored body. His long and wavy sable hair splayed over his head and shoulders, hiding his face from view.

His powerful body, half covered by a twisted sheet, did little to hide the outline of his big cock. Rieka licked her lips and shivered at the erotic pleasures his erection brought to mind. What the hell was going on with her? She sat semi-naked and in a stranger's bedroom, and her mind bombarded her with wanton dreams of a man she did not know.

She blinked her eyes, still in a daze about how she came to be in this man's bed. Then suddenly, the events of last night came back to Rieka.

She paid scant attention to those around her the previous evening, she was doing a stealth mind probe to find out just how hostile the conditions were at the trade-meets. Although it had been more than five years since she gave up being a fleet admiral, Rieka still kept the honorary title of admiral. She'd been ordered by her current commanding officer, First Admiral Joeseeph Coyton, head of the Legion of Allied Worlds' most secretive intelligence agency, AIM, to take R and R on Krithnar while staying on stand-by duty. He knew it was the only way to make Rieka take recreational time off.

Because of the war with the Vaukeen, nearly ten years ago, the LAW and Aldairian Alliances made a truce with their former enemies, the Gehennans, and stopped battling. They could defeat a common enemy, the bloodthirsty Vaukeen. The Vaukeen remained quiet for almost five years since their defeat. Then nearly a month ago, LAW's secret service branch, Alliance Intelligence Medium, received various reports that the Vaukeen were planning a reprisal. Several agents were sent to scout the Krithnaran Territories, including Rieka and her cousin Kathea Sairius. Each world in the Non-Partisan system, including Krithnar, maintained its own government and was not part of any formed alliance with other worlds.

Although the Legion of Allied Worlds were feared and respected, each planet Rieka visited did not have to answer to LAW should something happen to her. Therefore, Rieka deliberately dressed as a Krithnaran woman to keep those who knew her from recognizing her, allowing her easier access to the other planets in the non-allianced system. Having a father who was half Krithnaran did give her some advantages; the females of this planet were generously proportioned, and tall like their Aldairian and Gehennan ancestors. Applying a temporary dye to her skin and hair made it even easier to fit in being a paler tan like her Earth grandmother.

She figured the only reason LAW decided to hold the trade meets here was to stay on friendly terms with the Krithnarans and especially the Gehennans, hoping the latter would join the Legion of Allied Worlds instead of remaining enemies with them and Aldairia. Aldairia, the old home-planet of the Gehennans, joined just after LAW helped them overcome the Gehennans the first time over a decade ago. The Aldairians kept that new connection to trade agreements and other help should the need arise. They governed their own territories.

If she did not find a trace of anything concerning the Vaukeen within the next few days, Rieka intended to leave Krithnar and head out to one of the other insular planets within the Krithnaran Territories or beyond. She would try to find Kathea and see if the agent came across any news of a Vaukeen reprisal. Throughout her short time on Krithnar, during the eclectic trade-meets, she sporadically mind-traced individuals' emotional auras, hoping to pick up any Vaukeen hostilities. They were masters of disguise, but still emotional creatures.

Rieka knew she was a strongly skilled empath. If she did it correctly she could pick up even a Vaukeen's emotional vibrations without any other empath or psychic detecting her mind probing. She tried empathetically sensing for their auras for the past two days on different parts of the planet, but didn't have any luck. Then last night at the trade-meets she felt she should try one last time. Rieka concentrated and sent out a quick mental search. It must have been stronger than her other probes, letting her deeper emotions escape.

After glancing around the lower part of the room, something compelled her to look up. She saw one particular man staring in her direction. Tall and devastatingly disturbing to her feminine senses, his dark hair played seductively around his wide shoulders and the natural copper streaks of hair along the sides framed his darkly noble face. Then Rieka's empathic senses told her he scrutinized her at the same time she studied him.

Those same extra-senses told her that he felt a powerful sensual attraction to her. The man oozed an incredible, raw sexual prowess. She admitted that her upper thighs creamed with the awareness of his powerful attraction. By the fates, he had been the most compelling physical specimen of male sexuality she'd ever come across. Her latest search wave must have been more powerful than the others. She had the oddest feeling he picked up on her mind probe. He must have been slammed with many of her empathic emotions. She inwardly smiled at the thought that he picked up on how much she wanted to bed him.

Despite her healthy appetites, she would always be selective in her choice of whom she bedded. However, when she saw the devastating man above, her libido screamed, *Hello Universe!*

Rieka took her time studying him at her leisure, thinking of all kinds of wicked things she would like to do to him. She paid scant attention to anyone else around her in the ceremonial pavilions.

She slowly drew in her breath at the way his loose gold and white robe caressed his darkly delicious physique, wishing it were her hands flowing over that magnificent form. His body, large and dangerously seductive, made her want to spend a night or two in his arms. She liked the way his wavy, copper-streaked sable hair tantalizingly played around his face, creating an intriguing frame for his well-etched facial features. Her skin tingled with anticipation and some confusion.

Never, in all her thirty-eight years, did she ever desire a man from the first sighting so explosively. Usually she took her time raking them over, calculating how fiery they would be in or out of bed. But this alien man shook up all her senses, emotionally and physically, and for the first time in her life, she felt hesitant about making a move.

He came down the stairs and headed in her direction.

Rieka's skin tingled, causing her more confusion. A disturbing feeling engulfed her, a sort of omen, and she knew it had nothing to do with her sudden sexual awareness of him. It was unlike anything she had ever felt, even during her years on the galactic battlefield. Right then her instincts warned her to retreat. With mixed emotions, she turned and went out a side entrance before he could reach her. Yet, at the same time, she hoped he would pursue her.

The stranger followed her to the gardens, and she knew she could not deny her extraordinary desire for him. When he admitted to wanting her as much as she lusted after him, Rieka damned the steadfast instincts that kept telling her this man would give her nothing but trouble and heartache. She sensed he didn't want more than the night either. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to follow her personal, feminine intuition and needs, and let her libido scream with the entire fulfillment this extraordinary man could definitely deliver.

Rieka was almost afraid to touch him, least the fantasy and thrill of the night dissolve. Tentatively, she brushed close against him, feeling his heat emit as powerfully as her own. She let him see the raw hunger in her eyes that she felt throughout her entire body. The extreme nearness of his satiny, dark honey-brown skin infused ripples of sexual heat in every nuance of her being. She wanted to feel his cock plunging deep inside her moist, inner channel.

His mesmerizing voice and smooth accent almost made her want to confess all her past, shocking deeds to him. His thick, sensual lips were made for caressing a woman's body, driving her wild with desire. And his eyes, the color of rich cinnamon, caressed her as if his hands were slowly, intimately making love to her. They seemed to take in everything about her, not letting her hide any amoral secret from him. Her instincts were on fire with the discovery that within him shimmered a vivacious intelligence and thirst for life that he used in every aspect of living. Probably even in bed.

She knew he wanted her body as much as she desired his, sensed it would be exciting. So, she kept the energy of the moment alive by daring him to follow her. Men instinctively liked being the hunters, chasing their quarry. She noticed him enjoying the slight jaunt, the thrill of expectation.

For the first time in her life, she didn't watch where her feet were headed. Her body had been roaring too loudly, and she slipped in the soft, mushy grass, sending her over that darkened precipice. *He had pulled her up to safety, and then he changed her life forever when his hands imprisoned hers.*

The skies opened up with demonic roars of lightning and thunder. Frantic, sensual bio-electric energies rushed chaotically from his body into hers, scaring the living hell out of her, but at the same time searing her with a different kind of blatant, forceful sexual pleasure she never encountered with another.

Yet, she had heard of it before.

At that moment, she realized the impact of which race he belonged to. From her experience of dealing with multi-intergalactic races, she knew that only Aldairians' experienced this mating power called the *Charj*. Was that what this stranger imposed upon her last night? Had the traces of her mixed heritage allowed her to experience the *Charj*? Her main genetic coding was that of Earth human. Surely, the ordeal had just been some bizarre occurrence?

It could not have been what the Aldairians thought of as a true *Charj*. She did not know how long it lasted or much of what happened afterwards, except that he did not force her to endure it. Somehow, she inherently knew he didn't expect the *Charj* to spring forth between them. She felt protected through the night. That, in itself, scared her. He could have controlled her, taken what he wanted, but he hadn't. The *Charj* branded her in many ways—ways that scared the hell out of her! She could not let its frantic after-effects control her life. *Damn her libido, and damn this crazy mixed-up, friggin' mess.*

If she didn't have tough military training, she felt certain the experience would have left her a nervous wreck. Rieka suddenly groaned and started to shiver uncontrollably with devastating thoughts over the implications of what this odd occurrence might cause. There were more than her own feelings to consider. She couldn't allow anyone to ever find out. War and hell would break out if anyone ever did discover she had been *Charjed* by an Aldairian.

The man moved, jerking her out of her thoughts. At his slumbered groan, she quickly reached toward the side of his head and pressed the bottom of his left earlobe. He slumped quietly against the pillows. Rieka was thankful she remembered that an Aldairian's vulnerable spot rested at the bottom of the left earlobe. Pressed too tightly, it could put even this large man out within seconds. She recalled seeing some Aldairians here on Krithnar wearing the protective lobe coverings to prevent such a thing from occurring. For whatever reason, she was glad this man did not wear one.

She reached over and touched his forehead slightly, with the tip of two fingers. She ignored her body's physical reaction to his physical sensuality. Concentrating, Rieka sent empathic, hypnotic messages to the man's psyche, making him think their night together had been nothing but a dream. Then she used what slight surreal energy she had to make sure the psychic-magical technique she learned from her clairvoyant cousin, Doctor Eilea Sairius, would work on the Aldairian. Hopefully, the method would work for a very long time.

After seeing that he remained completely unconscious, Rieka concentrated on fixing her attire. The man must have cleaned her up after her fall. She pulled off her torn, skimpy jumpsuit and threw the outfit down a recycle-tube. Rieka looked quickly around the room and went to the first storage closet she found. Opening it, she saw a few loose caftans in dark colors hanging inside. Rieka grabbed the shortest one and donned it. The dark brown robe was slightly large and dragged the floor. She made a sweeping knot on one side, which had been fashionable in her younger days, and allowed her to move more freely. Hurrying around the room, she cleared away any evidence of her presence.

Rieka then opened the main door just far enough to look out. Relieved no one was around to notice her, she rushed through several halls until she came to her own temporary quarters. She quickly took a sonic shower, scrubbing hard with a bio-dye remover to eradicate the dark gold coloring from her skin and hair. Once that was done, she removed the violet contacts from her eyes. She did not bother to replace them with another color. Finding a regular civilian jumpsuit, she donned it, and then gathered her few belongings.

Rieka glanced down at her left wrist at the unusual band she'd put on just after her shower. She tapped an orange button on the bracelet unit, and a light orange ray encompassed her body. She faded

until she was completely invisible. If she thought just a little quicker and more rationally, she would have used the device sooner and saved herself a whole lot of grief. Shrugging at her *shoulda-coulda-woulda-if-only-I wish-I-had-of* thought, she headed out of the Krithnaran habitat. Rushing through a nearby exit, she found the corridor that led to a turbo shaft. Rieka drew closer the elevator that would take her to the underground shuttle, when she saw a group of people coming up the opposite end of the hall. Four were men near eight feet tall and woman near Rieka's own seven feet.

By the time she reached the elevator to board, the troupe of Gehennans walked into it ahead of her. Feeling dread at her luck, she recognized a few members of the party. She grew quiet and stayed clear of them as the others waited for the elevator door to close. The square compartment was large enough to hold fifteen people, and she could stay far enough towards the back without them ever touching her. She felt especially glad of the roominess because she stood not far from one Gehennan in particular that she had no desire to have a physical encounter with again.

High Chieftain Almeagar Viaad was not a man to deal lightly with. Their respective governments fought many times over the last ten years. Rieka and he created a torturous and anguished history together. She needed to keep all her inner senses in cold stasis right now, praying he did not psychically sense her emotional vibrations. The invisible ray she used on herself would keep them from detecting her presence, at least as long as she did no more than minimally breathe and stay nominally still. Though Almeagar possessed intense psychic abilities, he could not fine-tune his empathic vibrations as well as Rieka. However, in all ways, she unobtrusively stayed huddled in her corner, to listen and watch for anything they might say or do.

Almeagar Viaad closed his eyes, and the uncanny feeling came over her that he could almost feel her presence. She first delved into his darkened soul over twenty years ago. Then at the start of the Vaukeen war, she suffered more from him because he swore she denied him her love. War hardened her heart, and so had Almeagar Viaad. She wondered if he came here for the trade meets or something else.

“Almeagar?” Rieka heard the worry in the female Gehennan’s voice and saw it in her dark brown eyes. “Can I do anything for you?”

He opened his eyes to view the woman standing next to him. Rieka's empathic abilities picked up on what he was feeling. Hard of heart though he was, he still showed the warmth his family brought him. "I am fine, Cassia."

Like all the warrior clans of Almeagar's people, Cassia bore the war mark that snaked down the right side of her face. She wore the sapphire blue and silver robes of a High Chieftess well. Rieka could tell Almeagar felt proud of his kin.

Cassia moved in front of him, and he rubbed the tattooed side of his face against the hand she held up to him in greeting. "I know you have waited a long time for revenge, my brother."

"As have you, little one." He traced a long finger along the natural S-shaped mark on her cheek, returning the family gesture of affection. Almeagar looked from her to the men and then back at Cassia. "Our people have you to thank for what will be, Cassia. Your training at the Legion of Allied Worlds' Ambassadorial Center gave us the edge we needed."

"This is more than that, is it not, Gar? The Admiral is still in your blood, no matter how much retribution you seek."

He let out a long sigh and nodded. "You see too much, young one."

Her liquid chuckle pleased him. "I am not as adept in the ways of sorcery as you, but our mother left me a bit of her witchery cunning."

"You are indeed a witch-imp, sister." Almeagar's violet-black eyes filled with grave concern. "Are you still prepared to go through with this...marriage? It is not too late to back out before we leave Krithnar."

Cassia tightly clasped her hands together. "Yes. Like you, I will do what I must to bring final unification to our people."

Almeagar reached out to stroke Cassia's wavy black hair, pushing a strand aside. "I would not have you unhappy just to bring about amalgamation for our people."

"You bore twenty years of heartache and war to bring our people's honor back to them. I could do no less, brother."

He bent over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "The heartache is mine alone to deal with. Remember that. Too many years of war with LAW, the Vaukeen, and Aldairia, have weakened our forces. Warrior race we may be, but we are not senseless bloodthirsty killers like the Vaukeen. Your honor of duty, your courage, and this

marriage will bring about more than the merger of Aldairia and Gehenn.”

Cassia tentatively laid a delicate hand on his arm. “Gar, it irks you that this marriage must take place.”

He lowered his head, giving a slight nod. “I cannot help what I feel. I bear the mark of having failed our people once. I will not do so again.”

“We may be warriors at heart, but our people have all claimed they do not find you dishonorable,” Cassia said. “The war with the Legion of Allied Worlds went well until the Vaukeen attacked both the LAW forces and our own. The last time you met with Fleet Admiral Hahl became a necessity for our race.”

“I know,” Almeagar agreed, “but that was many years ago.”

Streaks of darkness and light flashed before Rieka’s eyes. Images clouded her mind. She mentally picked up on his thoughts and recalled that day ten years ago when she and Almeagar met to discuss a truce between their alliances.

“I wish for this meeting no more than you, Almeagar. Don’t think that I do not know how crippled your fleets are.” She remembered some of those first words she said to him back then, words meant to anger him.

In the middle of a stateroom on a neutral Krithnaran ship, Rieka saw that Almeagar did his best to keep his resentment and hatred in check. They were alone and no one was to bother them until the two walked out together. Though a handsome enough man, she had never been physically attracted to him. His admiration and want of her never changed from when the two first met and he forced her to become his blood-mate.

“My forces have not left yours undamaged, Rieka. I called you here to ask about a truce. You are no fool, nor am I. We both know the Vaukeen are gathering more forces every day. We must become temporary allies or be destroyed.”

She moved to stand in front of him, her eyes never leaving him. Her smugness must have irritated him because he looked as if he wanted to reach out and strike her. Rieka tilted her head back to stare at him. Almeagar was over half a foot taller than she, yet she used her aura of command to show him that he didn’t frighten her.

“I never thought you a fool, Gar. Egotistical and overbearing, yes. Savage, at times, but never a fool. You are a warrior. I expected a war to the end with you and your people. You do not give up easily.”

He moved closer until he stood but inches from her. Even after several years away from her, she still felt his heat. Still sensed his savage need for her. His ebony hair caressed his wide shoulders when he tilted his head downward.

“Nor do you, Rieka. We would have fought to the death.” His eyes hardened.

Rieka did not flinch under his harsh stare. “LAW has enough power to keep the Vaukeen at bay for several years. Do your people? And to keep up war with us?”

“Can you parry your forces between my people and those bastards?” he countered.

“Yes.”

He cocked his head to one side. “If any other warrior said that to me I would strike him down immediately for their gall. I have no doubt you believe you could. What happens should I not call a truce and join forces with you long enough to wipe out the Vaukeen?”

“Then you and the Vaukeen will die,” she threatened.

“After the Vaukeen war, I will come for you, Rieka.”

She bristled and drew herself ramrod straight. “My blade will be ready to gut your lecherous heart.”

His arms came around her swiftly, and his face lowered over hers. She stayed cold and still in his arms, even though his kiss was fierce and hard. Almeagar pulled her up against him, pressing her body as close as possible to his. Rieka knew he felt her checked shiver.

He pulled his head back and said hoarsely, “One day I shall win this private battle between us, Rieka.”

“You would put your own desires before your people?”

She meant to anger him with her question, but he did not release her. “The truce will last long enough to defeat the Vaukeen.”

“Then why this?” Rieka snarled.

“To see if the woman I blood-bonded with is still the tigress I enjoyed in bed.”

“Bloody bastard.” She spat at him.

Rieka had not meant to lose her cool, but did over his words. She struggled in his powerful arms and within a few moves freed herself of his hold. Almeagar tried again to physically outmaneuver her. Seconds later her right foot caught him underneath his chin with a forceful thrust that sent him reeling backwards.

Aldairian Ecstasy: Forbidden Desires

He landed at the foot of the bed in the stateroom. Wiping the blood trickling down his lips, he heaved himself up into a sitting position. "Your combat skills have progressed."

Her lips formed a smirk. "I'm glad you felt the improvement."

"But so have my talents." Almeagar waved a hand toward her.

Suddenly, Rieka was swept up by the psychic energy wave he emitted. Almeagar made a strong gesture with his hands as if slapping it down. Her body landed hard on the bed, and he immediately threw himself over her. The impact of his weight caused her to gulp for air. Before she could regain her composure, he secured her wrists above her head and entwined his legs around hers, imprisoning her even further.

Rieka shot him a look of fierce loathing, and her chest heaved beneath him. "If the Vaukeen don't wipe you out, I will"

He let out a harsh laugh. "No, Rieka, you will not. LAW and you are tired of this war between our races, just as much as my people and I are."

"You should have stopped the feuds with us and Aldairia a long time ago."

Before he answered her, he lowered his lips until they almost touched her own. "You could have easily prevented it by staying on Gehenn as my wife."

"I would rather the war continue than to commit to that displeasure."

Angrily, his mouth covered hers again, and this time Almeagar kissed her until she moved beneath him. She gasped for air when he removed his lips momentarily. Rieka only had a few seconds to breathe before he started his assault again. This time, she jerked in retaliation beneath him. Her movements made him press his erection against her. She shivered against him involuntarily.

"The truce is yours," he whispered against her lips. "I found out what I wished to know. After the war, we shall recapture our feelings for each other, Rieka."

"There was never anything between us but what you forced upon me."

He released her wrists, but remained over her. "Lie to yourself, but your body just responded to my touch."

"You're delusional. I reacted with distaste and disgust of you," she sneered. "Why will you not realize I have no feelings for you other than loathing?"

"I can prove you differently," he threatened.

As he brought his lips down harshly over hers again, she pulled at his hair and clawed him. She struggled fiercely with him and continued to fight him until she was once more free of his hold.

"One day, after the war is over, I will kill you," Rieka promised, rolling away from him.

"I have felt your blade before, yet I am still alive. Soon, you will acknowledge our blood-union," he declared.

"Give up on that idea. I've never had any desire to be your wife."

"It was foretold long ago you would be my destiny. Our blood bonding was meant to be special. Yet you made a mockery of it by refusing to acknowledge its meaning. I'll never forgive you for that. Nor the turmoil you have caused my people."

"You never really cared for me and have caused my family and people plenty of anguish, Almeagar. Either make a truce or stay at war with my forces."

"My laws do not allow divorce. When our combined forces defeat the Vaukeen, I will find you, and you will live as my wife again," he threatened.

"And on that day," Rieka promised, "my blade won't miss, and I will carve out your heart."

A soft movement brought Rieka out of her memories and to the present situation in the lift. Almeagar put a hand on his sister's shoulder. "Again, are you sure you wish to go through with this farce?"

Cassia's voice was full of firm resolve. "Yes."

"Then we continue as planned." Almeagar turned from Cassia to look upon a Gehennan male with dark olive green eyes. Rieka recognized the loathsome man as Morkruel Viaad, a close cousin of Almeagar's. "Morkruel, you will report to me about what is happening on Tigon as soon as possible. Reports say that LAW has sent an agent that way. Find out what is going on there. I will not have Gehenn sullied even more by LAW. Is that clear enough?"

"Understood, cousin," Morkruel answered. "I will be leaving shortly to take care of that particular matter."

Rieka's muscles were getting stiff in her effort not to give herself away, and she hoped the elevator stopped soon. She got her wish as the lift halted with a soft thud and the Gehennans began to exit. For a split second, Almeagar turned back around and surveyed the elevator.

Rieka was thankful that the shaft's door slid shut before he could use his powers to ascertain if anyone was there. Several other aliens rode the elevator up, then down. After a few minutes of waiting until it was empty again, Rieka materialized. She pushed the lift button that would take her to her destination.

Not much later, after leaving the elevator, she entered the underground shuttle, which carried her to a docking bay just outside the city's borders. She boarded her ship, the *Oddessy*, and just sat down at the control center when the communications module beeped. Letting out a frustrated sigh, she answered the vid-com. An oval screen opened, picturing a dark-skinned man with gray-streaked, light brown hair.

She immediately straightened in her seat and saluted the uniformed being. "First Admiral Coyton, what may I do for you?"

"Cut the military posture, Rieka. This is a personal line, and I'm alone," Coyton said.

She relaxed. "Yes, Joeseph?"

He grinned, looking years younger. "I expected a check-in call before now. I know you well enough to know you didn't take much R and R. What have you found out?"

"I was about to contact you, sir. Unfortunately, I've had no luck in this quadrant of the insular territories bordering Krithnar or here on Krithnar. Have you heard anything?"

"Your cousin Kathea sent me a cryptic report that she caught sight of a group of Vaukeen on Tigon. It has been several days since we heard from her," Coyton informed Rieka.

"That is one of the most disreputable planets in this sector, Joeseph. Cutthroats from all over the three known galaxies go there to hide because no outside law enforcement can touch them. I could be there in two days..."

He held up a hand and interrupted her. "We shall discuss your going there shortly. There is something else you need to know that I heard about late last night."

"Um-m, that sounds serious." Uneasy, Rieka asked, "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Probably not," Coyton admitted. "Your family and mine have been friends for a long time. I wanted to speak to you before anyone else did. Your sister Raeschel will soon be engaged to Prince Kaderick of Aldairia."

At this turn in the conversation, she leaned forward in her chair. “What do you mean she’s getting engaged, Joeseeph? I contacted her earlier this month before going on this last scouting mission and heard nothing about that.”

“Raeschel went to Aldairia last week with your younger brother Jon-Carter. Raeschel was *Charjed* by JC’s friend Prince Kaderick sometime yesterday. Your brother contacted your parents and is still on Aldairia with Raeschel. She is safe with him. JC told me that nothing formal will be announced until the two have gotten to know each other better and the rest of the family shows up.”

“This is a tense situation, Joeseeph.”

It startled Rieka to learn that her sister went through a similar ordeal to the one she just experienced. She needed to find out how the *Charj* affected Raeschel’s life. Rieka would interfere if her sister wasn’t happy. Rieka was glad her brother JC was there with their younger sister. He would let no harm come to Raeschel. Since Prince Kaderick was a friend of JC’s, she trusted things would be fine until she could get to Aldairia after the mission.

Composed, she looked back at the screen. “Other than this major event concerning my sister, I feel something else is on your mind you wish to tell me.”

“Your empathic senses are not wrong. There have been gatherings on Krithnar besides the trade-meets.” He let out a long breath, and Rieka noted his hesitancy to divulge more.

Rieka had a gut feeling she wasn’t going to like what he was about to say. “What gives, Joeseeph?”

“A few days ago, the heir to the Aldairian throne, Prince Dalharan and some Gehennan officials were in a closed meeting. I just learned the other day from your father the purpose of the conference. Prince Dalharan instigated a contract with the Gehennans. He intends to marry the War-Chieftess Cassia Viaad to ensure lasting peace between their two worlds.”

“Damnation!” Rieka exclaimed and jumped up from her seat. She paced in front of the console. Rieka now had confirmation that what she overheard between the Gehennans was not wrong. “First Raeschel’s news and now this. How can the Aldairians or Gehennans be foolish enough to want this twice?”

“Rieka, stop your infernal pacing. That’s not going to solve any problem.” However, she didn’t stop pacing until his next words. “You

have been ordered to Aldairia after the Tigon mission, but not because of your sister's engagement."

Rieka turned and flopped back down in the chair. "I would have thought the President would order me to stay away. He's not stupid enough to allow my past mistakes to cause another war, nor does he want me to further corrupt Raeschel's life."

Coyton narrowed his eyes, his voice grave. "You are concerned the Gehennans will seek retribution with you there?"

"My name is a curse word in their language now. They blame me for the breaking of the first contract over twenty years ago. Should I show up, they're certain to cause trouble." Rieka decided not to tell Coyton what she overheard in the elevator since she already heard his confirmation of the events and needed to find out more about what they were up to on Tigon.

Joeseeph rubbed his chin. "Rieka, you and I have always been close friends, despite my being your superior officer. You might have even become my sister-in-law had Mikel lived. I have given more thought to this situation than you realize."

"Joeseeph." She clasped and unclasped her hands. "I know you forgave me for what happened to Mikel all those years ago when I interfered with the first contract between the Gehennans and Aldairians, but..."

"That war was not your fault, Rieka. You were a convenient excuse for the Gehennans to blame it on," he said, interrupting her. "I knew Mikel better than you knew him. He was always too impetuous. It is past time you stopped suffering for his and your brother's deaths. Your twin would not have wanted you to suffer so long, Rieka."

She waited too long to have this conversation with him concerning her first love, his brother Mikel. "I guess, Joeseeph. I just never allowed myself to come to terms with their deaths."

"I think you are on the road to finally doing that now," Coyton said.

Rieka reigned in her thoughts and stiffened her resolve. "Who pressured LAW into my going to Aldairia?"

"The Aldairians and Gehennans both wish your presence on Aldairia. When the merger is publicly announced, the wedding will be held there. You're one of LAW's best security and war skilled officers. I must agree with the heads of the Legion of Allied Worlds. You are the best choice to handle our interests in this unusual matter," Joeseeph answered.

"I see." She leaned forward once more. "You're still holding something back from me, my friend."

"The Aldairians have gotten wind of LAW's concerns about a Vaukeen reprisal. It seems they have done some undercover work in the Tigon area themselves and have a missing operative. They are sending an agent of their own to help you. He should be on Krithnar now. Expect him to notify you soon. When you contact him, give him the location of the *Oddessy*. Once he is aboard your ship, the two of you are to head to Tigon."

"Bloody hell, Coyton. You know I usually work alone on an undercover assignment!" Rieka exclaimed in frustration.

"Exactly my thoughts, Rieka." His face revealed that his feelings on the matter were the same as hers. "I am positive our government is holding back another reason for its decisions, but LAW and the President have agreed to this security merger. I can only surmise that their main motive is because..."

She finished the thought for him. "Because after the wars with first the Gehennans, and then the Vaukeen, the Legion of Allied Worlds are not totally equipped to handle another huge battle with either faction."

"I personally would feel better, Rieka, if you agreed to work with the Aldairian."

She never disobeyed a direct order from Joeseeph, nor would she ever. "I accept what I must do."

His look of relief weighed heavy upon her. "I wish it were not this dire, Rieka."

"I have no doubts about that, my friend. I shall keep you posted on your personal channel on what happens."

"May the Fates send you luck, dear friend. Give my regards to your family."

"I shall, Joeseeph. Take care."

Rieka turned off the vid-con and leaned back in her swivel chair. She exhaled loudly and grimaced as she contemplated what lay in store for her. It was bad enough for her on the elevator; she did not like the idea of being among the Gehennans again. Especially, she thought with a shiver, if I have to get that close to War-Chieftain Almeagar Viaad again. She feared more what would happen should the two of them meet face to face another time. Both of them had explosive temperaments when pushed too far. She knew also that there was more than the Gehennans now to concern herself with.

Aldairian Ecstasy: Forbidden Desires

What if, when on Aldairia, she met up with that damn Aldairian stranger, who'd done his damnest to rip her life apart last night? She trusted the hypnotic inducement she gave him would last for a very, very long time. Rieka leaned her head against the chair's cushioned headrest and closed her eyes. She hoped for the strength and courage to handle the dangers that occurred during her current mission and later on Aldairia.

CHAPTER THREE

Dalharan awoke disoriented. He surveyed the spacious bedroom, absently running his hand down the empty side of the bed. He curled his lips in disappointment. It seemed so real – finding the woman and then *Charjing* her. Had it been real, though, he would have remembered the details more vividly and felt them even this morning. He brought his legs up, wrapped his arms around them, rested his chin on top of his knees, and let out a long sigh.

“I wish such a dream,” he said to the emptiness of the room, “could have been truly real. “

Such a reality would never happen for him. He was now duty-bound to marry the Gehennan War-Chieftess Cassia Viaad, a woman fifteen years his junior. He knew the only reason he signed that damn contract was to ensure the Gehennans would keep a truce with Aldairia and LAW should the Vaukeen start another war. His middle brother, Vultar, head of the Aldairian Armada and planetary security, suspected a Gehennan renegade faction planned to join with the Vaukeen.

Even after the Gehennan truce of ten years ago, rumors began that there were Gehennans who did not want the continued peace. Recently, there had been a major theft at the Aldairian National Archives and Planetary Historical Museum. Vultar was the one who tied the theft of the Aldairian’s mystical Sage Stone with the most current events. The second prince felt that a Vaukeen or Gehennan disguising himself as an Aldairian, and was skilled enough, could pull off the heist easily. The ancient gem was to be presented to the Gehennans just before the commencement of the wedding. The Vaukeen, Dalharan felt sure, would like to disrupt any permanent alliance between Aldairia and Gehenn.

With the theft of the jewel and the latest rumors being spread, Vultar went undercover a week ago and no one had heard from him

since his last missive from the planet Tigon. Taking over security while his middle brother was gone, Dalharan had been told by Aldairian informants that LAW was sending one of their operatives to Tigon to find a missing agent and more information to ascertain whether the renegade Gehennans and Vaukeen were actually going to join forces. As of yet, LAW did not know about the missing Sage Stone or its importance to Aldairia's continued peace with Gehenn.

All this happened before Dalharan came to Krithnar. In response, he contacted First-Admiral Coyton, head of LAW's Special Forces unit, AIM, and informed him that LAW would work with Aldairia on the matter. He was due to contact the agent today. Duty, he thought, would always come first.

Dalharan moved off the bed and then headed for the sanitation unit. With determination, Dalharan quickly freshened up and dressed. He made the necessary coded contact, given to him by Admiral Coyton. Dalharan left a message at a check-in point here on Krithnar. Minutes later he decoded a return reply giving the name of the ship on which he and the LAW agent would meet.

He gathered only the things he needed for the mission. Hopefully, if all went well, his brother Vultar would return home as well. Dalharan resolved to make sure that happened.

Thinking about home, he went to the communications machine in his room. He turned it on and programmed in for Aldairia. His brother Kaderick's face appeared on the view screen after some moments.

"Any news yet, Dalharan?" his youngest brother asked.

"No, Ked, I am just about to leave to search for Vultar." Dalharan told his brother of his joint venture with the LAW agent.

"Be careful. Father and I do not wish to see you missing either. We would like you to bring Vultar home for my wedding."

At this news, Dalharan's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You have *Charjed*? When?"

Ked chuckled. "It surprised me. You remember my Earth friend Jon-Carter Hahl whom I met about seven years ago when I did a stint on a LAW war vessel? I *Charjed* his younger sister Raeschel only this morning."

Dalharan's eyes widened. His dream of last night must have been more than wishful desires on his part, perhaps some kind of premonition. The chances of such an event happening after his dream were almost astronomical. It was not bad news, though.

“Then our family will be united with that of Admiral Hahl’s. Amazing, Ked. This is the first non-Aldairian *Charj* ever,” Dalharan said.

“It has made Uni-News headlines today. Someone leaked it out. I did not *Charj* her in public,” Kaderick told him. “Raeschel’s father, President Hahl, is half Krithnaran. Since Krithnarans are descendents of Gehennans and Aldairians, the Watcher believes this is what caused her to be receptive to my *Charj*.”

“That is quite a long shot and odd occurrence, indeed, but I am happy for you,” Dalharan returned. “Will your wedding be scheduled near my own then?”

For a moment, he saw his brother’s lighter brown face cloud with worry. “Dalharan, you go too far for Aldairia at times. Forgive me, I should not have reprimanded you.”

“It is all right, Ked. I understand your concern,” Dalharan assured Kaderick.

A warm smile of affection played on the younger man’s lips and his dark brown eyes lightened to amber, reflecting his smile. “Raeschel will not be rushed. I have not *Charjed* her a second time. Her system is still highly active from the first occasion. So, we are waiting until her family is here and for Raeschel to grow accustomed to the idea. Besides, her brother Jon-Carter threatens Admiral Hahl might be highly upset if we do not wait for her to get there.”

“I am glad for that. I have been waiting to meet the infamous Admiral for a very long time. I must get going, Ked. Give my regards to Father and your new love. I promise to return home with that scoundrel brother of ours.”

Kaderick laughed. “See that you do. Out.”

Dalharan let out a wistful sigh, wishing that at times he had more intense psychic powers like his distant cousin, the Master Watcher. The man could probably whisk himself to Tigon and back in minutes. However, the Aldairian government did not like to use their most renowned scientist for those purposes. He would have to talk with his friend and mentor when he and his entourage returned to Aldairia.

Dalharan left the needed messages for his councilmen and entourage, grabbed his travel bag, and then left his Krithnaran quarters. At the docking bay just outside the city, Dalharan located the vessel. After going to the ship and pressing a com-button on the outside of the main hatch, he was allowed to enter. He found himself being scoped with a ray before he passed to other areas of the ship.

Beyond the ship's entrance chamber, he entered a control room more technologically advanced than any other cruiser model he had seen before.

"You can stow your things in the second state-room down the corridor on the left. We'll meet after take-off," a voice from nowhere and everywhere bellowed out.

Dalharan did as he was bid, finding the quarters easily enough. He dropped his belongings on the bed and briefly looked over the sparsely furnished cabin. He then left to make his way back to the control room. Dalharan saw the back of a woman sitting at the control panel area, where the two command seats were empty before.

"Take the seat beside me. We shall be on-route to Tigon shortly," she said without turning around.

Again, he did as he was told. After she put the controls on auto, she faced him. Dalharan's full view of her startled him. It felt as if he knew her intimately somehow. Yet he'd never met this woman before. She looked even more beautiful than the golden-skinned woman in his dream did last night. The female agent before him bore a soft tanned skin tone and dark auburn hair tightly twisted in a braid that swirled to one side of her broad shoulders. Her athletic shape told of prowess, and her extraordinary blue-gray eyes bespoke command.

Her insolent gaze raked over him, and Dalharan stiffened his demeanor. He *sensed* she was not happy to have him there. Dalharan decided that whether she liked it or not, this LAW agent would find out that Aldairians were a force to be reckoned with in matters of intrigue.

He finally broke the silence between them and tried to be amenable. "It shall be a pleasure working with a LAW agent. I am sure we can be of help to each other."

"Your government did not give LAW much choice." As he just did, she spoke in Univerb, the intergalactic language most space-faring, sentient species used to communicate with each other. "Most of the time I work alone. You may call me RJ. I don't think we need to communicate more about each other than our first names."

Even using a simple language like Univerb, Dalharan still found it difficult adjusting to the fact that other races used contractions. Aldairians did not. "I am called Dalh. Usually, I work solo myself when undercover."

She looked at him speculatively, and the strangest feeling came to him that she was trying to peer into the deepest recesses of his mind.

“Are you psychic, Dalh?”

Dalharan tried not to show his surprise at how she knew, but answered anyway. “Yes. Have you something against that?”

She shook her head. “Just be careful where you use your powers. There is a sect of outlaws on Tigon who would kill to absorb psychic energy.”

“I will take that into consideration then. I am given to understand you also have a lost operative on Tigon.” At her nod, he continued, “Then we are on a rescue mission as well as trying to find out what the Vaukeen are up to.”

“And whether the Gehennan faction is aiding them,” she added. “Have you ever been to Tigon?”

“No. I am assuming you have.” Dalharan leaned back in his chair. “What can you tell me about the planet and the inhabitants?”

She turned from him and pushed a button on the console. An oval screen lit up, and he turned to view it. “I have other things to take care of. The information you require is here. These two white buttons scroll up and down. When you are done, flip it off. You will not be able to do anything else with the controls.”

Dalharan said nothing as she stood and left him without any further instructions. He frowned after she exited. There was definitely something about the woman that did not set well with him. For now, though, he needed to trust her. Admiral Coyton held a reputation in LAW and with Aldairian security as being trustworthy. If the man teamed him up with a highly recommended agent, then Dalharan would keep his judgment to himself about RJ.

Her name, he thought, was a bit unusual. Though not sure of its origin, he liked the way it sounded. Perhaps because uncommon and exotic things and creatures always fascinated him. As a woman she epitomized mystery and dark secrets. He was not sure how he knew, but Dalharan felt that those tendencies were part of her nature and her very soul. Yet, sometime during this mission, Dalharan intended to find out everything he could concerning RJ.

* * * *

For several hours aboard the ship, Rieka kept to herself. She knew she couldn't stay in her quarters for long. When the Aldairian operative boarded, the ray that scoped him for any microbial diseases

also showed her a 3-D picture of him. She'd been down in the engine room at the time. When she first glimpsed his likeness on the imaging screen at the engine computer console, she wondered what kind of sadistic humor the universal fates had in mind. What were the astronomical chances of her meeting the same man who *Charjed* her the previous evening? In addition, the damn man was Prince Dalharan Demmonarris of Aldairia. Rieka couldn't let either Dalharan or Almeagar find out about Dalharan and her having shared a *Charj*. She didn't need her luck to go nova right now.

After she finished speaking with Coyton, she pulled up details on the royal family. A fairly recent image of Prince Dalharan and Kaderick were in the data banks, along with the rest of the royal family. Rieka was relieved that there were no recent images of her in any galactic information storages. She never posed for shots for Uni-News, nor did she allow her images to be publicly circulated. Even though people could see her from her view screen, the image was protected from being downloaded. This enabled her to move about more freely in her undercover missions. Moreover, most of the time she used some sort of disguise so that those who did know her face from past encounters would have a hard time recognizing her.

She did not think Prince Dalharan would know her identity since the two had no communications with each other for over twenty years. If she kept him from touching her palms, he could not *Charj* her again. She briefly looked over the files on the Aldairians' customs to update her perspective on their lifestyles. One of the aspects of the Aldairian mating energy bothered her a great deal after she read about it. If the *Charj* were not complete, either individual could go mad or die. Rieka felt it must have been finished. That damn experience was both nerve shattering and left some details of the previous night foggy in her memory. She would keep an eye out on any irrational behavior or such from either of them. If she did not have to tell Dalh about the episode, she wasn't going to.

Still, she didn't forget the hot liquid coursing wildly through her veins, nor the way the *Charj* made her body meld so close to his. It was as if the two of them shared in a devastating sexual and emotional experience that made them a special constellation of lovers amongst the stars. She needed to contain herself even now; least those rampant sensual sensations overwhelmed her even now.

Rieka never let her emotions get into the way of her duty. She would handle the situation effectively. Rieka wished she wasn't torn

between wanting to kill the man for pressing his attentions on her and enjoying the way he affected all her sexual senses. *Keep your distance and keep your cool*, she told herself fiercely. *Yeah, right*, her subconscious tormented her.

Frustrated, she went to the ship's gym. A good work out always eased her tension. She performed relaxation breathing followed by limbering exercises. Closing her eyes, she began her daily ritual of uno-martial arts techniques. Rieka felt the tension leaving her and knew she'd be able to handle what came next.

"You have a graceful form, RJ."

Blinking open her eyes, she saw Dalharan standing with one leg upon a workout bench. He leaned forward, executing limbering exercises himself. A shudder of sensual awareness jolted through her as she watched his hard, elegant body stretch outwards. Dalharan's muscles tensed through the form-fitting jumpsuit that caressed his body as intimately as his hands had once possessed hers. He had the sexiest ass she'd ever seen on a man. She couldn't help but let her eyes stray lower to the large bulge in his crotch. Hell, if he was that big without a full erection, she wondered how large his cock would be at full length.

She creamed just thinking about him. Rieka realized this situation was not going to be as easy to handle as she thought. Frowning, she kept her resolve to not let this dangerous man affect her senses. She was on a mission and had to remember that. Turning away from him, she grabbed a small towel off a nearby bench and began to pat the sweat from her face and chest.

"You may have use of the gym." Rieka started to leave.

He straightened. "Finish your exercises. I find it useful to do such myself when I am tense. Do not leave on my account, unless you care to spar with me?"

Though he didn't realize it, he said the one thing that would stop her from leaving. She was dying to teach this arrogant man a few things. Throwing the towel towards the bench behind her, she gestured for him to come towards the center of the spacious gym.

His eyes lit up mischievously, and Rieka realized that she better be on her guard. Obviously, she set his hackles up somehow. He crossed one foot over the other, his hands positioned for giving or receiving a blow. Rieka grinned and immediately moved.

A few seconds later he lay on the floor blinking up at her. “Damnation. I have never seen anyone move that swiftly. I take that back. I did not even see you move.”

“I’ve trained intensely most of my life.” she said, moving near him, but not offering him a hand to help him up.

Slowly sitting upright, Dalharan glanced up at her. “So have I.”

Dalharan moved quickly, swinging a powerful leg up against the backside of her knees. Rieka flailed in the air for a couple of seconds, then landed with a thud on her backside. She swiftly gather her wits and composure, but not quick enough to rise completely before Dalh suddenly swung his legs out again to capture her between them. He brought her up into the air, and then swiftly brought her back down to the floor. The harsh impact took the wind right out of her body.

The Aldairian immediately threw himself over Rieka, pinning her arms behind her back. “You should not toy with someone who challenges you, RJ. That leaves you at a disadvantage.”

Rieka gasped for air. “Get off me, you impudent fool.”

He did not comply. “Are you always such a sore looser?”

His speculative look bothered Rieka. She hoped he was not remembering her from last night. “You’ve proved your point.”

“Not yet. Before I let you up, we will talk.” He shifted his weight and Rieka felt a sudden warmth tingling between her thighs. Hell, forget the tingling, she was creaming as his hips pressed against hers. His cock pushed hard against her sensitive areas.

Why was her body betraying her so? Had the *Charj* heightened her senses so much that she would respond so readily to this man? Or was it because she was *that* attracted to him since she first glimpsed him? She squirmed, and then realized that only added to the physical problem above her. His shaft hardened.

“You are not making this easy on us, RJ. Only in a dream have I ever reacted to a woman this way. Now, do we talk before this gets out of hand?”

The crotch of his jumpsuit tightened around his growing erection. *Freg-hell yes!* He also felt the overwhelming sexual desire escalating between them. She knew Dalharan was not going to move until he received her reply.

Nodding, she felt only half-relieved when he rolled away. She got to her feet, moving to sit on the nearest bench in the gym. He sat on top of a nearby piece of exercise equipment, she decided, to keep his distance and give her a few moments to gather her composure. She

figured he did not realize the impact of what he admitted to her. Nevertheless, from what he said, he did not remember last night. She intended to keep it that way.

When he continued to watch her, Rieka felt as if his topaz-tinted eyes could see into the farthest depths of her soul.

“Well, RJ?”

It sounded as if he called her “Rae-Jah” instead of RJ each time he sounded her name. She did not bother to correct him. “The last message from our operative was traced to the southern continent on Tigon. It is one of the most unexplored mountainous regions on the planet.”

When he brushed a thick strand of the copper and sable hair off his shoulder, she fought the sudden wild urge to run her fingers through his tantalizing, wavy locks.

“In the last missive we received from our own agent it stated he was in a place called Shasz-Norr.”

“The LAW agent was near there when we received her message. Shasz-Norr is a small city on the southern continent. The psi-energy thieves I mentioned have a stronghold there in a mountainous region near the town. In Shasz-Norr, we can obtain a land vehicle to take us to the base of the mountains and proceed on foot.”

“I could teleport us there from the ship,” Dalharan offered.

“No.” She slapped a hand across her thigh for emphasis. “Using stealth empathic talent doesn’t release a lot of power. However, the pirates have psychic detectors that could pick up on heavily released mental energy—such as teleportation—from miles away. I think they would expect such a tactic. We can both adequately defend ourselves against physical attack. I have special weapons on board that will aid in other ways. I’ll show them to you before we reach our destination. Right now, we must concentrate on getting your operative and mine out of there if they are both still alive.”

“I would know if he were dead,” Dalh stated. “Do you have any hope yours is alive? There is the possibility that our two agents found each other.”

Rieka stood up. “I would have felt the operative’s death. You are right, the two might be together if they learned who one another were. We can only hope for the best. I intend to make sure we rescue them, get the information we need, and get the hell out of there alive.”

“Your simple statement leads me to believe you are more than overconfident, RJ. One should always exercise caution.”

Putting her hands on hips in anger, Rieka glared back at him, “I usually do. Any other time you would have stayed flat on your back, Dalh.”

“For you, I might have considered that.”

His suggestive grin irritated her. “You are an impudent ass. The rec room on my ship is also the galley if you need sustenance. Keep to your rooms and out of my way until we get there. That shouldn’t be too hard for you to understand.”

In a huff, Rieka left the Aldairian alone.

* * * *

Dalharan stayed in the gym after she left. He felt both bemused and bewildered by their recent encounter. The woman was damn good at universal martial arts. Better than himself, he realized. The only reason he toppled her was that he caught her off-guard. Dalharan felt that hardly anyone ever surprised RJ. He got lucky, probably because of her preoccupations or her smugness of overtaking him so quickly.

Or, he grinned to himself, her attraction to him frustrated her more than she let on. He hardly missed her breathless intake of air in the gym as she surveyed his body. The intense way her spellbinding, blue-gray eyes calculatingly inspected him, made his cock harden to painful proportions within his form-fitting jumpsuit. RJ might be a strong-willed woman capable of containing her emotions most of the time, but she gave off the age-old telltale signs of a woman attracted to a man. It still amazed him that from the very beginning she managed to completely invaded *all* his senses.

RJ, he realized, was a woman of many capabilities, besides being devilishly beautiful and sexually intoxicating. She kept up her mental and physical training. Dalh rubbed his chin thoughtfully. She inadvertently let it slip about her being an empath when she answered him with “I felt”. Only one with empathic abilities would have addressed him so. This compelling and dangerous beauty guarded her thoughts quite well. Dalharan intended to find out just what RJ hid from him. RJ had a startling effect on him, emotionally and physically.

He found her undeniably beautiful and she intrigued him. Not even his dream lover stimulated such intense feelings in his mind, heart, and body. In fact, he amended, no other woman ever touched him that way. If he lost his chastity to anyone, he felt it would be with someone like RJ. He had been around lots of beautiful women, but none made him think about sex so blatantly. RJ did. He just never

found the right woman before her, whom he wanted to loose his chastity to.

Dalharan vehemently decided he did not want to go to his marriage bed a virgin.

The thought of being married soured Dalharan's stomach. If it were not for LAW and Aldairia needing the Gehennans' alliance, he would never think about signing that damn contract. Or offering the Sage Stone to the Gehennans as a lasting peace token. The Sage Stone had been in the possession of the Aldairians for over ten thousand years. It symbolized the beginnings of the *Change*, when the ancient chemist-healers and the oldest Aldairian race, the Majeeks, altered the uses of the *Charj*. The Sage Stone used to be an icon of ruling power, fought over by the Majeeks and the Jahaen, the former ancestors of the Gehennans. These were also the two oldest ancestral tribes on Aldairia, from which the Demmonarris and Viaad clans descended.

Now, no one would be able to access the ancient power gem's intense magic, for its uses were lost through the annals of time. All that had been left of its secrets were the myths of a cryptic prophecy. Dalharan recalled the puzzling words with a smile:

One who is not, yet could be, shall wield the power within and make the races whole again.

Dalharan did not think anyone would ever be able to solve the mysterious puzzle.

He got up from the exercise machine and began to work out. After half an hour, he built up an appetite and left the gym to go to the galley. He found RJ there in the recreational room picking at a plate of unusual looking vegetables. She did not look up at him and he went over to the reproduction unit built into a wall behind one of the three tables in the room. After programming a meal, he took his tray of food to the table where she sat and took a seat across from her.

"That is an unusual plant you are toying with. What is it and that stuff you are stirring it in?" he asked.

She let out a sigh. "It's called celery and ranch dressing. Not many of my people eat it anymore since reproduction units were invented two hundred years ago."

Though he could tell she was not use to company or sharing her feelings, her show of loneliness surprised him. "I eat a lot of vegetables and berries myself. If I upset you, RJ, I am sorry. This mission is just as important to me. My government felt it best we

worked together. So do I. Our missing agent is a good friend of mine.”

She glanced up at him then. “The LAW agent missing is such to me. I acted out of frustration towards you. I do not usually let my emotions interfere in an assignment. It will not happen again.”

He felt he still physically stirred her even though she tried hard to contain the situation. Her off-handed way of apologizing made him smile. “Then let us make the best of this situation and work together without animosity or anything interfering with the importance of our mission.”

“Agreed.” RJ shoved her plate away from her. “I must make preparations. You can join me in the control room when you are ready. We will devise more of a plan then.”

“Stay a minute, RJ,” Dalharan pleaded. “Let us talk about the mission while you are still in an amiable mood.”

Her wry grin perked up his spirits. “You are a mercurial person, Dalh. Have you been an agent long?”

He chuckled. “Awhile. And you?”

She folded her hands on the table. “Quite a long time. I’ve been around the Tri-Galaxies probably more than most people my age.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You cannot be more than my own thirty-eight seasons.”

“I’m thirty eight years old.” She said

“Interesting, both of us being the same age. Your eyes tell me you have seen so much more than I have. I read the bio on Tigon, but I am sure there are other things you could tell me about the planet,” Dalharan voiced.

“I’ve been to Tigon several times. The mountains of Tigon hide a series of cavernous routes used for shipping pirated merchandise from one stronghold to another. I am sure there are less-used tunnels we can make use of.”

“On Aldairia,” he commented, “there is a structure of ancient subway systems that run in places below the planet. As children, my middle brother and I use to explore them extensively, much to my father’s disapproval.”

Her generous smile sent a flame of passion down his spine. “I suppose your mother was outraged as well.”

“No, she use to join us before she died in childbirth with my youngest brother. I miss those days.” He finished his food and pushed

the plate away. "Did you ever experience such adventures in your youth?"

"Many. My father also hated my antics." Her eyes saddened a bit and her next statement told him why. "He's never let me live them down either."

"And your mother?" Dalharan asked.

"She took his side, part of the time. She use to be in the military until they married," RJ answered.

"I have only one family member in the military."

"A brother or sister?" she queried.

He laced his hands together, nodding. "My middle brother. I would not have a spouse to concern herself over me."

"I have never cared for the necessity of bonding myself," she said.

"You sound as if you quite dislike it." Dalharan, for some reason, really wanted to know her views on marriage. "On Aldairia, we look forward to it. If we are lucky enough to experience the *Charj*, bonding is even more welcomed."

"We plain Earth humanoids prefer the simple and complex emotions of love, if we are lucky enough to find it. I think we would find it too overwhelming to have magic assist our emotional and physical needs."

He perceived the distinct impression she again tried to mesmerize his soul, for her eyes sparkled sporadically with hints of sapphire and emerald and gray, flickering over his face as if searching for some answer.

"The *Charj* is natural to us Aldairians, just as love is to your race. It is but a different name to explain the special occurrence when two destined souls find each other. I personally believe the *Charj* is a more intense, higher summation of those feelings on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level," Dalharan explained.

"Then it is a good thing that it remains only in you Aldairians. I think we lower human species would find it a horrendous experience." The oddest feeling came over him that RJ deliberately baited him with her words, perhaps to ascertain more of what his thoughts were. And he could not shake the most sudden and strangest feeling that she just referred to his dream experience. Yet, how indeed could she have known about that, unless her empathic powers were on such a high level he could not even fathom?

Despite his apprehensions, he could not help but respond to her challenge and defend his people's natural gift. "I do not think your race would find it so strange. In fact I am surprised you have not seen your most recent Uni-News segment."

"I have been preoccupied these last few days." She prompted, "Since you watch current events on the intergalactic news channel, perhaps you'll enlighten me."

"The incident was broadcast just before I came on board your ship." Dalharan remembered what Ked said about it being leaked out, so he figured it was not that much of a lie.

"I was taking care of our mission arrangements," RJ said.

"One of the ruling members of the Aldairian royal family publicly *Charjed* the first non-Aldairian in our recorded history. Perhaps you have heard of her, President-Elect Hahl's youngest daughter, Raeschel," Dalharan said.

"The family is well-known, Dalh, even to your people. I can only assume the girl must have been scared out of her wits."

"It has only been a short while ago. I am given to understand that both Prince Kaderick and Raeschel Hahl enjoyed the experience."

"You are close enough to actually know the situation?" she goaded him on.

Dalharan could understand how effective this woman was at getting information out of someone. "We agreed no more than first names, RJ. Remember?"

Again, her devilish smile caused turmoil to his insides. "I do. I am but curious. I can only think of how it must have felt for the Hahls' daughter. She probably went through confusion and anguish to begin with. But that is only a guess."

Dalharan pondered her words for a few moments. He had not thought about the Earth woman's side of things. RJ was right. For an outsider, experiencing the *Charj* the first time could very well be frightening or cause devastating results. He felt relief such did not happened for his brother. According to his youngest sibling, Ked and Raeschel experienced a mutual bonding of love and understanding. However, Kaderick waited to give Raeschel time to adjust before he *Charjed* her again. Dalharan hoped he stayed as sensible as Ked if such ever happened to him. Dalharan contained a sigh of regret, correcting his thoughts. He was not likely to ever *Charj* a woman.

“Perhaps your biased opinion comes from you not having found a worthy enough bond-mate,” he stated, becoming even more curious about RJ now.

“I do not ever wish one.”

He was glad to hear she was not married, but saddened for some reason she wished no union. *Feeling* she wanted to change the subject, Dalharan glanced around the room. For the first time, he noticed a Sec-star level chess set on a far wall. A game would be a good way for them to while away their free time when they were not involved talking about the mission, and perhaps to keep their minds and hands off forbidden needs.

Dalharan motioned to the game display. “Do you play quad-chess or is that for decoration?”

RJ’s eyes lit up. “If that’s a challenge, I accept.”

Dalharan went to retrieve the game and rejoined her at the table. “Be prepared, RJ, I take this game just as seriously as a mission.”

Her soft chuckle filtered into his ears, like a musical aphrodisiac. “It’s been a long time since I’ve faced someone who thought they were worthy enough to beat me. Do your best.”

Setting the game pieces in their perspective slots, he laughed heartily. “RJ, you are about to be brought down.”

He met her eyes and saw some fleeting emotion there that he thought was more than physical attraction. Or she could have been thinking about the bout in the gym earlier. She veiled her eyes quickly before he could be certain. She motioned towards the board, inviting him to go first. He did not intend to let this LAW agent win.

After a few hours into the intense game, he leaned back in his chair and let out a sigh of resignation as he glanced at RJ. “You are damn good, RJ. I want a rematch.”

At a sudden warning klaxon going off, RJ jumped up. “Later. We’ve company.”

She bolted out of the room, and Dalharan ran only nano-seconds behind her.

In the control room, he saw her rush to command console and turn on the viewer. In front of them, a large vessel loomed off to the starboard side. Her hands sped over the com-unit, typing information in.

“This does not look good, RJ.”

“It’s not,” she answered, her voice tense. “Better buckle up. That’s a Batoork scout ship heading for us. They aided the Vaukeen in the first days of that war.”

His eyes riveted to the view screen. “Looks like they are preparing to fire weapons.

“I’m going to try and outrun them. Hang on tight,” RJ said.

Dalharan did as she bid. Just as he strapped in, the *Oddessy* jerk rapidly in a sharp turn. More alarms blared throughout the ship, and the small craft started shaking violently. On the screen, he saw several laser torpedoes coming directly at them.

“Hang on tight, Dalh.” RJ’s hands were a blur of movement over the console’s imbedded buttons. “We’re about to dive into a spin cycle.”

The ship quivered violently, and a sudden force riveted Dalharan to his seat. “That maneuver is dangerous. You are crazy.”

“So I’ve been told.” Her soft-spoken words only heightened his anxiety.

Seconds later as the *Oddessy* jerked into a jagged downward turn, the space ship raced into a violent spin. He saw a whirl of sporadic lights in the view screen and realized they were going into hyperspace. Dalharan was sure if the Batoork scout vessel did not destroy them, RJ and the *Oddessy* would.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rieka chuckled as Dalh's face slowly returned to its normal, dark honey-brown coloring. "You've never ridden out a rotating helix route while shooting into hyper space?"

He eyed her warily. "No, and I hope never to do so again. I want my guts to stay in one piece. Are they still trailing us?"

"No. My maneuver enabled us to put lots of mileage between the *Oddessy* and the Batoork scout ship."

His eyes widened. "Your maneuver? It is over ten years old. Never mind, it figures. You are one hellacious woman, RJ."

"Thanks, Dalh." Rieka tapped in some more configurations on the panels before her. "That ship was too close even for a Batoork scout vessel."

"During the War with the Vaukeen those ugly cretins never scouted this near to Krithnar," Dalharan added. "Your ship is too advanced for the *Oddessy*'s warning system not to have picked them up."

Rieka turned off the warning systems. "I know. It must have been their firing system blocking the *Oddessy*'s system configuration."

Dalh turned his chair towards her. "They must have obtained a Silencer illegally."

Rieka swirled her chair to face him. "You know your equipment well."

"It was built by your alliance's Earth Scientist, Doctor Sairius, and the Aldairian scientist, the Master Watcher. The Silencer was used during the last days of the Vaukeen War by some of our ships and yours. It is not uncommon knowledge. Its latest adjustments to smaller ships are recent improvements in the technology."

"Using stealth weaponry, the Vaukeen could invade without us knowing."

“With the Silencer enhanced in the smaller ships,” Dalharan added with emphasis, “the Vaukeen’s Chaos-crafts could do some damage in a surprise attack.”

“It’s no wonder neither of our operatives have reported back. The Vaukeen and those working for them do not wish it known they are using our own weaponry against us. I think we both better report this in.” Rieka turned in her seat back to the command console.

“Just let your superiors know. I am sure they will inform mine.” Dalharan said. “Too many relayed messages might be picked up this close from the Batoork ship.”

“Agreed.” Rieka typed in a coded message and sent it to Coyton’s private channel. She then put the ship back on auto. “Tigon is still over a day away.”

“After that ride, a quick break wouldn’t hurt,” he said.

“Yeah, I don’t think we’ll see another Bartook ship any time soon. We’ll get the upgrades to the *Oddessy* shortly. I won’t let you win the game.”

Dalh stood up and grinned. “I look forward to seeing your equipment closer. As far as the game goes, I will win this time.”

Rieka rose from the command chair and pondered his words. The man was sly with his innuendos. She chose to ignore the first remark. “No, you won’t.”

As they went to the rec room, he glanced at her with some confusion. “You mean I will not? Those damnable contractions your people use are confusing.”

Chuckling, she nodded. “I will not let you win. How is it that Aldairians do not use contractions? Even while as we speak in Univerb, you have used possessive forms.”

He sat at the same table where they left the game board earlier. “I think I see what you are getting at. We Aldairians use no contractions and not doing so in another language is our way.”

“Just like using contractions are Earth people’s ways.” Rieka sat across from him and helped arrange the pieces for playing. “We have a talent for mangling any language.”

He laughed. “According to Pleasurians, Earthers, out of all LAW races, have the easiest language to understand, are the most interesting people, and have a talent for passion only third to their own.”

“The Pleasurians have an escalated sense of their own pleasures. I’d hate to ask whom they consider only second in the love senses.”

Rieka laughed with the Aldairian, finding him more likeable than she first thought, though he still disturbed all her senses.

"They believe Aldairians do." His chest shook mirthfully. "Hundreds of years ago before LAW helped to bring order to the known solar systems, Aldairians and Pleasurians were used for *paschii*. Translated, that means passion-slaves."

"Then I am glad I live in today's times. I do not believe in anyone being forced into something. Slavery of any type, or having their abilities used for the selfish benefit of others is abhorrent to me." She studied the board after his move. "You really should watch your moves better, Dalh, instead of mine."

His delectable lips tilted upwards. "I have to watch you to see what you are up to. Make a play."

His little teases of seduction tore Rieka's insides up with confusion and desire. She should forget about getting close to him no matter how attractive she found him. It just wouldn't work, and she forcefully reminded herself of the fact. Having to be in his company for close to a week would be nerve-wracking. And full of temptation and frustration, she inwardly groaned. Because there was almost nothing more she wanted to do than ravish that fantastic body of his.

Rieka moved a piece. "Checkmate."

"Damnation. I have never seen anyone win in three moves. I shall have to remember those plays so I can at least get you in two moves another time. Shall we go again?"

"No, I think we better prepare for our trip."

"It is still a day and a half away," he said.

"We are not Pleasurians who can while away all our free time. Come, perhaps you can offer some suggestions on how to fix the Silencer," Rieka told him and rose. "You did mention that earlier."

He stood, also. "You can be a forceful woman, RJ."

"This way." Rieka showed him to the engine room. "Beyond here is a small cargo bay and an escape pod."

"What are those twisting stairs at the end of the engine room?" Dalharan asked.

"Never mind, it's off limits to you," Rieka told him. "This is what we're here to check out. Let's see and hear your ideas."

Rieka unscrewed a small panel of a wall near some engine control equipment. Dalharan moved close to her and peered into a panel full of colored wires and twirling tiny lights. She watched his

expressions intently as he studied the designs and patterns of the mechanism before attempting to touch the electrical inserts.

“How long has it been since you upgraded” He grinned at her. “I would have thought you were state-of-the-art everything.”

“Those Batoork could not have had that Silencer for more than a month. There was not enough time to get Dr. Sairius’ latest adjustments to the warning systems before I came on this mission.”

“Then you have been scouting out the Vaukeen for awhile now.” He glanced at her.

Rieka nodded and was again impressed by his clever insights. “I’ve put a bit of mileage on the *Oddessy*.”

“Why do you call your craft that?” Dalh took the tiny set of adjustment tools she handed him.

“Because this ship and I have been through an unusually long haul together.” Rieka answered, amazed at how quickly he repaired and enhanced the Silencer components.

Rieka found his mind as fascinating as she did his body. He not only showed her a quick-fix upgrade to the Silencer but also the ship’s protective shields so it could detect an enemy ship that made use of the Silencer. The man knew almost as much as she did about engineering.

“Impressive, Dalh. It’s been a long time since I worked with anyone on repairing a ship,” Rieka commented.

“I liked repairing things when I was younger and did a stint on an Aldairian ship as an engineer’s assistant. Some desires have to change as you get older and take on more responsibility,” Dalharan admitted.

Rieka conceded that he did a good job at covering up his real identity. If she did not know already, she might not have guessed his true self. It would be hard, going to Aldairia later, and pretending they were not close, especially if he found out her identity.

“I agree.” She took the tools back from him and put them away. “That was an excellent enhancement you made. Let’s go back to the rec room now. I think you deserve another chance to try and defeat me at the game after that neat repair job.”

“Eventually, I will win or checkmate all your moves,” Dalharan said as he followed her out of the engine room.

Rieka found it difficult to ignore his blatant innuendo. Once in the rec room, she set up the game pieces. “You play well and keep me on my toes. Not many people can do that.”

He grinned and sat down. “I bet. Glad I could, then.”

Rieka knew she should find something else to do besides sit here with him, but his ingenuity became as tempting as those delicious lips of his and she wanted to at least enjoy his company in one way that would not cause problems. This time, he kept her senses alert and heightened for several hours. Some games tended to be that way depending on how and whom one played with. Dalharan showed he was one of her most clever and gifted opponents. This moment became one of the more enjoyable times of her life. It was too bad they couldn't get to know one other after this mission. Her choices in life would not allow room for him in her heart, and neither would the dark secrets she held within her soul.

* * * *

After the games, RJ retired. Dalharan went to his own stateroom, glad for a few hours by himself. It took a while before he could sleep. Thoughts of RJ kept him troubled. The woman's personality and beauty were both volatile to his male senses. He so wanted to pull her into his arms and ravish those luscious lips of hers. With his impending marriage and that damn erotic dream, it was no wonder RJ filled his every moment since he met her. This close proximity to a sensual and intelligent woman like her was dangerous for him. He figured stress from signing the contract and being near her were why he felt moody and kept breaking out in cold sweats these last twenty-four hours.

He rose several hours later, more frustrated and with little sleep. He recalled the pleasurable little oddity he came across while exploring his stateroom. Use of the old-fashioned shower would help cool him down. Most space ship hygiene facilities were equipped with sonic toilets and showers in one unit. Evidently, RJ liked to make sure her traveling companions enjoyed a pleasurable cruise aboard her ship. Though a small cruise ship, its top-notch efficiency and sleek design was a perfect, deadly disguise to thwart most enemy craft. The only reason for the attack was because the Batoork fired at anything they did not like the looks of and just because they enjoyed a fight. He was thankful for RJ's expertise and wished there were more time to get to know her better. The shower eased some of his stress, but not his desire for her.

After drying off, he dressed in a dark green, loose-fitting jumpsuit, pulled on his boots and went to the rec room. She was not there. Dalharan searched elsewhere, finally finding her in the command center. RJ was not sitting at the ship's main control module,

but to the far side of it at the science console. He moved near her and leaned against the console while she finished inputting data.

RJ looked up at him from the scope she had been peering into. "I've been checking out more of Tigon's territories. The southern region is about the only area where I detected any heavy movement for the last hour. I have a hunch that's where our operatives' missives originated."

"Let us just hope we can find them alive," he said.

Her blue-gray, green-tinted eyes darkened to an almost emerald color. "And be able to stop whatever it is the two factions are up to."

Having an uncanny feeling she was holding back some of her concerns, he asked, "Besides the obvious war threat from the Vaukeen, do you suspect more?"

"Yes." She cross-folded her arms and tilted her head back to look up at him.

Dalharan wanted to lean down and kiss those worries off her lovely face. "What?"

"When First Admiral Coyton informed me I was to work with you, he also stated that your planet has a pact with Gehenn. I'm supposing you know about that."

He nodded, interlacing his own arms. "Yeah. That did not take too long to get out. I suppose you know about the Sage Stone, also."

She quirked an eyebrow. "No, but I'm sure you'll explain."

He shook his head. She really was very good at filtering things out of people. "Yes, but after you explain yourself."

"Fair enough. Let's go to the rec room. I'm famished." She led the way to the recreational and galley area of the ship.

Dalharan chuckled and followed her. He, too, got hungry at the oddest times. They sat down after retrieving their meals from the reproduction unit. He found more and more things he liked about RJ the more they interacted. Right now, he wished their trip together never had to end.

"I don't always eat vegetables." RJ grinned at his inquiring look. "This is Cheok-Veeahl-Deor. A Krithnaran veal-type meat made with a special sauce. One of my mother's favorites."

"She is Krithnaran?" Dalharan asked.

"Good try, but no. She just liked it. Now about that Sage Stone you mentioned. What has it to do with this mission?"

"You are quite a woman, RJ, trying to get me to speak first." He smiled at her ruefulness. "What exactly did the admiral tell you?"

“Only that your people have planned another marriage contract with Gehenn. There was a faction years back that did not want the contract to be fulfilled. They tried to kill the Aldairian heir then.”

“I know. That was where I first served.” Dalharan made up something close enough to the truth so he could talk more freely with her. “Do you know much about it?”

“Only what I was told. Since you were there, fill me in. Why did they want to stop the wedding from taking place?” RJ queried.

Dalh took a mouthful of his own food before answering. “Some Gehennans did not want Aldairia and Gehenn to reunite. There are probably some Aldairians who do not wish the amalgamation either.”

“And your views?” She looked up at him between bites.

“They do not matter. What is best for Aldairia is all that concerns me. There has been enough war between our two worlds. I think the prince made the contract for that reason. It is enough,” Dalharan stated adamantly.

“I see. So the current wedding will once more accomplish the reunion?”

Dalharan nodded. “That is its purpose. Aldairia cannot afford to have another war. As I suspect neither can Gehenn or LAW. I think the Vaukeen wish to instigate turmoil between Gehenn and Aldairia.”

“If a war was started between Aldairia and Gehenn again, then the Vaukeen would have all sides weakened, including LAW,” RJ emphasized.

“Exactly,” he pointed out and picked at something green on his plate. “We must prevent that at all costs. That is why finding the Sage Stone is very important.”

“Tell me about it,” RJ said as she took a drink from a blue, odd-shaped container.

He finished his food first, then pushed his empty tray to one side before talking to her again. “The Sage Stone is one of the oldest artifacts in Aldairian history. It has a lot of mystery surrounding it and is said to possess enormous powers. Its main importance to Aldairia is that it symbolizes the Great Change of long ago when the *Charj* was altered from war usage to strictly mating purposes. The old gemstone is to be given to the Gehennans upon their arrival at Aldairia just prior to the wedding.”

“Then they do not know it is missing?” RJ asked and rose with both trays.

“We have to find it before they do. The heads of Gehenn have wanted to get their hands on the Sage Stone for a long time.” Dalharan’s insides churned with need when he watched her sleek body move like a graceful, deadly cat as she walked to the matter unit and back. He would like nothing better than to slide his length into her slick channel and hear her cry out his name again and again during the heat of her passions.

“So it seems we have our work cut out for us—finding our operatives, getting the Sage Stone, and preventing the Vaukeen from causing another war.” RJ sat back down. “Maybe we should ask the fates to send more problems our way. I don’t think we have enough.”

“Do not ask them.” Dalharan let out a gruff laugh. “I think we have plenty of worries for the present.”

He definitely did not want any more problems than they already faced. Lost agents, a stolen power gem, threats of war, and one damn attractive woman he was having a hard time keeping his hands off of. In fact, that was the worst problem of the lot for him. Dalharan felt relieved when she made an excuse to leave him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rieka paced her quarters, trying to get the man out of her mind. It must be the *Charj* that made her react this way. She never fell into deep affection and attraction easily. Several cold showers failed to help. She dressed in a brown one-piece suit she hoped didn't emphasize her shape. She certainly noticed his interest in her since he first boarded the *Oddessy*.

The two of them needed to be away from each other and soon, before either one of them acted irrationally. Twelve hours, she thought in exasperation, until they landed. It couldn't be soon enough for her. She went back to the control room and found him waiting for her there.

"You keep yourself occupied," he said from the co-pilot's seat. "I searched for you earlier to see if you wanted to play another game before we landed."

"Like you," she sat down, "I need to stay busy and out of trouble."

"It is not easy with you as a partner, RJ," he teased. "I almost went in search for you in your private quarters. I assume that off-limits area is your own stateroom."

"It is. Thank you for respecting my privacy." Rieka ignored his teasing and then got up. "We have less than twelve hours now until we reach Tigon. I think we should finish preparations and plans for our mission. Time for a tour of the weapons room"

She caught the wayward look he cast her and heard him follow her to the main cargo bay situated below the control room. The metal stairs clanked beneath her weight and sounded even noisier when he clomped down them several at a time.

"Impressive, RJ." Dalharan glanced around the room, whistling at the armaments held in bolted fixtures on two of the large metal walls. "You ever use all these weapons?"

“Some of them. Most are a collection I’ve gathered over the years.” She moved to the wall farthest away from the circular stairs they just descended. Rieka pulled off a long, thin rifle-like weapon and stroked it fondly. “This belonged to my maternal grandfather back in his youth. It still packs a wallop even by today’s standards.”

She replaced the weapon and watched in amusement as Dalh fingered several pieces before stopping at the end of the wall. He motioned to a built-in cabinet that held several different size laser guns and other objects. Rieka nodded, and he opened the cabinet doors, gingerly fingering a few pieces before pulling out a small triangular based object that purported a half-moon shaped handle.

“A Vaukeen distortion ray. This deadly little beast will eat one’s insides up in long torturous seconds. I saw how they worked in the last war. Were you in ground combat?” He looked over at Rieka.

Rieka nodded. “For a bit. It was enough. Choose any weapon you feel comfortable with...wait don’t touch that other one.”

She let out a sigh of relief and moved next to him before he picked up a dangerous looking object. Rieka held her hand momentarily over the ominous silver disc-shaped apparatus he started to touch. A small whirring sound emanated from it, followed by a flash of light. She chuckled then picked up the tiny unit.

“This Death Disc is attuned to my physical patterns only. Right now, it is set on stun-mode and would have emitted a shock dart if you touched it. Comes in handy when the enemy is disarming you, even if you have it on stun-mode.” Rieka held it out to him.

His lips curled ruefully and Rieka wanted to reach up and caress his delectable mouth with her fingertips.

“I want to stay alive during our trip together, RJ. Perhaps you had better explain more of your little wonders to me.”

She put the unit back in the shelf and motioned to another. “That one should suit you. It’s an Aldairian-modified piece.”

“Modified with what?” he asked cautiously.

Grinning, Rieka brought the small weapon out. It looked like a small derringer from the mid-eighteenth century Earth time, only without a trigger. “This little baby was shortened from an Aldairian mid-ranger.”

“Those were bad enough,” Dalharan exclaimed. “The shorter barrel will only give it a more powerful aim.”

“Exactly. Comes in handy if you’re out-manned close up.”

“You are an amazing woman, RJ. Remind me never to meet you in a dark alley. Or any place dark for that matter.”

She felt an inner heat rising when she saw the warm twinkling glance he bestowed upon her.

Laughing, she retrieved two brown travel satchels lying on a nearby shelf and then handed one to Dalharan. “Choose your toys, Dalh.”

She added a few weapons to her pack. As he took the Death Disc out of the case, she smiled when he toyed with it, set it on stun, and then put it in his own satchel. Rieka moved to other storage compartments and handed Dalharan objects they would need for any type of emergency or necessity. They went over the uses of each device.

“Everything is compact. Do you always believe in traveling light?” he asked, bemused.

“On missions and everywhere. Use whatever you are comfortable with. Get what you need from your room and meet me in the control center.” Rieka slung the other pack over her shoulder and headed back up the stairs.

* * * *

Both were glad not to encounter any more trouble while they finished preparing for the trip. They landed on Tigon a few hours later, docking at Shasz-Norr’s small space terminal. Rieka stood outside the ship with Dalh, watching the main hatch close. She extended her left arm and touched a tiny red button on the bracelet device she wore. Immediately, a thin blue ray shot out towards the *Oddessy*. The ship glowed for a few seconds then appeared normal. She tapped the red button again and the ray stopped.

She turned to view Dalharan, seeing a wry grin upon his handsome face.

“Tell me, RJ, do all AIM agents have such a device?”

“Only myself. An experimental unit a LAW scientist made for me to try out on my more current missions. The ray I just used on the *Oddessy* is an extra security precaution. Hopefully, not even a psychic is going to break into my vessel.”

“Just as well,” he commented. “I do not like the looks we are getting from others at this crowded docking site. Shall we go into town and try to purchase a land rover or something for travel?”

“I know of a certain place that handles those things.” Rieka nodded and led the way.

The bustling town of Shasz-Norr was a two-day journey from the mountains and the only place close enough to their destination. Dark, imposing stone buildings lined a filthy, cobblestone street. The town was a miasma of derelict species that inhabited the small city. Rieka led them to a small pub not too far away.

Dalharan lowered his head as he went through the doorway. Inside, smoky air circulated around the room and it smelled of rotted wood, damp stones, and stale alcohol. The two went to the bar, it took a few seconds for the barkeep to wait on them. A squat, gray-skinned, two-headed, creature snorted at them.

“Drakz.” Rieka spoke up using the intergalactic language “And an air-cycle.”

The creature glanced from her, to Dalh and back at Rieka. “Tventy credakss for da Drakz. Eighty more for da air-cycle, pluz depozits. I have only survice around.”

Rieka plunked the intergalactic currency coins down on the bar. Just as soon as his four-fingered hands reach out for it, she moved quickly and pulled the being up by his apron straps. She hauled him over the bar top until his face was up against hers.

“Just make sure that air-cycle is here within half an hour or I’ll cut off your other fingers. And no sweetener in the Drakz. Ok?” Rieka let him go.

The barkeep snorted again, but nodded his head and hurried away. Dalharan shook his head in amazement. “What was that all about, RJ? That little dweeber was ready to choke with fear at your actions.”

“The barkeep here expected a docile female. He’s Tveend. They think women of any species are dumb. One that shows them a little muscle is treated with respect.”

He chuckled. “Remind me to show you lots of respect then. Are those drinks safe and that air...thing you paid for...is it reliable?”

Rieka grinned. “Both will be. Here are our drinks now.”

The barkeep plunked down two large mugs with pinkish gray concoctions inside before throwing a small package at Rieka. He then headed away quickly. Rieka took the package and one of the mugs and motioned for Dalharan to join her at a nearby empty booth. Once settled in their seats, she opened the package and pulled out a square metal object.

“This is the key. When he held up two fingers after serving us the Drakz, he indicated the cycle would be here in about twenty minutes. Enjoy your brew.”

Dalharan eyed the mug with some distaste. “What is this stuff anyway? It smells god-awful.”

“It is exceptional after the first sip. Packs a wallop, but it will clear any fuzzies in your head right away. Don’t worry, Dalh. By the time we get the air-cycle, you’ll be feeling just fine and not hung over. Bottoms up.”

Dalharan scrunched his nose and then took a quick sip. “Ugh. How can you stand such crud?”

“When you visit places like this, you develop particular tastes,” Rieka said.

“I take it you are excessively travel-wise then.” He pushed the mug away.

“Quite. And travel-weary.” She took a large sip of her drink.

“Why not give all this excitement up then?”

Curiously, she eyed him. He had been too amenable lately. Moreover, she responded too easily to his advances. Rieka knew part of it was due to the talk they had aboard the *Oddessy* about the *Charj*. Though still somewhat uncomfortable with the *Charj* they’d shared, at least now she understood the Aldairian more. He did not plan their sharing. It was her own reaction that made her feel as if she had been assaulted. She enjoyed past lovers, but her own past dealings with Almeagar left her leery of a permanent involvement with any man.

Rieka looked away from him and glanced around the crowded pub. Creatures here and there studied her and Dalharan. It wouldn’t be long before one of the beings decided to interfere in their business. She let out a sigh. That was one of the reasons she felt mission-weary, along with war and secrets, and all the crap that went along with her lifestyle.

“All this must be part of it.”

She jerked her head towards him in surprise. “I beg your pardon.”

“You spoke out loud while you were woolgathering. Why not give up the agent’s life if you are so mission-weary?” He pushed his drink farther away.

She started to answer him when movement near them caught her attention. “Uh-oh. Don’t look behind you, Dalh.”

Rieka realized she shouldn’t have said that for he immediately turned around. Coming towards them was a huge being twice

Dalharan's size. It was half-humanoid, half-insectizoid. Its antennae glowed brightly. Rieka saw this type of creature once before...a female Sectbug. And in full-heat by the flashing of its antennae.

"Dalh, quickly look down. The bitch is in heat, and she's got her claws and antennae pointing at you. Do it now, dammit. I'm not kidding!"

However, both were too late. As the creature reached Dalharan and jerked him out of his seat, Rieka jumped up swiftly and ducked under the Sectbug's swinging arms. The female insectizoid spun around to strike at Rieka. Rieka sprung in the air with a small laser in her hand. She did a double aerial kick at the creature's head and aimed her blast at the Sectbug's arms. The creature immediately dropped Dalharan on top of the table. It let out a long piercing screech before rushing away from Rieka and heading out of the bar.

Rieka snatched up the square key and grabbed Dalh by the arm. "Let's get out of here now. No, don't ask questions. The barkeep just signaled the air-cycle is ready out back. Come on."

They hadn't settled in their seats long enough to take off their arms packs. Dalharan followed quickly behind her. Rieka led them out a back exit. Dalharan let out a small yelp at hitting his head on the low door. A creature similar in looks to the barkeep stood by a motorized vehicle that gleamed silver and hung stationary in the air. Rieka threw a credit-coin at the waiting creature, and it scuttled out of the way. She leaped on the small vehicle and started it up. Dalharan jumped behind her on the second seat.

"Hold on, Dalh. These air-cycles are made for quick get-a-ways."

Dalharan let out a groan and quickly wrapped his arms around her waist. Rieka guided the machine onto the streets and then out of town. She laughed freely, enjoying the rush of wind striking her face. Dalharan just gripped her waist tighter.

* * * *

Just outside the city, the land sloped downwards into barren plains. Dalharan enjoyed of the air-cycle's ability to glide smoothly over the rough terrain. They cruised for perhaps an hour before the landscape slowly turned into a marshland. RJ kept the air-cycle at a higher altitude. He knew it would push the small engine's capabilities. As they journeyed closer to the mountains, the marshland gave way to bog encrusted swamplands covered with unruly enormous trees that started from the dark pools of the swamps and shot upwards. The dark branches threatened to engulf the sky above.

Dalharan saw by the cycle's built-in road map of the territory that they had another half-hour drive before they came to the end of the swamp. After that, they would head into a jungle area just before reaching the base of the southern mountains. The sudden spitting and spewing of the hard-pressed engine did not appeal to either him, or her, he noted.

Rieka kept the air-cycle going even when something suddenly arose out from the murky waters before them. "Damnation. Hang on, Dalh."

"Veer right, RJ!" Dalharan shouted over the loud roaring noise of the enormous creature that sprang up in front of them.

She did as he directed and steered the vehicle away from the creature. They soared under one huge gray tentacle. Another ominous arm emerged from the water and slammed the water in front of them. A large wave hit them full force, sending both riders and the cycle hurling into the air.

Dalharan landed on a soft muddy bank, half in, half out of the water. He coughed up mud and water. Quickly, he shook the stinging water out of his eyes and looked around for RJ. He heard her cry out. Glancing in that direction, he saw her arms flailing in the water. Just after one of the creature's tentacles wrapped around her torso, it dragged her down into the deadly pool.

Seconds later, the beast rose from the water, its huge mouth agape, ready to pull RJ into its' dark depths. Dalharan jumped up immediately and dove back into the water. A tentacle lashed out at him, barely missing him. He made a movement with his hand, sending a beam of energy towards the creature's head. The monster jerked and then howled in pain. Dalharan reached RJ as the creature lost its grip on her. He grabbed her in his arms and with his psychic powers transported them to the grassy bank where he first landed.

Once materialized, Dalharan slung RJ over his shoulders, not waiting to see if the creature was alive or dead. He dodged in and out among the trees of the swampland, doing his best to keep from slipping or tripping over the soft ground. Long minutes later, the ground hardened and the trees thinned. He saw more greenery around them and realized that they entered the edges of a jungle.

In a tiny clearing, he finally stopped with her and dropped to the ground to rest. He pulled RJ onto his lap. Like him, she was drenched, caked with slimy mud, and gulping in air. Their suits were torn in several places from the branches that struck at them on the run

through the swamp-forest. He was thankful that the two of them were in one piece and that they did not lose their supply packs.

Gaining his composure, he shifted her more closely against him, letting her rest her head on his upper arm. "At least that damn contraption got us somewhat close to the mountains."

RJ let out a gruff laugh, her chest still heaving with exertion. "Thanks, Dalh."

"What, no reprimand for using my powers?" He chuckled, glad to see her returning to normal.

"Those abilities of yours saved our hides. How often can you do that? Teleportation, I mean, without it taking a lot of physical stamina out of you?" RJ asked.

"A few times during the day. I doubt I could teleport anymore today though. That seemed to tax me a bit more than I would have expected," he explained.

"Well, I owe you." She smiled.

"I will call it even. You saved my hide back in the tavern," Dalharan reminded her.

"You two would have made such a cute couple." RJ made to move out of the circle of his arms.

Dalharan restrained her. "I think I prefer you staying where you are for now."

RJ rested her head back on his arm. "I don't respond to orders well, Dalh. But I haven't the strength to resist right now."

"Good." Dalharan stated just before his mouth came down over hers.

He swallowed her gasp of surprise and enjoyed the first savoring of her lips immensely. He always knew, somehow, that she would taste hot and sweet. His tongue teased the inside of her mouth, and he let out a groan of triumph as she arched her body against his. Shifting his weight, he pulled her beneath him before deepening the kiss. RJ did not remain pliant beneath him. He heard her groan of regret just before she shoved him away.

With some effort, he moved into a sitting position. "I will not apologize for what just happened, RJ."

"Damn you." RJ cursed him. "Just keep your hands off me and remember we are on a mission, not a pleasure cruise."

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Dalharan got to his feet. RJ was already up and dusting off what dirt and grass she could. Without another glance in his direction, she stomped away from him. Dalharan

adjusted the satchel more securely on his back before he took off in her wake. He kept a few feet behind her, giving her time to adjust her bearings. She might be angry with him, but he held no doubts RJ enjoyed their heated kiss just as much as he did.

He hated to admit RJ was right. They were on a mission of utmost importance. Neither had time for dallying. However, it was not a mild flirtation Dalharan had on his mind. From the first moment he set eyes upon RJ, he knew she would make a difference in his destiny. He could not be sure why or how, only aware that she would. If nothing else, before his upcoming marriage, he hoped to persuade her to let him do more than kiss her. He felt the physical ache and dammed the circumstances that held them back from giving in to their mutual sexual attraction for one another.

RJ moved in front of him through thick vines and branches. Using a small laserchete, he cut slimy creeping plants out of his path. RJ just whacked them with the side of her hand and they fell at her feet instantly. Again, he realized the intensity of her uno-martial arts training, knowing that if she wanted to she could have snapped the life out of him at any time. Whether he used his powers or not.

As much as he thought he was in control of his inner emotions, the LAW agent was more so with hers. After their kiss, her ardor cooled quickly. She could easily switch from passion to a calm, dignified military persona in a moment's notice. He, however, needed more than a few seconds of adjustment.

A sticky, yellowish branch slapped him in the face. "Damnation."

"Watch where you are going instead of woolgathering, Aldairian." Her soft chuckle grated his nerves. The wretch deliberately let the limb hit him.

"There's a clearing ahead, Dalh." RJ stopped walking.

He stopped behind her, looking to where she pointed. Hidden behind the cover of tall bushes, he peered through the wide flat leaves. A small area of level land lay before them. There was little to see beyond yellow-green grass—a few dilapidated huts and evidence of long ago dwellers strewn around the ground.

After scouting the area, the two moved out of the jungle and into the clearing. They checked out the first hut they came to. Dalharan scrunched up his nose at the foul odors emitting from the shelter. Long-decayed bodies and bits of other unidentifiable things lay on the earthen floor. The two quickly searched the last of the huts and found much the same in each ancient edifice.

Dalharan glanced around the clearing again and then over the tallest of the trees in the distance. Barely above them, he espied the peak of a snow-capped mountain. Whistling, he tried to get RJ's attention since she was doing her best to ignore him.

When she looked up, he pointed to the mountains towards the south. "That set of snow-capped mountains must be the Wrevich Mountains I read about on your computer records. I think about a day's walk or so. Is your suit thermalized?"

He noticed that RJ absently smoothed a hand across the sleeve of the form-fitting bodysuit she wore. However, of similar design to his own brown suit, hers was black. The suits they changed into just before landing were designed to protect the wearer from all weather conditions and enabled them to carry other provisions. Though both of their outfits were splotted with bits of mud and slightly torn, Dalharan figured they were still in working order.

"This place looks as good as any to make camp," RJ suggested. "There's a small stream over by that group of trees. Nightfall will soon be here. We can at least clean up some before it darkens completely."

Dalharan glanced at the semi-darkening skyline. "I concur. That last hut looked more like an old supply holding and did not smell as bad. How about there?"

RJ shrugged her shoulders and entered the dwelling. He followed behind her and left the door standing ajar so that the hut could be aired out. Quietly contemplating their mission so far, he set about helping her to make the place a bit more habitable. So far, he thought as he cleaned the hut, it had been one hell of an adventure with RJ at his side. Both of them did their best to keep their hands off each other. He wanted like crazy to touch that curvy body of hers. She was the most desirable woman he ever met. Every minute, it became more difficult for him. Moreover, *he was sure*, by her wayward looks at him, she was having a hard time of it also.

"Now that we've got camp ready, I'm going to wash up at the stream. I'll be back in a few minutes," RJ said then left the hut.

Dalharan watched through the doorway as she made her way over to the stream that ran past a group of tall, willowy trees a few yards from the hut. He felt she did not realize just what the swaying of her rounded hips or the way she slowly unbraided her hair during her walk to the stream did to his senses. By the fates, he wanted to know what it was like to touch that delicious body of hers. He turned away

from the tantalizing scene and tried to stay busy while she cleansed herself. It did not work too well.

After fifteen minutes, he became worried and went to the stream to find her. She said she was going to do a wash up, not take a full bath. He found her belongings alongside the bank of the stream, but she was nowhere around. Something struck him from behind and Dalharan found himself falling into the stream.

A few seconds later, he stood up in the middle of the waist deep stream, sputtering water. Glancing up he saw RJ standing at the edge of the bank, grinning down at him. She wore a thin covering wrapped around her from chest to hips. Her dark auburn hair, even wet, looked like flames bursting in the evening sun.

He frowned. "What the hell was that for?"

"You shouldn't have come up on me unannounced. I was only protecting myself."

"I still do not appreciate getting shoved into the water even if I do need a bath." Dalh narrowed his eyes and waved a hand towards her.

RJ cried out as she found herself gripped by an unseen force, and then dropped into the water at Dalharan's feet. Dalharan bent over and scooped her up in his arms. He pulled her tightly against his chest and brought his mouth over hers. When she stopped struggling, he brought them out of the water and moved with her in his arms to the grassy bank. He knelt down and lowered their bodies onto the soft mound of grass.

"Damn you!" she exclaimed when he raised his head, allowing her to catch her breath. "Get the frig off of me."

"No." He lowered his head, once more claiming her lips in a deep, thorough kiss.

She struggled with him at first, but soon wrapped her arms around his neck. Dalharan groaned at her fierce response. He had no time to think, only do, as she tugged at his clothes and rolled him over.

Breathing frustrated sighs, she stared heatedly down at him. "If you're so hard up for sex, fine, I'm willing. I'm not an innocent, Dalh. I've had lovers before and I never promise a tomorrow. Now, either defrost your libido or strip and let's get it done with."

Dalharan pushed her away and sat up. He moved to the edge of the water and splashed some on himself. "I will cool off, RJ. I was wrong to push you into something. I will try to restrain myself in the future."

Aldairian Ecstasy: Forbidden Desires

“Yeah, right.” She got up, gathered her belongings, and then stomped away.

Dalharan watched her go. With a low growl, he dove into the stream, fully clothed. It was cool and invigorating, and what he needed to chill his ardor of moments ago. Getting out of the stream, he hand-wiped the water out of his face. For a long while, he sat on the grassy bank wishing he had not acted like such an idiot.

* * * *

Rieka awoke the next morning, finding the Aldairian staring down at her. She frowned at him and rolled away from his edge of the pallet. After what happened yesterday evening and then seeing his dripping wet form, she had little sense left and offered to share her thermalized, weatherproof blanket with him so that they had better protection against the cold night air. She got up quickly and gathered up things to put in her pack. He put his own things back in the satchel he used. She'd changed into a spare mission suit before he'd come back from his second trek to the pool, to completely bath himself, after their bout.

“Let's get going.” Rieka started to leave the hut. “We have a long walk ahead.”

“Wait, RJ.” She turned back around as Dalh spoke up. “I have a better idea.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What?”

Swiftly he pulled her against him and then they disappeared. The next thing she knew, they materialized at the foot of the mountains. Dalharan stood heaving from exertion, but kept his arms around her just the same. Rieka allowed him to gather his composure before she eased out of his arms.

Turning from him, she looked around to view the area he landed them in. Faint traces of snow blanketed the mountainside. Winter was closing in on the area, but soft chilly breezes still nipped at their faces. Neither one said more than a few words to each other since the night before. Each kept to their respective sides of the pallet, though she knew that both of them had one hellacious night trying to keep their hands off each other. Rieka intended to keep her distance from the devastating alien.

“Look above us on that second slope. I see an opening there.” Dalharan pointed up. “Perhaps that will lead underneath or near the stronghold.”

“Agreed,” Rieka said.

They did not need to use their climbing equipment as they found footholds up the mountain until they reached the slope. They slipped on loose gravel and snow, Dalh steadied them both. Even through his gloved hands, she felt the intense heat of his desire attacking her weakening senses. Rieka pulled away from him quickly and peered into the opening of the cave.

The rays of the mid-morning sun beamed down upon the cavern's entrance, she pulled a small porta-light from her pack and pressed it on. Dalharan did likewise and moved with her into the cave. Adjusting their eyes to the darkness, the two turned in opposite directions to view more of the underground room.

Rieka saw structures of surreal-looking crystal. There were some formations highlighted by a phosphorescent film, while others were of dark and light hues. Stalactites from the ceiling loomed above them, and stalagmites threatened from the floor. She pointed her flashlight in another direction and saw a large set of columns in the cavern's center. On either side of the breathtaking giant rock were tunnels.

"Which way do we choose?" Dalharan's voice echoed softly off the walls.

She gave him a quick glance before letting her instincts decide for them. "This way, and keep your voice down."

Dalharan chuckled, following her lead. The two passed other unusual crystal formations on the walls, flooring and ceiling of the underground passage. Rieka felt as if they trekked for hours before she heard the soft echo of trickling water. It wasn't long before the two of them found themselves in a small chamber, a pool of water in the center. A small rivulet of water, flowing from a wall above, sprinkled down into the pool.

Rieka bent down before the pool. She scooped up some of the water then brought it to her lips. She sniffed it first before sticking the tip of her tongue out to taste it. Glancing up at Dalh, she motioned towards the pool. He knelt beside her, and drank the sweet tasting liquid. Like her, he rinsed his face and hands in the pool, then moved back to sit at its edge. They both filled their extra canisters for later.

"There is only one small opening on the other side. I think I can fit through it though." He pointed to a small florescent column.

Rieka directed her porta-light at the crevice and saw this to be true. "It's either that or we trek back to the cavern's main room and go through the other tunnel."

"I say we rest here a short while before we chance the crevice over there." Dalharan removed his pack.

She shrugged her shoulders, doing the same. "Resting my feet sounds good."

Rieka studied the formations in the room so she did not have to look directly at him. She kept her attention on a form of lines, which folded and curled like a set of curtains covering a window. Beautiful and serene, the stones were eons old.

"You would like the caverns systems I mentioned before. They are just as fascinating."

She jerked her head around in his direction and saw him lying comfortably against a mid-sized rock. His powerful arms were behind his head and Rieka felt the sudden urge to splay her hands over his taunt chest. She shifted herself more comfortably against a rock and hoped he would say no more when she remained silent.

But he didn't. "Odd, is it not, how our paths have crossed."

Rieka let out a soft sigh. "I do not find it strange. If it were not you that your government sent, it would have been someone else."

He shook his head in disagreement. "I was the most likely choice. I am an empath as well as being psychically endowed. I will find my...comrade."

He's endowed all right, she thought, and a bit too pigheaded. Hell, those toasty brown lips of his made her melt. She couldn't lie to herself, and knew she enjoyed each of his deeply heated kisses. He also made her more nervous than any other man ever did. This mission couldn't be over with soon enough for her. Last night was just too close a call for her, and she didn't know how much longer she could restrain her own desires. Men, she thought, are not the only ones who have problems controlling their sexual urges.

"We shall find both our operatives and obtain the data we seek. Remember we have to work together." She tried to keep the sourness out of her voice.

"My father tends to stay cross a long time about things. I think you two would get along." His teasing grin only made her more frustrated.

"I doubt we shall ever meet." She closed her eyes and folded her arms on her chest, once more hoping he would get the hint to leave her in peace.

"Fate is a strange mistress, RJ." His voice and breath were too near.

Fluttering her eyes open, she saw him peering down at her. “You bloody fool. You shouldn’t have used your powers to materialize next to me. We are too damn close to a pirate stronghold. I just hope they didn’t detect your use of powers, any of the times you used them.”

“Make up your mind, RJ. One minute you want me to use them, the next you gripe about them.” His eyes lit up with amusement. “Just like caresses.”

“Go to hell.” Rieka jumped up and began exploring the mountainous chamber.

She opened her empathic senses, closing her eyes to concentrate. Letting out a sigh of relief, she *sensed* no one else in their immediate surroundings. The enemy did not notice his materializing and dematerializing antics.

“I do not think these pirates can perceive all forms of psychic energy.” He grunted with frustration. “I do use caution with my powers, even at home on Aldairia. Give me credit for something.”

Rieka gave him an annoyed glance and started to move away from him. Dalharan reminded her once more how swift he could move. He had her encompassed in his arms within seconds, and then he brought his lips down over hers. Rieka let out a low growl as her body responded to him.

Before he did more damage to her senses, she shoved him away and headed for the pool. Rieka heard a chuckle behind her as she knelt again by the pool and splashed water on her face. Damn him. Fate could indeed be cruel. And she should not have allowed that kiss or being in his arms at any time to have taken place. Her lips still seared even after wetting them down with water. It would take a lot to forget his touch. If he let her.

“Shall we resume our trek now?” he asked, some mirth in his voice.

Slowly, she rose and faced him. “I’m not here to make this trip more pleasurable for you, Dalh. Don’t make me warn you a third time that our operatives’ lives depend on us remembering that fact.”

Her coldness seemed to have the desired effect on him for he sobered quickly. “Of course. I shall watch my actions from now on.”

Rieka didn’t believe him for one minute, but ignored him, retrieved her pack, and headed towards the other side of the cavern chamber. She did not look behind her to see if he followed or not through the dark crevice. Rieka just wished he would get lost permanently. Somehow, she didn’t feel she would be that lucky.

CHAPTER SIX

Dalharan traversed behind her, keeping pace with her movements as best he could. They went through several tunnels that twisted, turned, and curved. Some went upwards, and others turned downward. Finally, he and RJ entered a chamber that was similar to the first one they entered, but this one looked much larger. Near one wall, they found a downward slope that continued into a dark abyss. At another opening, lighted walls showed steps leading upwards.

Dalharan took the lead, heading up the stairs. As they ascended, both watched how they moved their feet. Some of the rock-hewn steps and the walls were covered with shiny, neon aqua-colored, slimy moss. After some time, the stairs changed course and started heading downwards. Not much later, the stairway ended at a bolted door.

He put his hands against the door and psychically listened. His inner senses picked up no vibrations nor detected the presence of beings on the other side.

RJ placed her hands on a thick board placed diagonally across the door. He pushed upwards on the piece of wood with her. Together they were able to remove the heavy board.

Motioning for her to stand back, Dalharan laced both hands around the ancient latch and pulled. His efforts were rewarded after some minutes. The door creaked and grunted, but finally opened under his insistent hands. Both started coughing after they accidentally inhaled the dank air coming from the other side.

Dalharan led the way into a dark, narrow passage. Though it was hewn into the mountain, this tunnel had smoother walls. He held his porta-light up, scoping out the passageway. RJ brushed past him and headed forwards. Dalharan hurried to catch up with the impudent wretch. The tunnel led them to another door, but this one had a metal bolt against it and bars they could peer through.

RJ put a finger to her lips and pointed for him to peer through the bars. Carefully, he did as she directed. On the other side of the door, he saw several people in chains lying on the filthy floor of a damp and dusky chamber. He clenched his fists. No one should have to suffer the torment he saw on the faces of the prisoners in that awful cell.

He started to open the door, but RJ stopped him. He narrowed his eyes until she touched his lips and tugged at his arm for him to follow her back down the opposite way. Quietly, he let her lead him back through the tunnel, to the opening at the other end.

At the wooden door, she stopped and turned towards him. “Dalh, the woman down there was our missing operative. Which one of the men was yours?”

Dalharan realized what she was getting at. “You think one of the two men might be a plant?”

“Yes. I did not wish to hurt your agent.” He was glad to see her smile again.

“The one with the golden brown hair is Aldairian.” At her questioning look, he chuckled. “Not all Aldairians have sable hair coloring as most people assume. We have some variety in our appearance.”

“I should hope so. Now that I know what your agent looks like, let’s get this rescue over with.” She traipsed back towards the other door.

Dalh reached out quickly to stop her. “Not yet. They have company.”

“What...”

He put a finger to her lips to stop her words. “The Aldairian is a partial empath and telepath. He knows I am here and sent me a warning message just now. We will wait until he sends me a communiqué that the area is clear.”

Dalh took her wrist and led her back to the metal door. Both peered through it once more and saw the prisoners below were no longer alone. Several minions were slopping food at them. Dalh and Rieka stayed silent for some moments watching.

“*Dalh...*” came a tired, soft voice into his mind, “*Be careful. There are psi-detectors in the corridors outside the cells.*”

Dalh pulled her away from the door and said softly, “You were right. Psychic detectors are on the other side of the cell. My operative just informed me.”

RJ pulled a small, deadly looking laser-gun from her weapons holster. "Then we had better be prepared in other ways."

Dalharan felt an ominous foreboding, but removed a similar weapon from his own arms pouch. "After you, RJ."

Once more, they peered through the metal door, finally seeing the room cleared except for the chained prisoners. The metal creaked a bit and then swung open.

Dalharan rushed after RJ down the steps leading into the cell. It was dimly lit, dank, and smelled of rotted vegetation. Dalh went immediately to a man just a few inches taller than himself, but who had dark golden brown hair.

Dark brown eyes, much like his own, viewed him wearily. "Glad you could make it. Who is your partner?"

"I will introduce you two later, Vul." He took out a miniature laser drill from his pack and immediately went to work on unchaining the other Aldairian.

"You're slow, cousin." Dalharan heard the female prisoner's feeble words.

"I had a stubborn mountain delaying my progress, Kath. Be still I'm almost done," RJ returned.

By the time he was through with his brother Vultar, Dalharan looked over to see RJ had the woman Kath free. He left Vul to go over to the other prisoners in the room.

He recognized an ape-like being known as a Presord. Though as big as an Aldairian, he knew Presords were normally gentle creatures. The alien must have been taken prisoner for its telepathic abilities.

The Presord grunted thanks of some sort before Dalh went to work on the last prisoner. He was not sure of the person's origins, but the alien was humanoid in shape and had dark green hair and eyes. Cautiously, he freed the male and stepped back away from him.

"Thankss." It slur-sung out its words. "I'm Fikk."

"Dalh." He said to Fikk, and then turned to RJ. "We better hurry."

She nodded, helping the other woman to her feet. "Lead on."

Neither the Presord nor Fikk seemed to be as abused as Kath and Vul. Dalharan helped Vultar to his feet and led the way out. None of the troupe stopped until they were in the underground room where RJ and he first halted for a rest near the small pool. There the group stopped and took a well-deserved break.

"We can rest here for a short while," Dalharan said.

Vul moved near him at the pool and away from the others. “Brother, your face is a welcome sight for me. How did you get hooked up with a LAW agent?”

Briefly, Dalharan told him before asking, “Have you been a prisoner all this time?”

“For about three days, Dalh. I was captured two days after I sent my last missive in Shasz-Norr. The others were in there longer. I do not trust Fikk. The Presord, Omb, I have communicated with, but not Kath.”

Dalharan placed a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “She is RJ’s lost operative, so I think we are safe there. I do not trust that Fikk either. He does not look like he has suffered the way you and the others have. We shall be careful with him. However, if Kath is not psychic, why did they keep her alive?”

Vul raised a hand to his forehead as if he were in pain. Dalharan touched the man’s head, emitting a soothing sensation from his hand. He sensed the fatigue in his brother’s body and waved a hand over him. Healing never took a lot out of Dalharan. Lately though, within these last couple of days, he seemed able to use his powers for longer measures of time, though it tired him out more. The awareness of this perplexed him, but he put it to one side when he saw a healthy flush creep into Vultar’s face.

“Thanks. It is to my advantage you have healing abilities as well as other powers. And that the detectors are not setup to scope inside of the cell.” Vul said. “How long have you been looking for us?”

“We just arrived here yesterday afternoon.” Dalh explained what he could to his brother. “Your last missive was picked up and RJ traced her operative here to this mountain area. We figured you might have met up. So far, neither of us have seen any traces of Vaukeen, only Batoork.”

“Those damn pirates are the ones who help the Vaukeen. They captured me just outside this mountain,” Vul put in. “I have seen no Gehennans.”

“Still, we may need their continued alliance,” Dalh looked away from his brother for a moment, met RJ’s eyes, and then turned back. “There is something you should know... I signed the contract to wed War-Chieftess Viaad.”

Vul’s face paled. “You go too far for Aldairia, brother.”

“Never enough.” He sighed and then continued, “RJ told me that some of the pirates engaged in the despicable trade of psi-draining

and theft. I think RJ believes the Vaukeen will use the psi-energy and convert the derived power into weapons against our alliances.”

Vul laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I have to agree with her. I gave a lot of thought to the disappearance of the Sage Stone. What if the Vaukeen did have someone steal it? That would give them power to use if they found a way to wake the gem and put a huge dent in our relations with Gehenn.”

“That is what I have been thinking about, Vul. The Gehennans have wanted the Sage Stone for a long time. If there were other attempts to steal it, they covered their tracks well. We shall discuss this with RJ in more detail.”

“Do you trust her?” Vul queried.

“With my life, brother,” Dalh answered Vultar. “She is quite an exceptional and talented woman.”

“You sound as if you have feelings for her.”

He shook his head. “That would not be wise on my part even if I did. RJ does not have a heart to give.”

Dalharan hated to admit the truth in his own words. Somehow, he knew RJ could not or would not reciprocate his feelings, if he developed any for her. Love, he thought, was one thing the fates did not have in store for him.

“Dalh, you are looking a bit pale yourself,” Vultar stated, interrupting his reverie. “Did you take the necessary med-cautions before coming on this assignment?”

“I have done this a few times before, brother. This climate is just different from Aldairia’s. Stop worrying and rest,” Dalharan ordered.

He admitted, he was feeling a bit peaked and had been breaking out in small sweat spells. Like he told his brother, it probably was the frustrations of being around RJ and all else that had been happening. Dalharan just wanted this damn mission to be done with and quickly.

* * * *

Rieka let Kathea settle down on a small flat-level boulder to one side of the pool, but far enough away from the others where she could talk privately with her cousin. She dipped a cup of water from the pool and handed it to her cousin. As Kathea sipped the cool liquid, Rieka wiped some of the soot and muck off the younger woman’s face. She motioned for Kathea to be still and indicated she was going to use the multi-chan on her.

“This healing ray should take effect soon, but you might feel a little dizziness, Kath.” When Kathea had enough ministrations, Rieka

put the cleansing cloths and med-kit and other stuff back in the pack, and then sat on the boulder next to her cousin.

Kathea smoothed down her dark golden hair. "Rieka, I know I should have been more careful on this assignment. I wasn't sure I'd make it through at times."

"Kath, you did fine. It's a risk an agent takes when they go on these intrigue missions. I'm just relieved you are alive," Rieka assured her.

"That bothers me though," Kath pondered. "After their first round of interrogation and experiments, they learned I was not psychic or empathic. Why did they not just kill me? Ransom would be out of the question, wouldn't it?"

"No, Kath. You are a member of two highly placed families. Mine and your own. Someone must have figured out who you are and wanted to use you as bait for your sister Eilea or me. She's one of LAW's foremost scientists," Rieka explained.

"That makes sense. The Vaukeen, perhaps even those Gehennans I saw, would love to get their hands on you," Kath agreed.

Rieka put a concerned hand on Kathea's upper arm. "Then you did see Gehennans here?"

Kathea blinked her eyes as if she were seeing Rieka for the first time. "I think I've been in a daze since you brought me out of that cell, cousin. I'm sorry. Give me a second."

Rieka nodded, briefly looking over towards the others. She saw the two Aldairians in deep conversation. Rieka just bet they had a lot to talk about. The Presord was still cleaning his fur and Fikk, whatever he was, stayed perched on a rock, his beady eyes darting from her and Kathea and back to the Aldairians. There was something about the green-haired alien that did not set well with Rieka. She was good at assessing characters, and he was not a trustworthy one. She remained reserved about the Presord.

"That Fikk gave me the creeps when he entered the cell." Kathea placed a hand over Rieka's. "The Vaukeen only took him out once during the day he was in there, and he didn't act like he was too shaken up. I was interrogated by a Gehennan who wore a mask."

"You are sure they were Gehennans?" Rieka asked.

"Positive," Kathea assured her. "You know how detailed I am when describing a situation and people. Aldairians have longer earlobes than Gehennans. Their side ridges are smoother also. Gehennans look a lot like Aldairians, with their very tall and healthy

bodies, but Gehennans are born with that snake-like tattoo on them. Aldairians could never possess one because their darker skin pigment would not....”

Rieka laughed, putting up a hand to stop her cousin. “Okay, okay, I get the idea. You sound a lot like your sister, when you can get her to talk.”

“Thanks. I use to not like being compared to Eilea, but it doesn’t bother me now. It’ll be good to be home again.” Kathea was starting to look less peaked now.

“I agree. And not soon enough. I don’t want you going on any more missions without help from now on,” Rieka admonished her cousin.

Kathea looked up at Rieka and grinned. “I’m only three years younger than you, not thirty. Besides, I may just do that.”

Rieka couldn’t help but notice the way Kathea’s eyes strayed to the Aldairian Vul. “Great. Just what we need, another family member interested in an Aldairian.”

Kathea demanded an explanation for Rieka’s comment, and Rieka told her what Admiral Coyton relayed to her days ago. Kathea’s surprise was even more comical than her own had been. However, Rieka still kept her own concerns to herself.

“Uncle Jon and Aunt Lydea must be squirming over that news.”

“I haven’t talked to my parents yet, but can only assume so,” Rieka responded. “Tell me, did you hear about what the Gehennans were going to do? And when the Vaukeen might attack?”

“Forgive me, Rieka. I did not mean to get off the more important subject. It was a good thing you taught me some of the Vaukeen dialect. They have almost amassed enough psi-energy to make more weapons and attack many of the alliances,” Kath answered.

“Then they must be waiting on something more or otherwise they would have attacked LAW or Aldairia by now. Did you hear anything else?” Rieka pressured the younger woman for more information.

Kathea took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m not sure what. The only other thing I overheard was somewhat cryptic to me...something about unlocking a stone of some kind. I hope that makes sense to you.”

“More than you know. Are you ready to move on?”

At Kathea’s nod, she motioned for the others to start moving again.

On the trek back, movement was still a bit slow until the ex-prisoners got the kinks out of their bodies. A short time later the small group reached the cavernous tunnel that would take them to the main opening that Dalh first found on the mountainside. Rieka knew she needed to discuss her findings with Dalh right away and decided to halt the hike.

Loudly, so all the troupe could hear, Rieka said, "Let's stop here. The entrance is just around that bend."

The four ex-prisoners, she felt certain, were thankful for another rest. Rieka left Kathea sitting on a large rock and moved over to Dalh. She nodded in Vul's direction then gave a small jerk of her head, an indication for Dalh to follow her.

"I think we should check out the entrance before going further," Rieka said to Dalh once they were out of earshot of the others.

She found him searching her face, then a soft smile crept up his lips. "I have had similar uneasy feelings, RJ. My senses are sending me warnings. You think there is an ambush out there?"

"Something like that." She rested one bent leg on a small boulder as did he, leaning forward with both arms crossed over her knee. "The rescue was too easy."

He glanced from her to the others and then back. "Vul does not trust Fikk. I learned long ago to rely on Vul's gut instinct. They are even more accurate than his empathic senses."

"I will heed your judgment on that being so, Dalh." Rieka then let him know a bit of what she discussed with Kathea. "Also, I thought you might want to know that Sage Stone of yours is here. Kathea overheard some Gehennans talking about it and that the Vaukeen were waiting to unlock one more power source before they attacked. Make any sense to you?"

"It is vital that we get the Sage Stone back to Aldairia after we blow this place apart and stop the Vaukeen." His tone was grave.

"I agree, but let's investigate the entrance first." She moved away from the rock and he followed.

They motioned the others to stay before proceeding down a pathway that led to the cave's main entrance. Rieka felt Dalh using his inner senses, as she did, to ascertain if any other beings were in the vicinity. Though not the powerful empath she found him to be, she knew that whatever psi-related powers she possessed could be siphoned from her mind and converted into deadly energy. The process would kill anyone slowly and painfully.

Clearing her mind from past traumas, she focused on their current situation. The two of them peered around the last bend, checking out the main chamber. As Rieka feared, someone waited for them. A large group of beings all dressed in brown uniforms with dark red trim and facemasks were stationed at different points around the chamber. She couldn't guess how many might be outside the cave's entrance.

Rieka pulled away from the bend. "They must have discovered one of us using our sensing skills."

"Perhaps someone told them we were here, RJ. Vul said only Fikk had been in the cell for less than twenty-four hours. Though they are not shape shifters, the Vaukeen have the ability to disguise themselves. We will have to check everyone for communication devices when we return."

She thought about his words. "True, and there are only two ways out. We can try the other route we found or fight it out."

"Or," Dalh added, "I can mentally try to transport the others aboard the *Oddessy*."

"It seemed to exert you just transferring us to the mountainside earlier. I would not want you to tax yourself." Rieka could not keep the concern out of her voice.

"I feel I could do it," he said, then his hand shot out to cup her chin. "RJ, you must know that it would be much more than mere sex if we came together."

Rieka put her hand on his wrist, but did not remove his hold right away. "Dalh, now is not the time to discuss this. I don't need this on my mind right now."

"Just know that if things were different, I could care a great deal for you." He leaned over and gently brushed her lips with his. "My empathic and normal senses tell me you are not averse to my caresses no matter how much you try to deny it."

Rieka reached up and quickly caressed his cheek, letting out a soft sigh as she did so. "Another lifetime maybe, Dalh, because it would cost too much to allow myself to feel for you. This mission is of utmost importance. We have to keep our desires checked, so they do not interfere with our quest."

"Of which you constantly remind me," Dalh stated.

"I have to, Dalh. Nothing can happen between us." She let out another soft sigh at the look of resignation on his face, and then spoke again. "I think we should conserve your powers for later. All right?"

"I understand, RJ. Let us get back to the others now. I have a bad feeling coming on." Reluctantly, he moved away from her.

Knowing the Aldairian was more empathic than herself, Rieka did not hesitate to follow his lead and go back to where the others rested. Vul and Kathea sat conversing near the pool's edge. Orb patiently waited nearby. Fikk was nowhere to be found.

"Dalh, Fikk left without us seeing his departure," Vul said, getting up.

"I'm not empathic, but something about that cretin gave me the creeps," Kathea put in. "Guess he went to report our whereabouts to his superiors."

Orb, Rieka noticed, paid close attention to what everyone did. She cautiously watched him. She sensed the Presord held something back and wondered why she had not picked up on it before.

"We had better get moving, RJ," Dalh suggested.

"Lead on." Rieka motioned for Kathea to join her away from the men. "Kathea and I will follow you three."

Rieka waited until the three males were a short distance ahead before speaking to Kathea. "Kath, Dalh does not know who I really am, and I'd prefer to keep it that way. I just use RJ."

Kathea glanced up at her. "Rieka, I think the Aldairians are trustworthy. Why not let them know?"

"Just a feeling." Rieka made adjustments to her wrist unit, eliciting a chuckle from Kathea.

Walking alongside Rieka, the younger woman reached a hand out to stroke the multi-purpose band on Rieka's wrist. "After you used that small healing ray on me, I had a feeling this little device was made with my sister's ingenuity?"

Rieka nodded. "Eilea concocted it for me just over a month ago. I've found it useful so far. Now, we just have to get back to my ship."

"Rieka, my vessel is on the other side of the mountain fortress, parked in their docking bay," Kathea said. "The pirates matter-transported aboard *Ol' Americus*, and that's how they kidnapped me."

Rubbing her chin speculatively, Rieka asked, "You still have those mega-pops I left in your lower cargo hold a few months back?"

Kathea's eyes widened. "I can't believe I've been gallivanting around with those deadly nitrin-bombs aboard my ship."

"It's a good thing you learned to pilot and navigate well." Rieka chuckled, then pulled a weapon out of her arms pack and handed it to

Kathea. "I'm going to get you to your ship. I want you to take the others aboard with you."

"Then we can start bombing the heck outta this place," Kath said.

"Exactly." Rieka was glad to see her cousin still had her quick wits about her. "While you're giving them hell in the air, I'll be doing extensive damage on the surface."

"Rieka, I don't like the sound of this idea," Kathea voiced her concern.

"You know I cause better chaos alone, cousin." Rieka pointed to the bracelet again. "There is a homing device in the unit. Once you get airborne, you can track me with it. I'll keep the signal operating."

The other woman smiled wanly. "I trust you to know what you are doing then. Just be careful please. I want to see you at Raeschel's wedding in one whole piece."

"I'll see you there, Kath," Rieka promised, then whispered in the woman's ear to keep an eye on the Presord.

The two women quickly caught up with the men, staying close behind the Presord. The group followed Dalh in the cavern, his light showing the way ahead and Rieka's glowing from the end of the line. Previously, Dalh and Rieka took the left route and found the cell the others were imprisoned in. This time, the troupe veered to the right, hoping to find another way out of the mountain. A few hours later, they found another opening partially blocked by large boulders.

Dalh motioned the others to stay behind. Rieka moved up front, following him to the boulders. Rieka peered with him around the pile of stones and saw sentries posted at the entrance. Dalh and she crept back towards the others. They gestured for them to follow a ways back into the tunnel.

"There are guards posted out there," Dalh told the group as they huddled closer. "I saw that the exit goes to their docking bay. We must be below their fortress."

"We'll need a diversion to get to Kath's ship." Rieka moved nearer to Dalh. "Think you can project some life-like images of us running away from the cavern's entrance?"

He nodded, and she knew he caught on to her plan. "Give me a second. I shall make sure the guards move."

Rieka noticed that Dalh gave the other Aldairian a laser pistol and the Presord a Death Disc. "I'm glad to see you armed the other men, Dalh."

He nodded, she knew, in understanding. Dalh must have picked up bad vibrations from the Presord also. “We will need back-up getting to Kath’s ship.”

Rieka moved with him near a large boulder that hid them from the pirate sentries. She remained quiet as he concentrated and made movements with his hands. She kept watch vigilantly. Sweat poured from Dalh’s brows as he strained. Rieka became aware of his anxiety and determination. Moisture rolled from his handsome body as he used his powers. Rieka hoped that sweating was a natural occurrence when using his powers and not from something else affecting him. Less than five minutes later, she saw images of the men and women of their group running and shouting in the near distance. Suddenly, Dalh swayed from side to side. Rieka immediately went to him and put an arm around his waist to steady him.

“Thank you. Just give me a moment.”

Rieka felt his arm go across her shoulder. “You did well, Dalh.”

Dalh turned his head in her direction, and a beguiling smile played upon his tempting mouth. “It is too bad we only get close in dire circumstances.”

Rieka removed her arms from around him and shoved him away. “I think you’ve recovered enough, Dalh. I’ll check to make sure they are gone.”

Rieka fumed as she heard Vul and Kath chuckling behind her. She ignored them and peered around the boulder. There she saw a being with black hair and about Dalh’s own height join the startled guards. Suddenly, she realized why he seemed familiar. He turned his head towards the entrance making more of his face visible to her. Her eyes narrowed in anger when she recognized the alien.

General Kraahk Viaad was a vicious and dangerous man, a distant cousin of War-Chieftain Almeagar Viaad, and one of Rieka’s worst enemies. Rieka’s instinct ran rampant to kill the bloody bastard, but she couldn’t allow herself that luxury right now. Kraahk’s presence meant the situation was direr than she previously thought. She and the others must make destroying this fortress and Kraahk’s plans their top priority!

Rieka tugged on Dalh’s arm when she saw Kraahk and the guards rush away from the entrance. “Make sure the others board Kath’s ship safely. She’ll get you those nitrin-pops to use. Go do some major damage. I’ll keep you all covered.”

Assuring again that no one remained in the area, Dalh and the others ran from behind the boulders, leaving Rieka to cover them. Rieka rushed out of the opening, and at the same time, the others headed towards the docking bay a short distance away. She kept a laser pistol in each hand, set on death-mode and ready to use. Six aliens came rushing at her moments later. Rieka rolled, fired, and blasted four of them quickly to nothingness. The other two jumped out of the way.

A large edifice loomed to her right, and she ran for a nearby doorway. Alarms rang all over the place. Shouts and screams echoed off the walls around her and in the vicinity of the building. Rieka came up against several other masked beings and returned their open fire. She kept herself alive with the two laser pistols and her superior fighting skills. It was part of the job at times, but she never liked leaving behind a string of dead bodies.

She turned down several twisting corridors until she reached what she saw to be a control room for the fortress. She immediately opened fire upon the aliens in the room. Thankful there were only a few to eliminate, she started firing blasts into the machinery, making sure the enemy could not use force fields or weapons against Dalh and the others.

A beam of light seared her shoulder. Rieka ducked behind a smoldering machine. She heard shuffling and muffled voices in the room. Firing over the metal structure, she was rewarded by screams.

For a split second, it was quiet. Cautiously she peered around the machine. General Kraahk and two others stood at the entrance to the control room. His eyes met hers in recognition. Kraahk raised his hand, halting his men's further movements.

"Give up, Admiral. You cannot get out of here alive," Kraahk boasted. "Almeagar will not be able to bring about the reunion now, not while I have the Sage Stone and you. It is what he has striven to accomplish for a long time now."

"You couldn't take me before, Kraahk. I beat your blasted hide years ago and I'll do it again now," Rieka spat.

She did not like the sudden smug smile on his face. "Not this time."

Rieka dropped to the floor quickly and swung around to look behind her. Tiny yellow-gold dots dispersed from around a being who just materialized into the space near her. A Death Disc was aimed at her. The Presord grinned evilly down at her. He tugged at his head

and quickly pulled off the hairy headpiece. Rieka looked into the face of a Vaukeen. Long fanged teeth grinned down at her with evil intent. Brown skin hung in folds around his leathery face and gleaming yellow eyes promised death.

The Vaukeen snorted a laugh and then pressed the disk. His eyes widened at the sudden electrical shock that enveloped him, and he fell to the floor in an unconscious heap. Rieka jumped up quickly and began firing at the entrance. Kraahk and his men's enlarged eyes of disbelief were the last things she saw of them before her laser beams lacerated their bodies. She'd have to thank Dalh for giving the fake Presord the disc.

She moved swiftly over debris and bodies and was about to leave the area, when a glowing object on the floor caught her attention. A gleaming, silvery item with a bright blue stone in the middle hung out of what was left of Kraahk's uniform. She bent down, and snatched-up the jewel-like article, amazed it had not been destroyed. Rieka could only guess this was the Sage Stone the Aldairians were frantic to find.

Pocketing the item, she started running back the way she had first come into the fortress. Outside she saw burning ships and more bodies scattered around the large docking bays. Just as a small squad of beings headed her way, Rieka found herself dematerializing. Minutes later, arms enveloped her and Dalh pulled her into a fierce embrace.

* * * *

Dalharan used his laser rifle and his powers to shoot what enemy appeared in his and the others' paths. His brother and Kath left their own trails of alien bodies. They lost track of the Presord during the blasts of fires and explosions, on the way to find Kath's ship. They shot at several men guarding Kath's freighter. Kath raced up the entrance ramp, quickly followed by Dalharan and his brother. The last in, Dalharan made sure the hatch locked securely behind them.

"You two, look towards the back," Kath shouted as she prepared the small ship for take-off. "Take that first door to the right. There's a cabinet near the cargo hatch. You'll find the mega-pops there."

Dalharan and Vultar did as she bid and were back by the time she got the craft in the air. Kath bent over and touched the metal floor near her control console. A piece of the flooring slid back and Dalharan saw the landing strip below.

“It’s an emergency entrance should the outer one be unsafe to use.” Kath grinned at the two men. “We’re high enough, start dropping away.”

About half an hour after soaring over the landing bay and the mountain fortress, smoke and fire covered most of the grounds. Vul sat in the chair next to Kath’s, and Dalharan closed up the emergency hatch.

He looked up from the floor to Kath. “Do you have a transportation device on board here?”

“My ship may be a little old, but it’s got some damn good operating equipment. I’ve also got a lock on RJ’s homing device,” Kath answered him. “I can get her aboard now.”

“From the looks of that fortress below, I would say she has done quite a bit of damage. You were right, Dalh. RJ is quite amazing,” Vul added.

“Good. Transport her aboard now, Kath,” Dalh ordered. “Then head towards Shasz-Norr. We need to get her ship.”

“She’ll appear in the cargo bay,” Kath told him.

“Dalh, what about the Sage Stone...”

“We will find it later, Vul,” Dalharan interrupted him. “After we make sure RJ is safe.”

Dalh jumped up and headed back to where he and Vultar found the nitrin-bombs. Within the minute after he entered, he saw tiny golden particles forming a shape in the middle of the room. As soon as RJ’s body solidified, he pulled her into his arms and brought his mouth down over hers. His kiss was complete and demanding. He tightened his hands around her backside, pulling her up against him.

Never in all his life had he worried so over another person. He thanked the fates she stood safe in his arms. He groaned out his worry and his need and never wanted to let her go. Her heart pounded rapidly against his chest, beating in rhythm with his own and proving she wanted him just as deeply as he desired her. He shook with the depth of his passion for her. Were he not aware of Kath’s and Vul’s presence in the control room just beyond, he would have taken RJ right there on the cargo bay floor.

He pulled his head back. “I am glad you are safe. Next time I shall do land demolition with you.”

“No, Dalh.” RJ broke away from him. “There will not be a next time.”

Dalh's chest heaved with the exertion of the force with which she pushed him and his own shaky emotions. "Soon, RJ, we will fulfill this need we have for each other. For now, we have yet to find the Sage Stone."

RJ moved farther away from him. "I think I have it."

She put her left hand in one of her suit's pockets and then pulled out a shiny, oval-shaped article that hung on a long chain. She held it out to him. His eyes looked at the object in disbelief. RJ held the Sage Stone. The blue jewel in the middle of the silver medallion glowed with mysterious life for a second, then dulled.

"How did you come by it?" he asked.

She threw the Sage Stone at him, which he quickly caught. "I found it on one of the Gehennans I killed."

"I should have been there with you, RJ." Dalh moved towards her.

"No, you would have been in my way, just as you are now." Her cold words stopped him. "We are through here. This mission and our acquaintance are over."

RJ swiftly sidestepped him and was out of the cargo bay in a flash. He clutched the ancient gem in his fist. He looked from it to the cargo bay door. In his mind, he knew she was right, but in his heart, he felt a great anguish. Something about her touched him more than any other woman ever did before. If he met her a few years back, even a few months prior, they might have been able to further explore their interest in each other.

However, he knew that even if it was for only one time, he *wanted* to be complete with RJ. Deep down, he felt she needed him just as much. He would not let her go without hearing her confirm she did not in some way care for him. He was not wrong. She wanted to feel his heat and body mingle with and against her own. With determination, he entered the control room. Vul moved out of the co-pilot seat where RJ was now sitting, leaning towards Kath in whispered conversation. Dalharan gestured for his brother to join him. The two moved away from the women.

"Vultar, RJ found the Sage Stone. I have it here." He lowered his voice and pressed the medallion into Vultar's palm. "I want you to go to Krithnar with Kath and then report in to Father. Wait for me there. I have some unfinished business with RJ to take care of. Just do this for me and do not ask any questions."

“We are almost to Shasz-Norr now, brother,” Vultar stated. “RJ mentioned to Kath she wanted to board her ship alone.”

He looked at his brother with intent. “She will not be alone once she takes off.”

“You intend to self-transport over there?” Vultar asked.

“Yes. Just make sure Kath takes you to Krithnar.” Dalh then told his brother where his space ship was docked on Krithnar. “Inform my entourage that I shall be there within a day after you land.”

“Be careful, Dalh. From what I have noted of her, RJ is one woman who should not be trifled with. I do not think I would like her angry at me,” Vul warned Dalh. “Are you sure of this?”

“Positive,” he assured the younger man. “RJ and I have unfinished business to take care of.”

“I can take care of Kath. I just hope you can do the same with RJ.” Vultar grinned.

“Do not worry, brother. I shall handle RJ with utmost care.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I have a clean-up crew already on their way to make sure that the Vaukeen and renegade Gehennans are no longer any trouble for anyone in the Tri-Galaxies, Rieka.”

“Thanks, Joeseeph. I’ll report to you again as soon as I get to Aldairia. Rieka out.”

She reached over and shut off the viewer, then leaned back in the command chair and let out a sigh. She had never been so glad to have a mission over with. This assignment, more than any other or any episode from all her years on the battlefields, drained a lot of emotional and physical energy out of her. And so had Dalharan.

When she was through with her stint on Aldairia and saw to her sister’s happiness, Rieka intended to take a very long, and very much needed shore leave. Well away from Tigon and knowing Kathea was taking the two Aldairians to Krithnar, she typed in a destination, put the ship on autopilot and left the control room.

Rieka stopped by the rec room intent on getting some refreshment. She glanced down at the table where the Sec-star level chessboard still sat, the pieces ready for another game. For a split second, she reflected on the enjoyment she felt while playing the game with Dalh. He had been one of the best players she’d ever come across. He was even better than her long-time friend and ex-lover, the Aldairian scientist Deurke Sol, the Master Watcher. Rieka sat down on one of the stationary chairs and leaned over the table.

Absently she toyed with one of the pieces as thoughts of Dalh entered her mind. Since meeting him, her senses and her feelings escalated into a higher plane of knowing and wanting. Remnants of their *Charj* still filtered through her mind and body, and part of her recalled a total completeness with him. She would never know it again. Dalh was well on his way to Krithnar. She needed this quiet

time alone to strengthen her resolve against his charms when she went to Aldairia. She had duties left to perform.

Getting up, she went down the ship's main corridor until she stopped and entered the small stateroom that he once used. Her ship needed no more than one to four persons at a time to operate it, even with it being a mid-size battle cruiser. There were three small personal rooms for crew or company, and then her own larger one above the control room. The bed looked as if no one had slept in it in awhile, but remnants of his male presence could still be felt.

The duffel bag he used for his belongings when he first boarded her ship lay on the bed. Rieka moved into the room, but did not touch the bag. It was best if she did not pry into his belongings. She already knew who he was, and fondling his stuff would only complicate the loneliness her heart experienced. She sighed and decided to use the old-fashioned shower in the stateroom. She always used this particular room before the addition of her private quarters above-ship. Rummaging through the storage drawers, she found a set of underclothing. Taking the items with her, she entered the sanitary unit.

After the shower and in her civvies, Rieka re-entered the stateroom. She lay upon the bed exhausted, closing her eyes to rest. She only got a few blissful seconds of dark peacefulness before Dalh's image formed in her mind. Even in her dreams, he would not let her be. Why did this man have such a hold on her? It must be that blasted *Charj* that caused the aftereffects on her system. Rieka tossed for over an hour before she drifted into troubled slumber.

* * * *

Dalharan sat below in the main cargo bay, waiting until a few hours after the *Oddessy* took off. It seemed to be easier these days to use his powers, but unusual sweats and exhaustion were happening to him more than before. That usually did not come, with increased powers. He would determine what was happening when he returned to Aldairia. The Watcher could help him. Or a number of trusted psychically endowed scientists who understood the workings of mental abilities.

After he materialized into the *Oddessy's* cargo bay, he felt tired. He stayed there to rest, using only a minimal amount of energy to keep RJ from detecting his presence with her empathic powers. He would worry about that later, though, because he needed to find RJ. He quietly ascended the stairs, using his mental sensing to ascertain

that RJ was not in the control room. He moved over to the control console and checked the ship's headings, feeling satisfied after slowing down the ship's speed. The destination remained set for the vicinity of Krithnar.

He wanted to make sure the controls stayed that way. He waved his hand over the neon-hued, multi-colored control panels. The buttons glowed with an eerie green sheen for a moment then flickered back to normal. He went to look for RJ., briefly stopping by the recreational room to see if she might be there. He reached over to the table and picked up the game piece lying away from the others. His senses told him she held this object not too long ago. It pleased him to know RJ thought about him.

He let his inner instincts guide him to her whereabouts. He found her in the stateroom he occupied before. She was not dressed in a jumpsuit, but in her underclothing. The stretchy material did little to hide her ample curves. Her luscious body beckoned to him with unintentional provocation as she tossed in her sleep. He sat on the edge of the bed. RJ immediately rolled over on her back, opening her eyes in surprise.

"Damn you." Her eyes narrowed in anger. "How dare you stow-away aboard my ship. I should beam your damn carcass out into space."

"It is good to see you again, too, RJ." He grinned down at her. "You know, this is not going to work with you scowling like that."

Dalharan reached out for her. RJ jumped away from him. He dove quickly, catching her from the backside. He gripped her tightly, but the two of them rolled, tossed, and struggled for long moments before he trapped her beneath his heavier build. He grabbed her upper arms and used all his strength to keep her under him. By the time she settled down, they were both gasping for air. He hoped he did not have to struggle like that again with her.

"Neither one of us can stand this frustration between us, RJ," he said, finally getting his breathing back to semi-normal. "I wanted to see you again."

RJ's chest heaved from the exertion he put her through, and her eyes darted nervously around the room. "You should have stayed away, Dalh."

"You really are afraid of the attraction between us."

RJ trembled beneath him. Even without an answer, he knew the truth.

“Being near you scares the hell out of me more than facing down an enemy. Even blowing up the pirates’ stronghold didn’t relive the anxiety I’m feeling in your arms right now.”

Dalharan shifted above her. “You do not have to be afraid of me, RJ. I know neither of us can promise each other any longer than the next few days until we arrive at Krithnar. Yet, like you, I could not get on with my life never knowing. My attraction for you scares the hell out of me, too. I have never felt such a powerful attraction for a woman before. You do things to me I never knew I could feel.”

She sucked in her bottom lip. “You should have stayed aboard the *Ol’ Americus*, Dalh.”

“Then tell me you really want me to go.” Dalharan took a chance by pressing the issue between them, but he needed to hear a true denial or affirmative from her lips. “Tell me you have not desired me, or in some small way cared for me, and I shall go without troubling you.”

“I can’t damn you,” her capitulation made his heart and body soar with sudden elation and desire. “How can something so right, be so wrong?”

“It does not have to be, RJ. Open yourself to me. Whether we ever meet up again or not, let us at least have this time to care for each other.”

“I cannot promise anything else to you, no matter what happens.” Tentatively, she reached up to caress his cheek. “Please understand, I can not offer you a future afterwards.”

“This time with you is all I ask. It will be enough.” He placed his hands on either side of her face. “Just show me that I am not wrong. Do I stay or go?”

“Stay with me,” RJ answered breathlessly.

When she arched against him and put her arms around his neck, he brought his mouth down over hers. His head swirled with mixed emotions and thoughts. Never before had he experienced such a whirlwind of feelings. His desires and senses spun in erratic somersaults. No woman affected him like RJ. He ignored any uncertainty within him. All he knew and cared about right now was that this incredible woman gave her all to their lovemaking. He intended to return in kind.

He let her fully see and feel the intense desire that he felt. Her eyes were filled with the rawness of her emotions. He tasted the saltiness of her neck and feasted in the softness of her skin. RJ was all

woman, and he hungered for every inch of her. He became bolder in his touch. With little effort, he pulled the thin material of her civvies off then removed his own clothing. He took a sharp breath as he viewed her luscious body. Her high breasts jutted up to tease and tempt him, to savor the ecstasy they offered. He wasted no time in feeding his ravenous desire.

RJ arched against him as he cupped both her breasts. In a heated response, she quivered violently beneath him. It drove him further into an intense, maddening desire for her. Never did he expect a woman to be so brazenly forward. Yet he found it made him desire her that much more.

She placed her hands on either side of his face, moved closer towards him and kissed him. Her lips scorched his full mouth, with the alluring deftness of her intense kiss. Her tongue thrust into his, teasing, exploring, and teaching. She put an arm up around his shoulders and pressed herself as close to him as possible.

Dalharan's head swirled with mixed emotions and thoughts. Something powerfully passionate passed between them on *all levels*, taking over their senses. Her experienced hands explored every corded muscle of his body. His own hesitancy did not seem to bother her, for she controlled and seduced, leading him into deeper passions. His whole body and mind exploded with intense hunger.

His senses reeled, and he released the last vestiges of his uncertainty. He marveled that this breath-taking woman offered herself to him, giving her all to their lovemaking. Instinctively, he kept his hands from closing over hers, but he used them to touch and caress her delicious body.

He explored, savoring her delights once more, making this first time last as long as he could. He took great pleasure, as she did, when he gave his attention to her heated core. She pressed her hips against his exploring tongue and hands.

He had never gone this far with a woman before, and felt such devastating emotions and reactions. Her juices tasted warm and sweet. Her moist reaction drove him to distraction. He could wait no longer to possess her, to make her completely his. Her nails dug into his shoulders urging him forward. Leisurely, he made his way up, leaving wet trails of desire over her navel. His tongue flickered teasingly over her lower stomach, and he felt the shivers of uncontrollable desire building up within her body.

He caressed her left breast and suckled it for several moments. She arched and rubbed her right breast against his cheek. He didn't dare ignore the other soft mound. One hand streaked back down to her center of pleasure. He thrust two fingers into her, still feeling her juices flowing. His fingers slid in and out of her, as his mouth lavished soft wet kisses along her delicious neck. Her hips shoved upwards, and he felt the tenseness welling up within her. She parted her thighs and her body tensed for his entrance. The enormous intensity of her desires nearly made him lose total control.

He removed his hand and positioned himself above her. His head lowered to hers, capturing her mouth hungrily. Her hands worked wonders again on his lower torso. She was not shy about showing what she wanted him to do as she parted her thighs even farther to allow him better ease into her. The tip of his cock teased her pussy. Her body tensed and for a moment, he halted. Here and now, he thought, *I'm going to lose my chastity*. The virgin foreskin would dissolve, and he would experience a brief, sharp pain if he dove in quickly. Yet he did not wish to hurt her with his largeness. She made the decision for him when she wrapped her legs around his hips, placed her hands on his buttocks and pulled him against her.

When she shifted her thighs towards his erection, he reacted with a fevered passion. He automatically thrust into her wet channel, burrowing himself deeply into her in a swift, powerful stroke.

Dalharan only felt a minor, swift discomfort, and then the enormous intensity of her desires brought his own flooding to the surface. He drove hard and fast within her, losing all control of his sanity. Bold, savage desires ravaged out of control. Their senses physically and emotionally united in a blaze of euphoria. They were like rampant stars shooting out into the darkness of space, bringing brilliant light to every inch of the universe.

Beneath his lips, she cried out his name, as he did hers when they came together in total completion. With covetous satisfaction, he knew he would never know again, Dalharan held her close, wishing with all his heart he never had to let RJ go.

* * * *

Rieka eased herself out of Dalh's arms and moved slowly to the edge of the bed. She wiped the grogginess out of her eyes. It had been awhile since she slept so peacefully. She felt drugged with the newness of his euphoric lovemaking, and the weight of exhaustion lifted off of her. Last night with Dalh felt so right. Less than two days

was all they would have together. She needed to make him realize the reality of their situation.

Selfishly, she was now glad that she gave in to her desire for him. At least for a short time she would know how it felt to think and care so deeply about another person that nothing else mattered. She would not admit, even to herself, that some other underlying, prohibited emotion lurked behind her feelings. It would not and could not happen for her. Not even when they met again on Aldairia. Theirs must be a forbidden ecstasy.

Sighing, she leaned forward for a morning stretch and let out a loud gasp. Blood smeared her inner thighs near her labia. Damnation, she thought. Why the hell would she start her six-month cycle now? She tossed her thick hair out of her face, thinking maybe anxiety and stress started it a few days earlier than was due.

She felt the bed shift, and Dalh plopped down beside her. "What is it, RJ? Were you startled waking up beside...oh, I see. I should explain. I am sorry I did not warn you about this."

"Dalh," Rieka grinned down at him, bewildered by his words. "I am just frustrated by the fact that I started my cycle a few days early. It is usually always on time. I'm sure women on your world have them since they are humanoid."

He propped up on his elbows, looking devilishly appealing. "Of course, they do, but that is not what happened. You see...damn, this will be peculiar for you. Aldairian males lose their virgin foreskin the first time they have intercourse."

Rieka started at him in disbelief. "Instant circumcision... damnation. No, the males of my world don't experience that...You are telling me last night was the first time you ever experienced full sexual relations?"

His face reddened. "Yeah. Yet you know it was more than mere sex. Most men of my world keep their honor intact until they *Charj*."

"Frig." Rieka jumped up from the bed and then started pacing furiously. She let out expletives that expressed her anger and frustration in the plainest and crudest manner she ever used. *Dalh never forced himself upon her on Krithnar*. "Dammit all."

Dalh got up, went over to her, pulling her against him. "You did not bring shame on me, RJ. I chose to care for you and give my honor up for you. I am your age. Most Aldairian men *Charj*, or have total physical pleasure of some kind by their late twenties. I just never found the right woman whom I desired enough to let either ever

happen. Do not be upset with yourself. The choice was mine I do not regret you being my first.”

He put a hand behind her head, pressing her head against his shoulder. Rieka closed her eyes and groaned into his satiny, dark honey-colored skin. Damn him, she thought. Is feeling like a jerk what the men of my world experience when they take a woman’s virginity? Or do they feel euphoric about being the first? Knowing she was Dahl’s first and that she could not tell him about their *Charj* together did not set well with her. It would not make their parting easier.

“I sense you are still disturbed about this and angry with yourself. I have no qualms with you being more experienced than me, so do not have any that I was a virgin.” he assured her.

Rieka chuckled and lifted her head. “You are an amazing man, Dalh. I’ve never known anyone quite like you. Nor do I think I will ever experience again what I felt in your arms last night.”

His lips curved into a devilish grin. “Then our joining was extremely special to you also, RJ?”

“Yes. I do not think that any other man will ever be able to make me feel as alive and special as you did last night.” Rieka knew if nothing else, she could admit that last night was indeed the most wondrous experience of her life.

“Good, then let me make it even more special for you several times before we reach Krithnar.” He stroked her tousled hair.

“And just how do you intend to do that?”

His slow mischievous smile sent shivers of renewed desire racing throughout her body and mind. “By *Sparking* you.”

She raised a questioning eyebrow. “I haven’t heard that term before concerning Aldairians.”

“After we clean up, I will tell you about it.” She led him to the shower in the next room. Excited about what he had in mind, she quickly washed, as he did. They didn’t speak until they were back in the bedroom.

“Remember when we spoke about the *Charj*?” At her nod he continued. “The *Spark* is a lesser version of the *Charj*. Single Aldairians, um, use it when they do not wish to mate permanently, but want to sample around a bit. Not everyone *Sparks*, so I am told, but I have often thought about it.”

“Then it’s nothing like the *Charj*?” She asked, tentatively going back into his open arms.

"I would not be so intimate with you as to try to *Charg* you, since we can not permanently mate. But, I do know how to use the *Spark* to give you pleasure. Consider it foreplay of a different kind. Just let me touch your fingertips. Trust me in this."

She smiled, intrigued, and at ease that he wouldn't touch her palms. She held out her fingertips to him tentatively. Dalh touched the tips of his fingers to hers. A sudden flame of bio-electric sexual euphoria shot through her body, making her labia drenched with instant desire. Rieka grew slightly flustered when he toppled them to the bed. Locking his fingertips to hers, he licked his way leisurely across her breasts and down to her labia, tasting, teasing and bombarding fiery sensations throughout her entire being!

Then he slowly eased his fingertips from hers and trailed them down every inch of her body. The effects of the *Spark* still lingered, making her writhe in radiant heat. Soon his glowing fingers found her wet entrance. He darted his tongue up and down her clit as his fingers slid deep into her creamy passage.

Rieka screamed out in instant orgasm as the non-painful, sexual current from his fingers zipped into her. She stretched out stiffly as he licked her and thrust into her over and over again. Then she went limp as he slowly eased his fingers out of her wetness.

"Oh, heavens, that was fantastic, Dahl!"

His impish and satisfied grin played havoc with her passion-aching libido.

"Good."

He started working his way back up to her body, kissing and tormenting her with feverish desires until he once more made devastating love to her. She laughed freely for the first time in a long while. She would indeed give back to him what he was giving to her, if only for their very, precious short time together. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she kissed him with abandoned fierceness and began showing him how ecstatic his touches made her feel.

After many heated kisses and touches, he pulled her up in his arms and carried her back into the bathing unit of the stateroom. There he turned on the old-fashioned shower and this time took long, leisurely minutes lathering her body and making slow heated love to every inch of her delicious form.

Rieka adored every minute of his passionate worship of her body. She did the same for him, their efforts finally culminating in a

devastating joining that let her know they reached far into the stars and heavens.

She hoped their short time together would be enough. She just began the long and sweetly torturous taste of divine passion and Rieka was in no hurry to give up the wonder of the Aldairian's physical ecstasy.

* * * *

"I cannot believe this. You are indeed relentless, RJ."

Dalharan laughed freely, even with her satiated and sitting in his lap, she still beat him at Sec-star chess. She pulled her upper torso back a bit, and her eyes sparkled with mirth and satisfaction. His humor came from playing Sec-star chess while making love. RJ proved a mixture of surprise, temptation, and cleverness. He doubted many couples ever experience slow, heated physical pleasure while playing dual enticing, challenging games with their partner. RJ became ingenious with the places and positions they made love over the last twelve hours.

Dalharan felt ecstatic at being completely in her arms, and treasured the happiness this woman could bring him in so many different ways. He never wanted their time to end and tried hard not to dwell on that devastating factor.

"I told you I play to win in sec-chess. I haven't been beaten or checkmated since I was five years old. But you have given me the greatest pleasure and challenge in the game that I've ever experienced." RJ actually giggled.

He would dare her one better. "Then if you like challenges—how about in the control room while doing a spin-cycle."

She pulled back from him in surprise. "Now, look who's crazed."

"Can't handle it...I shall be damned...your slang is rubbing off on me." His shoulders shook heavily. "Well? Did I find somewhere you cannot do it?"

"Getting inventive or bored?" RJ's shoulders shook with as much mirth as his own. "Do your worst damage, I accept."

His brows shot up. "Now, I know you are crazed, woman."

She pressed her thighs against his. "Can't handle it, then?"

Dalharan grabbed hold of her hips and shoved them harder against his own. "Can you, again? You tempt me beyond reason, RJ. The control room it is."

He cupped her body against him and headed out of the rec room. She squirmed in his arms trying to get free. He just looked at her,

intently showing her he intended to make sure she backed up her teasing.

“You are indeed nuts, Dalh. Fine, do your damndest. You’ll break before I do.”

“I do not think so, RJ.” He sat down in the command seat, pulling her onto his lap.

RJ glanced down at him as he waved a hand over her control panel. “What the hell are you doing? I already set the course.”

“I know. I just made sure you couldn’t touch the controls in case you tried to throw me out of your ship,” Dalharan explained with pleasure.

“Why you...”

RJ didn’t get many words out as he reached up behind her and brought her face towards his. He kissed her like a starved madman, hungry and desperate for the taste of her. He remembered her moves, and behind her back started the ship into a downward curve. The ship jerked into the beginning of a spin-cycle. He moved his hand from the panels and placed them upon her body.

Slowly with one hand, he caressed her smooth buttocks. His other snaked between their thighs and two of his fingers slid into her deep moistness. Her gasp pleased him. RJ’s hips went forward with an involuntary reaction. Their bodies gravitated toward the control console. He moved his hand from her backside to the middle of her back. He lowered his mouth over one of her breasts and suckled it, his fingers sliding deeper and more rapidly in and out of her.

RJ’s mouth hardened over his and he swallowed her deep-agonized cries of passion. She teetered near to the brink of coming, and he sensed the thrill. He felt her wetness thicken over his fingers. He pulled them out of her slick channel and took hold of her hips. RJ let out a loud gasp as he thrust firmly into her wet depths. RJ’s hands moved behind her to grasp the edge of the control panel. He saw her fingers clutch the console until they were red.

She was trying hard to keep her climax from happening before the ship started to jerk with too much exertion from the downward force. He drove harder into her. His tongue teased the twin peaks jutting out at him. RJ cried out as the ship’s jerking force nearly tore them and itself apart. Her hands shot backwards to the control lever, and she screamed out in wild pleasure at the same time.

Dalharan thrust his cock vigorously into her pussy. She screamed out a second time and the ship shot upward, out of the spin-cycle. She

turned back to him and grabbed his head between her hands. RJ's mouth covered his in a hot and savage kiss. Her hips bucked rapidly against his lap. Dalharan chuckled and met her thrust for thrust. RJ tilted her head back and cried out her climax. He continued moving within her until his own completion burst forth.

"Okay, you win." She leaned her head against his shoulder as the two of them sat there panting. "This time."

His shoulders shook in laughter. "You are a wretch, RJ. It took me a lot to get you to admit that. We still have several long hours left, you know."

RJ groaned and pulled her head back to look at him. "You have got to be kidding. I'm exhausted from this last bout. What are you, sex starved?"

"And love starved."

Her eyes darkened just before she pulled away from him and hopped off his lap. "I think we'd better take a break from each other for awhile, Dalh. Please do not come to my quarters."

Perplexed, he bolted upright, but RJ left the control room before he could stop her. What did he say that upset her? Everything had been going well. Such a mercurial woman, and it would take him a hundred years to ever figure her out. Dalharan had yet to visit her private quarters. She kept him busy elsewhere, all over the ship. With a sigh, he went back to his stateroom and decided a rest would indeed be in order.

* * * *

Rieka paced her quarters after having showered and changed into a somber jumpsuit. She let it go too far between her and Dalh. He was contracted to marry the Gehennan War-Chieftess and she had her duties towards LAW. If Almeagar ever found out she had an affair with the Aldairian Prince, she held no doubt the Gehennan leader would stop at nothing to get revenge, maybe even start a war. She knew what must be done.

Dalharan needed to go back to Krithnar...now. They could catch up with the *Ol' Americus* if she pushed the ship's drive capabilities. She went back to the control room and checked the settings. The chairs and control center, she noted, were now cleansed by the housekeeper droid. Nothing else appeared changed since she and Dalh made such intense love.

No, she corrected, not made love, but experienced erotic pleasures together. She could not let herself get out of control again.

Her hands flew rapidly over the control panels. She locked the configurations in place, making sure her security overlays could not be interrupted, even by his psychic powers. Moreover, to double the security she aimed the multi-chan she wore at the control console.

“What are you doing, RJ? I thought the controls were set.” Dalh entered the control room. He looked devilishly tempting in a tight green jumpsuit and with his long damp hair dripping tiny rivulets of water across his wide shoulders.

“They are, Dalh. I’m just making sure that we get to Krithnar at the same time as Vul and Kath.” She turned to face him. “I checked the schedule and saw that you delayed the arrival time. I would not advise you using your powers on my ship or me again. Do I make myself clear?”

“I do not understand your sudden coldness, RJ. We have little time left as it is. What happened to make you like this?”

“The insanity of wanting you,” Rieka said then held her hand out towards him. “I am sorry, Dalh. Our affair must end now while one of us can still stop it.”

Dalh did not jump out of the way in time as she aimed and fired a beam from the bracelet unit at him. His body slumped to the floor. Rieka moved towards him, but did not touch him. She looked down at him briefly then turned and headed towards his stateroom. She gathered his personal belongings, stuffed them into his duffel bag, and returned to the control room. Dropping the bag next to him, she went back over to the command console. She typed in Kathea’s vessel’s frequency. Seconds later, Kathea answered her vid-com. Thankfully, Rieka did not see anyone else in the chair next to Kath’s.

“Kath, my sensors tell me I am only an hour behind you. Is that correct on your end?” she asked her cousin.

“Yes, Rieka. What’s wrong?”

“Besides two Aldairians getting the better of us?” Rieka answered. “I think that’s enough.”

Kath talked freely. “Vul is in one of the sleeping units here aboard *Ol’ Americus*.”

“I am glad you did not have a hand in their change of plans. Be ready to receive another passenger. I’ll catch up with you within the hour.”

“Rieka, are you okay?” Kath showed her concern. “He did not harm you...”

"No, Kath." *Not physically anyway*, Rieka thought but didn't say. "He'll be unconscious, though. Just don't tell your companion. Are you handling everything okay?"

"Yes, I'm doing fine. I'll be ready for you when you catch up. Will you be heading out to Aldairia then?"

"Not immediately. First I have to make a detour for a few days. I think some rest and relaxation for me is long overdue," Rieka said.

"Way, long overdue. Going to Leos I?" Kath queried.

"Perhaps. Just somewhere to get my head cleared up and not think about wars, missions, and such. Thanks for your help. You get some R&R yourself. You have been through a lot lately." Rieka smiled warmly at Kath. "That's an order if I have to make it one."

Kath chuckled. "Aye, Admiral. See ya in about an hour then."

Watching him lie there while she stood by, waiting, the next hour became the most agonizing one she lived through. When the *Ol'Americus* came within range of the *Oddessy*, Rieka matter-transported Dalh's body and duffel bag aboard her cousin's ship. It was not the best parting nor was it fair to him, but it was necessary. Dalh would think twice about wanting her near him again.

Before she went to Aldairia, Rieka would give herself ample time to get her mind and body under control. It would take longer, however, to get her emotions in check. Or repair the damage his *Charj* made to her heart and soul. With Dalh gone, Rieka would never be whole again. Loneliness already set in, but it was something she would have to deal with. No one could find out about their affair.

She felt he would wise up and guess her identity. If not now, then when she came to his world. He would know by then that the two of them could never become permanently involved. Her lifestyle and his were too dissimilar, yet their enemies were not. He would marry an alien princess to make peace with his world and another. She would stay married to her military career. Their positions and fate would not allow them an alternative.

Duty and peace came before their desires. Love and commitment were not personal commodities she could afford to let happen on any level. She would not allow her desires or past mistakes to instigate any harmful reaction for either of their alliances. No one, other than a select few, like Coyton and Dalharan's brother Vultar, she swore, could ever find out about what happened here aboard the *Oddessy*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Damn, woman.” Relieved the other crewmembers and councilmen were not in the main control room to hear his outburst, Dalharan rubbed his aching head and remained slumped in the co-pilot’s chair.

He woke an hour ago. Vultar told him that Kath landed on Krithnar, then ordered Vul off the ship, and to take Dalharan with him. Vultar disembarked with belongings in one hand and Dalharan slung over his shoulder, then came straight to Dalharan’s ship, the *Glaxion*. None of the Aldairian councilmen attending the trade-meets were aboard yet, but a few crewmembers had started readying the ship to leave Krithnar.

“She must have been more than you bargained for, Dalharan.” Vultar laughed.

“Shut up.” Dalharan growled at his brother. “And you need not look so smug. If I knew who the hell she really was, I would repay her little deed in kind.”

“Perhaps I can help there.” Vultar twirled his seat in Dalharan’s direction. “I think maybe Kath and RJ have put one over on both of us.”

“How so, brother?” Dalharan queried.

“Your Majesties.” The two princes turned at the sound of a crewman’s voice. A young Aldairian yeoman saluted the men. “All the councilmen have checked in. They are ready to depart Krithnar at your convenience.”

“Tell them Prince Dalharan and I will take care of the control room. We do not wish to be disturbed for awhile,” Vultar ordered.

“Yes, Prince Vultar.” The yeoman turned and left them.

Dalharan watched as Vultar twirled in his chair and pushed in some communication buttons to let the Krithnaran Control Center know they were leaving. The younger prince deftly punched in a

destination on the control panels and expertly guided the large ship out of the Krithnaran docking-bay. Dalharan stayed quiet until they were some minutes out into space.

“You had something to tell me?”

“Yeah. You are not going to like my surmise though,” Vultar answered.

“Just tell me what you are getting at, brother.” Dalharan frowned with frustration.

“Getting edgy because you did not get lucky?” Vultar chuckled.

Dalharan slammed a fist down on the control console and made the younger prince jump nervously in his seat. “Do not tease me, Vultar. I am not in the mood. Now, tell me.”

“What has gotten into you, Dalharan?” Vultar asked. “You are not usually this easily irritated. Calm down.”

Vultar was right. He normally possessed more patience. “I am sorry, Vul. I think it is just the stress of the last few days. Forgive me. What were you going to say?”

“Sure. Just that I started thinking about RJ’s and Kath’s names.” Vultar studied him speculatively. “Kath called her something different during a period in the caverns. Then a few times RJ called her Kathea. And Kath once called RJ, Rieka.”

“You are right, I recall that now. Do you know who they really are?”

“I have a good suspicion anyway,” Vultar said. “While Kath was piloting the ship, I used one of the cabins to refresh myself, and did a little snooping around. Saw a few plaques with Kath’s full name on them.”

“Which is what, Vul?” Dalharan paid close attention to his brother’s words.

“Kathea Reyanna Sairius. She is Doctor Eilea Sairius’ younger sister,” Vultar answered.

“I remember talking to RJ about Dr. Sairius and the Watcher working on something together. Are the Sairius’ not related to the President of LAW?”

Vultar crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat more comfortably. “And to Kaderick’s fiancée and his friend Jon-Carter Hahl. Now do you see what I am getting at?”

Dalharan’s dark face paled to a soft brown, and his eyes widened in surprise. “We were on a mission with Admiral Rieka Hahl.” Dalharan never had trouble pronouncing that name before now, even

in its correct form. “Damnation, how could I have been so imperceptive?”

“It is no wonder that pirate fortress was strewn with bodies even before we started dropping those bombs,” Vultar said with emphasis. “LAW sent its most accomplished agent out to help us. I do not know whether to feel flattered, flabbergasted, or fooled.”

“Or just plain thankful,” Dalharan added. “She saved Aldairia’s neck and mine several times before. Now, she will be coming to Aldairia.”

“I know,” Vultar stated. “We shall have to beef security up to an all-time high when we get home. With her there, there is no telling what might happen.”

“That is what I am afraid of, brother.” Dalharan laced his hands together and glanced at Vultar, seeing his own frustrated realizations reflected in the younger man’s eyes. “Such as another war if I am not careful.”

Vultar’s face paled also. “You mean...?”

Dalharan finished the words his brother could not. “Yeah, we did. You will tell no one else. Is that understood, Vultar? No one can ever find out.”

The younger Aldairian nodded. “I...uh, understand.”

“Good.” Dalharan stood up. “I am going to my cabin.”

He saw Vultar press in a button and order part of the crew to the control room to take over the bridge duties. “I agree. Get some sleep, Dalharan.”

“You, too,” Dalharan said and left the control room. However, he felt he would not get much rest at all, now that he knew who RJ’s true identity. “Damnation. Why did my luck have to start going hellstorm-nova?”

He was still feeling the effects of deep shock. He got to the cabin somehow, and immediately lay down on the large bed. His head spun with uncertainties. His life would never be the same again. Admiral Rieka Hahl made sure of that on several accounts. He groaned with despair, and tried to force thoughts of her out of his mind. It did him little good.

Even days later, after their return to Aldairia, Dalharan still held reminders of her. Meeting his future sister-in-law Raeschel Hahl and seeing the growing happiness in her and his youngest brother Kaderick’s eyes only caused him more turmoil. Dalharan was happy

for them, but inside he felt torn up because he knew he would never experience such ecstasy again with...Rieka.

* * * *

Rieka sat alone in a booth in a dimly lit area of the quiet pub. She had been on Leos I for a day now. The man-made resort world purported to be the most provocative and sensational worlds ever created for any imaginable pleasure any being wished for. She came here before, accompanied an old lover or come with a friend, and enjoyed herself. However, now she only wallowed in despair and guilt.

She slowly sipped her third mixture of Pleasurian-Bataacan wine, one of the most powerful alcoholic drinks ever made. She didn't think it would be strong enough to sooth her pains or make her forget the aching in her heart.

Rieka had called Coyton after dumping Dalharan on Kathea's ship to let her superior officer know she would be visiting Leos I for a few days. He agreed she needed it and told her he might join her. If he did, he would be able to find her by the locator badges installed in all AIM agents' and LAW military personnel's dog tags. If she knew her commanding officer and close friend, he would come. Rieka had never been wrong before on any hunch, intuition, or empathic sensing. Seeing Joeseph coming towards her just minutes after thinking about him confirmed that.

Tall, darkly handsome, and still well built in his early forties, he wore a warm smile on his face and in his green eyes when he slipped into the seat beside her. "I had a feeling you would be hiding out somewhere dark and all to yourself."

She smiled with fondness upon the man she had known a very long time. "It's good to see you, too, Joeseph. You are looking great, as usual."

He reached out for the container of wine sitting on the table and filled a glass for himself. "The higher-ups were pleased with your and the Aldairian operative's work. You two did so great together, they are thinking about more such teams in the future as needed."

"Swell," Rieka said sarcastically and took another sip of her drink.

"From yours and his reports, everything went well. What's wrong, Rieka?"

She turned and looked into a face filled with dire concern. "Joeseeph, I've had it up to here with Aldairians, Gehennans, Vaukeen, and whatever. Is that enough wrong for you?"

He nodded in understanding. "It does get to one after a while. You have been threatening me with a resignation for the last few years."

She chuckled and relaxed her guard with him. "Don't be surprised after the Aldairian venture if I make that threat into a reality."

Joeseeph refilled his glass and poured some into her half-empty container. "I have half a mind to join you. I can imagine the hoopla that'd cause with your father and the higher-ups."

Raising her glass towards his she said, "Then a toast to frustrating the uppers as much as they've frustrated us over the years."

Joeseeph laughed with her and clanked his glass against hers. Rieka downed her drink and he did the same. She poured them both another, and when a waiter came by, she ordered a few more bottles to be brought to their table. It seemed Joeseeph needed to let loose just as much as she did.

Rieka was glad that he came. A friend to talk with, and to be able to talk to, was a rare and precious thing. The Master Watcher was one of her most long-time friends, along with a few select others, yet only with a best friend could she tell her deepest secrets to. It was Joeseeph whom she needed now and who would understand the most. The two were always totally honest with each other and could talk freely to one another.

"Thanks for coming, Joeseeph," she told him. "You know, it's been a long time since either of us had any time off for rest and relaxation."

His eyes sparkled with warmth. "I know, my friend. I don't think we've had a decent shore leave since we went to Skylarr to visit our mutual friend Andrina Vetachek."

Rieka let out a big laugh. "I remember that quite well. We were both captains at the time. Our friend stopped a planetary war and got married while plastered on Pleasurian wine, and she was a business expert, not a military one. We were the only ones ever able to drink that woman under the table and still stand."

"I miss those times, Rieka." Joeseeph's eyes were reflective. "It has been a long while since we talked. I too have faced anxieties lately. Why don't you tell me yours and I'll tell you mine."

“You first,” she offered.

“Oh, just your usual stresses—listening to threats of war, making sure we don’t go to war, cleaning up after your exploits, and being in love. Not much, Rieka,” he confessed to her.

Rieka shot him a look of disbelief. “You treat me too much like a best bud, so I know I’m not the lucky soul. Who?”

Joeseeph chuckled, refilling her glass and his. “Well, since we were both smart enough to always be just friends, I’ll tell you.”

She took a big sip of wine and then, after he was quiet for some moments, asked, “Are you going to keep me in suspense? Is this some devastating secret or something?”

He did the same before answering. “She’s flighty, always in trouble, has a great sense of fairness, intelligent, witty, caring and the lovely wretch doesn’t even know I exist beyond assignments.”

Rieka clanked her half-empty glass down on the table. “Naw, Joeseeph. Man, you’re talking about Kathea.”

He made a half-grin, half-snarl expression and nodded. “’Fraid so. This last assignment when she went missing, I was a nervous wreck and so were my underlings. I was never so relieved to see someone alive, even though the wretch argued with me.”

“That’s Kath.” Rieka laughed heartily. “I’ll be damn, Joeseeph. I can’t imagine why she’s not reciprocating your feelings.”

He shot her a hard glance. “Don’t be sarcastic, Rieka, be helpful. I’m her superior officer. That’s not easy.”

“Get around that by going out on some made-up assignment with her and let her get to know you better. You two have never spent any time together. How’s it going to work if you don’t?”

“I get so wrapped up in work, I never think of the simplest answers to a problem.”

“Yes, Joeseeph, you can be slow-topped sometimes. Unless you hit Kathea straight in the face with something, she won’t get the point. Just like you. At least, you’ll know one way or another if you take some kind of action,” Rieka pointed out.

“Thanks, pal.” Joeseeph raised his glass to her then took another hearty sip.

“Just do it after the Aldairian venture. I think Kath wants to make Raeschel’s wedding,” she suggested and emptied her own glass.

He gave her a wry glance. “I know this hasn’t been easy on you, Rieka. The marriage contract being renewed, Almeagar and you being around each other again, and Raeschel’s news, probably are taking

their toll on you. Especially after that blasted assignment. At least, the Vaukeen will keep out of our hair now that their plan has been exposed and their secret base destroyed. You and the Aldairian did a great job.”

“Gee, thanks, Coyton.” Rieka frowned and leaned against the back of the padded booth.

“Now, you are being more sarcastic than usual. What happened to sour you so during that event?” Joseph pried deeply and Rieka let him.

She didn’t answer him right away as the waiter came back with several bottles and two more glasses. “More wine?”

When the waiter left, Coyton spoke up again. “Yeah. I have a feeling I’m not going to like what you’re about to tell me. Is it pretty bad?”

Rieka refilled their glasses and handed Joseph back his glass. “Fraid you won’t like this at all, Admiral.”

Joseph groaned with worry and gulped his drink down. “Let me have it, then.”

“First of all, do you have any idea who the Aldairian was that I partnered with?” At his nod, she knew he had known Dalharan’s identity all along, but she continued talking anyway. “Then I figure I’ve frigged-up royally.”

“I definitely know I’m not going to like this!” Joseph uncorked another bottle. “You never screw up, Rieka. You are too methodical. I figured if you ever did, it would be the highest number used on the Richter scale.”

Rieka gulped her own drink down and then let Joseph refill it again. “It is past that. You’re going to need one of those bottles all to yourself when I tell you everything, Joseph. So am I.”

“Great. Lay it on me.” He physically steeled himself for her reply.

“It’s pretty thick.” Rieka gave him a wry smile, though she was serious when she explained everything to Joseph that she could about her and Dalharan. “See what I mean?”

“You’re right.” He pushed his glass away and started drinking from the bottle. “That is pretty royal in actual fact. Rieka, this friggin ordeal can never get out.”

“I know, Joseph. However, since my father ordered me to Aldairia, I have no choice but to go. I just hope I can handle the situation.”

"If ever you needed to keep your wits about you, this is the time, my friend," Joeseeph professed, and then added, "And your hands away from him. Damn, I'm sorry, Rieka."

"It's okay, Joeseeph. I am not in love with the man. It was just the most devastatingly sensual experience I've ever encountered, nothing more. I will act as if nothing happened when I see him again. The wedding must take place."

"I know. Are you sure that is all there is to it, Rieka? I've always trusted you to know your feelings."

"I'm positive, Joeseeph," Rieka assured him. "LAW can't afford for my scandalous behavior to come out in the open. You know better than anyone else that I will not let our alliances down."

"I've never doubted your loyalty to the Legion of Allied Worlds, or Alliance Intelligence Medium. No one ever has, in fact. This is just one bloody, unusual occurrence that we have to deal with." Joeseeph gulped the contents of the bottle down quickly.

Rieka did the same with the other bottle. "Well, the best suggestion that I have right now is to order a few more bottles of this excellent wine and plan our best defense back in our lodgings."

"An excellent idea, Admiral Hahl." Joeseeph let out a small, hiccupy chuckle.

Laughing hard, she rose with her commanding officer. "I think we need to get you back to your quarters. That potent stuff will start affecting me pretty soon. After a few more bottles, of course."

"Of course," Coyton agreed. "Lead on, my friend."

Though a bit light-headed herself, Rieka put an arm around him, steadying his body. She definitely wanted to get him to his quarters before one or both of them landed face down on the floor. That would not set well with her father. It would also be a juicy story for the Uni-news reporters she always saw lurking around in the worst possible places. Thankfully, none were about right now, as she trudged with Coyton and a few more bottles back to his quarters. Coyton and she both had some dire problems to work out.

At least, Joeseeph had a chance to work out his heart interest. Rieka knew she'd never be able to. She didn't like the idea of Dalharan marrying another woman, but she could not be responsible for another contract being broken between the Gehennans and Aldairians. Her short affair with Prince Dalharan must to be kept a secret. When she went to Aldairia, she could never show her desire for him again. It would take all the inner strength she could muster to

keep herself in line, and keep her hands and mind off his delicious body. It wouldn't be easy.

Rieka plopped down on the bed besides Joeseeph, whose large feet half hung off to one side of the bed. She sighed, leaning up against the headboard near him. He was out of it, no more for him. Yet, it wasn't him that she imagined there. No, she wished it were Dalharan, with his large delicious body waiting for her to come to him.

She could feel his arms even now about her, loving her as she wanted to love him. Yet their love could not be. It was a forbidden desire they had for each other. How then could two forbidden hearts become one? As she felt certain his belonged to her, hers belonged to him. If they were to openly admit anything for each other, war with the Gehennans would ensue. She was still the wife of War Chief Almeagar Viaad, and Dalh just signed a contract to marry Almeagar's sister.

What worse predicament could the two of them be in? No, no one must know, ever. At least she had the memories they shared. Not even the fates could take that away from either her or Dalharan. Her attention riveted to a snoring Joeseeph. He mumbled something in his sleep.

“Rieka, take care, be happy...”

Rieka moved his big feet over and lay near him on her back, staring up at the dark ceiling. “I wish I could, I cannot even allow myself the luxury of what swells in my heart, Joeseeph. However, no one will ever find out that I love him...not even Dalh!”

She closed her eyes, her mind filling with visions of forbidden desires and a disparate love that she wished could be fulfilled.

THE END

Aldairian Ecstasy: Forbidden Desires

Rieka and Dalh found ecstasy in Forbidden Desires.
Can they ever find a way to make it true love?
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The Aldairian Ecstasy: Forbidden Hearts

By

Mae Powers

Coming July 2006 at www.midnightshowcase.com

Forbidden Hearts

CHAPTER ONE

The Planet Aldairia, 2655

“Kaderick, you're about to marry my sister, how can you sit there looking so disheartened?”

Kaderick Ahmaad Demmonarris glanced up at the short Earthman he'd known for a long time. He let out a sigh, motioning for the alien male to join him on the couch in the royal drawing room, which was presently empty except for the two of them. “It is not my upcoming nuptials that have me disturbed, my friend.”

The Earthman sat his lanky, six-foot-six-inch frame down near the Aldairian prince. “Then what are you sulking over?”

Kaderick squared his broad shoulders, straightening his seven-foot frame. “I do not sulk, Lieutenant Hahl.”

When Kaderick saw his friend's grinning eyes, he sucked in his lower lip. He leaned forward, placing his arms on his knees, and clasped his hands together. “I guess I do tend to worry too much over things. It is thoughts of my eldest brother who is causing me such turmoil.”

Carter Hahl's eyes saddened and he also leaned forward. “His own upcoming marriage is not in the same vein as yours and Raeschel's, Ked. But he chooses to do this for his world and peace.”

Kaderick stood up suddenly and began pacing furiously. “That is the problem! Dalharan always does everything for the good of Aldairia, regardless of how he feels personally! He has no regard for that damn Gehennan princess. But he will marry her just to bring lasting peace between our worlds!”

“Is it that you feel guilty about being happy yourself, while you feel he's miserable, that's got you so riled up?”

Kaderick threw his hands up in the air and sat back down. “You know me well, Carter. There is nothing I can do to stop Dalharan's marriage. What hurts worst of all, is that he is even dis-*Charj*ing himself for the Gehennan's benefit.”

Carter bit his bottom lip, asking, “Ked, I've known you seven years, enough to know something about an Aldairian's heritage. When your people choose mates, male or female, that partnership is intolerable between two persons unless there is a *Charj*.”

“It is so integral to us. It is how we choose our soul mates. As I experienced with your sister.”

“But you also love Raeschel. She's said you've told her so. Raeschel would not have agreed to marry you otherwise.”

“True. I still do not fully understand this chemical emotion you humans feel for each other, but Raeschel has been adept at teaching me. I just wish my brother could even experience what it is like to have a *Spark* before he commits himself to a life of hell.”

“I heard a *Spark* is a very minor version of the *Charj*. Like when a human might decide on an affair before settling down to marriage?”

“Yes. Dalharan is considered one of the most handsome males on my world, but he never takes the time to look any woman's way.”

Carter leaned back a bit, his face showing some surprise. “Are you telling me that impressive brother of yours is a virgin?”

Kaderick tightened his hands together, trying to keep his temper in check. “There is no need to be amused, Carter. Many men of my world keep their honor in tact until they find their soul-mate and choose not to even *Spark*.”

Carter tried not to grin. “Your brother is thirty-eight years old. It's hard to believe, considering how I've seen women flock around him vying for his attention.”

Ked leaned back, trying to ignore his friend's infectious grin. “I know, but it is true. I hate to think it, but I believe Dalh finds Aldairian women too quiet for his tastes.”

“Aldairian women are graceful and quite beautiful. But perhaps what he needs is someone more exotic.”

Kaderick's thick brows knitted together. “Are you suggesting we 'hook him up'? I believe that is how you put it when you tried to get me involved several years ago during our precarious friendship.”

“I'm not suggesting fixing him up with a ditz, Ked. But maybe someone who's more experienced and who would not hang on him once the affair is over. We've six weeks before the Gehennans arrive.”

“I do not think I like where this is leading. Dalharan would be furious to know I have meddled in his affairs. His temper makes all of Aldairia stand at attention.”

“Your brother is a level-headed man. I see nothing to fear.”

“You do not live around the man, Lieutenant.” Kaderick rolled his eyes when he realized his friend was deliberately teasing him. “You tempt me to throttle you, Carter. Sometimes I wonder how we became friends.”

“Almost a decade ago I rescued you from a drunken Gehennan woman on Vetas Prime. That's in the Nonpartisan Tract, remember?”

“I was seventeen at the time and listening too much to my middle brother Vultar's advice. He left me there at the mercy of that beast. Gehennan women like their men experienced. I still do not understand what she saw in me.”

“Perhaps she was a wolfer.”

“A what? What kind of Earth slang is that?”

Carter stretched out his lanky form, his full lips curving into a mischievous grin that made Kaderick nervous. “It sort of means a woman on the prowl for a man to bed.”

“You are suggesting we find this kind of woman for Dalharan? You scare me with your antics sometimes, Jon-Carter. Vultar had no luck setting Dalh up, what makes you think we could do any better?”

“It all depends on the woman we choose.”

Kaderick fidgeted. “I am afraid to ask who you have in mind.”

“I'm almost afraid to suggest the woman, but I can think of none other who could catch your brother's interest and still allow him to carry out his duty.”

“Dammit, Carter, who are you suggesting?”

“My eldest sister, Rieka. She's a confirmed bachelorette, Ked. I think once she sets eyes on...”

Kaderick jumped up and began pacing again. “Of all the lame-brain ideas I have heard—even from my brother Vultar—yours is the worst, most stupid, and outrageous. Your eldest sister would eat Dalh alive! She is a military woman.”

Carter jumped up then, stretching upwards to get up in Kaderick's way. “My sister is the most brilliant officer in Earth Enforcement! And she's a wonderful, intelligent woman. Any man would be lucky to be in her company!”

Kaderick's irritation grew towards his friend. “How can you disrespect you own sister, Carter? She is not the person I would want around...”

"Everyone in the palace can hear your shouting. Might I know what you two are arguing over? Right now." Both men were startled by the rich, calm voice breaking in on their dispute.

The two were at once embarrassed to find out that the very person they were plotting about had walked in on them without them knowing so.

"You two look like a couple of children caught in doing something mischievous. Tell me the matter of your quarrel, Kaderick." Dalharan Demmonarris said.

Kaderick gulped and looked away from the taller, stalwart Aldairian to his friend. "We were just having a discussion concerning his sister."

"Raeschel?"

"No, Prince Dalharan." Carter bowed slightly to the elder prince. "My eldest sister, Admiral Hahl. Kaderick does not wish to have her at the wedding."

"Damn you, Jon-Carter," Kaderick muttered beneath his breath, hoping that his brother did not hear. "That is not true, Dalh. I merely assumed Admiral Hahl would not be able to make it and suggested that she probably could not get shore leave. She has not attended many functions held for Raeschel."

"Raeschel told you that?" Carter glanced at him speculatively. "It's never been because Rieka never wanted to come, Ked. Raeschel should know that. What with the war our two worlds have fought with Gehenn and the Vaukeen, plus her other pressing duties, Rieka's never had the time. She is more attached to Raeschel than you could possibly imagine."

"Now that we will finally be at peace with Gehenn, perhaps I can come to know her while she's here on Aldairia."

Startled at the elder prince's words, both men turned in his direction, but Ked was the one to put their mutual concern into words. "You have never given any indication of that before, Dalh."

"I have wanted to meet her for years, but the Legion of Allied Worlds has always kept Admiral Hahl quite busy. As President Elect of the Legion of Allied Worlds, your own father could have pulled enough strings to get Admiral Hahl stationed here for the duration of the wedding, Jon-Carter."

Kaderick noticed Jon-Carter's face turning pale.

"My sister and our father, President Hahl, are not on the best of terms, sir. He is coming here within a few days. Rieka is one of

Earth's and LAW's best defense leaders. They feel more secure when she is out there.”

“The matter is taken care of, Lieutenant. I persuaded your father it is in Aldairia's and LAW's best interests to have the Admiral here.”

“Then my elder sister could arrive anytime?” Carter asked, astonished.

Prince Dalharan nodded, his eyes sparkling with humor. “Now, I believe we are all due to dine with some of the family soon. Let us not disappoint them. There is something I must take care of. Tell them I shall be along shortly.”

“Of course, Prince Dalharan.”

“We shall go there promptly, Dalh.”

Quietly, side by side, Kaderick and Carter exited the room. They walked silently and swiftly for some moments before either one spoke again.

“I hope you are satisfied, Carter. Now he will meet her.”

“I hope you're satisfied, Ked. I was beginning to believe I'd erred. But now you've really made it worse.”

“Me? You suggested she come here to have an affair with my brother!”

“I know it was a stupid idea. I was funning you at first, until you started making nasty comments about Rieka. She may not be perfect, but she is my sister, and the best damn officer in any of LAW's fleets. I don't see how your brother got LAW and my father to let Rieka come!”

“You do not know my brother's gift of persuasion. He has all of Aldairia at his beck and call and there are very few who deny him anything or do not fear his temper!”

“Damn! I shouldn't have been such an idiot. Rieka's temperament is like a nova going off when she's been pushed too far. And even a second in my father's presence sends her off the deep end.”

“I have wondered why the two never got along. In the few times I met him, your father has been very proud of all three of his children's accomplishments.”

“Ked, the problems between my eldest sister and my father go back a long way. I am not at liberty to divulge that information. Please don't ask it of me.”

“Forgive me, my friend. I just hope your sister is all you claimed.”

Carter turned his head in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Perhaps an affair with Admiral Hahl is just what my temperamental brother needs. It is about time someone showed him he can not rule everyone.”

Carter laughed. “Just a few minutes ago you were aghast at the thought and worried about him. I see you don't like being chastised any more than I do.”

“Never mind, Carter. Let us just hope there will not be sky-rockets on Aldairia when the two meet.”

“You mean explosive novas, I'm sure.”

Even as Ked and his friend joined the family for dinner, the younger Demmonarris prince was not any easier about the present situations than when Carter first talked with him. He only hoped Admiral Hahl's coming would be a pleasure for them all.

CHAPTER TWO

Glad to be back home these last few days, Dalharan walked quickly and purposefully towards the royal family's private drawing rooms. His father usually reserved early morning for his family members alone. He waved away the door attendant and entered the spacious rooms.

Dalharan always liked the elegant blue and gold furnishings in this suite. He walked towards the three high-backed couches, trimmed in walnut carvings, which were arranged openly in the center of the room, yet cozy enough for conversation. He paused at the smallest of the three couches upon which his father and Raeschel sat. He nodded to Lt. Jon-Carter Hahl and Dalharan's two younger brothers—Kaderick and Vultar, who sat on one of the larger ones.

"Prince Dalharan, I'm glad you joined us." Raeschel rose from her seat, and held out a hand in greeting. "I don't know how you accomplished the feat, but Jon and Kaderick tell me I have you to thank for my sister Rieka coming to Aldairia for my wedding."

"You are welcome, Raeschel." Dalharan shook her hand then glanced at her elder sibling. Jon-Carter Hahl might have been tall by Earth standards, but Dalharan found him short by Aldairian ones. He was even shorter than his youngest brother Kaderick by several inches. But he liked the younger man's arresting face and quiet manners Carter had shown over the years since befriending Kaderick.

"I don't know what you did, but I thank you," Jon-Carter said. "Most impressive. You've done what no one else could do—move my father to station Rieka here during Raeschel's and Ked's wedding."

Raeschel looked puzzled when she turned Dalh's way. "I heard from her early this morning, Prince Dalharan. She should be landing anytime now. What did you do to get Rieka posted here indefinitely?"

Dalharan grinned wickedly. "Just a little persuasion. And as we are practically family, please start calling me Dalharan or Dalh."

All his relatives chuckled, perplexing the two Earth persons.

Carter looked from Dalharan to Kaderick. "You mentioned he was very convincing. Might I know the humor behind the situation?"

Kaderick looked at his eldest brother with whimsy before speaking to Carter. "My brother pulled your father's strings."

“During the last two visits he and I had, we shared a mutual liking for Sec-star level chess,” King Zahr put in. “My son merely mentioned that having your sister stationed here would assure President Hahl that we could continue those friendly visits.”

Carter chuckled and turned to Dalharan. “If I didn’t know better, I would assume that was a threat that Aldairia would leave the Alliance if my sister did not come here.”

Dalharan looked intently at the two Earth persons. “It was.” Then he suddenly grinned at JC. “I find it hard to take no for an answer.”

“I did warn you about that, JC.” Kaderick moved around to sit with his father and Raeschel sat back down, too.

Dalharan and Kaderick were only four inches apart in height, but Kaderick was darker in looks and younger than Dalharan by 11 years. Dalharan turned to glance at Kaderick after taking a seat near him and noticed Raeschel giving him and his kin speculative stares.

Her ambassador abilities, he noted, took over after her perusal of them. “Come now, you three, don’t make our family time so dreary. JC, he was only kidding.”

“Though our security forces have had dealings with hers, I have yet to formally meet her in person.” Dalharan’s middle brother, Vultar, moved forward on the lounge, finally joining the conversation. “Her strategies during the Vaukeen invasion were brilliant.”

Dalharan glared at his second brother, head of Aldairia’s own armada. Vultar stood the tallest of the three brothers and the fairest, his hair being a darker golden brown rather than having the sable brown coloring of Dalh or Ked. But in physique, Dalharan and Vul were more robust. The two had not spoken yet to the rest of their family about all that happened on Tigon. He could not tell any member of his family that he was already closely acquainted with Admiral Hahl. Vultar’s teasing did not make it easier. Like King Zahr and Kaderick, Dalharan was glad to have Vultar back in one piece and his health improved.

“Quite so, Prince Vultar,” Raeschel said. “I loved keeping up with her adventures. However, later on in ambassador school I often wished I didn’t have such a famous sister.”

“You just recently graduated from there, did you not?” Vultar asked.

“Yes, Prince Vultar. In fact, Carter’s graduation present to me was this trip to Aldairia.” Raeschel added.

“For which I am thankful.” Kaderick said softly.

Dalharan was happy to see the ease with which his family and the Hahls were getting along. The evidence of Kaderick’s happiness showed on the younger man’s face. Dalharan exchanged a satisfied glance with Vultar, before Vultar turned his attention back to Raeschel Hahl.

“We all are happy for you, Ked,” Vultar commented. “Just call me Vul or Vultar, Raeschel. I understand from Uni-News sources, High-Chieftess Cassia was in your class this last year of your Ambassador training school.”

“Yes, that is so. We were, um, amenable towards each other.” Raeschel answered.

All heads turned to Dalharan as everyone realized the awkwardness of the situation. He smiled and shrugged. “The more I know about my future bride, the better our relationship will be. Tell me, Raeschel, do LAW officers of Admiral Hahl’s rank ever get a chance to enjoy themselves at any festivity?

Raeschel chuckled lightly. “Of course, they do. Rieka and JC taught me to dance.”

Vultar turned to glance at JC. “You’ll have to give me lessons then, Jon-Carter. Last time I danced, I stepped on my partner’s toes.”

The others grinned at him and JC commented, “I think we would make lousy partners, Prince Vultar. Raeschel would be the better choice.”

Vultar turned to Raeschel and stated. “I promise not to step on your toes if you consent to teach me some graceful moves.”

Raeschel grinned. “Maybe Rieka can do so instead. She’s an excellent teacher. Despite her military sobriety, Rieka has always charmed everyone.”

Dalharan noticed JC giving Kaderick a lopsided grin and an I-told-you-so-look. He had the feeling the two friends were plotting something. Earlier today, he walked in on a conversation the two were having and he saw the guilty looks on their faces.

“Carter has let me know her glowing attributes in no uncertain terms.” Kaderick said, and Dalharan was duly convinced then, the two men had been discussing him.

No one commented else, for the doors to the drawing room opened up. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Yet when he rose and turned, a being of his own height and build, strode into the room. Dalharan immediately recognized the person dressed in

long, flowing, dark gray robes from head to toe. The face of the man seemed always hidden in shadows. His distant cousin, the universally known scientist, Deurke Sol, the Master Watcher, became both his friend and mentor years ago.

“Cousin, I am glad you could get to Aldairia!” Kaderick exclaimed then turned to his fiancée. “I do not know if you have met our cousin....”

Carter surprised everyone with his sudden curtness towards the Watcher. “Raeschel and I have had the opportunity to meet the Watcher. Everyone knows the icon he is.”

“Yes,” Raeschel said quickly. “I’ve had the pleasure many times. Deurke is a friend of mine and Rieka’s.”

The Aldairian scientist nodded his cowled head in her direction. “Will Rieka be here for your wedding to my fortunate cousin?”

After giving her brother a quick warning look she smiled at the Watcher. “I am the fortunate one, sir. Rieka will be here. It has been a long time since you two have seen each other.”

“Quite a long time,” the Watcher said wistfully.

Dalharan, though a bit perturbed by his cousin’s and Carter’s attitudes toward each other, asked, “When did you meet her before?”

“I’ve been friends with Admiral Hahl since Raeschel was an infant.”

“Much has passed in those intervening years, sir.” Raeschel commented.

“Quite a bit, sis.” John Carter Hahl said sullenly.

Dalharan had the oddest feeling that Carter Hahl did not like the Watcher. “I shall order refreshments.”

He pressed a button of a built-in unit on a small table and ordered wine and appetizers to be brought into the room. Within minutes, the doors opened, and a servant brought in a laden tray. He motioned for the servant to put the tray on a round table in the middle of the conversation area. After the servant left, he poured drinks for everyone.

“I look forward to seeing your parents again, Raeschel. Your father plays a mean game of Sec-star level chess.” The Watcher commented.

The king chuckled. “That he does. He is the only one beside yourself and Dalharan who has ever beaten me, Deurke.”

“Then you have yet to play my sister, King Zahr.” Carter said, grinning. “She’s better than anyone I’ve played against. Even my father.”

“I shall have to second that, Jon-Carter.” The Watcher stated. “I have enjoyed many a game with her.”

Carter stood up. “If you will all excuse me, I should get ready to greet my sister when she lands.”

Dalharan was surprised at the younger man’s curt display, but as Raeschel rose with her brother nothing was said. “I shall join you, JC. If you will excuse us, Sire.”

The king rose, nodding his permission. He did not settle back down but glanced at his younger sons. “Vultar, join me and Kaderick in my study. There are things about the wedding I would like your opinion on. I will talk with you two later, Deurke, Dalharan.”

The other two men nodded in the king’s direction and seated themselves again after the others had left. “What was that all about between you and Carter Hahl? He is usually an amiable man. I am assuming he is protective towards both of his sisters and you got on the bad side of Admiral Hahl.”

The Watcher turned his head in surprise. “You know me better than I thought you did, cousin.”

Dalharan chose his words carefully. “You and I have been friends a long time, Deurke. I am surprised you kept your feelings for Admiral Hahl from me.”

“I never mentioned because...You read that just now in my conscious thoughts. You never were able to read my mind before, Dalharan.”

“I have improved my powers over the years. I know I am being presumptuous, but were you two ever closer than friends?”

The Watcher slumped his shoulders. “Yes, but Rieka made me realize we could never be more than friends. It was a long time ago.”

Dalharan could sense psychically and emotionally the sadness in his friend’s demeanor. “You still care for her more than you want to admit even to yourself.”

“Though we cannot be together, I will never stop...” The Watcher tilted his head up in surprise. “How is it you are able to sense me out and read my aura so easily? I know you have adept psychic powers, but I am one you could never intuit before.”

“As I said, I have been training my powers more, in private.”

The Watcher tilted his head thoughtfully. “Though I feel you are more confident in yourself, you seem saddened also.”

Dalharan looked dejectedly at his friend. “I am to wed the Gehennan wretch and must dis-*Charj* myself for their benefit. At one time, I thought a small price to pay for peace between Gehenn and Aldairia.”

“How could you have gone through this a second time, Dalharan? Why not Vultar, or another cousin or...”

“No, I am heir to the throne. The Gehennans broke off the contract last time when High Chief Vahn Viaad’s elder daughter Kreaah died. The younger one Cassia and I may not like each other much, but she and I have an understanding that our marriage will benefit both worlds. The feud between Gehenn and Aldairia must finally end.”

“You have always put others before yourself, Dalharan. I wish you had a chance for happiness.”

Dalharan shuffled his feet and folded his hands in his lap. “I will find a way to be content.” Dalharan rose then and the Watcher did likewise. “I should join my father and brothers now.”

The Watcher nodded in understanding. “We will visit later.”

After the Watcher left, Dalharan plopped back down in the big chair, leaning his head back. With eyes closed, he let out sigh of frustration.

Dalharan strummed both hands on the arms rests of the chair and muttered out loud, “Universal Hell!”

What was he to do? The only loving happiness he ever known had been with Rieka and in his dreams. No, he corrected, it had taken Rieka to make him realize his imaginings were but suppressed longings. At least, his dream came true. He lost his virginity to Rieka. He smiled with remembrance at her embarrassment at the blood. She had uttered out loud that it was not time for her feminine cycle. When he told her about Aldairian males losing their virgin foreskin the first time they physically partnered with a female, she was shocked.

Dalharan had been perplexed himself, when she started cursing in her native tongue and almost left him afterwards. Their actual parting had not been easy. He tried to convince her they needed more time together, but she refused and ordered him off her ship. That was the last time he saw her. Frustration and anger built up inside him now. For what could have been, and for what could not be. Anguish tore his insides up. Anguish at finding out that Rieka and the Watcher, his

best friend, had a history together, and anger at her for her deceptions towards him. Yet, when Rieka Hahl arrived here, he would act as if they just met in persona for the first time, and never made such devastating love together.

He let out a loud groan as he remembered that Carter and his brother were plotting to set him up in an affair with someone. How could his personal life be thought so sad that people close to him figured they needed to do something to liven it up? Who was the unsuspecting person they had in mind?

Remembering back to their earlier words he let out a loud oath. “Damn those two.”

Their glances toward each other earlier gave their plan away. JC and Kaderick were intending to set him up with Admiral Hahl. How could they have even thought such an idiotic thing? Even though the affair already happened, they should have known better than to interfere in his life, especially with him about to marry a Gehennan. Rieka Hahl had been a thorn in the Gehennans’ side for a long time. If it were found out that he had an affair with her, neither LAW, Aldairia, nor Gehenn would know peace again.

Before Rieka Hahl arrived, he must make sure Carter and Kaderick did not meddle and mess up both his and the unsuspecting Admiral’s lives. Dalharan felt he already did enough of that himself. It would be hard, but he had to keep his hands off her body and her throat while she was stationed here. She needed to leave Aldairia after his brother’s wedding, though. He did not know how long he could keep his hands off her sexy body. Groaning with the injustice of the situation, he went to join his kin.

*To Be Continued in The Aldairian Ecstasy: Forbidden Hearts,
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