



# The Portal

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## Chapter One

The trip had been long and tedious, but it would've been a lot more boring, and, truth be told, probably impossible, if not for the frog DNA.

Dr. Alexis Conyers tried to push that stray thought to the back of her mind, as she had every time it had surfaced since she'd agreed to accept mutation for the sake of mankind, but it wormed its way to the forefront of her thoughts again as she struggled to focus on the activity around her.

Their mission might not be mankind's last chance, but there was no denying it was their best hope. Sacrifices were necessary if they were to have any expectation of pulling it off. She'd accepted that.

They'd all accepted that.

And it still bothered her to think about the alien DNA strands that had been webbed to her own, making her less than human anymore.

She still felt human. She still looked human, but the bald truth was that she wasn't entirely human anymore and she wasn't as comfortable with that as she would've liked to be. It made her wonder if the desperation to save the human race hadn't already gone beyond what it should've.

Harnessing the comet had seemed hair-brained and brilliant at the same time ... and so simple it almost made everyone feel stupid they hadn't thought about it before. Scientists had studied comets and meteors for decades. Other scientists had trained their gazes on the search for a truly habitable world, one that would support human life without requiring terraforming, or building biospheres, or lugging tons of life support equipment light-years just to provide the minimum to sustain life.

But, until fairly recently, no one had thought to put the two projects on the same page.

They'd colonized the Earth's moon, Mars and its moons—moons belonging to half the planets in their solar system, but that was less than ideal. Not one 'world' they'd conquered could sustain life without a tremendous amount of work and the ever present danger that some vital piece of equipment would fail and wipe out the entire colony before help could arrive.

As bad as things had gotten on Earth—and it was pretty damned unstable—it was still better than anything they'd been able to come up with—although there was some comfort in not having all their 'eggs' in one basket, in knowing it was less likely, now, that a single cataclysm could wipe out the entire human race.

The probes they'd finally set down on comets to piggyback a ride through the universe had succeeded where all other efforts had failed, though. The comets had carried their 'eyes' further than they'd been able to reach before, faster, and given them a far better look at the universe.

With the comet borne, deep space probes, they'd found the perfect new home for humans--as close to perfect as they were likely to find in time to do them any good, at any rate. The problem was that the planet was so far away it made the ordinary methods of colonization impractical if not completely impossible.

That had resulted in 'hair-brained/brilliant' strategy number two—their mission. Instead of trying to build a fleet of deep space ships to carry colonists to the new world, they'd built the U.E. (United Earth) Plymouth, crammed it with everything needed to build the transport portal, a handful of scientists/engineers, barely enough supplies to sustain those scientists/engineers, and sent them forth in the fastest ship ever built by man.

It had still taken nearly ten years to reach the new world, and there wasn't enough room on the ship for the supplies needed to sustain human life for that long. It would've taken a far bigger ship to do that, more time, and more money.

That was when the geneticists had stepped in with 'hair-brained/brilliant' plan number three—the introduction of foreign DNA into the scientists which would allow them to be frozen for most of the trip—literally frozen.

Alexis' stomach churned and a shudder raked its way up her spine.

It wasn't altogether a new idea. Geneticists had been working for years to help the human race evolve with the same speed as their world, adapt swiftly to the changes to keep them from going extinct.

The introduction of frog DNA was still radical, though. Never before had anything other than the DNA of other mammals been utilized.

And she was still surprised she'd woken up after being deep frozen for so long.

They'd tested it as much as possible, of course, before they'd blasted off into the unknown, but there'd been no time to do the years of research that needed to be done, should have been done before it was pronounced 'safe'. The compromise had been to deep freeze them for relatively short spans of time, awaken them to do routine checks of the ship and equipment and make certain everything was still working properly, perform or check minor course corrections as needed, and then deep freeze them again.

All in all, they'd been awake only a year, total, of their ten year trip, thawed for a matter of weeks and then back into the deep freeze, but even with the work they had to perform during those waking times the trip had seemed excruciatingly long and tedious.

Alexis dragged in a deep, cleansing breath, trying to make herself relax as the engineers finally took their places and began the process of 'lighting' up the portal to full power.

She sincerely hoped it was going to be full power this time. They'd already lost two probes. They were down to one. If the signal boost they'd jerry-rigged didn't reach the counter portal on Earth this time, they were going to be down to drawing straws to see who would become the guinea pig. There wasn't much else they could scavenge off the U.E. Plymouth without the risk that they'd be permanently stranded on New Earth, and no one wanted to even think about that.

It crept into her mind anyway and Alexis glanced around at her fellow travelers. Dr. 'Mel' Melody Carson, the lanky, almost six foot blonde navigator, was the closest person of the group that came to being a 'friend', although the two of them were hardly bosom buddies. She was currently chewing her last fingernail off at the quick while she stared at the blank screen of her console as if she could will the thing to light up. Linda, who in Alexis' opinion had far more boobs than brains, but who was supposed to be a crack mechanical engineer, was staring off into space, her lips moving as if she was either going back over her calculations ... or singing to herself ... or maybe praying?

That would be about as helpful as crossing her fingers, Alexis thought dryly,

wondering if Linda had always been this 'spacey' and she just hadn't noticed, or if the freeze/thaw process had left part of her brain frozen.

Richard 'the dick' Sloan, one of the two 'grunts' they'd brought along for protection and to help move heavy but delicate equipment, was scratching his balls as he, too, gazed off into space. His side-kick, Gary Pitts, a real whiz, was crouched on the ground nearby, chewing on the stalk of a plant that hadn't even been analyzed yet for possible toxins.

Drs. Li Chung and Angus O'Neal had their heads together over the main control console and Dr. William 'Bill' Long was staring at the gauges of the power unit. The three men were brilliant and held so many degrees in so many fields it was almost sickening.

Alexis tried to block the nasty thought that they had no reason to focus on anything besides their studies since it wasn't likely they'd had women to distract them, but she was only marginally successful. It wasn't that any of the three were deformed or just plain ugly, but they were certainly no better than average in looks and, more importantly, to her way of thinking, anyway, their personalities left a lot to be desired when it came to companionableness, let alone charm. A block wall had more charisma than the three of them put together.

She was fairly certain she'd never heard anything come out of their mouths beyond scientific speculation. She'd yet to see even one of the three open their mouths to say anything remotely conversational. They might as well be eunuchs. She was pretty sure not one of the three had even looked at Linda and registered that she was a female ... and recalled that they were male, which, as far as she was concerned, said it all. Any male that could work around Linda and focus on their work instead of her wasn't a red-blooded male.

She hadn't considered when she had set out on the mission that she might be stuck with the crew of the U.E. Plymouth for the rest of her natural life—and no one else—She'd been honored to be chosen. She'd been focused on the mission.

One 'waking' year of travel and three months of roughing it on the new world later, she was finding it harder and harder to ignore the possibility that she might never see anyone but this group again.

And, with the exception of Mel, she didn't even like them.

Not that she *disliked* them, but the degrees that separated 'like' from 'dislike', she'd come to realize, were like a vast ocean when one viewed it with the perspective that this group might be 'it', the only people she was going to be around for the rest of her life.

Not that there was a lot of reason to worry about it. After three months on New Earth, as careful as they'd been with their supplies, they were still running dangerously low on everything and they'd been too focused on completing their mission to spare the time to explore their new world and search for local resources to replenish their dwindling supplies.

If they didn't get the portal open soon, they probably wouldn't be around long enough to have to worry about what they were going to do with the rest of their lives.

It worried her that they hadn't been able to hail Earth.

It worried everybody, although they had carefully avoided the subject.

Regardless of the distance they should have been able to reach someone, hear

something from mission control in all this time. If nothing else, it seemed to her that one of the furthest colonies, closer to the edge of their solar system, should've picked up their attempts to communicate. Not that that made them close by any stretch of the imagination, but still . . .

Dr. Long was speculating that there was something about the planet itself that was interfering with communications.

It was as good an explanation as any, and completely unsupported by research of any kind since they hadn't brought along a lot of equipment for testing the environment. That wasn't an area of their collective expertise. *She* had a degree in anthropology, but that wasn't terribly useful in their current situation.

It couldn't be avoided, though, or at least she hadn't been able to avoid the knowledge that the crew of the U.E. Plymouth was pretty much useless for anything other than the focus of their mission. They had all the skills and knowledge they needed to build the portal and none of the skills or knowledge they would need to live on this new world if they found themselves completely alone.

The 'grunts' might make it. The rest of them were toast if they couldn't accomplish their mission and bring through the people it was going to take to build a colony.

"Ready, Alex?"

Alexis jerked as O'Neal barked the question at her, surging to her feet from her perch on the supply box she'd been using as a bench. "I've checked the probe out thoroughly. It's good to go."

Almost before she got the words out, the whine of the power unit reached a near ear-splitting pitch. A gust of air rushed past her as if the portal was a living thing and had just sucked in a deep breath, and static electricity danced along her body, making the fine hairs prickle.

Alexis stared at the portal, feeling a surge of adrenaline rush through her. Her heart danced a little jig of awakening of hopefulness.

"Mel?"

Melody's head jerked up when O'Neal barked at her, her eyes wide.

"Anything?"

Melody ducked her head, staring at her vid screen again. "Phantoms," she said, referring to the streams of light visible beyond the portal, which created a tunnel-like effect through space. It was actually more along the lines of a cannon, designed to break down the cells of both living and inanimate objects and shoot them across time and space where it reassembled them—theoretically. The portals on the other colonies did, of course, but then they hadn't needed the range this one did. Supposedly, the distance shouldn't make one iota of difference, but then, what did they know when it had never been used over such a vast distance?

"Wait! It's stabilizing!" she exclaimed excitedly.

Long, who'd been diverted by the conversation, returned his attention to the power unit. "Stable here, as well—minor fluctuations."

Melody looked up. "I've got a fix on mission control."

"You're sure?" Chung asked sharply.

"Confirmed," O'Neal said, a note of excitement in his voice, now, or as close to excitement as the man ever got.

“The portal on the other end isn’t responding,” Chung announced after a few moments.

“Knock, knock!” Richard said.

Gary snickered.

Alexis tamped her irritation. “Should I release the probe?”

“Hold,” O’Neal snapped. “Let’s make sure the power’s going to be sustained this time.”

“Why aren’t they opening the other portal?” Linda demanded of no one in particular.

“Maybe they’re out to lunch?”

Alexis sent Richard a narrow eyed glare that time. “I’m glad you find this so damned humorous, *Dick*.”

His beefy face reddened.

“Can we activate it from here?” Linda asked, an edge to her voice that Alexis recognized as fear and/or hysteria, mostly because she was struggling against both herself.

Chung and O’Neal exchanged a look. “Possibly,” Chung finally answered.

“Possibly? Or definitely?” Linda demanded, sounding more anxious than before.

“What would the point?” Richard ground out.

“The point,” Linda snapped, “is to get home!”

Richard gave her a disgusted look. “And what would be the point of that? We ain’t been able to contact anybody. Nobody’s answering the call to activate the gate. Don’t tell me it hasn’t occurred to any of you ‘brains’ that nobody’s fucking there or the damned portal would’ve been opened on the other end?”

\* \* \* \*

“How much time, by your calculations, has elapsed on Earth?”

The food Alexis had just popped into her mouth, space rations and nothing to get excited about to begin with, lost what little appeal it had had as she waited for Chung’s response to Long’s question.

Chung’s dark eyes leveled on Long speculatively. “The theory before we left was two hundred years—give or take fifty. I have no new data to add that suggested a need to recalculate.” He shrugged. “Or to factor in that might yield a different calculation.”

The Plymouth party had clustered around the portable plasti-table and bench units as they generally did for their evening meal and Alexis exchanged a look with Mel, who sat across from her.

“You think Richard’s right?” Mel asked. “Something’s happened?”

Long turned his head to stare at her. “Obviously something has. I wasn’t particularly alarmed when we failed to hail anyone. There was no absolute guarantee when we left that we’d be able to communicate across such a distance. Theoretically, it shouldn’t have been a problem, but we maintained the connection precisely thirty minutes without any response from the other side. The signal was good on our end. The only conclusion to be drawn from that is that mission control, for whatever reason, has been abandoned.”

Alexis felt her stomach clench around the food she’d been gamely trying to swallow. “Why would they just abandon it, though? Wouldn’t they relocate it to one of the other colonies if something cataclysmic happened on Earth?”

Long's gaze was almost pitying. "One would think so."

"Maybe they did? Maybe we should try the coordinates on the other colonies?"

O'Neal looked at Linda in surprise. "You know as well as we do that the portal is linked to the one on Earth. If they'd moved it, the portal itself would have adjusted. We wouldn't have to key in the change. Besides, it connected. There was no response."

Linda glared at him. "Maybe we could try recalibrating the portal to one of the portals on one of the colonies?"

"Dangerous," Chung responded succinctly.

"And it isn't dangerous staying here!" Linda snapped. "Look around you!"

The comment was rhetorical since they were inside habitat. There wouldn't have been any point anyway. New Earth was primal, lush, and teeming with life—paradise, but a raw, untamed one, beautiful and without a doubt deadly due to the completely unknown plant and animal life. Alexis had imagined that it must be a great deal like Earth had been when it was young, despite the fact that it had four moons, instead of one, and rings very much like Saturn's. Not surprisingly, although they'd taken great pains to avoid any contact, there was even evidence of emerging intelligent life.

She didn't especially want to find out *how* intelligent, but they'd scanned the area thoroughly before they chose their base camp site and she had hope that it wouldn't be an issue. Richard and Gary were the only two members of the group who'd even ventured beyond the perimeter they'd set up when they'd landed and established base camp. They didn't know what was 'out there' and none of them were anxious to find out when they weren't really equipped to deal with it.

Aside from that, the mission was top priority. They couldn't take the chance of losing a single member even if they'd felt brave enough to face the challenge. Gary and Richard were the only members of the party that were armed and the only ones who knew how to use the weapons, or at least the only two who'd had any training in using them.

"If the other portals happened to be in use," Chung said finally, "and we did manage to tie in, we'd risk dispersing their particles across the universe. You know that."

"So we do nothing?" Linda demanded tautly.

'Going home' hadn't been on the agenda, but, like Linda, Alexis hadn't been able to think about doing much else since they'd landed on the primitive world. If civilization wasn't coming their way, she was more than ready to pack it up and head back to it herself. They'd accomplished their mission. If 'home' wasn't coming, it was time to go back. "I could re-program the probe to activate the portal on the other side," Alexis suggested tentatively.

Everyone at the table turned to stare at her. It unnerved her for a moment, until she realized their intent focus and the fact that not one of them had immediately denounced the suggestion meant they were as anxious to go back as she was.

"You're certain of that?" O'Neal demanded in the gruff voice typical of him.

"I am," Alexis said staunchly, quelling her doubts.

Richard shoved to his feet and slammed his fist down on the edge of the table, making everyone jump. "What the *fuck* is the point? They're gone! Don't you get it? We're all that's left!"

"You don't know that!" Linda virtually screamed at him, leaping up from her seat, as well.

"Right!" Richard snarled. "I'm just *guessing* that if there was anybody around,

they might have turned the damned portal on! Obviously, they either completely forgot about us after they shot us into the 'great beyond', or everybody's gone."

Chung, Long, and O'Neal exchanged uncomfortable looks. "Hysteria isn't going to solve anything," O'Neal said finally.

For a moment, Alexis thought Richard was going to completely lose control of his temper. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest as his eyes narrowed on O'Neal, his fists clenching and unclenching, the threat of violence palpable.

Regardless of the fact that it had made him far stronger than a 'normal' man, which was supposed to be an asset, it occurred to Alexis that webbing ape DNA to his might not have been a wise decision. It seemed to her that the man was having a very hard time controlling a tendency toward violence.

"Easy for you to say," he growled finally, relaxing his stance with obvious effort. "You wouldn't know an honest emotion if it bit you in the ass. If I didn't know better, I'd think you three were fucking droids!"

Chung studied him with a face devoid of expression. "We are as deeply concerned about this unexpected turn of events as you are, Sloan. But we realize we must analyze the situation carefully before a decision is made."

"Analyze?" Gary snarled, joining Richard. "And while you're sitting around with your thumb up your ass, analyzing, maybe you can tell us how the hell we're going to survive if it turns out there ain't anybody on the other side? We may not be engineers and scientists like the rest of you, but we can sure as hell count. We've got enough rations left for a few weeks at the most. The fucking habitat is already starting to fall apart because it was never intended to be anything but temporary shelter and we don't know a hell of a lot more about what's out there than we did when we landed—except that once the fucking power goes there's plenty of things out there that aren't going to be out there anymore. They're going to be in here—with us—and I don't think they're too worried about whether or not we're edible!"

"Exactly my point!" Linda snapped. "We're completely unequipped to deal with this environment. We have to go back. Whatever happened, regardless of what state things are in, Earth is where we belong. We stand a much better chance of surviving there than we do here."

Alexis studied Linda, tamping the urge to agree with her—at least openly.

She *did* agree with Linda's assessment, but she wasn't certain whether it was because there was any real logic to it or if it was just an instinctive urge to run 'home' because this place was so completely alien and the thought of getting up close and personal with raw nature terrified her. For all they knew Earth might be just as 'alien' to them now as this place was.

Almost as if he'd read her thoughts, Chung suggested the same thing. "If, as Sloan surmises, something has happened and no one is there, can we be any more certain that we could survive if we did go back to Earth? If our civilization has been destroyed, would we not do as well to remain here and try to survive?"

"On what?" Richard snapped. "*With* what?"

"And who gets the women?" Gary growled.

Alexis felt her jaw slide to half mast. When she glanced at Mel and Linda, she saw what she thought was probably identical expressions of revulsion and outrage on their faces. She didn't know if she was more insulted and disgusted because it had been

Gary who'd dropped that little nugget of dung in their midst or if it was on principle. She thought it was both.

"The most reasonable thing to do would be to share," Long responded.

Long's comment stunned Alexis almost as much as Gary's had. Talk about an absolute breakdown in civilization! In the space of five seconds they'd gone from a group of respected scientists and equals to the completely archaic view of men vs. women? "Now, wait just a fucking minute!" she snapped, surging to her feet, as well. "I'm just as well aware of the role of sexual congress in the general health and mental well being as the rest of you and the government's stance on that in this type of situation. I signed on just like everyone else and I don't mind sharing myself if there's a need, but *we* happen to be people! It isn't up to *any* of you to decide what to 'do with us'!"

Richard gave her a look she didn't like. "Things have changed," he said, his voice a low, threatening growl.

A shiver of uneasiness went through Alexis, but she stood her ground.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if its going to come down to survival of the fittest—and it sure as hell's looking that way—you might want to consider who's best qualified around here to help you survive."

## Chapter Two

“Our best chance is through that gateway, whatever’s on the other side,” Alexis murmured quietly.

She heard a rustle as Mel shifted on her cot. The inside of their quarters was like a pit, without any light at all since they’d been conserving energy. It was impossible to tell if Mel had shifted to face her or turned away. “You think Sloan’s dangerous?”

Alexis turned in the direction of Linda’s voice, although she couldn’t see her any better. “He’s having dangerous thoughts. That’s for sure.”

“Neither Dr. Long, Chung, or O’Neal will be a party to what Sloan and Pitts have in mind,” Mel volunteered, a distinct quaver of uneasiness in her voice that proved conclusively, as far as Alexis was concerned, that she didn’t believe for a minute any of the three, or all of the three, would have any more say in the matter than they did.

“Maybe—maybe not, but what will they do to stop Sloan and Pitts?” Alexis countered.

“He couldn’t have been serious. They just need a little rec. Everybody’s tense,” Mel said, doubt threading her voice. Or maybe it was blind hopefulness?

“You want to volunteer to soothe the savage beast?” Alexis asked dryly. “I did him last time. He’s a selfish prick and he’s too damned rough.”

Silence greeted that. “You think, maybe, it’s some sort of side effect of the chromosome webbing?” Linda asked uneasily.

“How would I know?” Alexis retorted irritably. “I didn’t know him before. Maybe he was always a caveman throwback.”

“I didn’t notice that he seemed particularly aggressive before we left Earth,” Mel volunteered tentatively.

“Well, you must have had your head in your ass!” Alexis snapped. “He’s military. They don’t pick them for their docility, and they certainly don’t *train* them to be docile.”

“There’s no need to be insulting!” Mel snapped.

Alexis swallowed her irritation with an effort. “You’re right. I’m sorry, but it doesn’t really matter what he was like before, does it? We have to contend with now.”

“He did have a point,” Linda said after a few moments. “You’re an anthropologist. You know that better than anyone.”

“Which is exactly why I said our best chance is to convince everyone to go through the portal. If Sloan doesn’t think there’s going to be any repercussions or disciplinary actions taken against him—and obviously he’s already thinking that way--there’s no telling what he’s capable of. Besides, I simply refuse to believe that everyone’s gone. Maybe something terrible happened and civilization has fallen, but there will be other people there. There has to be, and if I’m going to be thrown into a survival situation anyway, I’d rather be on home turf. I don’t know about you two, but I don’t like my choices here.”

“Sloan or Pitts,” Linda agreed, a quaver in her voice. “We should talk to O’Neal.

He's got a degree in psychology. He'll know if Sloan's a threat and how much of a threat."

\* \* \* \*

"We have to analyze the data," Chung said in a perfectly reasonable voice.

O'Neal and Long nodded in agreement.

Alexis studied the three men in dismay for several moments, glanced at Linda and Mel, and then tried again. "I understand scientific protocol requires that, but we have a situation here."

"Which might only be aggravated if we attempt a jump without studying the data we've retrieved from the probe," O'Neal said brusquely.

"Did you not notice how ... *erratically* Sloan and Pitts are behaving? Doesn't it bother you *at all* that the only two people here with weapons, trained to use them, are showing signs of aggression?"

O'Neal reddened slightly. "High testosterone levels. They need rec."

Alexis, Mel, and Linda exchanged speaking glances. "We tried that," Mel volunteered. "If anything Sloan only seems to be becoming more controlling and aggressive. He doesn't ask anymore. He just grabs whichever one of us happens to be unlucky enough to be most handy at the moment. You've been studying the data for a week. Surely if there was anything seriously wrong with the environment you would've found it by now? He's talking about shutting down the portal because its using too much energy."

That comment seemed to pierce the cocoon of scientific aloofness enveloping the men as nothing else. It was O'Neal who responded, however. "*I'm* in charge of this expedition!"

"Exactly how do you think you're going to stop him from shutting it down if he decides to?" Alexis snapped. "We're going to be trapped here without the option of returning if you don't make a decision soon. Sloan knows he's the strongest among us and none of us can stop him from doing whatever he wants to do. He keeps saying this isn't a scientific expedition anymore. It's a military operation."

O'Neal came to his feet. "I'll speak with him," he said decisively, striding from the main living area of the habitat.

Alexis turned to watch him, feeling a sinking sensation of doom in the pit of her stomach. Without questioning the sense of impending disaster, she surged after him, catching him by the arm as he reached the door. He stopped, looking down at her hand with an expression of shock before fixing her with his frowning gaze.

"You're not going to confront him?"

"I have every intention of doing so, yes," he retorted coldly. "I am in charge of this expedition. He takes his orders from me."

This was a hell of a time for him to remember he had balls, Alexis thought furiously! "Don't do it! I'm telling you he's dangerously unstable!"

He peeled her fingers from his arm with an expression of disgust. "I have a degree in psychology, young lady! I know what I'm doing."

Alexis wasn't certain why she followed him outside, perhaps the forlorn hope that she could still intervene, that she could think of something to say that would get through to him. She certainly hadn't done so to witness his death.

\* \* \* \*

“He thinks he’s cowed us. He won’t expect us to do anything ... not so soon after ...”

Mel lifted a tear stained face to stare at Alexis, her gaze as blank and unfocused as the eyes of Drs. Chung and Long. Her chin wobbled. “We need to bury him.”

Alexis felt sick to her stomach. “We can’t spare the time. They’ll be back. We have to go now.”

“You mean leave him like that?” Long demanded, outraged.

“For pity’s sake!” Alexis nearly screamed at him. “Do you think I like it? If we don’t go now we’ll never have another chance!”

Linda, who didn’t look as if she was in much better shape than any of the others, got to her feet. “What do we do?”

Alexis turned to stare at the woman. She was the next thing to a blithering idiot with terror herself. It took all she could do to stay on her feet. Mentally, she shook herself. “Weapons, water, food ... we need to grab anything we think we might need that’s easy to carry ... that we can grab fast. Long! Can you get the portal generator started?”

Long stared at her, glanced at Chung, and finally rose slowly from the seat where he’d collapsed when they’d returned from examining Dr. O’Neal’s body. After looking around a little vaguely, he began to shuffle toward the door. Resisting the urge to scream at him to hurry, Alexis grabbed Linda’s arm and began to haul her in the direction of the store room.

“Lights on!”

The moment the lights came on, Alexis headed for the weapons rack. Grabbing one of the pulse rifles, she slung it over her shoulder by the strap and turned to look for something else. Mel, she saw, had followed them. Like Linda, she was standing in the middle of the room, looking around blankly. “Find something to carry the stuff in!” she snapped.

“Sloan will kill us if he catches us with the rations.”

Alexis stared at her, fighting the terror gnawing at her guts. “And what are our chances of survival if we don’t have them and there’s no food readily available? Grab something, damn it!”

Alexis was almost sorry she’d yelled at Mel when her chin wobbled, but it seemed to jolt her out of some of her shock. Nodding, she disappeared out of the door. When she returned, she had a couple of pillow cases.

It was just a damned shame the planners of their little expedition hadn’t had the forethought to supply them with camping accoutrements. Canteens and backpacks would have been a lot more helpful than the thirty to fifty pound containers that held their water and food rations. Fortunately, the food rations were individually packaged. Grabbing handfuls, Alexis tossed them into one of the pillow cases. Her frantic movements seemed to communicate to Linda and Mel. They picked up their pace, tossing food and medical supplies into the cases. Linda grabbed a five gallon container of water. “There’s nothing else to carry it in,” she said when Alexis stared at it.

“I know. I was just wondering if we should take two. Mel, grab another pulse rifle.”

“I don’t know how to use it,” Mel complained even as she pulled one from the rack and slung it over her shoulder.

“We’ll fucking figure it out!” Alexis snapped. “We’re scientists for pity’s sake! We ought to be able to figure it out.”

Chung had disappeared when they rushed through the main living area again. Hoping against hope that he’d overcome his shock enough to go help Long, Alexis headed for the door. Relief surged through her when they reached the site and she saw that Chung was indeed at his console. The high-pitched whine that assailed her ears told her the portal was opening.

Dropping the pillow case she was carrying near the portal, Mel hurried to her own console and checked her read outs. Her heart pounding frantically in her ears with sheer terror, Alexis set her burdens down and unslung the rifle, examining it. Dismay filled her as she stared at the thing. It had so many buttons! Which frigging button did what, she wondered a little frantically? The button on the hand grip seemed self-explanatory. Undoubtedly it was what fired the weapon. But what the hell were the other buttons for? Range? Strength? Something else entirely?

Would it even fire if the necessity arose? Or was there some button she had to push before it would fire?

Giving up on figuring it out for the moment, she leveled the thing and began scanning their surroundings, hoping against hope that neither Sloan or Pitts would return from their self imposed ‘scouting mission’ and put her to the test.

“We’re at full,” Long announced.

“Connected!” Mel seconded him.

“The probe isn’t responding to the command to engage the other portal,” Chung said.

“Fuck!” Alexis exclaimed, not only because of that unwelcome announcement, but also because she’d caught a glimpse of movement in the jungle beyond their enclosure. “They’re coming back! I think I see them coming back,” she muttered, more to herself than anyone else as she rushed to the console and began punching the keys with shaking fingers. “I’ve reset. Check it again.”

“Still nothing,” Chung responded after a moment of silence.

“Work, damn it to hell!” Alexis growled, punching the sequence in again before she lifted her head to stare toward the jungle once more. The moment she did, her gaze was snagged by Sloan’s as he parted the fronds of a plant at the edge of the camp.

Shock rippled over his features before rage transformed it.

“Oh god!”

“Primary portal engaged,” Chung announced as if he hadn’t heard her.

“Run!” Alexis screamed, charging from the console toward the portal. Slinging the rifle over her shoulder, she swooped to grab the container of water and the bag of provisions she’d left without slowing appreciably. The heavy container of water nearly wrenched her shoulder out of its socket. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she lumbered up to the portal and fell through, the sound of pounding feet competing with the frantic tattoo of her heart against her ear drums.

Fire washed over her. Before her brain could even fully register the pain, however, nothingness engulfed her.

Alexis’ next awareness was of excruciating pain as she sprawled full length on an unyielding surface hard enough to force the air from her lungs in an inelegant grunt. The impact loosened her grip on the water container and the pillow case full of rations. The

container went skittering in one direction. The contents of the pillow case scattered across the icy stone floor. The rifle slung across her shoulders slammed against the back of her skull, sending blinding pain through her head to compete with the fiery burning of impact and friction burns on her knees, elbows, and palms.

Someone tripped and fell across her even as she struggled to push herself to her knees. The collision flattened her again.

“Ow!” Mel exclaimed, rolling off of her.

It was dim in the room she found herself in, but enough light filtered in from somewhere to allow her to see the shadowy shapes of Mel, Linda, and Dr. Long. Scrambling to her feet, Alexis looked around for the control console a little desperately. Spying it at last, she sprinted toward it even as Linda and Mel began to scream.

Expecting any moment to feel a pulse blast in the back, she clawed her way around the console, quickly scanned the key pad and jabbed the power button to shut it down before it even occurred to her that it was probably too late.

Grabbing the rifle when that thought finally filtered through her mind, she swung the barrel in a wide arc, searching for the source of threat that had sent Mel and Linda into screaming hysteria.

Dr. Li Chung lay sprawled at the entrance to the portal. A black hole, still smoldering, was centered in his back.

Nausea rolled over Alexis. “Is he dead?”

Mel nodded jerkily, mopping at the tears streaming down her face with one hand and wiping the dampness on the legs of her jumpsuit.

Long moved to crouch beside him, lifting his limp wrist. Alexis stared at him hopefully until he finally dropped Li’s hand and settled heavily beside him.

“Do you think they can reopen the portal?” Linda asked jerkily.

Alexis stared at her. “I don’t know,” she responded finally, swallowing against the knot of fear that had wedged in her throat. “They’re not idiots. I suppose it depends on how badly they want to get it open.”

Long pushed himself to his feet. Moving to Alexis, he took the rifle from her hands and used the butt of the gun to pound the probe into pieces. “They can’t use that, at any rate,” he said with satisfaction when he’d finished.

Alexis, who’d simply watched in stupefaction as he destroyed the probe, stared at him with a measure of respect she hadn’t felt before.

“They might decide to risk it anyway,” Mel pointed out shakily. “I wouldn’t, but there’s no saying they won’t.”

Alexis nodded. Lifting her head, she looked at her surroundings for the first time. She shouldn’t have been surprised to see that it looked as if it had been abandoned long, long ago, but it still came as a shock to see the thick layers of dust and ancient cobwebs.

She’d hoped ....

“No one’s been here for a long time,” Linda said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“What do we do now?” Mel asked in a shaky voice. “We can’t stay here. If they come through ....”

Dragging in a shaky breath, Alexis crossed to the supplies she’d flung away from her when she’d sprawled in what had once been the main control room. “We should move.”

“Are we just going to leave poor Dr. Chung lying there like we did Dr. O’Neal?” Anger surged through Alexis. “Do you think it matters to him ... now?”

Dr. Long gave her a look. “If it was you ...?”

“I’d be dead and beyond caring,” Alexis snapped, holding back her raw emotions with a supreme effort of will. “How are we supposed to bury him?”

Mel, Linda, and William looked at each other and then looked away. Dr. Long cleared his throat. “I suppose this would be a fitting tomb. His life’s work was wrapped up in the mission.”

The thought flickered through Alexis’ mind that it was liable to become *their* tomb if Sloan figured out a way to get the portal open again ... assuming, of course, that he hadn’t flown into a rage and destroyed the other portal. He’d already killed two people. It seemed safe to say he wasn’t entirely rational. She glanced around when she’d finished gathering the supplies she’d scattered. “We could put him in the supply room,” she suggested tentatively. “At least that would prevent scavengers ...”

Linda looked horrified. “I don’t think I could touch him.”

“Oh for pity’s sake!” Alexis snapped. “First you complain that I don’t want to take the time to bury him and now you balk at helping to dispose of him ‘decently’! It’s not like we can call someone, damn it!”

“I’ve never touched a dead thing,” Linda cried angrily. “You’re an anthropologist!”

“*He* is Dr. Li Chung!” Dr. Long said coldly before Alexis could inform Linda that she studied cultures, not bodies, bones occasionally but not the recently departed. “I’ll carry him.”

Alexis watched him struggle to lift Dr. Chung’s lifeless body for several moments and finally moved to help him. When they’d settled him on the floor of the supply room, they stood staring down at him for several moments. “Would you like to say something?” Alexis asked Long.

He glanced at her, but finally shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he murmured in a shaky voice and then turned and left.

Wondering if he was apologizing to Chung or regretful that he couldn’t think of anything fitting to say, Alexis followed him.

They discovered when they’d managed to pry the door to the main control room open that it was the only part of the building still completely in tact. The further they walked, the worse the damage to the building, although it looked like the slow decay of time rather than the result of anything more specific, like a bomb—or nature’s fury in the form of killer storm or earthquake. By the time they neared the exit, they’d begun to have to climb over great chunks of debris where sections of the roof had fallen in and walls had collapsed. The building looked as if it was slowly deteriorating from the outside toward the central core.

Once outside, they discovered the sun was low on the horizon.

They also discovered that the city and wooded lands that had once surrounded the space center were gone. In their place was a vast desert that spanned the horizon in every direction.

With no idea what now lay in any direction, they finally headed west, hoping the sparse vegetation that dotted the sand dunes in that direction would lead them eventually to some sign of civilization. Three days later, exhausted almost to the point of dropping,

they topped a rock strewn rise and saw vegetation in the distance. Alexis stared at it blankly for many moments, almost afraid to give up the sense of disbelief that suspended the breath in her lungs.

“It’s cultivated fields,” she finally said through dried, cracked lips. “Look!”

Long and Mel, who’d dropped to the ground to rest the moment she stopped, lifted their heads hopefully. “You’re right!” Long exclaimed, scrambling to his feet with renewed vigor.

Linda, who’d been trailing the rest of the party by a goodly distance, came abreast of them and then, sucking in a sharp breath of delight, dropped the supplies she’d been dragging and passed them, trotting more energetically.

Alexis was so relieved she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. For days she’d fought the fear that she’d led them all to their deaths, prodding them to leave a world teeming with life for one that appeared dead. No one had said it, accused her with more than dull, fearful glances, but she’d known it must be running through their minds if it had occurred to her.

Uttering a choked laugh of gladness, Mel struggled to her feet and followed Linda. More than half tempted to drop her burdens so that she could walk faster, Alexis finally decided to err on the side of caution even if it took her a little longer. Switching the now half empty, only remaining container of water to her other hand, she picked up the pillow case containing the last of their supplies that Linda had dropped and headed down the slope behind the others.

They outstripped her, buoyed by their hope and excitement, moving faster and faster as they drew close enough to discern movement along the rows of the cultivated fields until they stopped as abruptly as if they’d slammed into an invisible wall.

“People!” Linda, who was by now as far in the lead as she had been trailing before, called back to them.

Alexis squinted her eyes against the bright sunlight, staring hard until she, too, saw the movement. Her heart was thundering with a mixture of excitement and exertion by the time she came to a breathless halt at the edge of the fields behind the others.

Wondering why they’d stopped so abruptly, she moved around them to see what it was that had brought them to a halt.

The people toiling in the fields had heard their approach and stopped, turning to look at them.

Except it wasn’t people in the fields.

## Chapter Three

For many long moments, Alexis thought the light was playing tricks on her. She considered whether or not the time they'd spent in the desert had somehow addled her wits, or if the horror of witnessing Drs. O'Neal's and Chung's murders and the fear that had driven them to flee had made her crazed.

Clearly, if that was the case, she wasn't the only one who's mind was gone.

One glance at the others was enough to assure her that they believed they were seeing what she was seeing.

"They're mutants," Mel finally whispered in horror.

One of the creatures screamed abruptly. As if that sound had galvanized the others, they lifted their crude hoes and charged. For a full moment that seemed like an eternity, Alexis merely gaped at the beings charging toward them with farm implements raised like weapons. Abruptly, her instincts took charge of a mind gone completely blank. Whirling, she threw everything down and fled.

She had no idea of where she was going. Her mind was simply functioning on automatic, unable to reason, incapable of calculation. Around her, she was dimly aware that Mel, Linda, and Dr. Long were scrambling to keep up with her, pass her. In her periphery vision, she saw other creatures charging toward them from the fields and finally realized she'd simply turned and run along the edge of the field instead of retreating back into the wastelands they'd just left.

She had no real understanding of why she'd done so. Broken thoughts skittered through mind, almost too quickly even to grasp, but she accepted that there was no place to hide where they'd come from—nothing. She didn't know if it was the need to stay near living, growing things, mere happenstance, or an instinctive urge to seek a place to hide, but she didn't veer away even when she realized that she was still passing rows of plants where other strange beings toiled, and took up the chase as they ran by.

Her heart and lungs felt as if they were going to explode. She thought she might have stopped except that Linda and Dr. Long both stumbled, tripping one another up and then sprawling in the dirt. She threw a glance back as they disappeared beneath the tide of their pursuers.

When she looked away again, she saw to her horror that there were mounted creatures coming toward her from the opposite direction. Mounted on what, she had no idea—some domesticated beast.

Beasts riding beasts!

The others *were* assuredly beasts. Her mind hardly grasped it. Not humans, but walking and behaving as if they were, wearing the faces of ... dogs and cats.

Changing directions abruptly, she headed toward the desert. There was no hope of hiding in the fields, not now ... no hope of escaping, and she still ran, closing her mind to Mel's screams as she, too, tripped and fell.

Something hard slammed into her back. She pitched forward. Her head swam dizzily and then blackness swarmed over her like the stinging of a thousand bees.

\* \* \* \*

Alexis had no idea how long she was unconscious, but it wasn't nearly long enough. Pain jolted through her from so many directions she could hardly think for it. Slowly, her senses expanded, however, and she became aware that she was jouncing up and down, rocking, moving. Groaning, she opened her eyes. A moving sea of green greeted her and, for several moments, she thought she might throw up.

A hand fisted along the back of her jumpsuit, lifting her up. The suit cut into her throat, and her crotch, burning the tender flesh of her nether lips. It would've been hard to say which hurt worse, but thankfully after dangling her above the beast he rode for only a few moments, the man/beast that had captured her settled her before him on the beast he rode.

The pain subsided.

The fear escalated.

Wide eyed, Alexis looked around at the riders surrounding her and her captor as they emerged from the fields and turned along a hard packed dirt lane.

These beings looked very little like the ones who'd chased them from the fields.

On a dark night, she might have mistaken them for men—a very dark night—except that they were bigger than the average man.

They were warriors. That much was clear. On their heads, they wore helms of beaten metal. They wore breast plates made of leather, metal gauntlets that covered their arms from wrist to elbow and shin guards, also of beaten metal, strapped to their thick calves with leather strips. Each carried a heavy metal shield and, strapped along their backs, they carried sheathed swords.

Despite the fear clogging her throat, Alexis found herself sorting those impressions, adding them to the workers in the fields and producing the fact that these creatures, whatever they were, were certainly civilized, and just as surely—barely civilized. Feudal system popped into her mind. They were like ... knights, she thought in stunned disbelief.

The muffled, whimpering sound that she'd barely acknowledged finally penetrated Alexis' mind, drawing her gaze. She didn't know whether to be relieved or sorry when she saw Mel riding as she was, before another creature like the one that held her.

Tearing her gaze from Mel's tear stained and bloodied face, Alexis stared at the man-beasts surrounding her. It was almost scary—how man-like they appeared.

*How*, she wondered? How could this be? How could something like this come about in the little time since they'd left Earth?

Unless it had been longer?

Or they hadn't come to Earth at all?

No. That couldn't be the case, she realized. They'd emerged in mission control. She'd recognized it.

Had their theories of the time been wrong, then?

That didn't seem possible either. Evolution like this would take thousands of years and she didn't believe anything would've been left of the space center if that was the case.

She looked down at the arm spanning her waist.

It looked like a man's arm and man's hand—furred, but not misshapen, not

*almost* like a man's arm and hand. *Just* like a man's.

The faces were another matter. The shape of their faces wasn't entirely human, close, but still more beast-like.

*What* beast escaped her. They were too close to human to bear traits from their animal half distinct enough to positively identify. The farm workers had been easy to identify. Despite the fact that they walked upright, despite the fact that they were roughly humanoid and nearly as big as an average human, their faces were easily distinguishable as cat-like, or dog-like once they'd come close enough for her to see them clearly. They'd only appeared human in the distance because of their occupation and the fact that they'd walked upright, not on all fours. She recalled, too, that they had been mal-formed, more like caricatures of animals twisted into the general shape of human beings.

These beings seemed closer to human.

Why? What might cause such a drastic evolution of what had once been animals? And why some more than others?

The one carrying her pulled into the lead as they topped a slight rise along the hard packed ribbon of dirt they'd been following, drawing her from her thoughts.

Before them, she saw a fortress built of stone and in a manner that had not been built on Earth for many centuries before they had left Earth.

The shrill blare of horns of some sort sounded in the distance and as she watched, the thick wooden gates set in the stone walls began to open like some great maw of a beast.

Her heart quickened, though it had barely steadied at all. She tensed all over as the urge overcame her to fling herself from the beast they were riding and run. Her captor's arm tightened on her waist. "Don't even think it," he murmured in a rumbling growl that sent shivers down her spine.

She thought for a moment she might throw up.

English? They spoke English?

This was *not* evolution, she realized in horror. She didn't know what would account for what had happened here, but there was no possibility, at all, that language would not *also* have evolved past recognition in the time it would've taken them to evolve naturally or, contrarily, that these creatures would just 'happen' to develop the same language as humans had.

The man-beast holding her dismounted in the bailey and dragged her from the saddle. Mel commenced to screaming and struggling. Alexis might have screamed, as well, might have tried to fight her captor despite the futility of such an attempt, except that she couldn't find her voice and she was so weak with fright it took an effort even to stand. She was almost relieved when they were hauled inside and down a steep, winding stair and finally shoved into a dank, dim cell.

Almost.

As she righted herself, a pair of gleaming, golden eyes in the deep shadows at the back of the cell caught and held her gaze.

"We've brought you company, halfling," the guard who shoved her inside announced with a guttural laugh as he slammed the door shut behind her and locked it.

Mel, apparently too hoarse from screaming to do so again, uttered a squawking noise when she caught sight of the glowing eyes. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she slowly wilted to the floor. Alexis' gaze flickered to Mel in consternation and then

returned to the glowing eyes.

Her heart leapt into her throat and tried to choke her as she realized the eyes were drifting closer and a hulking shape began to emerge slowly from the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Torin's first thought when he caught the rhythmic sounds he finally identified as the march of feet was that, as careful as he thought he'd been, they'd heard him when he'd broken through. They only brought food for him once a day, and he'd eaten. Besides, he could tell it was far more than the single guard who generally brought his food tramping down the steep stairs that led to his dungeon cell.

They were definitely coming toward him, however.

Gritting his teeth, he quickly replaced the stones in the opening, scrambled out from under the bunk, and dropped onto it. Dragging in a deep breath and holding it a moment, he willed his heart to slow. The bear didn't have the acute senses of his own people. It was highly unlikely, he thought, that they would hear the rapid breaths and heartbeat that would alert them to his tension and make them wonder at the reason for it, but there was no sense in taking the chance that they would. Or, if they did, that they might realize it had nothing to do with their unexpected visit and everything to do with his plans to escape.

He completely forgot why he was so intent on convincing them it was lethargy that had him sprawled upon his bunk, though, when they shoved the women into his cell and slammed the cell door again.

He barely even registered the fact that their were two women.

His gaze settled on the smaller of the two the moment they shoved her inside. A veritable wave of acute awareness rolled over him, and, as it slammed into him with the force of a stunning blow, everything inside of him froze to a state of watchful stillness. Everything beyond his focus upon her ceased to exist as the hunter within him surged to the forefront.

His brain catalogued every detail, assessed—after a fashion—but his perceptions had sent any true thought processes reeling. Human, his mind clicked, enemy, and then it discarded the warnings. Soft, vulnerable, frightened, his senses registered absently.

Beautiful, womanly—unprotected—his for the taking.

Hunger surged inside of him, thirst, want.

He slipped quietly and slowly from the bunk, yielding to the hunter's instinct to stalk without even any consciousness of it. Later, when he could think, he wasn't entirely certain what had drawn him. He'd felt a need to move closer even though he drank in everything about her from where he was—the soft, pale hair that fell in waves past her shoulders and framed that small, oval—human—face that he should not have found the least appealing but did—the soft swell of her breasts that thrust against her clothing with her rapid breaths, the appealing curve of waist and hip and thigh—the scent of her.

He'd *needed* to move closer, though, the better to feast his senses on her.

In the dark recesses of his mind, the warnings drummed—human—enemy. Any moment she would see what he was and she would begin to scream in terror.

She would run.

He tensed all over in anticipation, wondering, when she did, if he would be able to resist the urge to pounce, wondering if he wanted to.

He thought he didn't.

His mind filled with images of it—the chase, the capture, the claiming—mostly the claiming. He dragged in a deep breath. He could almost taste her, could almost feel the soft, yielding flesh of her body against his. His cock, already swollen with the need burning through his veins like acid, grew harder still as he imagined the moist heat of her body closing tightly around it.

Through the choking mist, though, he saw the alarm in her wide eyes, heard the frantic pounding of her heart, smelled her fear.

Dredging up the will to resist temptation with an effort, he fought to bring his body within his control.

He should not want her—even to slake his needs. She was his enemy. She was human.

He frowned thoughtfully as that drummed in his mind again.

Human, he realized, but not of the enemy clan. She was nothing like them—certainly not clothed as they clothed themselves, but it went beyond that.

\* \* \* \*

Halfling? Alexis thought in disbelief, tilting her head back as the man-beast emerged from the shadows. The guard had clearly not meant the term to describe his size. If anything, he seemed taller, and broader, than the one who'd captured her. Raw boned, she thought as her gaze flickered across his wide shoulders. He looked as if he didn't have quite enough flesh to cover the massive bone structure that supported his body, and yet there was no shortage of bulging, ropy muscle on that frame. Rather, the muscles were cleanly, individually defined, as if he'd lost most of his body fat, leaving little beyond lean, hard meat to cover his bones.

He was the next thing to naked, clad in nothing more than tattered breeches that left more of his muscular legs bare than covered. Beltless, the breeches he wore rode low on his hips, exposing the taut, flat muscles of his belly, hovering within a hair's breadth of revealing precisely what caused the unnerving bulge near the apex of his thighs. Realizing after a moment that her eyes had welded to that bulge long enough she could clearly discern the thickness and length of his cock from his balls through the thin material of his breeches, she felt her face heat. And it still took an effort of will to drag her gaze from that pointed perusal to the darker golden pelt just above the low-riding waist of his breeches, up the washboard of muscles along his belly to the firm, bulging pectorals and finally to his face.

The face sent a jolt through her. As alien as it was to her eyes, it was still strangely appealing, despite the fact that his features weren't entirely human. His squared jaw and aggressive chin, and hard, thin lipped mouth were far more man-like than that of their captors, and yet there was something distinctly feline in the broad bridge of his slightly hooked nose and the almond shaped, golden eyes that studied her just as keenly as she examined him.

He was not the same as the others.

A dark golden pelt, slightly lighter in color than the nest in which his maleness rested, covered more of his skin, she realized abruptly, than was bare. The broad, black, almost horizontal stripes that framed his chest and belly, disappearing around his sides, and coiled around his thick biceps and forearms; the pencil thin black slashes across his high-boned cheeks and forehead, weren't tattoos as her mind had first supplied, but a contrasting variegation of his pelt.

A long, dark golden mane crowned his head and framed it all the way to his shoulders. And it *was* a mane.

He was part lion, part tiger, she realized with a jolt.

Half-ling—the sneered ‘name’ had been a reference to his heritage, not his size. He was a half-breed, though she had no idea whether he was despised for that or merely because he wasn’t of the same breed as those who’d imprisoned him.

Realizing abruptly that she’d been so mesmerized by his appearance, so disarmed by his stealthy approach that she’d allowed him to come within arm’s reach of her, she took an instinctive step backwards and felt the cool brush of the door at her back.

He stopped when she took a step back. Tilting his head curiously, he scoured her with his gaze from the top of her head to the toes of her boots. “You are not of the clan, little bird,” he said finally in a deep, rumbling voice that raked along her nerve endings and set them to twanging with an awareness she didn’t care to examine too closely. “Even I can see that. Why have they tossed you in here with me? What did you do to fall of the bad side of the bear clan, I wonder?”

Alexis swallowed with an effort around the knot of fear that had formed in her throat when it abruptly dawned on her that she was trapped between him and the door at her back. “Clan?” she asked hoarsely.

“The humans.”

Alexis blinked, feeling her stomach execute a somersault. “Humans?” she repeated, breathless with sudden excitement. “The human clan?”

His gaze flickered over her face. “You look like them,” he said musingly, as if he hadn’t heard her, “but you’re not one of them.”

Alexis swallowed the impulse to inform him she was, obeying the instinct toward caution, although she had no idea whether it was better for him to think she was, or that she wasn’t, a part of that clan.

Obviously, though, the bear clan thought she was and that was why she was currently in the dungeon of their keep.

“Why would you say that?” she asked instead, her voice shaky with the tremors that had begun deep inside of her and were slowly working their way through her flesh, setting it to quivering.

He lifted a hand. A jolt went through her as he grasped her jaw, the movement so swift she barely had time to do more than flinch. His grip was firm but not painful. As he tilted her face for a closer inspection, she felt the light brush of his body against hers and realized he’d shifted closer still and she was well and truly trapped between him and the hard surface at her back, without room to maneuver at all.

A faint smile curled his lips, a gleam of humor entering his eyes. “Because you are not,” he said simply. “The question is, what are you? And where did you come from? And why have they thrown you in with me? Mayhap they thought I’d eat you, little bird, and save them the trouble of rending this tender flesh themselves, eh?”

Alexis felt her eyes widen in pure terror. “I’m not a bird,” she said a little wildly.

He leaned closer, until the tip of his nose touched hers and her vision blurred. She curled her fingers into claws, unaware until the moment she’d done so that she’d lifted her hands in instinctive defense to hold him off and gripped the hard flesh of his chest. If he felt the prick of her nails in his flesh he gave no sign of it. Instead, he rubbed the bridge of his nose along hers in a leisurely fashion and then turned his head to brush his

cheek along hers. "I hear the flutter of your heart against your ribs like a little bird beating against its cage," he murmured in a husky whisper near her ear. "It's not entirely fear, though, is it, little bird?" He lifted his head to pierce her with his gaze. "Don't worry, little bird. I've no more taste for human meat than they have for Halflings."

She felt faint when he drew back slightly. Mortified when she realized he was right and it wasn't altogether from relief, she felt a heated blush ascend her cheeks. Moistening her dry lips with her tongue, she stared into his eyes because she couldn't seem to disconnect her gaze from his. "You said I wasn't a human," she reminded him in a breathless whisper.

His gaze moved almost caressingly over her face before amusement lightened his features again. "I said you were not of the clan," he corrected. "I'm not likely to mistake the scent of my enemies, and yours is not the same."

To her relief, he pushed away from her abruptly and paced to stand over Mel's prone form, staring down at her. "What ails your companion? Sickness?" he asked dispassionately.

A surge of protectiveness washed over her and vanished like mist. She couldn't protect Mel. She couldn't protect herself. There was power in the beast-man, she sensed, that went far beyond even the strength of a human male, and she would've been hard put to stand toe-to-toe and win against a human male no bigger than herself. This man-beast was a full head taller than her and would be stronger than a man of equal size, she knew.

Just as Sloan and Pitts were far stronger than their pure human counterparts.

She didn't know, exactly, what was wrong with Mel, but she wasn't about to tell him she'd wilted merely from fear. "They chased us when we came out of the desert," she said after a pause.

His head swung swiftly toward her again, his golden gaze pinning her. "You came out of the badlands?" he demanded sharply.

Immediately regretting that she had revealed something obviously dangerous, Alexis bit her lip.

He scanned her with his gaze again. Unlike before, though, she realized his attention wasn't on the form beneath, but on the clothing she wore. Anger hardened his features. A cold glint had entered his eyes when they met hers again. "Do they know you're a true blood?" he asked in a low, rumbling growl.

A shot of adrenaline speared through Alexis' heart. She wasn't entirely certain what he meant by 'true blood', but she had a feeling it boded ill. "I don't know what you mean," she said in a breathless gasp.

He surged toward her again. Moving with the swift pounce of a jungle cat, he had caught her upper arms in his hands and pinned her to the door behind her before her mind had even grasped his intent. "Why are you here?" he growled.

Alexis gaped up at him open mouthed. Her brain scrambling madly for the answer he demanded, it discarded the truth as swiftly as it settled in her mind. "We just ...."

"We?"

The word was sharp, demanding answers.

"You and the other female?" he persisted.

Alexis gulped, feeling fear borne tears gathering in her eyes.

"No," he answered for her. "How many?"

“There were five ... four of us,” she stammered, unable to command her mind to fabricate a believable lie.

“Four or five?” he growled, his fingers tightening on her arms painfully, his lips curling back in a snarl.

“Dr. Chung died ...,” she stammered, fighting the urge to burst into tears.

His face contorted in disgust. He released her as abruptly as he'd seized her. “Doctor?” He spat the word as if it left the taste of shit in his mouth and prowled the distance between her and the deep shadows at the back of the cell. “Came to gloat, no doubt, over your handiwork,” he muttered. He lifted his head after a moment and speared her with his golden predator's gaze. Unlike before, there was no spark of sexual interest, though she hadn't consciously acknowledged that she'd seen that in his eyes before, no flicker of empathy for her plight. Now his gaze was cold, remorseless. “You're a doctor, as well?”

Alexis swallowed convulsively.

“And this one?” He turned his gaze to Mel, who hadn't so much stirred and whom Alexis had finally realized must have long since regained consciousness and was merely playing possum.

“To experiment more?” he demanded. “To observe your handiwork?”

Alexis shook her head in denial, but he dismissed it with a curl of his lips.

“They don't know you're a true blood else they would've killed you on sight.”

## Chapter Four

The knowledge should have cooled his ardor as nothing else, Torin thought with self-disgust. The fact that it hadn't disturbed him. His instincts, those he needed, had deserted him, though. He was almost regretful he didn't believe in such nonsense as magic and witchcraft. It would have been a comforting explanation for the things he felt that he knew damned well he shouldn't be feeling.

It had been a while since he had had a woman, and he was tempted to put it down to that and push it from his mind, but he knew that was a lie. This was nothing like the ache to simply spend his seed to find relief, on whatever female was handy, regardless of how little interest he might have in her otherwise. Nor was it like the pique of sexual interest that occasionally smote him when he spied a female he found particularly appealing to his senses.

He couldn't recall any time *any* woman—before—had so completely absorbed him that he lost all sense of reason, place, time—self-preservation.

Was it something in her scent, he wondered? An elusive something that had clawed its way inside him and demolished reason?

He was certainly not a stranger to desire, but he was long past youngling where his desires were apt to fry his brain, and self-control was a fine edged blade that he barely balanced on.

\* \* \* \*

The Halfling didn't return to the shadows where he'd lain hidden before. Instead, after pacing the cell for a few moments, he strode to one side of the cell and sprawled with his back against the wall, but not before Alexis saw the raw, angry red welts that crisscrossed his back. Nausea rolled over her as the sight jolted through her.

He'd been beaten, whipped with something that had torn his flesh.

Swallowing against the nausea, realizing he didn't represent an immediate threat, Alexis moved to Mel after a few moments, kneeling beside her. "Mel," she whispered, placing a hand on the woman's shoulder and shaking her slightly. "Are you hurt?"

Melody dragged in a shuddering breath. "Where are we, Alex? What is this awful place?"

Alexis doubted she meant the cell. Mel was wondering, as she was, how the hell their world could have changed so radically in the short time since they'd left it.

"You are 'guests' of Castle Doom, or more specifically, Prince Doom of the clan of the bear," the Liger-man supplied in a low growl before Alexis could think of what to say.

Shuddering, Mel shifted to fling her arms around Alexis' middle, rocking her back on her heels as she burrowed tightly against her for comfort. "It was a mistake to come here," she wailed.

"Aye, a deadly one," the man agreed, his voice laced with sardonic amusement.

Alexis lifted her head and glared at him. "If you're trying to scare her witless, you're succeeding admirably!" she snapped.

Something flickered in his eyes. Some of the hardness left his features. For a moment a glint of both humor and something unidentifiable gleamed in his eyes. He tilted his head curiously. "But you're not."

Alexis set her jaw, holding his gaze.

"The flutter of your heart gives you away, little bird," he murmured in a soft voice.

"Stop calling me that!" she snapped, irritated at the taunt.

His lips curled into a grin. "Shall I call you Alex, then? Or Dr. Alex?"

Fear curled around her intestines. Her gaze flickered to the door.

He chuckled, a feline playing at cat-and-mouse and pleased with his prey's reaction. "They can't hear you down here, little bird," he murmured. "If I was of a mind to plow your sweet furrows and taste that tender flesh of yours on my tongue, they wouldn't even hear your screams or care if they did."

There was no doubt she was demented. Her belly clenched at the purring promise in his words, but not with fear, not with anything approaching it. She wondered uneasily if he could smell the arousal he stirred to life with his words.

Something in his expression told her he did ... and was surprised by it.

"What should I call you?" she asked, more to distract herself than him.

He shrugged. "Torin."

"Just Torin?"

He looked away. When he met her gaze again, there was sardonic amusement in his eyes. "Lackland—once of the clan of the lion—but never accepted."

"Because you're part tiger?" she guessed.

Rage contorted his features for a moment. "Good guess, little bird."

He was never going to stop calling her that now, she realized in disgust, not when she'd let on how much it irritated her. "My name's Alexis," she said pointedly, despite her certainty that he couldn't care less.

He lifted a brow. "She called you Alex."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "My *friends* do."

He grinned at her snub. She thought it had missed its point entirely until she noted the glitter in his eyes.

Growing stiff from her posture, she settled more comfortably on the floor, stroking Mel's back soothingly. It comforted her, too, to feel the closeness of another human being—false comfort. It was far worse even than she'd at first thought if what he'd said was true.

Would they be killed the moment the bear clan realized they were 'true bloods'?

How would they know if the Liger-man didn't tell them?

Sickness welled inside of her as she abruptly remembered the supplies she'd dropped. Any of it was liable to tell the tale, but the pulse rifle almost assuredly would. They fought with swords. They might or might not recognize the rifle for what it was, but they would certainly know it wasn't from their world.

Their only chance was to escape.

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to realize the ... accommodations of Castle Doom leave a lot to be desired."

Irritation flickered through Alexis. "Is there some particular reason you're

reluctant to give a straight answer? Or is it just your winning personality that makes you inclined to be so damned unhelpful?" she snapped irritably.

He chuckled, a low, rumbling sound that prickled her skin—not unpleasantly at all—unfortunately. "I expect it's my winning personality," he retorted. "Thinking escape already, little bird? You've barely perched. Or is it my 'winning personality' that has you so ... hot ... to fly away?"

The bastard! He *knew* his effect on her alright!

A shiver skated through her. Assuring herself it was the cold seeping into her through her buttocks against the cold stone floor, Alexis peered through the gloom of the cell in hopes of finding a cot or a blanket. She saw nothing.

"There is nothing here to warm you, little bird ... save me. I might be ... persuaded to wrap you in my warmth," he murmured in a purring voice.

"You wish!" Alexis retorted with a snort.

"I'm beginning to think that I do," he said musingly.

"I'm cold," Mel whispered plaintively.

Alexis pulled away and stared down at Mel in consternation. "It's shock," she said finally, realizing it wasn't just her that was shaking from the chill. Mel's teeth were chattering. "Are you hurt, sweetie?"

Mel was silent for several moments, apparently taking a mental inventory for possible injury. "I hurt all over, but I don't think it's anything but bruising. I'm just cold."

"Come here. I'll help you get warm," Torin said gruffly, if somewhat testily.

Alexis and Melody both lifted their heads to stare at him suspiciously.

His expression hardened for a moment, then he met Alexis' gaze. "You haven't enough warmth for yourself, little bird," he said almost gently. "I'm sure I smell like a beast—I can hardly bear my stench myself—but it's better than freezing."

If it came to that, she doubted she smelled like roses. They'd been afraid even to drink much of their water. They certainly hadn't dared spare any for hygiene and they'd been in the desert for days. "It isn't that."

"It's lack of trust." He cocked his head at her. "There is nothing to stop me from hurting either of you if I was so inclined," he said pointedly.

Apparently convinced, Mel rose shakily and moved toward him.

Either that or she was too cold to feel the caution she should have.

He spread his thighs to accommodate her and drew her down between his legs, curling his arms around her. She nestled trustingly against him.

Nettled for no particular reason that she could fathom, Alexis rose, as well, moving to the wall opposite the cuddling pair and settling again. A low chuckle was his only response.

Dragging her legs up close to her body, Alexis wrapped her arms around them and dropped her cheek to rest on her knees. Almost immediately, fearful thoughts invaded her mind.

Torin had been beaten within an inch of his life by the monsters that held them captive, for no reason that she could discern other than the fact that he wasn't of the bear clan. What could she and Mel expect?

She would've liked to dismiss his certainty that discovery of their humanity would mean their deaths, but she found she couldn't. He had no reason to lie about that,

and his own reaction was enough to assure her humans were *persona non grata* on Earth now.

He'd accused them of returning to gloat and to experiment.

It answered some of the questions swarming her mind.

She'd been right. This wasn't a case of accelerated evolution of a new dominant species. It was the direct result of experimentation with things that would've been better left alone.

It still didn't explain why or how things had gone so terribly wrong.

When they'd left Earth on their mission, everyone had been saying they were on the cusp of the Genetic Revolution. The government had sanctioned wide-spread experimentation out of sheer desperation because the Earth's climate was changing so drastically and rapidly that it was killing off thousands. They'd turned to science to rescue them and the 'geeks' of the old world had become the new superheroes.

The focus had been on 'adapting' mankind to the changes. Just as the Mission crew had been changed to help them make the long trip, scientists were racing to find and duplicate the most desirable traits among Earth's other species to help the human race—strength, stamina, resistance to cancer ... to all the new diseases cropping up.

They'd been carefully selecting specific traits, though, not merely splicing and dicing at wild random.

*She* didn't look like a frog just because they'd borrowed a little DNA for that one specific trait—the ability to survive being completely frozen.

She couldn't imagine they would have deliberately done anything that would change the physical appearance of the human race as she was seeing here.

A vague memory that had been teasing her for a while surfaced abruptly.

Pet enhancement.

She hadn't paid it much attention at the time, but she remembered hearing commercials about a new company that had taken advantage of the government's lifting of bans on DNA experiments—Wonder Pets. They'd introduced human DNA into animals to make them 'better companions'.

That explained the cats and dogs toiling in fields. Did it also explain the others? Had she been looking at it backwards and these beings, rather than being humans with too much animal DNA, were animals with too much human DNA?

\* \* \* \*

Alexis roused to the sense of a presence even before she felt two large hands settle on her upper arms. Still disoriented from sleep, she lifted her head and met Torin's gaze. "You are a stubborn little thing," he growled irritably, rising and pulling her to her feet.

She swayed drunkenly when he released her.

He bent and slipped an arm around her back and one behind her knees as they buckled, lifting her against his chest. She tensed, but she found she didn't have the will or strength to fight and dropped her cheek against one hard pec as he turned and strode across the cell. Darkness descended over her. Her head swam dizzily and then she felt a semi-softness against her as he settled her on what must have been a cot.

She came up against a body—Mel, she realized—as he shifted her and then settled next to her, pulling a thin piece of fabric over the three of them.

"It smells ...."

"It stinks," he retorted, snuggling her tightly against his body and draping an arm across both her and Mel, who was now settled against her back. Sandwiched between them, Alexis felt warmth instantly invade her frozen limbs.

"Why?" she murmured, unable to completely wrap her mind around the question or voice it. He seemed to grasp what she was asking, though.

"Sheer stupidity, I expect," he muttered almost angrily.

Feeling a smile tug at her lips, Alexis relaxed against him. "You're right," she murmured with amusement after a moment. "You smell worse than I do."

He tensed. "Beggars can't be choosers," he muttered irritably.

She dismissed the impulse to point out that she hadn't begged. "True, and it helps my feelings to think you can't smell me over you."

Some of the tension left him. "Then I won't tell you I can," he murmured, amusement in his voice now.

"Thank you," Alexis said wryly. She was drifting toward sleep again when she felt his arm leave her waist. A moment later, his palm settled lightly against her cheek, his thumb stroking.

She tipped her head back to look up at him questioningly but discovered she could see nothing but the glint of his glowing eyes. He'd taken her to the deep, shadowy darkness at the back of the cell, she realized, where she hadn't been able to pierce the gloom and see the cot he'd been laying on before.

She heard him swallow. A faint tremor went through the hand stroking her face almost idly. "Your skin is soft," he whispered, a twinge of wonder in his husky voice. "I've never felt anything like it before."

Alexis felt her belly clench in response, either to his voice, or his touch, or maybe both. Warmth of a different kind moved in a wave through her, settling low in her belly as he brushed the pad of his thumb along her lower lip.

She felt his cock stir to life and press against her belly.

He dragged in a deep, shuddering breath and removed his hand, settling his arm along her waist again and then shifting his hips until she couldn't feel the hard ridge of his cock against her anymore. The tension left her slowly, but eventually, comforted by the warmth surrounding her, she drifted off again.

She was jarred awake sometime later by the slamming of the cell door against the stone wall and the heavy footfalls of several beast-men. Torin was on his feet so quickly it almost seemed he'd reacted *before* the door had opened.

Completely bewildered by the dregs of sleep clouding her mind, despite her alarm, Alexis jerked upright but made no real attempt at self-defense, merely gaping at the four huge guards that advanced toward them from the doorway. Three of them, wicked looking pikes extended before them, strode toward Torin, the point of their pikes aimed at his chest.

Alexis sucked in a sharp cry. It was cut off as the fourth guard grasped her by one arm, dragged her from the bed, and gave her a shove that sent her sprawling on the floor beside where Torin crouched. Mel's screams as he dragged her from the cot, as well, pierced the fog of pain, confusion, and fear. It was instinct that had her thrusting herself from the floor and launching herself at Mel's attacker, not rational thought. If she'd taken the time to think, she would've known she was no match for him.

"Leave her alone! Let her go!" she screamed, clawing at the arms of the beast-

man who'd grabbed Mel and was dragging her toward the door. "Take me!" she demanded when it clicked in her mind what was happening.

She was *insane*, she realized as the guard swept his arm out and flung her away.

"Prince Doom wants the tall one," the guard snarled. "Don't worry. You'll have your chance."

Torin grabbed her as she hit the floor that time, shoving her behind his back and holding her there. She struggled against his hold until the guards had dragged Mel from the cell and slammed and locked the door behind them, subsiding only when she saw it was useless even to try to protest any longer.

Mel's screams still rang in her ears, though, and as Torin turned to her, holding her at arms length and scanning her for signs of injury, she turned her rage on him and began struggling to free herself again. "You *bastard!* You didn't even try to stop them!" she screamed at him.

The moment he released his hold on her, she swung at him with her balled fists. He caught her wrists before she could even make a connection, despite her determination to beat him senseless. He shook her. "Would it have done her any good for me to run upon their pikes!" he bellowed.

She stopped struggling, panting for breath as what he'd said slowly sank in.

She'd feared that very thing, that they would gut him with their pikes. He was right, she realized reluctantly. He would've sacrificed his life for nothing. They would only have killed him and taken Mel anyway.

A painful, choked cry escaped her and before she realized it, she was sobbing loudly, hurtful sobs that tore at her chest and throat. He dragged her against his chest, cupping the base of her skull with one hand to hold her there when she resisted. Unable to break free, she collapsed against him, muttering over and over between sobs, "She's gone!"

His hand slipped from her head to her back, stroked her hair. "What possessed you to offer yourself in her place?" he demanded when she'd worn herself out sobbing and could do nothing more but hiccough.

What *had* possessed her, she wondered? "I'm alone," she said dully. "I'd rather be dead than alone."

"You are not alone. I am here."

She pushed away to look up at him. Almost reluctantly, he uncoiled his arms from around her, grasping her upper arms to steady her instead. "I *am* alone," she said angrily. "There's no one left like me. They're all dead."

His face slowly hardened with anger, his hands tightening on her arms for a moment before he thrust her away from him and surged to his feet. She didn't try to catch her balance. She sprawled where he'd left her, curling into a tight ball on her side. Her chest ached. Her skull felt as if it would explode. She sucked in a shuddering breath as the pain washed over her again, but she couldn't find any more tears.

He didn't understand, she thought angrily. It was more than loneliness she felt. It was impending extinction.

\* \* \* \*

A small panel at the bottom of the cell door slid open. The scrape of metal against stone followed. Alexis opened her eyes and stared at the bowl and cup that had been slid through. A smell wafted from the bowl that was almost appetizing, reminding

her that it had been a day, at the very least, since she'd last eaten. Ignoring the demands of her stomach, she rolled onto her other side, putting her back to the food and water.

With a low growl, Torin stalked across the cell and picked up the bowl and cup. She sat up as he settled on the floor beside her.

He offered the bowl to her. "Eat."

She turned her face away. "I'm not hungry," she said stubbornly.

"You missed the meal yesterday. It will be another day before they bring anything else," he growled through gritted teeth. "Eat, or I will hold you down and shove it down your throat."

She sent him a resentful glare. "What difference does it make?" she demanded. "They'll kill me anyway ... just like they did the others."

Setting the bowl down, he scooped some of the food up with his fingers and offered it again. "I'd as soon not have the stench of your rotting corpse to keep me company," he growled.

Alexis stared at the brown mess dripping from his fingers for a moment and then looked up at his fierce expression. Abruptly, humor suffused her. She had no idea why unless it was the sharp contrast between his fierce demeanor and his absolute determination to take care of her whether she wanted him to or not. She couldn't prevent her lips from twitching upward into a faint smile. Reaching for his wrist, she curled her fingers around it and drew his hand toward her mouth.

His expression went blank as she opened her mouth to take the food from his fingers.

It was hideously unsanitary, of course, but she figured if she didn't die of the nastiness of the cell itself, it wasn't likely it would kill her to eat from his fingers. He was staring at her hard when she lifted her gaze from sucking his fingertips. She saw his throat work as he swallowed.

Dragging his gaze from her mouth after a moment, he frowned as he scooped up another pinch of food and sucked it into his own mouth.

She opened her mouth readily when he held out another offering, swirling her tongue around his fingertips and sucking at the juices clinging to his fingers. Whatever it was—and it wasn't anything she'd ever had before—it was surprisingly good.

Or she was starving. She didn't know which.

Her belly fluttered with more than hunger for food, though, as she sucked his fingers and watched his eyes darken.

He wanted her. She might be a scientist. She might have spent more of her life with her nose in a book than looking at the world around her, but she knew the look. Unlike the way she'd felt when Sloan had looked at her with hunger, though, the way Torin looked at her made her feel trembly all over, warm, needful.

It reminded her that she was still alive and could still feel—too many things.

She searched her mind for a distraction.

"You've been here long enough you know when they bring the food," she said tentatively.

He stared at her for a moment and finally looked at the bowl of food frowningly and uttered a gusty sigh. "I have no idea how long I've been here—long enough they tired of trying to strip the meat from my back with their whips and nigh forgot my existence ... until you came. A month. Mayhap more. Mayhap a little less. One day is

like another here in hell.”

Alexis frowned, feeling her mood darken. He would have escaped in this time if he could have. She'd hoped ....

They finished their food in silence. As if by tacit agreement, he ceased to feed her, however, watching her intently, if surreptitiously, as she dipped her fingers into the bowl for food but not offering to feed her again once she began to feed herself.

Guilt settled in her. She realized as she appeased her hunger that she was glad they'd taken Mel instead of her and it made her feel like a horrible person, even knowing she'd done everything she could to prevent it. She also realized how unreasonable she'd been to be angry with Torin when he'd been as helpless to stop the guards as she was.

He wasn't the beast he appeared to be, not by a long shot. If she'd been tossed into a cell with Sloan and not offered herself, he would've taken, and probably beat her senseless if she'd objected—especially considering how violent he'd been toward the last.

She would've offered, though, she realized. It was a well known fact that men became more aggressive and dangerous when deprived of the chance of release, and more docile when given it. That was why it was required of females traveling in deep space to agree that they would offer sexual favors to the men of the crew. It prevented conflict, or at least kept it within control, optimized the mental health and morale of the entire crew, if it came to that, so long as the men were equally considerate of the needs of the women.

Sloan hadn't been, which was the main reason none of them had been too anxious to accommodate him. Drs. Chung, Long, and O'Neal hadn't appeared to have much appetite for sex at all. If they'd had sex with any of the women on the crew, she hadn't heard about it and certainly hadn't partaken—and Pitts had been almost as big a pig as Sloan.

She hadn't been with a man that had even attempted to satisfy her own needs for well over a year. She supposed that explained, at least in part, her attraction to Torin. He was a virile man, even if he was a mutant, and less a beast than Pitts or Sloan—and he wanted her.

It didn't escape her, either, that she'd managed to alienate her only possible ally with her careless remarks. It didn't matter that it was heartfelt. Actually, that made it worse, she supposed, and it wasn't right to take it out on him when it wasn't his fault and not something he could change.

She studied him speculatively when they'd finished the food and drank the water provided. Finally, dragging in a shaky breath once she'd made her decision, she pulled her boots off and then stood. Holding his gaze to gauge his reaction, she reached for the closure of her jumpsuit, slowly parting the opening from neck to ankle. He sucked in a harsh breath and held it as she did, his gaze following the path of her hands, his eyes darkening and his face going taut as she shrugged her shoulders from the suit and peeled it off along with the shorts she wore underneath it.

He didn't approach her, made no attempt to close the distance between them, and uneasiness crept into Alexis as it occurred to her abruptly that she might have misread the signs of his desire for her and his need for release. Finally, seizing her courage, she moved to him, lifting her hands and placing them lightly against the hard muscles of his chest.

He caught her wrists in a bruising grip as she skated her palms over his pecs.

Startled, she looked up into his furious face. He released her almost as suddenly as he had manacled her wrists with his hands, grasping a fistful of hair at the back of her head instead and dragging it back so that she was forced to meet his gaze.

“I am a dangerous man to trifle with, woman,” he snarled in a low, menacing voice.

## Chapter Five

Alexis swallowed with an effort, cringing inside as she fought the blush that rose in her cheeks. “It was a sincere offer to ease your needs,” she whispered uncertainly, wondering a little wildly if she’d completely mistaken his sexual interest in her.

“To soothe the savage beast?” Torin snarled. Equal parts surprise, lust, and, somewhat belatedly, anger had surged inside him while he had watched her slowly strip her clothes off, when he had seen the smooth, soft flesh that had been tormenting his imagination revealed to him. The hunger threatened to overwhelm his reason completely, but his anger had kept reason within his grasp—barely.

She didn’t want him—not as he wanted her. It might be immaterial to him that she was human, and an enemy. He might see her as the most beautiful, desirable creature he had ever had the misfortune to come upon, but he knew she saw him as he was—a beast man, no more than half human. He was respected within his own clan because of who he was, because he had *earned* it with his prowess as a fighter, but he was as far from handsome, and therefore physically unappealing, even to the women of his own clan, as he could get because he was a Halfling. She couldn’t possibly perceive him in any better light. He wasn’t entirely certain *why* she was offering, but he knew damned well it wasn’t because she wanted him as desperately as he wanted her.

And he distrusted it.

And it was still all he could do to hold onto his reason and question her motives.

Alexis dragged in a shaky breath. There was that. She hadn’t thought of him as a beast in need of soothing. He’d seemed completely in control, but obviously that had been deceptive. She certainly wasn’t against trying, if it came to that. She couldn’t escape him or fight him off if he was inclined to ease himself on her and, that being the case, offering generally disarmed the male tendency toward aggression.

Somehow she didn’t think it would be a good idea to tell him she’d considered it in the light of a peace offering, insurance policy, and payment plan.

“You said you’d been here for weeks. I thought you might need rec,” she offered shakily. At the look of incomprehension that flickered in his eyes, she added, “Recreational sex.”

The words crushed the air from Torin’s lungs. Desire and, incomprehensibly, pain, warred for dominance. He had been certain he’d long ago grown immune to the poisoned spears aimed at chipping away at his confidence every time a barb was thrown his way regarding his appearance, but obviously he hadn’t grown completely impervious.

He hadn’t expected more, he told himself. He wouldn’t have believed her if she’d claimed she wanted him.

And it still tore a painful, gaping gash through him that she had left no room for doubt of her motives in offering.

Fuck it, he thought viciously! What did he care so long as she was offering and he could take what he wanted without damage to his conscience? He’d wanted nothing since he’d first set eyes on her the day before but to feel her flesh closing around his, to

plow into her until he spent himself.

He *needed* to, he told himself, not just to ease the painful ache in his balls to expel his seed, but to see for himself that she was just a vessel for his lust, just another woman bent on using her assets to get what she wanted from him, nothing special—beautiful or not. As long as he could only want, and not have, he would fantasize, but reality was never nearly as glorious as one's mind made of things desired but unattained.

His lips tightened, his gaze flickering assessingly over her face. Alexis thought for a moment he meant to push her away. Instead, after holding her tensely for several moments, he released a sound of disgust—aimed at himself or her, she wasn't certain—dragging her upwards to meet the descent of his mouth.

She tensed in surprise as his hard mouth closed over hers in a punishing kiss, his tongue forcing its way past the barrier of her lips and surging into her mouth in angry conquest. Dizziness that was almost equal parts relief, uncertainty, and pleasure swirled through her at the assault to her senses. Despite the hurtful nature of his kiss, however, heat threaded her veins and sizzled along her nerve endings with his taste and the rough caress of his tongue along the exquisitely sensitive inner surfaces of her mouth. She sucked in a sharp breath, dragging his scent into her lungs with it, and a fresh rush of need suffused her, more pronounced than before, making her head swim as if she'd downed a shot of strong liquor.

Lifting her hands once more, she dug her fingers into his flesh to anchor herself.

As she did so, the entire tenor of his kiss changed abruptly. The weight of his mouth lightened. The hard grip on her hair lessened and hunger took the place of the anger she'd felt in his touch before. His tongue caressed hers. Coaxing it into his mouth, he sucked it, sending a hot shaft straight through her to her belly. The muscles there tightened almost painfully, forcing a wash of heated moisture into her channel. Blood flushed her skin, heightening her perceptions so that every faintest brush of his body against hers flooded her senses anew with pleasure, carnal heat, need.

She hadn't expected this, she thought dimly, nothing like this.

She'd never felt anything quite like it.

She'd begun to shake with weakness when he lifted his mouth from hers to stare down at her face, breathing harshly. Even as she struggled to lift her lids to see why he'd stopped, however, he arched her back over the arm supporting her and closed his mouth over her throat, sucking hungrily. She dragged in a shaky breath that ended on a moan, trying to gather her wits to caress him in return. Independent thought fled, though, as he sucked open mouthed kisses along her throat and upper chest before moving to explore her cheeks and then covered her mouth again in a kiss more heated and hungry than before. She was too inundated with pleasurable sensations to think, to do more than luxuriate weakly in the feel of his mouth and tongue on her flesh, the press and stroke of his hands as he alternately held her tightly against his body and eased her away to caress her.

The stroke of her tongue along his was for herself, to take more of his taste into her and when that wasn't enough, she sucked it, drunk with pleasure, thirsty for more. A shudder went through him. His hands tightened on her. He moved one lower, cupping her buttocks and pulling her against his erection.

Eagerness suffused her. Her skin pebbled as she felt the press of his desire hardened flesh against her lower belly. After a moment, he broke from her lips to explore

her throat again, and then lower, bending her further over his arm to suck one tightly puckered nipple into his mouth. She gasped sharply at the keen sensation that stabbed through her, clutching at him blindly and tangling her fingers in his hair. He ignored the tug, suckling at her nipple and pulling at it until she thought she would pass out before he transferred his attentions to its mate. Her knees buckled as he caught the tip between his teeth, dragging a whimper of need from her throat.

Abruptly, it was too much and not enough. She was ready, more than ready. Her flesh wept for him. She could feel the moisture slickening her nether lips, demanding his possession. The muscles along her channel clenched painfully at the emptiness inside her, begging for his girth to fill her. *Do it now*, she thought. *For pity's sake, give me what I need.*

He sucked her nipple once more and released it, lifting his head. Capturing her face between his palms, he covered her mouth with his again, waltzing her backwards as he kissed her deeply. She was scarcely aware of it until she felt the cold wall against the heated flesh of her back. She sucked in a sharp breath at the contact. A shiver skated through her and then he slipped his arms around her, stroked his palms down her back until he was cupping the cheeks of her ass, dragging her upwards to meet the hard ridge of his cock. Delight filled her and then despair as his movements teased the ache without appeasing it.

She lifted up on her tiptoes, straining to angle her body to feel more of him. He traced the cleft of her ass with his fingertips and then lower, gripping her thighs. Looping her arms around his shoulders, she lifted one leg and coiled it around his thigh, pressing into him, nigh frantic to feel his hardness against the aching fullness of her clit ... inside her.

He lifted her abruptly, dragging her legs around his waist and pressing her back against the wall. She was beyond caring that it was it still cold. Tightening her arms and legs around him, she moved against him, moaning as she felt the rough fabric of his breeches rubbing against her sensitive nether lips tantalizingly.

She was near to begging for it when she felt his hand move between them, pushing the fabric of his breeches away and then his thick, heated flesh plowed along her cleft. She uttered a sound that was part need, part demand as he hoisted her higher against his body until he could fit his body to hers, until she felt the swollen head of his cock delving the mouth of her sex, felt him pressing hard against her to conquer her depths.

He shifted after a moment. Hooking an arm beneath her buttocks, he lifted a hand to grip her jaw.

"Look at me," he ground out.

It took an effort to lift her eyelids. She stared at him dizzily, confused. He held her gaze as he penetrated her with a slowness that made her want to fight him to have it all, at once, to slake the ache that was growing worse, not better. Need clogged her throat as she stared at his face, contorted now with his own need, twisting as if with pain as he conquered the resistant muscles of her channel by fractions until at last he had buried himself root deep inside of her. Dragging in a shuddering breath, he braced her firmly between his body and the wall behind her. Supporting her with his arms along her back and beneath her buttocks, he withdrew almost as slowly and then pressed into her again.

A long, low moan escaped her as she felt the stroke of his hard flesh along her

channel, felt the waves of pleasure that radiated outward until she found it impossible to hold her eyes open any longer. Her eyelids slipped downward, pulling her into herself and magnifying the pleasure with each stroke until she found herself on the brink of explosion. Her body quivered, tightened, and then, as he quickened his pace, thrusting into her faster and harder, the dam broke with a suddenness that dragged a sharp, ecstatic cry from her. She shuddered, bucked against him as she came, gasping as wave upon wave of intense rapture exploded through her.

He began to shake as her body clenched around his cock, milking it, and then, with a choked groan, he pounded into her harder and faster as his body began to pump his scalding seed into her.

Shuddering and quaking, they leaned together in the aftermath for many long moments. Finally, dragging in a shaky breath, he eased from her, eased his grip on her until she slid to the floor. She leaned weakly against the wall, locking her knees with an effort to stay upright.

A shiver traced its icy path along her spine as he pulled away, adjusting his breeches.

She lifted her head to stare at him for a long moment when he stepped away from her, but he avoided her gaze and, after a moment, she moved away from him to collect her clothing, trying to ignore the weakness in her limbs and shake the sense of disappointment that began to fill her.

It was just recreational sex, she told herself as a sense of hurt and confusion joined the disappointment. She wasn't supposed to feel badly afterward, certainly not when she'd been so thoroughly satisfied.

She couldn't imagine why she did.

She heard a faint sound behind her and glanced toward Torin as she adjusted her jumpsuit over her shoulders. He'd moved into the shadows, she saw, a moment before she heard the creak of the cot as he settled on it.

Struggling to dismiss him from her mind, she fastened her jumpsuit, wishing there was some place to bathe.

What she wouldn't do for a decent bath!

She was sticky and grimy and uncomfortable as she turned resolutely toward the cot. There was no sense of welcome—far from it—but she'd shared the cot with him before and saw no reason why he would object now, and she was still weak with the release. He shifted to one side when she groped blindly for the cot and finally settled on it next to him.

Closing her eyes, she dismissed the sense of hurt that went through her when he didn't offer to cuddle her as he had before and struggled to find the peace to sleep off the lethargy.

He was sitting on the floor again when she woke, his back against the wall, an indecipherable expression on his face. She lay still for some moments, studying him, trying to fathom why he had behaved the way he had ... afterwards.

For that matter, she didn't entirely understand why he'd seemed so angry before. The things he'd said had indicated he thought she was merely teasing him—though she couldn't imagine a woman stupid enough to do such a thing with any man, let alone one like Torin. But he hadn't seemed particularly appeased when he realized she was offering herself.

She'd made him angry when she'd spurned his offer of comfort ... more than angry, apparently.

He'd still wanted her, or at least the offer of sex—no great surprise if he'd been alone down here as long as he seemed to think—but he hadn't been mollified.

She decided she'd touched a sore point. It wasn't her rejection so much as it was that she'd pointed out they weren't the same.

No doubt he'd had his fill of that long ago—not the same, halfling.

That had been stupid of her. She'd allowed her emotions to cloud her judgment and said things she shouldn't have—and words couldn't be taken back, especially hurtful ones.

He'd taken the sex she offered and rejected her, to get even, she supposed, for her rejection.

Uttering a sigh of disgust, she pushed herself upright and tried, rather unsuccessfully, to rake some order into her hair with her fingers. "They'll come back for me," she said.

He was watching her, she thought, staring in her direction. No doubt he could see far better in the darkness than she could. "Yes."

"Is there no way out of this place?"

"Death."

Irritation surged through her. "Alright. I'll do you and then you can do me," she said sarcastically. "What method do you prefer?"

A reluctant smile curled one corner of his lips. "Are they all like you?"

"They?" she asked, pushing herself from the cot and crossing the cell to retrieve her boots, which she'd hadn't put on before.

"True bloods."

"We like to think we're all unique—liked to," she corrected herself. "As far as I know, there are only two left besides me—assuming they haven't killed each other yet—but I'm not like them."

He frowned. "You meant it when you said they were all gone?"

A tightness welled in Alexis' chest. "Afraid so," she said flippantly.

Confusion settled over his features. "How could that be?"

Alexis dragged in a difficult breath. "Yes. How? Can we not talk about it?"

Moving to the door, she began to examine it carefully.

"It's bolted from the outside."

She turned to look at him. "And the walls, floor, and ceiling are all stone," she said speculatively. "No digging out, even if we had something to dig with."

Torin studied her for a long moment and abruptly came to a decision. Or, more accurately, he supposed with disgust, acknowledged the one he'd made almost the moment she was shoved into the cell with him. He wasn't leaving her behind. "I've been using a spoon."

Her eyes widened. "You're serious?"

"It won't have occurred to you that you ruined my escape plan," he said irritably.

"I?"

He surged to his feet. "Except for bringing the food once a day, they haven't so much as been near the cell in a week—until they brought you. And now they've been again—to collect the other female and they'll be back for you."

She stared at him. "That was inconsiderate of me," she said finally, keeping her voice neutral with an effort.

He scowled at her but finally shook his head. "Damned inconsiderate," he agreed. Turning, he strode to the cot, grasped it and dragged it away from the wall with a scream of metal against stone. Alexis followed him, trying to pierce the darkness by squinting her eyes. It was little help. She could see him only as a vaguely deeper shadow among the shadows. She could see, though, that he was moving, could hear the scrape of stone against stone.

"The dungeon was built in existing caverns."

His voice sounded hollow, almost disembodied, and she realized he'd thrust his head and shoulders through the wall. Kneeling down, she put her hand out to confirm it and found she'd settled her palm on his wiggling buttocks, and then his thighs, calves, and finally his feet disappeared. "Come on," he said.

"Now?" Alexis was stunned and thoroughly confused.

"You want to wait until they come back?"

She didn't have to dwell long on the answer to that. Dropping to her belly, she felt around in front of her, discerned the edges of the opening he'd revealed, and began to struggle through it.

"You might have said something before," she said, feeling anger begin to chase the sense of surprised disbelief.

"And risked losing my only chance of escaping this hell hole?" he growled. "I think not."

He had a point. Moreover, he hadn't had to reveal it at all. He could've simply waited until they came back for her.

It still angered her. If he'd revealed it before, they might have saved Mel.

It was blacker on the other side than in the cell. Alexis discovered she couldn't even see her hand in front of her face. "There's no light."

"It's a cave," he said sardonically.

"But ... If there's no light ... Is there a way out?"

"I guess we'll find out."

Some of Alexis' anger dissipated. "You didn't escape before because you haven't found a way out."

"I'd barely gotten the hole big enough to climb through when they brought the two of you in," he said tightly. "No," he added when she said nothing. "I haven't found a way out."

Alexis felt around for him and finally managed to latch onto his hand. She suspected because he grasped her hand, not the other way around. "I can't do this," she managed in a shaky voice, feeling claustrophobia begin to take hold of her.

He tugged on her hand, drawing her closer. "You can't see."

It wasn't a question. "No."

He was silent for several moments. "I can."

Alexis bit her lip, fighting an abrupt urge to cry. "Then go." She sensed his hesitancy. "You won't make it if you try to drag me along ... and they'll know when they come back. That's what you meant, isn't it? That, before, you knew you'd have time to find your way out and escape and now you won't."

"We sure as hell don't have time to argue," he growled. "We need to move as

quickly as possible.”

“Which is why you should leave me. You thought about it before, didn't you? You weren't going to say anything. You were just going to wait until they came for me.”

“Hell!” he growled. Grabbing her abruptly, he hoisted her upwards. She gasped in a sharp breath, tensing all over. The breath left her in a grunt as she landed on his hard shoulder.

“Torin! This is crazy!” she gasped out on a pained breath.

“Shut up, Lexis!”

She fell silent, realizing it was useless to argue now, and that she didn't really want to face whatever it was that Mel had had to face. She could barely breathe, at any rate, with his hard shoulder digging into her belly, and she certainly didn't want to chance giving them away.

She'd been right, though. He hadn't meant to take her with him. Why should he risk his life for her, a stranger, one moreover than he hated because of what she was?

What she didn't understand was why he'd changed his mind.

“Torin?” she said after a few moments.

“What?”

“Maybe I could walk?”

“You'll slow us down.”

“I think I'm going to puke down your back.”

There was amusement in his voice. “It'll wash off.”

“I'm serious.”

“I was, too.”

She fell silent, focusing on trying to fight the disorientation from the total blackness and from hanging upside down over his shoulder. After a while, she began to pray for unconsciousness ... and then death. Her relief was so profound when he finally stopped and lowered to her feet that she felt like crying. He steadied her with one hand. She sensed movement, felt him move, and realized he was trying to ease the strain on his shoulder. She massaged her stomach muscles, but she couldn't tell that it helped a hell of a lot.

She jumped when she felt something brush her face. His hand settled on her cheek. “Still feeling ill?” he asked gruffly.

“I'll live ... maybe.”

He dragged in a deep breath. “Fresh air,” he said after a moment.

Alexis felt her heart leap. She sniffed deeply. “Really?”

He turned to look at her sharply. She knew because she caught the glint of his eyes as he peered down at her, not because she could see any more than she'd been able to see to begin with. She knew what was going through his mind, too. “My senses aren't as ... acute as yours.”

He grunted and looked away. “I can't tell the direction its coming from.”

It wasn't like she could help him, but she dutifully turned her head in first one direction and then another, sniffing. All she managed to do was to make herself light-headed and more disoriented.

“Does it seem lighter in that direction to you?”

“Which direction?”

He caught her chin, turning her head. She stared. Hard. Abruptly, she realized

she could see shapes in the darkness. She thought she could, anyway. "I think it might be."

"Stay here!"

He was gone before she could grab him. As she heard him moving away from her, her heart began to accelerate, faster and faster. Her breath caught in her chest. "Torin?" she said in a small, quavering voice.

"What?"

His voice seemed far away. She bit her lip, struggling against the urge to yield to hysteria as frightening images of staggering blindly through the darkness pelted her.

"Don't leave me," she said in a shaky voice.

Silence greeted that plea, absolute silence. It occurred to her that he'd stopped. She heard movements again after a short time and realized with relief that he was coming toward her. She felt his presence a moment before his hand settled on her shoulder. She had to fight the urge to fall into his arms and wrap herself around him like a vine.

"There's a hole," he said. "I think you might be able to crawl through it."

There was something about the way he said it that told her it wasn't big enough for him to climb through. "But not you?"

"No."

## Chapter Six

"That's not an option," Alexis said flatly.

He was silent for a moment. "There's no sense, at all, in both of us being trapped in here."

Anger surged through Alexis. "I don't care!"

He ground his teeth. "You are a stubborn woman," he growled.

"We'll make it big enough we can both get out, or we'll find another way out."

"We don't have *time*," he snarled. "If they haven't already come for you, they'll be coming soon. And the minute they discover the cell's empty, they'll have men-at-arms swarming the countryside. The only chance either of us has, at all, is to get as far away from here as possible, as quickly as possible."

"You mean me."

"You, if you can get out. As much weight as I've lost, I still can't get through a hole that small. I don't know that you can, but we can at least try it."

"You mean I can, and you'll stay behind ... in that stinking hole in the ground."

He caught both her shoulders in a hard grip. "They will *kill* you when they find out what you," he snarled. "Or worse."

She couldn't imagine what would be worse than being killed, and she was sure she didn't want to. "They think I'm part of the clan."

"And they'll find out you're not the minute they try to ransom you."

A jolt went through Alexis at that. "Is that why they're holding you? For ransom?"

He said nothing.

"You said you were nobody. Why would they hold you for ransom? Why would they think they could get a ransom for you?"

He hauled her over his shoulder abruptly. "We're wasting time. Can you find your way back to where you came from if I get you out?"

"This is a *hell* of a time to ask me that!" Alexis grunted, struggling to break his grip.

He smacked the palm of his hand on her ass—hard! "Can you?" he snarled angrily, striding swiftly now.

Alexis swung at him blindly and managed to smack him on the back of the head. "Asshole!"

He grunted and smacked her ass again. "Is that a yes or a no?"

"Damn it to hell, Torin! Put me down!"

He did, so hard it jarred her teeth when her feet hit the stone floor. "The hole is just there," he growled, turning her so that she could see it. "I'll lift you up."

Alexis stared at the lighter patch of darkness, realizing, finally, why it had yielded so little light. It was night time, a starless night at that. At least, she couldn't see any stars, only a deep blue-black in contrast to the black of the cave walls. "I can't fit through that," she said with conviction.

“You can at least try, damn it to hell!”

She lifted her head to stare up at his face, realizing she could discern some of his features. “Why are you so determined to rescue me?”

“Why are you so determined *not* to be rescued?”

It hit her then. “I don’t think I can make without you,” she confessed, terrified at the idea of even trying.

He stared at her, his face hard. “You can. You’re smart, resourceful, and you have a mean streak a mile wide.”

Alexis gasped. “I do *not* have a mean streak!” she said indignantly.

He gripped her chin. “You attacked the guard, who was *twice* your size, little bird, and me. What you lack in size, you more than make up for in sheer ferocity and hard headed determination. Go! While you still can.”

She swallowed against the knot of emotion in her throat and turned to look at the hole. She knew he was right. She’d be lucky if she could squeeze through herself. He was right about everything. It wasn’t logical for her to stay when she had a chance to escape, only because he didn’t.

“What are you going to do?” she asked finally.

“Once you’re through, I’ll try to widen the hole to accommodate me.”

“We could do that now.”

“No, *we* can’t. If it collapses neither one of us will get out.”

She turned away to look at the hole again, realizing that staying to argue wasn’t going to help either one of them. He should talk about hard headed! A more stubborn man she had yet to meet!

He caught her around the waist as she stood staring up at the hole, lifting her straight up. She lifted her arms as he did, reaching for purchase. The ‘rock’ crumbled in her fingers as she grabbed it and she realized that at least part of it was no more than hardened clay. Sputtering and blinking at the dirt that cascaded into her eyes, she wiped her face with the shoulder of her suit and tried again, this time trying to reach through the hole to get a firm grip. He moved closer, lifting her as high as could.

He realized about the same time she did that she wasn’t going to be able to pull herself up high enough to climb out.

“Put your feet on my shoulders.”

She ceased scrambling for a hold on the rocks above her and tried to find a handhold along the wall to steady herself as his arms began to shake with the effort of holding her so high.

“Spread your legs.”

“*What?*”

There was humor in his voice. “I’m going to set you on my shoulders.”

“Oh.”

She grabbed two handfuls of his hair as he settled her on his shoulders.

“You’re heavier than you look.”

She glared down at the top of his head, tightening her fingers in his hair.

“Ow,” he said obligingly.

She let out a huff, more irritated because she could tell it hadn’t bothered him at all. “Now what?”

“Let go of my hair and grab my hands.”

“I can’t *see* your damned hands!” she hissed.

He grabbed her hands, holding them out to help her balance as he urged her again to stand on his shoulders. She managed to get her feet on his shoulders, but it was hard to balance, she discovered, in the thick blackness that surrounded them. She had no idea why, unless it was because she couldn’t get a visual reference. Finally, though, she let go of one of his hands and reached upward until she found a hold. The added height lifted her high enough that she could get more leverage once she had her arms through the hole.

It was still a struggle. She could feel the dirt and rocks giving around her, hear the debris raining down on the cave floor, and probably Torin, below her. He grasped her feet as she huffed and grunted, trying to wiggle through, giving her a push that enabled her to wedge her ass in the hole. For several moments, she thought it *was* wedged—permanently. After a good deal more squirming and struggling, however, she managed to wiggle her hips through, though everything she grabbed beyond the mouth of the cave came away in her hands.

Flattening herself on the dirt, she lay panting for a few moments, trying to gather the strength to pull her legs out. When she opened her eyes, she discovered they’d adjusted to the lighter darkness beyond the cave, enough to make out shapes in her surroundings, at any rate. There was a thick stalked shrub almost within reach. Undulating along the ground like a snake, she managed to move close enough to it to wrap the fingers of one hand around it and pull until her knees bumped the edge of the hole and she could roll over and pull her lower legs and feet out.

When she did, she turned to examine the hole. Despite the dirt and small rocks she’d dislodged, she saw she hadn’t ‘wallowed out’ the hole by much. She leaned over the hole and peered down at Torin. “I’ll see if I can find something to make the hole bigger.”

She couldn’t see much more than his glowing eyes looking up at her, but she was relieved to see he hadn’t turned and headed back the way he’d come.

“The noise will carry if you begin to pound on the rocks,” he cautioned.

Taking that to mean he’d accepted that she would at least try to help him get out, she nodded, scanned the immediate surroundings, and began pulling at the smaller vegetation around the hole. The soil was rocky, and seemed to consist mostly of sand and clay. She thought the roots of the plants might be holding the soil and rocks together. “You should get back in case it collapses,” she whispered.

He didn’t respond, but she noticed when she peered down to see where he was that he’d already moved away. Searching for something to use as a tool once she’d pulled away as much of the scrubby plants as she could, she finally found a stick she thought might hold up to digging and began working the thicker end around the edges of one of the larger rocks. It gave abruptly, falling inward. As it fell, it took another section of rock and clay with it . . . and almost her. She caught herself and wiggled back from the hole, more than half expecting the ground to fall away from under her.

To her relief, the cave-in stopped, leaving a hole that was now almost half again as large as it had been when she’d climbed through. She leaned over the opening again. “You think its big enough now to try it? Can you climb up high enough to reach?”

“Get back.”

She scrambled back from the hole.

One arm shot upward through the opening and then his head. She grabbed his

hand as he started to slide back, digging her heels into the dirt and pulling. She skidded toward him almost a foot before she managed to break the slide. He pulled his hand from hers after a moment, dug his elbow into the dirt and levered himself upward another inch or so.

She could hear him grinding his teeth as he worked to rotate his shoulders through the small opening but after a few minutes of struggle, he managed to get his other arm and shoulder through. Planting his palms on either side, he pushed upward until his hips had cleared the hole and then launched his upper body to one side and rolled the rest of the way out.

Another chunk of dirt and rock fell away as he did so. She made a grab for his arms and fell back as she dragged him toward her and he landed half on top of her with his face buried in her crotch. He lay perfectly still for a moment, panting for breath.

Alexis held her breath, fearing for several moments that the dirt beneath the two of them would collapse and send them both back into the pit. When the rain of rocks and dirt finally subsided, she pushed herself up on her elbows and looked down at Torin, who still had his face plastered against her lower belly. "I think it's stopped," she whispered.

"What?"

The single word vibrated against her sex, sending ripples of awareness through her. She'd just begun to suspect she'd completely misinterpreted the reason Torin hadn't made any attempt to get up when he finally lifted his head. She could see the gleam of his teeth as his lips spread in a slow grin. Before she could call him on it, however, he shoved to his hands and knees and crawled over her, planting his mouth firmly over hers just as she opened it to remind him they were in a precarious situation and didn't have time to fool around.

The kiss was hot, wet, dizzying, and way too brief. She'd barely had time to register the wave of heat that ran through her when he broke the contact and shoved himself to his feet. Reaching down, he grabbed her hand when she held it up, hauling her to her feet, as well.

He scanned their surroundings. "This way—quietly," he said on a breath of sound, shifting his grip to her upper arm and striking off.

Alexis stumbled, but managed to regain her balance. He released his grip on her arm when he saw she could see well enough to keep her footing. She followed his long strides at a jog, glancing around once she was confident enough of the terrain to lift her gaze from the ground.

They were moving, she saw, in the shadow of the fortress, little more than a few yards from the base of the outer wall. Torin moved closer still and she realized he was using the wall to evade the watchful gaze of the sentries above them. Focusing on the ground again, she strained to keep pace with Torin and, at the same time, watch for anything that might trip her up and give their position away. They were fortunate to have made their escape in the middle of the night, despite the difficulty of negotiating the rocky ground in the darkness.

Either that or Torin had timed it that way. After a little thought, she decided it was likely he had. She supposed he must have known they brought the food in the late evening and that, if he waited a while, most of the occupants of the castle would be asleep.

It had been a plus, she supposed wryly, that she'd 'entertained' him while he was

waiting for the right moment to leave.

So much for thinking she might have distracted him, or that he'd decided to take her with him because she'd shared herself with him. He wouldn't have wanted to leave her to raise the alarm.

Of course, he could have broken her neck quiet easily and left her behind, she realized, and he wouldn't have had to worry about her giving him away.

It startled her when that occurred to her. For one who'd never known anything but civilized behavior before, hailed from a world where any show of violence was almost instantly reciprocated by the authorities trained to keep order, it shouldn't have occurred to her that violence might seem like an answer to any problem. But then, as an anthropologist, she was well aware that it had been the answer more often than not in primitive times.

And this world was primitive, an emerging society, without a doubt, but still violent.

And Torin was an unknown entity.

He'd displayed a side of himself she hadn't expected, shown that he was not completely savage, nor more beast than man, and she worried now that it had lulled her into a false sense of security where he was concerned. As rough as his lovemaking had been, he'd given as much as he'd taken, taken her to heights of pleasure beyond her previous experiences with carnal love. But maybe that had been merely by accident, not design or even sexual prowess, something one wouldn't expect in a savage? Maybe it was nothing more than the chemistry between them that had brought her to culmination?

She was too much of a scientist to dismiss the possibility, or deny its existence. A lot of things had to be factored in. Psychologically, it was still human nature for the female to feel the urge to trade sexual gratification for protection from the physically superior male when they found themselves in a situation of threat. It was also human nature to seek comfort and reassurance in touch and to submerge any reluctance for the available male.

She hadn't had to submerge distaste for him, however. There'd been no struggle between reason and instinct. Her body had responded to his pheromones in chemical attraction before he'd spoken a word or come near enough to touch her.

That didn't preclude the possibility, though, that he was extremely dangerous. He was a male. He'd taken what she'd offered just as he would've taken it from *any* female who'd offered. It didn't mean he would continue to protect her, or that he wouldn't dispose of her without a qualm if it turned out that she was more trouble than he was willing to deal with.

He was not a civilized man. He wasn't even a man, if it came to that, and there was no telling how his mind worked, or what instincts toward savagery lay beneath the thin veneer of civilized behavior she'd seen thus far. Intelligence, unfortunately, didn't necessarily preclude a tendency toward violence.

He'd admitted, himself, that he was dangerous, and very convincingly. She'd *felt* the repressed violence in him as he held her, felt it in his touch when he'd yielded to the urge to dominate her and expend his needs on her.

It occurred to her that it was doubtful she could 'tame' the beast in him with no more than sexual gratification, any more than she'd been able to soothe the 'savage' beast in Sloan when they'd tried to excise some of his growing violent tendencies. He'd

simply taken, as if it was his by right of might, and grown more aggressive and domineering.

What options did she have, though? She wasn't equipped for the environment she found herself in. Her studies in anthropology might have prepared her more than any of the others for the sorts of situations she might find herself in, but studying was a far cry from experiencing. She knew a great deal about *how* ancient peoples had managed their day to day lives, but that didn't mean she had the skills to replicate any of it.

She hadn't thought beyond escaping the immediate threat, hadn't really 'thought' at all, she realized in dismay. She'd been running on instincts, and they had been dulled by generations of civilization and evolution. She had sincere doubts that her basic animal instincts were still strong enough to help her survive.

She was strong, she thought, for her size and gender. Like everyone else, she'd had to be in peak physical condition to withstand the rigors of their long voyage, but she wasn't a large person to begin with, no more than average, maybe a little less than average. That put her at a distinct disadvantage in an environment where physical, not mental, abilities determined the pecking order.

Torin had urged her to go back to where she'd come from.

The thought had no more than popped in her mind, though, when her belly began to churn. Assuming she could, and that was a big assumption, it didn't take a great deal of imagination to visualize the life that awaited her there. Either she would become Sloan's slave, or Sloan *and* Pitt's slave, depending upon whether the determination to dominate led the two men to try to kill one another. Either way, she didn't delude herself into thinking what she wanted would matter one iota.

It didn't bear thinking on. It made her nauseous with fear even trying to imagine accepting that fate.

So what were her other options? Trying to eke out an existence, alone, in this savage world? Attaching herself to Torin for protection and hoping he wouldn't treat her as badly as she knew Sloan would? Seeking another strong male to attach herself to?

It occurred to her abruptly that Torin had said there was a clan of humans. She was uneasy about the fact that he'd called her a true blood since that implied that they weren't, but how much would he know about them if, as seemed to be the case, all of these separate clans were enemies?

Surely she'd be better off among them, even if they weren't entirely human, assuming they'd allow her to become a member of the clan?

She hadn't realized until they emerged from the fields that Torin was heading for what he'd called the badlands.

"This is where we part company," he said, his voice hard.

Emerging from her dark thoughts, Alexis looked around. Before her stretched the desert she'd crossed only a few days earlier in hope that it would bring her 'home'. She dragged her gaze from the unwelcome sight after a moment and looked at Torin, nodding.

"Can you find your way back?" he asked after a moment when she made no attempt to move.

She shrugged. "There's nothing to go back to. Which direction should I go to find the human clan?"

His face hardened. "Don't be daft, woman! You're a true blood. You'll be no more welcome among them."

“That’s not your problem,” Alexis said angrily. “Will you tell me or not?”

“I’m more inclined to drag you across the badlands and send you back from whence you came,” he snarled. “Or finish it for you here if you’re so determined to get yourself killed anyway.”

“Then make it quick,” she snarled back at him. “I’m not going back there! I’d rather take my chances here than go back to Sloan!”

His eyes narrowed. “Who is this Sloan?”

She shook her head. “One of the men sent to ‘protect’ us. The minute he discovered there was no ‘home’ to come back to, he turned caveman on us and decided to make himself king. He killed Dr. O’Neal right in front of me, shot Dr. Chung in the back as we tried to escape through the portal. There is no way in hell I’m going back to that man!”

His eyes, hard with anger, moved over her. “He was your man?”

Alexis resisted the urge to roll her eyes. In the society he hailed from, she knew women *belonged* to men ... just like everything else they owned. He wouldn’t understand a society where women were considered equals and made their own decisions. “If you’re asking if I fucked him ....”

She wasn’t prepared for the restrained violence or swiftness of his move. His hands closed around her upper arms and he jerked her upwards until they were almost nose to nose. “Did you use your body to find favor with him, as well?” he growled.

“Exactly what other ‘coin’ do you think I had to trade?” she snarled back at him, very unwisely, even while she wondered what possessed her to provoke him when she could see he was holding on to his control by a thread.

He shook her. “What kind of woman are you?” he snarled, bafflement, rage, and disgust clearly written on his features.

“The kind who’s wise enough to use what she has to—even when it’s distasteful.”

It wasn’t until he’d thrust her away so roughly she staggered before she caught her balance that it dawned on her that he could easily misinterpret the comment to mean him. She hadn’t meant it that way. She’d only been thinking about how revolting she’d found it to share herself with Sloan, but she saw he’d taken it that way.

“How fortunate for you you’ve the stomach for such ‘distasteful’ things,” he snarled. “Mayhap you’ll fit well enough with the clan after all.”

“I didn’t mean you,” Alexis said quickly.

His look told her he didn’t believe her for a moment. “You should practice keeping that sharp tongue between your teeth, little bird. I may seem no more than a beast to you, but I am no fool to be easily duped by your lies.”

She might have tried again, but it dawned on her abruptly how well she could read his expression. She glanced around fearfully and saw the horizon was beginning to lighten, not by much, but enough to assure her they’d loitered to argue longer than they should have. Even if the guards didn’t discover them for a while yet, the workers would be coming to the fields before much longer.

“I was talking about that bastard, Sloan, but have it your way,” she said testily. “If you’re that convinced I was faking it, the hell with it. Thank you for your help and good luck to you.”

## Chapter Seven

Turning away from Torin, Alexis began to jog along the edge of the field. She knew what lay to the east—the badlands. To the west lay the fields that belonged to Prince Doom, and the north his castle. That left the south as the only option. He joined her after a few moments, then passed her. She didn't try to keep up with him. Just because they were going the same way, it didn't follow that he'd decided to accompany her, or would allow her to stay with him.

She stopped before she left the fields completely behind to examine the crop. Whatever it was, it hadn't yielded yet that she could see. Disappointed that she couldn't so easily obtain rations to keep her going, she turned away again. Torin had all but vanished from sight in that time. She shrugged off the tightening of anxiety in her belly.

She'd been alone when he'd been with her. It hadn't felt that way, but he'd disabused her of whatever doubts had remained that she'd won him over, even a little, with her sexual overtures. He'd been willing enough to appease his needs, but that was as far as it went.

It didn't mean he didn't still despise her for being a 'true blood'.

Obviously, he did.

Just as obviously, this was a society where a woman's chastity was her only protection and virtue, and she'd lost her virginity, without a qualm, long ago. Torin would've known that immediately, she felt sure, even if she hadn't admitted he wasn't her first. It angered her that that thin membrane, which was for nothing more than protection of the female organs within the womb, would be the thing her morals were judged on.

She was no liar, no thief. She didn't cheat or make promises only to break them. If sex was a natural drive for men, then it would follow that women must have some drive, as well.

Not that she hadn't come right out and admitted that she was perfectly willing to barter sex for what she needed—which only made her honest, not immoral.

She didn't see how that translated to 'bad'.

It was male insecurity.

In primitive societies, the only way they could be certain of paternity was to guard the female assiduously against all comers and any time doubt entered their minds about whether the woman was willing to share herself with other men it completely destroyed their trust.

Hell, they didn't 'trust' anyway! They knew how easily *they* succumbed to the lure of sex. Naturally, they judged everyone else's behavior by their own.

Damn him!

It was just as well, she told herself. If they'd been caught, he would've blamed her for holding him back. They probably both stood a better chance by splitting up.

He did, anyway.

At least she wouldn't have it on her conscience if he was re-captured.

She stopped to rest once she'd managed to make her way to a wooded area. It was well past sunrise by then. The sun was already brutal, and the little water she'd had since her capture hadn't done much to hydrate her. She needed to find water, she realized. She might survive a while without food. She wasn't going to last long without water and she didn't think she could dismiss it in favor of focusing on escape.

Lifting her head to scan the forest around her, she realized the plant life was abundant enough to indicate water. Unfortunately, it didn't necessarily follow that there would be any lying on the surface and she sure as hell didn't have time to dig, even if she'd had something besides her hands to dig with.

Torin could no doubt 'smell' water.

Bully for him!

She got up to move again after only a short rest, making another unpleasant discovery. She couldn't see the sun for the canopy above her. She thought the chances were good, though, that Prince Doom claimed this particular forest as part of his holdings. Would the castle have been erected in the center of his land, she wondered, or near the border?

It seemed, logically, that it would've been erected to protect the border.

She couldn't be certain of that, of course.

And she was not going to know when she passed beyond his border, unless he had something marking it.

Maybe she would've been better off, after all, to have headed back toward mission control?

She dismissed that. They'd had water with them when they'd crossed before. No way was she going to make it without any water, so that wasn't an option. She might just as well jump off a cliff.

Not that she'd seen one. The area was hilly and rocky, but not mountainous.

Frustration filled her. *Nothing* was as it had been in her time! Even the terrain had changed drastically.

She pushed all those doubts to the back of her mind and focused on moving, checking the position of the sun the best she could from time to time. If she stumbled across water, she'd drink. Otherwise, she needed to focus on escape, she decided.

It was, by her best reckoning, nearing noon when she heard the sounds she realized she'd been dreading—mounted men in the forest. Trying to assure herself they could just be hunting, and not necessarily searching for her, she began to move more stealthily away from the sounds. After a while, she realized the noise was more distant and that they were moving away from her.

Dumb luck had led her into the forest, but obviously the thick undergrowth had helped to disguise her passage. They were part beast, though, she reminded herself. They might be able to follow her scent if they came close enough.

Ignoring the incessant demands of her body for water, and the hunger that joined it in complaint before long, along with her body's demand for rest, she kept moving throughout the day, allowing herself only a few moments here and there to stop and rest. She had to keep reminding herself her life depended on her stamina, though. The desire to rest, or just give up and drop, became an incessant litany in the back of her mind, coaxing, trying to convince her she might as well give up.

Toward dusk, she finally accepted that she was too exhausted to keep going. She

had to have rest. More importantly, she had to have water. She was barely sweating, despite the heat, hadn't even felt the urge to urinate. Her body was clinging to the little water she still had.

She began scanning the woods around her for any plant that might hold enough water to keep her alive—assuming, of course, she didn't discover it was toxic after she'd begun chewing on it. So many plants were and she was no specialist in that field. She hardly knew one plant from another.

Finally, she gave up after trying the leaves of two or three and tasting nothing but a bitterness that indicated a strong probability of toxins. She'd rest for an hour or two, she decided, and then get up and try again. Stopping in the gloom from a cluster of tall brush, she dropped to her knees and scratched at the dead brush beneath it until she found dirt. It was moist. She was almost tempted to press her tongue to it in the hope that she could pull the little bit of moisture from it, at least enough to relieve the dryness of her mouth. Instead, once she'd gathered a fair pile of dead leaves, she settled on the bare dirt and swept as much of the debris over herself as she could, hoping it would protect her from the night chill and detection at the same time if anybody stumbled upon her while she was sleeping.

As exhausted as she was, her mind came alive the moment she settled. She lay for a while, feeling prickles and trying to decide if it was insects, or worse, crawling over her. When she finally managed to, mostly, drag her mind from that anxiety, she culled her brain for possibilities of what to do. That exercise in futility finally had the desired effect of stilling her mind and she fell asleep almost with the sense of dropping over a cliff.

She wasn't certain what woke her, at first. With her mind still sluggish, she used her senses to explore her surroundings and finally realized she could hear something heavy moving through the woods nearby. Fear instantly cleared her mind. She sucked in her breath, holding it to try to hear over the racing of her heart. The sounds grew more pronounced, making it patently obvious that, whatever it was, it was coming closer not moving away.

An animal?

It couldn't be anything else. It certainly wasn't a 'man', she chided herself.

The noise stopped abruptly.

Had whatever it was spotted her? Caught her scent?

She was afraid to move so much as a hair. With her mind, she tried to determine whether the leaves she'd raked up were still covering her or if she'd moved enough in her sleep to lose the little camouflage she'd gathered up.

A thousand painfully hammering heartbeats later, she heard a controlled crash nearby and then sounds that couldn't be interpreted as anything but swiftly moving, if stealthy, footfalls in her direction. She eased the breath out that she'd been holding and slowly drew in another one because she had to or pass out.

A hand touched her.

She bolted upright, ready to scream and fight. She didn't get the chance. He was ready for her, expected it. A hand clamped over her mouth even as one arm snaked around her to manacle her against a hard, unyielding chest.

"It is I, Torin."

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. When it did, she slumped with relief.

Fury at being scared senseless filled her the moment his grip began to ease, however. She whirled on him as soon as he'd loosened his grip enough to allow it, punching at him blindly. Fortunately, she couldn't get up momentum or leverage and only succeeded in shoving at him. "Damn it!" she hissed furiously. "You scared the hell out of me, Torin!"

"Somehow, I doubt that," he growled. "You've enough hell in you there would've been nothing left if I had."

"Smartass!" she snarled, refusing to allow herself to be diverted from her anger, determined to ignore the relief that had begun to seep into her. She discovered she was still too exhausted to hold on to her anger, however. The moment the adrenaline began to abate, she slumped weakly. "I would've thought you'd be long gone by now," she said tiredly.

"If I had any sense I would be," he retorted. "I've brought you water."

Alexis perked up instantly at that, groping for something that might be a container. He shoved a strange shaped object into her hands. She felt it, searching for an opening or a lid. He shoved her hands away after a moment, grasped her jaw and pushed something against her lips.

"Open your mouth," he commanded.

The moment she did, he shoved something hard into her mouth. Water squirted down her throat, strangling her. She coughed, snorting enough through her nose to make her eyes water. She was still coughing when she reached for it again. He held it away.

"Easy. If you drink too much it'll make you sick."

She wrestled him for it, but she was no match for him. He simply curled around her and held her, giving her what he thought she should have. Like a baby suckling from a bottle, she opened her mouth for it eagerly every time he moved it within reach and sucked on the hard spout until he snatched it away again.

"That's enough for now. I'll let you have more in a little bit. Have you had anything to eat?"

"I was too busy running to stop and look for food," she responded almost sullenly.

"It's as well that you didn't make better progress," he retorted dryly. "You've damned near come full circle. I'd have found you sooner except that I found it hard to fathom why you would circle back."

She stared up at him in the gloom, but couldn't see him well enough to gauge his expression. She didn't doubt that he spoke the truth, though. "I thought it would be easier to find supplies," she lied, embarrassed to learn she'd been so hopelessly lost she'd almost turned herself over to the very people she was trying to escape.

He grunted in disbelief. "I'd as soon not linger so close myself," he said dryly. Shoving himself to his feet, he dragged her up and led her away. When he grabbed her abruptly around the waist and lifted her, she thought at first that he'd grown impatient with her stumbling progress beside him. Instead, he settled her rump on something alive.

It shifted beneath her. She uttered a sharp gasp as she felt herself slipping. He caught her before she could hit the ground, planting her ass firmly on the beast again. "This time, try to hold on," he growled.

Before she could ask what she was supposed to hold on to, he flung himself up behind her, wrapped an arm around her waist and dragged her back against his body.

"What is this and where did you get it?" she gasped as the thing began to move.

“Later,” he murmured harshly near her ear. “If you keep chattering, you’ll give us away.”

Alexis clamped her lips together angrily at his rebuke. It seemed to her, though, that the beast was making enough noise to give them away. Having silenced her, he removed one of his arms from around her and began to fumble with something beside him. A moment later, he shoved something into her hand. She closed her fingers around it, wondering what it was. “Eat,” he ordered her. “It should hold you until I can find something else to put in your belly, little bird.”

Alexis let out an irritated huff, but she knew it was pointless to say anything about his persistence in calling her ‘little bird’. He just did it to annoy the hell out of her. She was still glad he’d come back for her.

She wondered why, but there seemed little point in asking him even if he hadn’t already cautioned her to be quiet.

Settling against him, she brought the piece of food to her mouth. It was dry and tasteless and reminded her of the space rations that had been her only diet for so long she’d all but forgotten what ‘real’ food tasted like. She doubted it was even half as nutritious, but at least it didn’t taste bad and it eased some of the painful ache of emptiness in her stomach. She was so thirsty by the time she’d finished it that she was almost sorry she’d eaten it, though.

As if he’d expected it, he held the water container up and allowed her to drink from it again. Once he’d secured it to whatever held it, he tightened his arms around her and somehow convinced the beast that was carrying them to move faster. The animal’s gate once it broke into a swift walk jarred her until she had to clamp her teeth together to keep from biting herself. That was enough in itself to discourage her from trying to talk.

As she settled more heavily against Torin’s chest, it occurred to her that he was no longer bare-chested. He was wearing something like their captors had worn.

She doubted he’d simply come across a beast like those they rode, laden with food and water, and armor. She found she didn’t want to dwell on what he’d done to appropriate it, however.

She dozed, a testament to just how weak and exhausted she was. Fear and uncertainty should have been enough to keep her alert, and, if not for that, then the sheer misery of riding on the thing should have kept awake.

She discovered when she roused that it was dawn and they’d left the forest behind, at least in the sense that they were no longer traveling through it but had moved onto a trail. After looking around, she looked down at the beast.

It looked like an unlovely cross between a goat, a horse, and ... a rhino. A thick horn sprouted from its forehead. She’d thought before that it was part of the armor the beast wore, but this one wasn’t wearing any.

The scientists, she decided, had gone completely mad to have engineered something like this.

How, she wondered yet again, had things gone from ‘saving mankind’ to such wildly unnecessary experimentation? Had everything simply snowballed completely out of control the moment the government had lifted the bans?

“It’ll be better to travel at night, I think, from here on out,” Torin said, breaking the silence.

Alexis shifted to look up at him. “Where are we going?”

He met her gaze for a long moment before he looked away. Slowing the beast, he guided it off the track they'd been following and into the woods. "I am returning to my clansmen," he responded after a several minutes had passed.

She sent him a startled glance, not only because he'd emphasized that they were still no more than fellow travelers going the same way, but because he'd mentioned 'his clansmen'.

He'd said he wasn't 'accepted', didn't belong to any clan.

What else had he lied to her about?

Rebuked, she kept her thoughts to herself as he negotiated the dense scrub and came out near a pool of water perhaps thirty minutes later. She almost fell off the beast when he dismounted, actually did, though it was a somewhat controlled fall. She didn't realize until she landed on her feet, unfortunately, that her buttocks and legs were numb from the ride. They refused to cooperate when she put her weight on them. He caught her waist when her knees buckled, steadying her, but the moment she managed to lock her knees, he moved away, leading the beast to the water's edge to drink.

She stared after him, fighting the dismay, the sense of abandonment she couldn't seem to shake even though he hadn't, yet, abandoned her.

After a moment, when some of the feeling returned to her legs, she stalked stiffly to the edge of the water and stood studying it. No doubt it was alive with creatures, but she decided to risk running afoul of something that might try to eat her. She couldn't stand the filth on her skin a moment longer when there was a chance of a bath staring at her. She wanted to be clean, if only for a short time.

Ignoring Torin, she sat down to tug her boots off and then stood to shrug out of her jumpsuit and shorts. Bundling them in her arms, she stepped carefully into the water, feeling the bottom with the sole of her foot before she took another step to make sure the ground didn't disappear beneath her. When she'd gone deep enough the water covered her knees, she squatted down. Tossing her jumpsuit over her shoulder, she began dunking the shorts up and down in the water. She'd never washed anything in such a manner in her life, but she figured the water would clean the clothing as much as it cleaned her.

Some sort of chemical cleanser would've been nice, but she figured if she could just freshen herself and her clothing a little, it was better than nothing. They didn't look or smell a lot better when she'd tired of working at it. Inwardly, she shrugged. She discovered when she let go of her shorts to have a try at cleaning the jumpsuit that they seemed inclined to float away. After trying to hold them beneath one arm for a few moments, she finally tucked them between her legs. Her back, arms, and shoulders were burning with the exercise by the time she decided she'd done the best she could at cleaning her clothes. Wading out, she looked around for some place to put the jumpsuit to dry and finally found a limb she could reach.

After studying her shorts speculatively for a moment, she decided to use them to bathe. She thought she felt Torin's gaze on her several times, but when she glanced in his direction he appeared to be fully occupied with whatever it was that he was doing.

Setting up a camp of sorts, she supposed. He'd led the beast away from the water and tied it by the thin strips of leather he'd used before to guide it. The beast was docilely nibbling at the vegetation while he removed the things it had been carrying on its back—the horribly uncomfortable thing they'd been sitting on and an assortment of

pouches that looked as if they'd been made from some unfortunate beast's hide. Returning to the pool, she waded out as she had before and then just sat down, staring at nothing in particular while she half heartedly worked at scrubbing the accumulation of too many day's dirt and sweat from her skin.

She supposed, under the circumstances, she couldn't expect to be attractive, at all, to him—beyond being female and having the right equipment. She must look as strange to him as he did to her, if it came to that. He would find females of his own kind far more attractive, she mused.

Of course he was a halfling, so maybe he found both lion-women and tiger-women attractive? Or maybe he was actually more of one than the other, regardless of his appearance, and preferred the lion-women?

He'd said before that he *had* been of the lion clan.

Obviously, he still was.

She stared down at her white, nearly hairless skin, trying to visualize what it must look like to him. She hadn't actually thought about how colorless she was—except, of course, for the hair on her head, which didn't have that much color, if it came to that. It hadn't been safe to get out in the sun, though. It damaged the skin far too quickly and caused cancer besides. Everyone she knew—had known—was as white, unless they were of a darker race and were naturally dark skinned. She lay back after a little while, staring up at the sky while she soaked her hair, but closed her eyes after a few moments against the glare.

A splash, magnified in her ears by the water, brought her upright just as she was about to doze. Torin surfaced near the center of the pool of water even as she watched.

She stared at him with something akin to amazement as she watched him move back and forth across the surface of the water, using his arms and legs to propel him.

He was swimming, she realized.

She'd never seen it done.

She hadn't realized he was completely naked, as well, until he flipped onto his back.

She looked away instead of studying him like she wanted to.

She hadn't really seen him during their frantic coupling in the cell. It had been too dim to see much anyway, and she hadn't actually thought about examining him.

Discovering her skin was starting to wrinkle from over-saturation by the water, she pushed herself to her feet and waded out. When she'd settled her shorts near her suit, checked it and discovered it was still too wet to put on, she glanced around for a place to settle and wait for her skin and clothes to dry. Bare dirt? Or the low growing vegetation, she debated?

The dirt certainly didn't appeal when she'd gone to so much trouble to wash it off her skin. Trying not to think too hard on what might be crawling in the vegetation, she settled on it and finally lay back, closing her eyes. The sun filtering through the trees warmed her skin, made her drowsy. Her mind had begun to drift lazily when a fat drop of water landed on her, startling her.

She opened her eyes just as Torin dropped to his knees beside her. In almost the same motion, he launched himself over her. She tensed as he covered her upper body with his, flattening her breasts against his chest even though he caught the bulk of his weight by planting his elbows on either side of her shoulders. Her lips parted in surprise

as she met his tumultuous gaze for a fraction of a second before his face crowded her vision and his mouth settled firmly against hers.

## Chapter Eight

Alexis sucked in a breath of alarm, bracing herself. His mouth was neither hard nor hurtful as it covered hers, though. Neither was it soft with supplication or tentative with doubt. It was hot and demanding with unleashed hunger. He slipped his hands upward to capture her head between his palms even as his mouth settled, the only sign of doubt of his welcome.

His tongue stroked her slightly parted lips and he sucked on them lightly before delving between with them with his tongue to explore the cavern of her mouth. A wall of dizziness like the powerful, tumultuous advance of a tidal wave swept over her with the first possessive stroke of his tongue along hers, when he filled her being with his essence. His taste, his heat, the urgency of his touch that went beyond mere piqued interest, that communicated a passion already almost out of control, swept the inclination to merely receive passively from her mind even as the thought formed.

Hazily, she wondered how his touch could evoke such a response from her. Why was it that his passion fed her own, sent her spiraling out of control with such ease? Why had no man's touch ever before had such an amazing and wonderful effect on her? She'd felt passion, experienced desire, but never so intensely that her body felt on fire with it.

Her heart thundering, her breath catching at the barrage of sensations, she lifted her hands to clutch at him as she closed her mouth around his tongue and drew on it to savor his heady taste. He made a sound deep in his chest as she did, shifting restlessly over her, and she felt his knee nudging her thighs apart. She moved at his urging, dragging one leg upward to settle the sole of her foot on the soft, natural mat beneath her when she found the other leg trapped by his.

Her arms, she realized dimly, were trapped by the cage of his body, as well, pressed against her sides by his elbows so that she could do little more than curl her fingers along his muscled sides.

He seemed not to care overmuch about her participation. He held her pinioned beneath him as he moved his mouth restlessly over hers, alternately sucking lightly and stroking his tongue along hers in a thrust and retreat that so closely mimicked the act of sex that she felt the muscles along her passage clenching convulsively for the feel of his hard flesh. Heated moisture flooded the throat of her sex in anticipation of his possession.

By accident or design, he slipped his thigh upward until his knee pressed against her nether lips as he filled his need for the taste of her mouth and sought fresh territory to conquer. The hardness teased her as she rubbed herself against his knee, wishing for more of him, wanting to feel his thick member delving inside of her instead.

His breath was sawing in and out of his lungs in harsh puffs of breath as he grazed her cheek with his and then with his lips. Shifting his weight to one arm, he lifted the other and stroked one hand restlessly along her body as he sucked a trail of love bites downward along her throat.

She tensed as she sensed his destination, waiting breathlessly for his touch,

hoping, momentarily distracted from her yearning to feel him filling her by the promised pleasure of his mouth at her breasts. The wandering hand settled on one breast, cupping and lifting it to his waiting mouth. Her back seemed to arch of its own accord, her body seeking his heat as his mouth settled over the peak. He sucked it, twirled his tongue around it, pulled at it with his mouth. And each tug sent delicious heat waves spiraling toward her core.

Her mouth and tongue went dry from her panting breaths. Lifting the arm he'd freed with his shift in weight, she speared her fingers into his hair, clutching at his head a little frantically, mindlessly, as he teased the sensitive tip until she was so drunk with need, she lost awareness of anything but the feel of his mouth and tongue on her. Her neglected nipple tightened almost painfully in want, aching with the blood pulsing there and when he moved to catch the swollen tip lightly with his teeth she uttered a sharp gasp at the intensity of the sensations that jolted through her.

Curling one leg along his thigh, she shifted, bucked, trying to free her trapped leg to open her body to him, to urge him to finish what he'd promised. "Torin!" she gasped plaintively when he ignored the demand.

His head jerked upward at the sound of his name. He stared at her with glazed eyes for several moments, almost seemed to hold his breath.

"Please! Now," she gasped as she slipped a hand to the back of his neck, tugging at him.

He surged upward abruptly, silencing her with his mouth, but she felt the shift of his weight over her, the nudge of his other leg as he settled it between hers and curled his hips to press his hard length against her. She coiled that leg around his hips, arching upward until she felt her nether lips parting to enfold his turgid flesh.

With one hand, he reached between them to guide his cock along her cleft, gathering the moisture of her want before he pressed the head into her nether mouth, pushing. She tore her mouth from his, sucking in a sharp breath and arching upward to envelope the cock that merely teased the entrance. Shuddering, he surged again, forcing his cock deeper.

She pulled him down to her, nipping at a patch of flesh at the top of one hard pec and then sucking at it as she felt her body convulse in gentle climax even before he'd claimed her fully. A shiver raked its way along her spine and into him. He groaned, began to pump into her hard and deep. The rough caress of his shaft along her passage stirred the ashes of her spent passion, ignited the embers until she was on fire again only moments after she'd come, felt her body building toward another climax.

Gasping, she met his thrusts with enthusiasm borne of mounting anticipation, pushing him to drive into her faster and deeper. As the quaking inside her reached a crescendo, she burrowed her face against his chest to muffle the sharp cries of ecstasy she couldn't seem to contain.

He uttered a choked groan as she clung to him, shuddering in release, followed by another, deeper one as his body convulsed, pumping his heated seed into her against her womb.

Lassitude claimed her as the rippling waves of rapture began to subside. She sank beneath it heavily, blissfully sated as she'd never been before in her life. If she died in that moment, she thought with dim amusement, it would be with a smile upon her face.

It had felt glorious, as different from anything she'd felt before as night to day.

A flicker of disappointment pierced the haze of contentment that had enveloped her as he moved off of her. She dismissed it firmly, considered rolling onto her belly briefly and then dismissed that, too. She didn't want to move, to do anything that might lift the haze of contentment she felt. She wanted to hold it to herself and luxuriate in it as long as possible.

It was nothing short of amazing the pleasure he wrung from her body. She had always thought she had a healthy sexual appetite, for a woman, which meant she wasn't particularly disturbed by abstinence but she was willing enough to perform her duties and even found it enjoyable at times.

She'd never suffered unduly during long, frequent draughts, however, hardly given it a thought.

She thought she could easily come to crave what he did to her, though.

Which would not be a good thing.

She cracked an eyelid at that thought and found him studying her, his head propped on one hand. He got up when he discovered she'd become aware of his perusal. Moving away, he collected his breeches and pulled them on.

It wasn't the tattered breeches he'd worn before, though.

Amusement touched her as the image arose in her mind of some naked beast man, and vanished just as quickly as she realized the man who'd owned them would not miss them anymore. He wouldn't have yielded his belongings readily, which meant Torin had taken them by violence.

He seemed completely comfortable in his theft, if not downright pleased about it.

It would be a long time, if ever, before she began to understand the intricacies of societal behavior in these beast-folk.

She closed her eyes again, debating whether to seek sleep and finally decided against it when she heard him splashing in the water. Sitting up, she turned to watch him curiously. He held a pike in one hand now and stood with feet braced wide, staring intently at the water. Curious, she finally got up and moved closer to see what it was in the water that held his attention. She'd nearly reached the water's edge when he struck, so swiftly her heart leapt into her throat and stuck there. When he withdrew the pike from the water, a large, wiggling fish was impaled on the tip.

Her stomach lurched, cramping in empathetic pain.

Glancing up at her, he motioned her closer as he moved to the bank.

She crouched beside him as he knelt. Pulling a broad bladed knife from his boot, he extended it toward her hilt first. She looked at the knife and then the fish and felt a wave of nausea roll over her. Swallowing with an effort, she took the knife in her right hand and grasped the fish in her left. It's body made a sickening, sucking sound as she pulled it off the pike.

And it was still wiggling.

Alexis stared down at it with a mixture of pity and revulsion as she settled it on the dirt.

"Remove the head here," he instructed, pointing, "and then slice the belly to gut it."

Alexis stared at it, fighting to control the sickness that welled inside her. Survival, she told herself. She wasn't going to survive in this environment if she couldn't learn the skills she needed. She was lucky he was willing to teach her. Squinting her

eyes, she pressed the knife against the fish where he'd indicated and severed its head. Thankfully, it stopped wiggling then. Slicing the belly and gutting it was worse than beheading it. Once he'd explained how to remove the scales, he left her to the task. She saw when she'd finished and rinsed the fish, that he'd made a small fire. As she watched, he placed a large, flat surfaced rock in the edge of the glowing coals. He took the fish from her when she brought it to him and carefully laid it on the rock.

"How did you make the fire?"

He glanced at her sharply, studied her a long moment and finally frowned, looking away. "I'll teach you that next time."

Nodding, she turned and headed to the pool to bathe the stench of the fish from her ... and the splattering of innards and scales. He followed her. Drawing her into the water with him, he guided her until she'd assumed the same wide legged stance that he had before. "Do you use your right hand most, or the left?" he asked near her shoulder.

She turned her head to look at him, thinking about it. "Both."

His brows rose, but she saw the doubt in his eyes. "Then hold the pike in whichever hand you prefer," he said finally.

It was heavier than she'd expected. She shifted the pike from her right to her left and finally settled on her right.

"Now, you must stand very still and wait."

She tried to focus on staring at the water, did train her eyes on the water, but she was acutely conscious of Torin at her back, the brush of his breath along her neck. After a few minutes, her attention shifted, though, to the pike, which seemed to be growing heavier and heavier. She held it as long as she could stand it and finally shifted it to the other hand, startling a fish in the process.

Torin said nothing, but she was irritated with herself. This time, she ignored the burning in her arm. She'd almost reached the point of giving up when she spied a fish. It swam slowly, unaware that death hovered above it. She focused on it, waiting until she decided it was almost directly below the point of the pike, and then struck.

Stunned surprise filled her when she withdrew the pike and found the fish wiggling on the tip. She stared at it blankly for a moment and then turned her head to look at Torin, feeling excitement begin to take hold of her. "I got it," she said a little breathlessly.

"You did," he responded approvingly, though she thought she detected almost as much surprise in him as she'd felt.

A smile curled her lips and then a chuckle escaped her. She'd gotten her own food!

His smile slowly faded as he studied her face. He glanced at the pike she was waving around. "I'll clean this one since you caught it."

She was tempted, but finally shook her head. "I should do it. I need to get used to taking care of myself in this world." She turned away, wading toward the bank. "I'll need something like this, though, to fish. A sharp stick would do as well, don't you think?"

He waded out behind her, stood over her for a moment, and finally crouched to watch her. "You catch on quickly," he murmured after a moment.

She threw a distracted smile in his direction. "Actually, I've studied this sort of thing. It's just that I've never actually done it, or seen it done. If I could find the right

materials, I think I could even make a stone knife to use—primitive, but effective, really, if it's done right.”

“You've never done anything like this before?” he asked after a short silence.

She glanced at him again as she rose and moved to the edge of the water to wash the fish. “No. We only eat—ate processed, pre-prepared, packaged foods. They were very nutritious, but the food didn't have a great deal of taste—especially the space rations—not like the things I've eaten here, anyway.”

“Space rations?”

She glanced at him again, but frowned as she headed toward the fire and squatted down to very carefully place the fish she'd just cleaned next to the other on the rock.

“When we went into space.”

“To the new world?”

She looked at him sharply at his tone. “Yes,” she responded cautiously.

“You could not have been among them. You would not even have been born,” he said, a mixture of anger and disbelief in his voice.

“Why do you say that?”

His lips tightened. “According to legends, it was nigh a thousand years ago that the last of the true bloods fled the Earth to a new world.”

Alexis felt the color leave her face. “That's not possible,” she said through lips that suddenly felt stiff and awkward. “It couldn't have been that long ago.”

“There are no records of the time before, but it has been generations since a true blood walked the Earth,” he ground out.

Alexis' shock was so profound, she simply stared at him blankly, trying to wrap her mind around it, trying to grasp the unthinkable. Almost a thousand years? How could they have been so wrong in their calculations? It was only to have been a little over two hundred, at the most!

She realized after a moment, though, that he wasn't even talking about *their* mission. He was talking about the migration of the last of the human race to another world.

She rose after a moment, lifting her head to stare at the sky, wondering where among the stars her own people had fled. Not to the colonies, certainly. Those were heavily dependent upon the Earth. Even though the colonists had been mutated to help them adapt to their new environment as much as possible, all of the colonies were lacking in some of the most necessary natural resources. Without the help of the people on Earth, they wouldn't have survived long.

Had things changed so drastically after they'd left, gone so wrong, that they hadn't been willing, or able, to wait to discover the success or failure of the mission? Or had they lost communications and decided the crew of the U.E. Plymouth had perished and developed a new plan?

Shivering, she looked down at her nakedness with a touch of surprise and finally moved to her clothing and pulled it on.

“Why did they leave?” she asked Torin when she returned to the fire.

He sent her a look she found hard to interpret. “You said you were among them. Why don't you tell me?”

“We were sent into space *before* they left,” she said. “Sent to find a new world.”

She could see he didn't believe her. “This world had become dangerously

unstable,” she persisted. “The climate shift was causing erratic, dangerous natural disasters and killing people by the thousands. Even the DNA advances couldn’t protect them from the tornados, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and flooding. It couldn’t prevent people from starving to death because the weather had become so erratic that they couldn’t plant and bring in the crops. That’s why we had the rations I was talking about. It was food developed and manufactured in processing plants to keep everyone from starving. The crew of the U.E. Plymouth was sent out to erect a portal to carry colonists to the new world they’d discovered in a new galaxy light years from here. It took ten years to travel there. We knew that time was not moving at the same rate, that more time would pass here than had passed for us, but our best scientific calculations put it at no more than two hundred to two hundred fifty years.

“We left before the others. How long, I’ve no idea, but if what you’re saying is true then that was more than a thousand years ago.”

“So, you’re telling me that, even though you are a true blood, you had nothing to do with abandoning the people to die here?”

A jolt went through Alexis.

“You see, we know all about the natural disasters and famine that killed thousands upon thousands, because it was *our* people who died, because *your* people, once they were done ‘experimenting’ with the DNA, abandoned the ‘monsters’ they’d created and left us to die.”

Alexis simply stared at him when he’d finished speaking, feeling sick, feeling guilty even though she’d had nothing to do with what had happened. “I’m not a geneticist,” she said finally. “I have degrees in robotics, specifically nanotechnology, aerospace engineering, and anthropology. That’s why I was one of the eight chosen to participate in the mission to New Earth. I’m not even a ‘true blood’ anymore, because I accepted chromosome webbing to prepare me for the long voyage.”

She didn’t ask again. Except to appease her curiosity, it didn’t actually matter. Despite the fact that she now knew why ‘true bloods’ were hated here, and her among them, it was some consolation to her to know the human race had apparently survived. Even though they were lost to her, it was comforting to think of them prospering on a new world.

She wondered if they’d gone to the alternate world that had been under consideration, discarded because it wasn’t as perfect as the one they’d finally settled on, but still a perfectly good world. She decided they must have.

There would be no reaching them, of course. Her choices were Earth or New Earth, and she’d already decided she would stay on old Earth. It was primitive compared to the life she’d known before she’d gone into space, and yet far less so than New Earth.

It was lowering to think she might be hated by every clan here, but she still thought she had a chance to find acceptance with the human clan Torin had told her about. After all, she wasn’t really a true blood. She supposed she must be closer than the clan members were, but still . . .

“You should rest,” Torin said when they’d finished their meal in an uncomfortable silence. “We’ll be on the trail all night.”

Alexis nodded, but then frowned. “Can’t they see better at night, too?”

He sent her a look. “Felines are night stalkers, not bears.”

Alexis reddened. It was on the tip of her tongue to inform him she wasn’t a

zoologist and knew very little about animals beyond the basics taught in primary school, but she thought better of it.

Torin doused the fire and stirred it as soon as they'd finished eating. She got up when she'd finished and went a little ways into the woods to relieve herself and then returned to the mossy area where she'd lain before to dry off and tried to get comfortable enough to fall asleep.

It should have easy enough with a full stomach for a change, particularly after their earlier activities and the weariness that still plagued her from her days of traveling on foot, first across the desert and then fleeing the bear clan. Her thoughts returned to what Torin had told her, though, and she worried it over in her mind, wondering how so much time could possibly have passed.

They'd traveled far beyond known space, though, much further than man had ever gone before. She supposed there was no telling what sort of anomalies they might have encountered along the way. She realized she didn't even know, with absolute certainty, that the voyage had taken no longer than anticipated. They'd been in stasis. The answer might be found on the Plymouth's flight recorder. They hadn't reviewed it. There had been no reason for them to. They'd arrived at the new world without apparent incident.

She was curious to know if something had happened that would be recorded, but certainly not curious enough to return through the portal to find out. It wouldn't change anything now even if she knew.

If the Plymouth hadn't been pretty much scavenged to build the portal, there might have been some possibility of using it to find the alternate world.

She couldn't imagine that either Sloan or Pitts would consider it, though. In any case, they no longer had a crew. Mel had been the navigator. Without her, there was no chance of programming the ship for such a voyage. Dr. Long had been their pilot. Without him there would be no taking the ship from orbit, or entering it in the target orbit.

Realizing there was no point at all in even thinking about it, she tried to close her mind to her thoughts and sleep. She drowsed eventually, restlessly. Like a roller coaster, she would drop off, rouse to semi-awareness, and fall again. The day had dimmed by the time she roused to discover Torin lying beside her, studying her intently.

She wondered if he was as fascinated with her as he seemed to be, or only curious because he hadn't had an opportunity to study a human so closely before.

He rose when he saw she was awake. "It's time to move."

## Chapter Nine

Torin pulled the beast to a halt, scanning the rocky terrain on either side of the narrow trail they'd been following for nearly an hour.

Alexis tensed, straining to see whatever it was he must have seen and when her sight failed her, trying to hear anything out of the ordinary. Her ears failed her, as well, though, because she couldn't discern anything that seemed the least bit out of place.

After a few moments, some of the tension seemed to ease from Torin's shoulders. He twisted his head to look back her where she sat on the beast's rump behind him, clinging to his waist.

"We must move as quietly as possible from this point onward," he cautioned her.

They'd been traveling together for almost a week and she'd long since ceased to feel either amazement or any shadow of doubt about his instincts or his ability to sense things she couldn't. "What's out there?"

He shrugged. "Nothing that I can discern at the moment, but we are near the border and the bear clan is warring with the human clan."

Alarm went through Alexis. "You think we'll stumble upon the armies?"

"We will skirt them as best we can, but we must pass close by."

"Can't we just go around?"

"The lands of the dragon clan lie to the east. I'd as soon not chance an unpleasant encounter with one."

"Dragons?" Alexis gasped hoarsely. "You're not serious. *Real* dragons?"

"Real enough," he retorted dryly, "and damned hard to kill when they grow back most anything you care to lob off so long as it isn't the head."

"They have good night vision?" Alexis asked uneasily. "Maybe it would be better to try this during the day?"

"They have good vision in the day, and better at night," he said grimly.

"Well—maybe it would be better to circle to the west, then?"

"There is an army there, as well. The bear clan is also warring with the tiger clan and beyond their lands lie the wastelands."

"Your people?"

He stiffened. "They are not *my* people only because the one who raped my mother hailed from the tiger clan," he said, his voice cold with barely repressed fury.

Alexis swallowed against a tightening of uneasiness and empathy in her throat. "I'm sorry."

He didn't acknowledge her apology. Instead, he dug his heels into the animal's sides and set it to trotting briskly along the trail once more.

Alexis was tempted to straighten away from him, feeling the beginnings of indignation take the place of her embarrassment and uneasiness about inadvertently treading on a sore point. It wasn't as if she knew, after all!

She did know that he was looked down upon, both by his own people, and others, because he was a halfling, but how was she to know the half that he despised was the

most dominant part of his appearance? Well, maybe not, but it was clear he had tiger in him.

It must chafe him unbearably, she realized abruptly, to look so much like those he despised. And what of his mother—to have a constant reminder? If he hadn't taken after the one who'd raped her, she might have been able to ignore his origins, but, as it was?

She hadn't given a lot of thought to who Torin was, where he was from, what his life was like before he'd been imprisoned by the bear clan. Then again, they hadn't exactly been thrown into a social situation where they might have the time, or inclination, for idle chitchat. Moreover, he didn't trust her because she was a true blood and he obviously hated them almost as much as he did the people of the tiger clan ... maybe more.

She found she wanted to know, though. What had molded him into the man he was? Had he spent his childhood tormented by his mother's people? Maybe even shunned by his own mother? Was that why he seemed so strong and independent? Because he'd always had to be?

Somehow, she didn't get the impression that he'd known a lot of pampering in his life, or much affection. But maybe she was wrong about that? He seemed empathetic of others, kind. Would he know how to be either if he'd never experienced it himself? Or was he that way because he hadn't and understood better than most what it was like to be bullied and tormented?

Her anger and sense of injustice dissipated and sympathy took its place. Settling against his back again, she tightened her arms round him in an empathetic squeeze. "I am sorry," she whispered, even though she doubted he could hear her.

Obviously, his hearing was as acute as his other senses. Some of the tension left him. His hand settled over hers where they were locked around his middle, squeezing lightly in return. After a moment, he disengaged her locked fingers and guided one hand lower, molding it over a thick, hard ridge. Surprise went through her and then amusement. She smiled against his back, struggling with the urge to chuckle.

He moved her hand back and popped it lightly. "Behave!"

She burrowed her face against his back to stifle a chuckle but uttered a snicker anyway. "I'm trying," she whispered unsteadily. "It's so hard!"

He chuckled. "If you'd stop rubbing your breasts all over my back it might not be quite as hard," he muttered chidingly.

"I meant difficult."

"Yes, it is."

Confusion went through her. "What?"

"Keeping my mind off your breasts ... and other things."

It sounded more like a compliment than a complaint, but she couldn't see his expression or tell from his voice whether she'd interpreted that as he'd intended or to please herself. He'd *sounded* teasing, but that didn't necessarily mean that it didn't bother him. After considering it, she decided it couldn't be very comfortable for him, that, maybe, he was just trying to be nice about it and sat up a little straighter, moving her hands to his sides.

Without a word, he grasped her hands, one at the time, and drew her arms around his waist again until she was settled firmly against his back as she had been. The gesture warmed her in an indefinable way.

He slowed the beast again after a short time, guiding it off of the trail and into a small patch of low growing, scrubby plants. Sliding from the beast, he reached up to grasp her waist and swung her down, steadying her once he'd set her on her feet. "Wait here," he said quietly. "Allow the tog to graze, but if he lifts his head, or twitches his ears, grasp the lead close to his chin and cover his nostrils with your hand. If he catches the scent of other togs, he'll try to call to them."

As he had since their first day on the trail together, he instructed her carefully, and then took her through the motions, showing her exactly how to do it.

"I need to scout on foot."

Alexis nodded, feeling her belly tighten at the thought of being left alone in the dark with nothing but the beast—or tog as he called it. She felt *more* than a little uneasy, however, when Torin drew the sword from the scabbard attached to the pack on the animal's back. She wanted to caution him to be careful, but he'd vanished into the surrounding darkness before she could give in to the urge to voice the foolish sentiment.

It *was* stupid. He knew what he was doing, she chided herself, and he would certainly not be careless. He didn't want to be re-captured or killed any more than she did.

She didn't know where the urge had come from anyway.

She tried to tell herself she'd felt it because it was perfectly reasonable not to want to be left alone to fend for herself when she was so poorly equipped to do so—and it was—but her situation, if he didn't return, hadn't actually crossed her mind. And it hadn't been an urge to voice a platitude, out of habit, that she hadn't particularly felt.

It was concern for him.

She was glad she'd resisted the urge.

She was disturbed that she'd felt it at all.

She was sure there was a perfectly rational, scientific explanation for it.

It was unfortunate that she hadn't decided to get a degree in psychology while she was about it. She was sure this must be a text book case of ... something. A sense of dependence brought on by her inadequacies in her current situation. Some sort of bonding due to their mutual plight, perhaps even because of the intimacies they'd shared, although she couldn't recall developing any sort of bond with previous sexual partners in a similar situation.

She frowned. She hadn't been in a situation even approaching anything like this before. There'd been danger in the voyage, of course, but it hadn't given her the urge to cling to any of the men for protection. She'd dutifully performed, and she'd *felt* dutiful about it, mostly relieved when it was over.

Maybe it would have been different if either Sloan or Pitts had put themselves out to pleasure her?

She decided not. In fact, she had a hard time conjuring any scenario including them where she might have found pleasure, no matter how much effort they'd put into it. She'd been hard put to contain her distaste—because she'd found both of them obnoxious to start with. Sloan's cockiness had grated on her from the first moment she'd met him, in fact, and she hadn't been more favorably impressed with Pitts. Although he wasn't as abrasive as Sloan, he hadn't been any more appealing.

And, unfortunately, that was pretty much the limit of her experience insofar as multiple encounters that had any potential for creating a bond. She could count on one

hand the times she'd experimented with sexual intercourse prior to that, and not one had been twice with the same man—or boy. She couldn't even call to mind the name, or face, of the boy she'd had her first experience with, mostly because it had been a hideous encounter—embarrassing, painful, and awkward. She'd done her best *not* to remember and it had been years before she'd even been tempted to try again. *Him*, she remembered, an older man, one of her professors, in point of fact, and if it hadn't been wonderful, it had at least not been so awful it completely discouraged her.

The third time had been the charm.

That one had *hurt*, the kind of wound no one could see, but that took forever to heal. She'd thought she was madly in love with Robert, and the sex had been everything she'd ever hoped it could be—nothing even *approaching* the way Torin made her feel, but at the time exceptional enough to make her feel as if there was something truly special between them. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, he'd shot her legs out from under her before she'd had the chance to get any deeper—not that she hadn't already been in way over her head!

She was just glad, now, that he'd opened her eyes before she threw away all the years she'd put into her studies. If she hadn't, completely by chance, run into him with his next conquest on his arm not three days after he'd told her she was the 'one' for him, the woman he'd been looking for all his life, she would've missed her chance . . .

. . . . To be standing where she was now.

Glorious!

Mentally, she packed those thoughts up and shoved them into the back of her mind again.

The one thing she couldn't afford to do right now was to start dwelling on all the things she should've done differently. It was demoralizing and fruitless. If she hadn't made the decisions she had, she might be with the others now, on whatever world they'd chosen to flee to—and she might not. It must have been chaotic—and horrific. Torin had said nothing about what had set off the chain of events—maybe he didn't even know—but she was certain something must have happened to convince her fellow humans to run. A war maybe? Between the 'true bloods' and the mutants they'd created? Or maybe it had been a natural disaster, a critical event that seemed likely to wipe out all life? A massive meteor strike? The eruption of a super volcano powerful enough to set off another ice age?

She didn't suppose she'd ever know, but she was certain they hadn't simply decided one day to abandon the only world they'd known and start over somewhere else. They'd fled. Torin had suggested as much.

And if she'd been on Earth at the time, instead of in space—she wouldn't have lived long enough to see this.

She sighed in self-disgust. Her thoughts were just getting more and more cheerful!

Lifting her head, she looked around for something to distract her from her morose train of thoughts, wondering how long Torin had been gone—and if he actually meant to come back.

He'd come back for the tog and the supplies, at least, she chided herself, trying to ignore the sinking sensation in her stomach as the possibility occurred to her that his going might not have been any more than a ruse to rid himself of her.

Truthfully, she was more than a little surprised he hadn't already dismissed her and gone about his business. From her point of view, she had every reason to want to cling to him—He knew how to take care of himself and her. Life on the trail had been far from comfortable, but she knew it was still light-years ahead of what it would have been like for her if she'd been left to her own devices. More than that, she found his strength comforted her, made her feel safe and protected, whether she actually was or not.

And it was the purest pleasure she'd ever experienced in her life when he gave her his passion.

With the best will in the world to shake the doubts, she couldn't convince herself that their association was mutually beneficial and therefore not nearly as desirable from his viewpoint. He seemed to enjoy the sex between them as much as she did, but what did she know? How could she tell the degree of his enjoyment? It might be nothing at all unique in his experience—beyond having sex with a human woman.

She would've liked to think it was as wonderful for him as it was for her, but wishing it didn't make it so.

He felt responsible for her, she suspected, or he wouldn't have gone back for her to begin with. She had no clue why unless it was just that he realized she was virtually helpless and his conscience wouldn't allow him to abandon her even though he wanted to.

Not that she actually *was* helpless! Not completely, anyway.

She still didn't know how to make a fire.

Necessity was the mother of invention, she reminded herself. She had her knowledge of ancient cultures to fall back on. She'd be able to figure it out—eventually—if she lived long enough.

The beast—tog—stirred and she caught a firm grip on the halter as Torin had shown her and covered the thing's nostrils. Trying to ignore the disgusting feeling of his hot, moist breath on her palm and contain the fear that had grabbed her heart in a vice, Alexis searched her surroundings for what the beast had smelled.

Her heart skittered to a halt as she caught a glimpse of a man moving toward her, stealthily, but quickly. He didn't look left or right. He was heading straight toward her as if he knew where she was.

Relief made her feel weak and heavy and downright faint as she caught a glimpse of his distinctive markings in the flicker of moonlight that passed over him.

And then her heart commenced to knocking on her ribs again as she caught sight of yet another man, very much like the first.

It took her mind precious moments to accept that it wasn't Torin she'd glimpsed—couldn't be. He'd made it abundantly clear he hated the tiger clan. He wouldn't be coming back with one.

So neither was Torin.

And both were heading right toward her.

It wasn't going to do any good to crouch down and hope they hadn't seen her. They *knew* where she was. They'd caught her scent, or maybe the tog's.

Indecision gripped her.

She didn't think she could hide from them and she didn't think she could outrun them, and she was pretty damned sure she couldn't make the tog carry her away. Fighting them was certainly out of the question, however.

That thought was enough to make up her mind. She grabbed a handful of the coarse hair growing along the back of the beast's neck and tried to haul herself up onto its back. It sidled, tried to sidestep away from her.

As she landed awkwardly with little more than her upper body on the saddle, though, she came face to face with yet another tiger-man. It startled him almost as much as it did her and before she even considered the wisdom of doing so, she let out a scream that almost seemed to pin his ears back.

The siren loud cry seemed to echo back from rock to tree and magnify. The beast let out a terrified scream to match hers and took off. She tightened her grip instinctively, but couldn't manage to drag herself up on the seat. By the time she realized she wasn't going to be able to, however, the beast was charging at full speed toward the trail and she was afraid to let go for fear the thing would trample her.

She'd caught the tiger men by surprise. The tog had almost dragged her back to the trail before they regrouped and charged after her and the beast, coming at them from every direction. Each time a tiger man leapt into the tog's path, it uttered another squeal, leapt into the air to kick out with first its front legs then the back, and abruptly changed directions, racing round and round in ever tightening circles until she was almost as dizzy as she was breathless and too shocked to feel more than dull thuds at the battering she was taking. When the tog finally accepted defeat and came to a shaking, bucking halt, she fell off, landing flat on her back on the dirt hard enough it forced a grunt from her.

Time seemed to slow as the tog danced above her, bouncing slowly into the air and kicking out at the tiger men circling the two of them, swiping at the tog in an effort to capture it and avoid the lethal horn it swung at them as it tried to defend itself.

As she lay staring blankly upward at the night sky, trying to gather her wits, a fourth or fifth—she'd lost count of how many there were—tiger man stood up on the rocky crag some fifteen feet above her and leapt to join the fray. She'd already rolled onto her belly to scramble away before it connected in her mind what she'd seen.

Torin!

A thrill rushed through her. He'd come back to save her!

Her heart sank in the next moment. He was outnumbered four to one, at least. As incredibly strong as he seemed to her, he'd admitted himself that he'd lost a lot of weight and he was no doubt weakened from his stint in the bear clan's prison.

Those thoughts tumbled through her mind on top of one another, jostled by the confusing impressions of conflict suddenly surrounding her as Torin engaged the tiger men in a deadly battle and the ring of metal against metal as they dueled with their swords filled her ears. Her shocked brain continued to move out of sync so that everything around her appeared to move in slow motion, cocooning her from terror at the same time it slowed her perceptions and reflexes.

She was still aware that Torin was badly outnumbered and that both his life and her own were probably hanging in the balance.

Weaponless and still wallowing about on the ground, she made a grab for the leg of one of the tiger men as he surged forward to swing at Torin with his own sword. His momentum carried her with him, but she held on for all she was worth and bit down on his calf.

The distraction cost him his life, but Alexis was in no state at that moment to feel any more than relief that Torin had dispatched him before he could behead her with his

sword. He'd swung at her. She hadn't realized it until he'd wrenched his leg from between her teeth and she looked up to see the blade arcing toward her.

Torin slammed his own blade against it, deflecting it before it connected with her and then caught the man across the middle with a backward swing that disemboweled him.

"Damn it to hell, Lexis!" Torin bellowed at her. "Get out of the way!"

She did scramble away, but only to search the ground wildly for something she could use as a weapon. The glint of the fallen tiger's sword caught her eye in the dim light, and she made a dive for it. One of the other tiger men beat her to it. Stepping on the blade before she could pick it up, he swung a backhanded blow at her that knocked her almost literally for a loop. She flew up and backwards in an arcing path, slammed into the ground, and skidded several more feet before she came to a stop.

Torin let out an enraged bellow and clove the tiger man's head from his shoulders. The body wavered for several moments before it crumpled to the ground, blood spewing from the neck in a gruesome fountain that splattered Alexis thoroughly.

Torin was beside her before she could collect herself and try to push herself upright.

Dropping his sword, he grasped her shoulders and pulled her upright himself. Cupping a hand behind her head when it wobbled with the dizziness that assailed her, he probed for broken bones with his free hand, but stopped abruptly with his hand resting on her thigh. She wasn't certain if it was the sudden tensing of his hand on her thigh that made her open her eyes or his sharp inhalation of breath, but alarm pierced her semi-stupor even before she lifted her eyelids to see what had happened.

When she opened her eyes, she discovered that they were surrounded by men holding swords—humans—and the tip of every sword was pointed at Torin.

Two of the men sheathed their swords, grasped Torin by either arm and hauled him backward and away from her. Two others grabbed her and jerked her to her feet.

Torin promptly dragged the men holding his arms together, slamming them into each other hard enough to stun both men. Even as they lost their grip, four others surged forward to grab him.

One of the men holding her caught her in a head lock. "I'll snap her neck, tiger man," he growled.

Torin stilled instantly, froze in the act of lifting one of the men he'd grabbed above his head. He dropped the man. As he did so, the men still standing surged forward to grab him, slamming him against the dirt and wrestling his arms behind his back.

"She is *mine*! Hurt her and you will beg me for death," Torin snarled in a low, rumbling growl that was somehow far more threatening than if he'd bellowed it.

Alexis wasn't certain if it was the way he said it, or what he'd said, but it pierced her shock clouded senses. The fine hairs along the back of her neck prickled. Her flesh pebbled in a cascade as if a douche of cold water had washed over her, her heart executing a strange little hitch.

A couple of the men uttered nervous, unconvincing laughs.

"Yours?" one of the men, apparently the leader, demanded with a snort. "And who are you to be making threats?"

Torin's eyes narrowed. For several moments, it seemed he wouldn't respond at all. Finally, with a tone of self-disgust, he snarled, "Torin, Lord of the Clan of the Lion."

## Chapter Ten

As rattled as Alexis was from the battering she'd taken in the brief scuffle with the tiger men, despite the pounding in her head from the choke hold that was just tight enough to make breathing difficult and trap the pulse of her blood in her head, she gaped at Torin, wondering if she'd heard him correctly.

To her surprise and relief, the man choking her eased his grip. The threat of unconsciousness receded as the pressure on her jugular relaxed and she managed to drag in a decent breath of air. The overpowering of her senses from the confusion of perceptions pelting her didn't abate a good bit, however, and weakness pervaded her. She slumped more heavily against the man holding her.

The leader of the group shifted uneasily. As she peered around at the group shrouded by night shadows, she noticed a tension about all of them that suggested the announcement had unnerved them.

Or maybe they were just as stunned as she was?

Why had he claimed her? To protect her?

And why was he now claiming to be the leader of the lion clan when he'd told her he wasn't even accepted by his mother's people?

She'd just concluded it was nothing more than fabrications he thought, somehow, would be advantageous to them, when the men surrounding them emerged from their surprise sufficiently to question his assertion.

"I heard he was dead," one of the men holding Torin said nervously.

Torin sent him a narrow eyed look and the man stiffened visibly. "They were wrong."

"I heard Torin was taller."

"They say he's a monster of a man. He's a big fella, but he doesn't look *that* big to me."

"He can't be of the tiger clan," one of the other men volunteered, "or he wouldn't have killed the others."

"Shut up, all of you, and bind him!" the leader said abruptly. "Her, too. And get him up on his tog. Will, go get our togs. We'll take them back to Joel and let him decide what to do with them."

Torin didn't try to escape again. Alexis might have thought it was because he was so badly outnumbered, and disarmed—because he'd lain his weapon down to check her for injury—but he'd proven, to her at least, that the human men were no match for him in strength. Regardless of their number, she had a feeling if it hadn't been for her he would've waded through them as effortlessly as he'd gone through the tiger men who'd attacked her and he'd hardly broken a sweat or been breathing hard from dispatching them.

Guilt weighed upon her at the thought. She averted her gaze as the man holding her released her long enough to jerk her around to face him and bound her wrists together. When he'd finished, he hefted her over his shoulder and hauled her through the brush for what seemed an eternity. Finally, thankfully, someone else grabbed her and she

was hauled upward and settled on the back of a tog before another man.

She thought it was the leader of the group, though she wasn't sure. It was darker beneath the trees and she could see even less than she'd been able to see before. The smell of unwashed bodies and beasts grew stronger as the men mounted their togs and clustered in a tight group, but otherwise none of her five senses were of much use to her. The smells blended into an unlovely bouquet without a great deal of distinction or individuality beyond the fact that she could tell it was a blend of man and beast. The thin streams of light that flickered through the tree branches overhead as they set off provided glimpses of pale flesh, beast, leather, and an occasional glint of a weapon, but by and large she was simply surrounded by shadows and darker shadows.

The sounds were no better, though she realized after a few moments that the tread of the togs seemed muffled. Beyond the occasional creak of leather the group made very little sound.

They'd wrapped everything that might make noise in cloth, she realized after a while—the hooves of the animals and any metal that might have clanged together to give them away.

She supposed that explained, in part, why Torin hadn't heard their approach, but she knew his hearing was far keener than her own.

They'd already been surrounded, she decided, while the battle was raging. That was why they didn't question Torin's assertion that she was his woman. They'd seen enough they'd already figured out the two of them were together. It also explained why Torin hadn't heard their approach. Partly.

She knew she'd been the distraction that had resulted in their capture. There was no getting away from that. He'd been too focused on protecting her and then on searching her for injury.

Guilt weighed more heavily upon her but after a while a sense of injustice joined it. She'd waited quietly. She hadn't done anything to draw attention. It wasn't her fault the tiger men had discovered her or that Torin had been so distracted by his battle with them that the men had captured them. She knew it wasn't, and she still felt guilty and defensive because of it.

She was uneasy, as well—too battered and shocked to feel full blown fear, but certainly the niggling of it in the recesses of her mind. Torin had seemed certain that the human clan wouldn't welcome her, would immediately know her for a true blood and would hate her accordingly.

It wasn't likely they would be friendly toward him since it seemed to her that all the clans were either actively at war with one another, or hated each other anyway and were constantly on the brink of war with one another.

Exhaustion replaced both her fear and her shock after a while. As she emerged from the cocoon of shock, though, she became more and more aware of the battle she'd engaged in. Not that she'd put up much of a fight, but she certainly felt the effects of trying. Her feet and shins were battered from being dragged around by the tog and throbbed almost as much as her head and jaw from the blow that had knocked her head over heels and the scrapes and bruises she'd gathered upon landing. It would've been quicker to name the few places on her body that didn't hurt than to list all the places that did.

The wicked pace the men set didn't help. The man had bound her hands before

her, thankfully, but her hands and fingers still felt swollen to nearly twice their size within a very short length of time and her arms and shoulders screamed for some ease from the awkward position.

She was too miserable to actually sleep and too weary to remain clear headed. She floated in and out of a pain filled fog as the togs raced along what she supposed was a trail of sorts. If not for the man holding her on the saddle before him, she thought it very likely she would've tumbled off before they'd traveled far.

At one point she roused enough to see that the landscape had lightened around her with approaching dawn. She discovered then that the tog the raiders had mounted Torin on was keeping pace with the one she rode. She flicked a glance in his direction when she became aware of his presence beside her, but his face was so set and uncompromising she didn't look at him again.

The sun had crested the horizon enough to blind her when they at last broke from the trees. Her gritty eyes watered. She blinked them, trying to bring the scene before her into focus, but her eyes still burned and tears blurred her vision. She squinted.

The trees had thinned, she realized as the togs picked their way through a maze of stumps, because they'd been chopped down. The land rolled gently and seemed less rocky, but it was obviously poor soil, for vegetation was fairly sparse and stunted.

In the distance, she saw the use the trees had been put to—a ragged stockade had been built with the green logs. It didn't look as if they'd even been debarked, though the bark was falling off the dead trees in patches, she saw as they drew closer. She also saw that the trees fit together poorly. There were fairly large gaps between them. An attempt had been made to fill the cavities with what looked like clay, but, like the bark, it, too, was falling away.

A shout went up from a lookout as they approached and a section of lashed trees was dragged open to allow them to enter.

The compound they rode into was a shock to Alexis. At first sight, it looked to be nothing more than a jumble of refuse, as if the humans had walled in some vast junkyard left over from the civilization that had abandoned the world. Here and there, she saw the partial standing walls of buildings that had collapsed and even a couple that almost seemed in tact. Ancient, rusting vehicles of all sorts, machines, broken pieces of furniture, and appliances were piled together with no sense of order. Ragged pieces of cloth fluttered in the openings left from shattered windows and missing doors. Mud had been daubed in cracks and crevices, obviously, since no amount of time would have naturally deposited so much.

As they entered the pock marked compound, half naked and half starved men and women, and painfully thin, completely naked children began to emerge from the junk heaps, drawn by the commotion of their arrival.

Alexis surveyed the compound and its inhabitants, her mind rapidly gathering and processing the information her eyes gathered.

The fear that had been gaining strength as they drew closer and closer to their destination was usurped by entirely different emotions.

Pity.

Shame.

Anger.

Understanding.

This wasn't unlike anything she'd ever seen before. It was *exactly* like areas she'd seen before. The worst of the city slums.

Whatever Torin thought, he was wrong. These weren't mutant humans. These were 'true bloods', very likely the only true bloods left in existence in all the universe.

These people were the 'undesirables' of the society that had once existed. They were the descendents of the poor, the ignorant, the homeless, very likely the criminal element, as well. They would not have been mutated because their antecedents wouldn't have had the money to pay for it, and they'd been left behind because they weren't important enough to be considered for relocation.

Something of what she was feeling must of shown on her face. She discovered when she glanced at Torin that he was studying her intently, a question in his eyes that she didn't want to answer.

She looked away again, feeling embarrassment surge in her cheeks.

The mutants had emerged from chaos and begun to build again.

As far as she could see the humans, these humans, had done nothing more for generations than their ancestors had. They were scavengers.

That had also made them survivors, but that was all they'd done. They hadn't prospered. They hadn't made any attempt to better their lives, to rebuild their own civilization. They'd simply continued to scavenge for anything useful that would help them eke out an existence.

She supposed, after a moment, they couldn't be expected to. They'd never been taught any different. Their forbearers had been civilized barbarians. Violent or meek, they'd sprung from the concrete and steel jungles of the cities. They had had little in the way of skills or knowledge to pass down to future generations.

She dragged in a shaky breath after a moment.

They were still human, *her* people, and it was with a fierce sense of gladness that she realized she'd found even this small remnant of the human race. They could learn. All they needed was someone to teach them and she was qualified to teach them the skills that they'd never been taught. If they'd listen, if they could be brought to understand there was a way to build, she could help them.

Several men emerged from one of the more reputable looking structures near the center of the compound and approached their group. She realized fairly quickly the one in the forefront was undoubtedly the one called Joel, and he was obviously the leader of the ragtag band of humanity.

A dark, ragged thatch of hair fluttered about his shoulders as he strode briskly toward them. He was tall and broad shouldered, but not exceptionally so. It was his bearing more than his size that set him apart from the men around him.

As he drew closer, she was surprised to see he appeared to be fairly young, perhaps in his early thirties. His face was harsh and angular rather than handsome, and still managed to be extremely appealing.

His eyes, she saw when he finally halted a few yards away to survey them, were a pale bluish gray. For what seemed an endless moment, he met her gaze, held it, his expression completely unreadable. Finally, almost as if it took an effort to do so, he dragged his gaze from hers, skimmed it over her and then surveyed the rest of her party. Slowly, anger descended over his features and the thick, dark slash of his brows drew together over the bridge of his nose until they nearly met. He planted his hands on his

narrow hips. "Why the fuck have you brought prisoners, Lawrence?" he demanded in a deep, growling voice. "You were supposed to bring back food, you dumb shit!"

The man holding her shifted uneasily. "I thought the woman was one of ours, Joel," he said, shifting so abruptly to dismount that Alexis lost her precarious perch and followed him. He caught at her, but not quickly enough to prevent her from slamming into the dirt. A cloud of dust rose around her as she landed, choking her.

Torin uttered a deep chested, warning growl.

Blinking the dirt from her eyes, Alexis peered up and discovered the man called Joel had reached her, crouching beside her, though he wasn't looking at her at the moment. When she opened her eyes, she saw he'd lifted his head to stare at Torin.

After holding Torin's gaze unflinchingly for a long moment, he returned his attention to her. Grasping her jaw in a surprisingly gentle hold, he examined her face before his gaze scanned her length. Her belly tightened uncomfortably as he met her gaze and she saw that, like Torin, he'd instantly recognized that she wasn't from their world.

Joel dragged in a ragged breath, feeling very much as if he'd been punched in the stomach. He'd known even before he did it that it would be a bad mistake to touch her, to come so close, but he hadn't been able to resist the urge any more than he'd been able to control his initial reaction to her. She'd rocked his world from ten feet away, so stunned him when she'd met his gaze he'd stopped dead his tracks as if he'd hit a wall.

This close, instead of refuting his initial reaction, she'd dragged him in deeper.

It took a conscious effort to withdraw even a little, to shift his focus to his surroundings. He wondered wryly if he'd managed to conceal his reaction or if everyone watching knew the woman had totally knocked him for a loop.

He dropped his hand from her face instead of stroking his calloused fingers along her velvety cheek like he wanted to, instead of soothing the bruise that marred her pretty face.

Rage suffused him as he studied it. No accident accounted for it. It was the size and shape of a man's fist and a pure wonder that whoever had hit her hadn't broken her jaw, or her neck. Either she wasn't as delicate as she seemed to him ... or it was pure luck.

"Did you do this to her, Lawrence?" he asked in a cold, deadly voice without lifting his gaze from her.

"It weren't us," Lawrence said, almost stammering in his haste to profess his innocence.

Joel looked up at him, studied him assessingly and finally returned his attention to Alexis.

"You speak English?"

Alexis tried to gather enough moisture in her mouth to respond and finally just nodded when she discovered she couldn't.

He stood up. "Bring her to my quarters. Put the tiger man in the brig for now."

"She stays with me," Torin said coldly.

Joel's eyes narrowed on him.

"He says he's Torin of the lion clan," Lawrence volunteered. "I'm thinking he's a goddamn liar. We just snuck up on him and took him."

Joel flicked a glance at Lawrence and then looked at Torin again, studying him

more intently than before. He shook his head in disgust after a moment, his expression thoughtful. "He let you take him, you dumb shit! The question is, why?" He hesitated. "Bring him with the woman."

"I'm gettin' tired of him calling me a dumb shit," Lawrence muttered under his breath when he was sure Joel was out of range of hearing him.

Reaching down, he grasped Alexis by one arm and hauled her roughly to her feet. She staggered, trying to manage her uncooperative limbs.

"I told you he'd be pissed if we didn't bring food back," one of the other men muttered.

"Shut up, Brian," Lawrence snarled, jerking Alexis around.

She stumbled again.

"Let me carry her," Torin said. "She's hurt."

"I can walk," Alexis lied, struggling to keep her legs moving when both were so numb they didn't even feel like they were part of her.

"Both of you shut up!" Lawrence growled.

Alexis' knees buckled after the first few steps and she nearly jerked Lawrence off his feet as she went down. He caught her, hauling her up again. She could see from the look in his eyes that he was tempted to hit her. He refrained, but she didn't think it was self-control. She was more inclined to think it was because he didn't want to antagonize Torin ... or Joel.

He shoved her toward Torin. "Carry her, then, if you can figure out how with your hands tied. I shore as hell ain't untying you."

Torin pulled his hands from behind his back, holding out the strip of leather that had been wound around his wrists. A gleam of both amusement and savage satisfaction lit his eyes as Lawrence gaped at the binding in his hand. Dropping it into the dirt, he scooped Alexis up against his chest.

Disconcerted herself, and more than a little reluctant to be in such close proximity to him when she knew he must still be furious with her, she nevertheless lifted her arms and looped them around his shoulders, mostly because she didn't want to risk being dropped again.

He snagged her gaze for a long moment. She didn't break eye contact. He released her from his hold as he scanned her face. Wondering if it was as swollen and misshapen as it felt, she dropped her head wearily to his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I got us into this mess," she said quietly. "You should've just left me."

Some of the tension seemed to leave him. "Just don't try to help next time," he said irritably.

Meaning he would've been better off if she hadn't?

She supposed she could see his point.

The rebuke still made her eyes sting with hurt. She'd never felt so useless and inadequate in her life and she hated the feeling. She didn't know why, but it made it worse that Torin seemed to see her in that light.

She managed to quell the urge to cry, knowing it would only make her seem more weak and useless, but she couldn't completely dismiss the hurt. "Fine then! I won't," she said stiffly, her voice husky with unshed tears.

He tried to look down at her face, but she refused to let him catch her eye again. Instead, she stared sullenly at the view she could see beyond his shoulder.

They had the full attention of everyone in the community, she saw uncomfortably—

everyone that had risen, at least. Fear and hostility dominated the faces that watched them, but she saw more than a few who merely stared with blank faced apathy. They seemed healthy enough, if underfed for the most part. They weren't all underfed, though. There were those among them who obviously managed to grab plenty of food for themselves. This group seemed primarily made up of men and she wasn't certain if it was because they, being the protectors, were catered to, or if they simply took because they could.

It occurred to her abruptly that at least some of the people she was seeing must be descended from prisoners. If those who'd left had left abruptly, abandoned the poor, they certainly wouldn't have emptied out the prisons and taken them with them.

Unless they'd died trapped in their cells.

That thought made her queasy, but it was hard to imagine that they would have stopped to open the prison cells. It was almost as horrible to imagine that they hadn't—had either not given a thought to the men and women they'd left caged or had deliberately ignored what must happen to them—as it was to imagine that they'd turned them loose to prey on the other people they'd left.

Time had no doubt weeded out the weak from the strong, the sick from the healthy, but, if she'd guessed right, then the violent criminals had probably weeded out a lot more than nature had.

Maybe that was why Torin had been certain the humans weren't completely human? Maybe he didn't realize that humans could be just as savage and vicious as any wild animal given the right incentive—and survival was incentive enough.

It seemed they'd managed to establish some sort of order, though. They had a leader, warriors to protect the clan and, if she'd correctly interpreted the things she'd heard, to raid other clans for the things they needed.

She wondered what sort of man Joel was.

The thought had barely registered in her mind when they entered the building he obviously claimed as his headquarters.

She lifted her head and looked around when Torin stopped.

The room was huge but she could see several doorways that indicated the building contained other rooms. The interior was dim and cluttered with odds and ends—she presumed the booty the raiders collected. His muscular arms folded over his broad chest, Joel sat with his buttocks propped on the top of what appeared to be a wooden container of some kind. It was cylindrical in shape, but definitely made of wood, not from any of the materials available in her time.

His handsome face was hard with anger as he studied her and Torin. He slid a narrow eyed look at his men. "Which one of you fucking morons untied him?"

The men shifted uncomfortably. "He got loose," the one Lawrence had called Brian finally admitted. "I guess I didn't tie him up very good."

"Guess not," Joel said dryly, fixing Torin with a steady gaze. "Put the woman down."

Torin's arms tightened around her at the coolly spoken command, but when Alexis lifted her bound arms from around his neck, he settled her on her feet. She locked her knees determinedly when the men who'd escorted them grabbed Torin and separated them.

"Tie him to that chair over there—and make sure you do it right this time," Joel said in a cold voice that sent a shiver up Alexis' spine.

When they'd finished, he ordered them out.

A little surprised, Alexis watched the men go. When she returned her attention to Joel, she discovered he'd approached her. He caught her chin in one hand, tipping her face up. "Did he do this?" he asked tightly.

Alexis stared at him blankly for a moment before she realized he was talking about her bruised face. "No!" she said, outraged that he would even suggest it.

His dark brows rose. He glanced at Torin. "And the man that did this to her?"

"Won't do it again," Torin growled.

He returned his attention to Alexis. "Why don't you tell me how you got here, why you came, and what you're doing with the high chieftain of the lion clan," he demanded coolly. He glanced at Torin. "Who, from what I heard, vanished a couple of months ago and was presumed dead."

## Chapter Eleven

Alexis sent a wide eyed glance in Torin's direction, wondering if Joel was insinuating Torin had lied and he knew he had, or if he, too, believed Torin was who he said he was.

*Was he what they thought? Who they thought he was? Was it possible?*

It seemed unlikely, although she had to admit that he behaved like a man that was accustomed to command.

She'd thought it was just the independence of having always been a loner, though.

"You need his permission to answer?" Joel growled angrily.

Alexis reddened as she glanced at him sharply.

He moved away from her after a moment, settling again on the barrel he'd been perched on before. "You're not from here, so don't bother trying to spin me a tale," he prompted.

She stared at him. He hadn't seemed particularly hostile, but she didn't know the man. He might just be very good at hiding what he thought and how he felt. After a moment's consideration, she rather thought he must be.

And Torin had warned her that 'her kind' was universally hated here. "Why would you say that?" she asked cautiously.

His gesture took her in from head to foot. "The flight-suit was a dead giveaway," he retorted dryly.

Alexis couldn't resist the urge to look down at herself, but once she had she didn't see what there was about it that had given her away. It was filthy now and torn in several places. She was almost as ragged as everyone else. "I found it," she lied, lifting her head to look him dead in the eyes.

His lips tightened. "Really? It fits you so well it might almost have been made for you," he retorted dryly.

Alexis didn't look away, but she couldn't prevent her cheeks from coloring. Obviously, the intelligent gleam in his eyes wasn't misleading, she thought uncomfortably. He was smart, and he was damned good at keeping his thoughts to himself.

A lot better, unfortunately, than she appeared to be.

"Guess that answers the question uppermost in my mind," he said tightly.

Alexis looked a question.

"You didn't come back for us."

Alexis felt her color change three times before it finally settled.

"That's what I thought." He surged to his feet and paced the length of the room, stopping in front of Torin. "You feel more like talking?"

Torin met his gaze but said nothing.

Joel studied him critically. "I doubt the bear clan furnished you with that armor, so I'm guessing you've been their guest for a while. Two months sound about right?"

Torin merely stared him, his lips flattened into a thin line.

Joel pulled a wicked looking knife from a scabbard strapped to one thigh.

Alexis sucked in a sharp breath. "What do you want to know?"

"Lexis," Torin growled warningly.

Joel divided a look between the two of them and finally moved behind Torin.

Alexis surged toward him with no idea what she intended to do to prevent him from harming Torin, but a determination to try whatever Torin had said about her interference before.

To her surprise and relief, Joel merely slipped the blade between Torin and his bindings and severed them. Torin looked as surprised as she felt.

Joel sheathed the knife again. "We don't take prisoners. You're free to go."

Torin stood, studying him with suspicion. "Just like that?"

Joel shrugged, grinning abruptly, though, despite the wry humor, his grin wasn't particularly friendly. "If only half what I've heard about you is true, we've nothing that will hold you. And to be frank, we don't have enough food for our own people after the last raid. We've got enough on our hands with the bear clan. We don't need a war with the lion clan, as well."

Torin rubbed his wrists and glanced at Alexis. "My weapons?"

"You can have them when you're outside my gates. You're welcome to stay as my guest for now. I can at least offer you a bed, a bath, and a decent meal before you go."

Alexis could see Torin didn't trust Joel but after a moment he nodded.

Moving to Alexis, Joel pulled his knife and cut her restraints and then strode to the outer door and opened it. "Lord Torin and Lexis will be our guests for now. Show them to the bathhouse and tell Mary to see if she can round up a clean change of clothing for them, food, and a bed."

Lawrence glanced past Joel's shoulder at them, studied them angrily for a moment, and finally nodded.

Relief descended over Alexis, her spirits lightening considerably at the offer of comfort. She didn't know which she wanted most, but she thought the bed.

The bathhouse, she discovered, wasn't much of a 'house', but rather a crumbling bit of building that was little more than a shell, and it appeared to be communal, although it was currently unoccupied. Torin stopped and turned to face their escort when they reached the pool, which looked to be around ten by fifteen feet, but was shallow, maybe two to two and a half feet deep from end to end.

After staring at Torin for a long moment, Lawrence finally took the hint and departed. Alexis looked at Torin questioningly when he glanced at her and then moved to the door.

"I'll stand watch."

Alexis frowned. "You think that's necessary?"

He shrugged, propping a shoulder against the door frame. "I'd as soon not find out."

She was too tired, she discovered, to argue, but she didn't see the necessity of it herself. If they'd meant harm there seemed no reason to tell them they were guests and offer them the bath to start with. They could've simply kept them bound and shoved them into a cell, or locked them into a room—somewhere. She hadn't actually seen anything yet beyond Joel's headquarters that looked whole enough to be considered a

room.

Unfastening her suit, she peeled it off and dropped it on the edge of the pool. "I wonder what this place was before?" she speculated as she crouched down to run her fingers through the water. "It's hot," she added in surprise, turning to glance at Torin.

He was still watching her, she discovered, his expression unreadable. He lifted one brow at her comment, though.

A woman appeared at the door as Alexis slipped into the pool. She looked Torin over uneasily and finally held out the bundle she was carrying. "Joel said I was to show you to your quarters when you've finished."

Torin took the bundle and nodded.

When the woman had left, he examined the contents, surveyed the area outside the building thoroughly, and finally moved to the edge of the pool. Alexis studied the clay pot he held out to her. "What is it?"

"Soap—I think."

She took the pot and sniffed it, wrinkling her nose at the smell. "It doesn't smell very good," she commented.

Torin's mouth curled up at one corner. "It's lye soap—harsh on the skin. Be careful with it."

Alexis wasn't certain she wanted to use it at all, but finally decided it wouldn't hurt if it peeled a few layers off considering how much wallowing she'd done in the dirt during their fight with the tiger men and it had been several days since their stop at the small natural pool of water. Settling the pot on the edge of the pool, she scooped a little into her hand and began to scrub herself with it. Discovering the scent didn't seem to linger on her skin, but worked wonders for removing the dirt, she used it with more enthusiasm and then dipped low in the pool and began to scrub her scalp and hair.

Torin had moved back to the door. "Don't get it in your eyes—or any place—ah—sensitive. It burns like a son-of-a-bitch."

She wondered if he was just teasing her but discovered he was right. It did sting.

His eyes were gleaming with both amusement and heated promise when she glanced at him after washing her privates. "I did warn you," he murmured with a faint chuckle.

She climbed out of the pool, picked through the bundle and found a length of material she decided had been provided for drying. "I'll watch for you if you'd like to bathe," she offered.

He sent her a startled glance and finally grinned. "You think they might come to watch me bathe?"

Alexis blinked at him in confusion. "Watch . . ." She reddened, realizing she'd completely misinterpreted his reason for guarding the door. A mixture of warmth, amusement, and surprise filled her—warmth at his thoughtfulness and both amusement and surprise that he'd think that it would bother her. She'd forgotten that in many of the old cultures nudity was taboo. She should have realized before that this society, or at least his, must have restrictions about such things if they guarded their women's 'virtue' as she'd surmised they must.

On the other hand, she also realized she didn't particularly care for the thought of the women gathering around to stare at Torin bathing.

That realization startled her.

Why would she feel possessive of Torin when she knew very well he wasn't 'hers', regardless of what he'd said before about her belonging to him?

It had sent a thrill through her when he'd said it, though, and she wondered if that had somehow changed her perspective of him.

Shaking those thoughts off, she dropped the cloth she'd dried herself with and picked the clothing up to examine it piece by piece. There were no shorts like those she wore beneath her suit. The breeches they'd provided looked more likely to fit Torin than her, but there wasn't another pair, only two tunics, one long and narrow, the other broad and much shorter.

"The gown, I'm fairly certain, is for you," Torin said dryly.

Alexis glanced at him. "Gown?"

Uttering a long suffering sigh, Torin moved from the doorway again and lifted the long 'tunic'. Alexis examined it critically and without much enthusiasm. "At least it seems to be clean," she finally commented, dragging it over her head and slipping her arms through the sleeves.

It didn't touch her anywhere except her shoulders. "I didn't see the other women wearing anything like this. I feel more naked than before I put it on. I couldn't run in this, or ride a tog." She couldn't, in fact, imagine doing much of anything wearing such a garment. There was far too much fabric to get in the way, to become snagged on something.

When Torin didn't comment, she looked up to see that he was removing his own garments. Pleasure wafted through her as she watched him, mesmerized by the beauty of symmetry that he was and the play of muscles in his body at the mundane task. "You are a beautiful man," she murmured appreciatively.

Obviously startled, his head jerked up, his gaze colliding with her face. He studied her expression keenly for a moment and finally looked away again. Amusement teased at Alexis as she saw his complexion darken. "Not hardly," he said gruffly, stepping into the pool with just enough uncharacteristic awkwardness to emphasize his discomfort.

She looked away politely, giving him a moment to recover, sorry, despite her amusement, that she'd made him uncomfortable. She wasn't exactly certain why her compliment *had* made him uncomfortable, but she could see it had. Maybe it was the 'beautiful' part since that was generally used to describe a woman of exceptional prettiness? He was certainly not effeminate in any way. "Handsome," she amended.

He grunted. "Your sight is worse than I thought to look at a face not even a mother could love and think it beautiful," he muttered, attempting to put a note of amusement in the tone and failing completely.

She'd meant that he was beautiful in the sense of physical perfection rarely seen, but his face certainly didn't detract from that. As alien as it had seemed to her to start with, she had still thought it a compelling face, not a repellent one and, as she'd grown accustomed, she'd also grown more aware of how appealing she found his face. A knot of emotion swelled in her throat. "There is something seriously wrong with any woman who could not love her child for any reason, who could look at the face of her child and *not* see it as beautiful," she said tightly. "And my senses may not be as acute as yours, but there is nothing wrong with my sight."

She moved away then, stopping in the open doorway as he had and staring

outside. It wasn't until her anger began to dissipate that she searched for the reason behind it. She was insulted by his comment, she had no doubt. She felt inferior that her senses weren't as keen as his, had felt that he considered her inferior because it was obvious they were.

He'd certainly made it clear enough that it wasn't her imagination!

Beyond the defensiveness, though, she realized she was more angry at what his remarks had revealed, angry, mostly, *for* him, not *at* him. She supposed he must know that it was his likeness to his father's clan that made him 'ugly' in the eyes of his mother and her people, and yet it was not something one could just dismiss or ignore. It was the sort of thing that wounded, regardless of why, promoted self-doubt.

It was a chink in his armor she hadn't expected. He seemed so completely self-confident, it hadn't occurred to her that he suffered any doubts about himself at all.

He didn't believe her. He suspected her motives for even making the remark. She knew he did, because of his self-doubts, but it still made her angry that an innocent, honest comment could call her motives into question.

What possible reason, she wondered indignantly, might she have for trying to pander to his ego?

She was so deep in her dark thoughts, she hardly registered the sounds of Torin emerging from the pool and dressing, approaching her, and a jolt went through her when his hand settled heavily on her shoulder. "I doubt they've any sort of medicine for it, but I will ask if they have something to ease the pain."

Alexis twisted her head to look up at him where he stood behind her. "Pain?" she echoed.

He touched her face lightly. It took no more than that to remind her of the dull throbbing that had been so constant she'd put it from her mind. "I suppose the hot water helped. It doesn't hurt nearly as much as it did," she said dismissively. "It must be unsightly."

"It is, but more in the sense that it's a constant reminder of my poor vigilance in protecting my little bird from the predators," he said, his voice low, gravelly with a mixture of emotions she found hard to define.

Her response was as hard to decipher. The overall effect, however, was to remind her that he had a poor opinion of her competence.

When they left the bath house, they discovered the woman—Mary, Alexis supposed—was waiting for them. She led them back to the dilapidated building Joel claimed as his headquarters. Instead of stopping in the main room just inside where they'd spoken with Joel before, though, she led them across it and through a doorway into a corridor. The hallway, despite the fact that it was well into morning, was dim, bereft of any artificial lighting and fed light only by a narrow window at one end that had been covered with what appeared to be some sort of woven material. There were doors all along the corridor and on each was a faded number.

Alexis wondered if the ancient building had once been a hotel for travelers, an apartment building, or possibly even a prison, though she dismissed that possibility fairly quickly. Mary opened a door and stepped back. "This one's for Lexis."

Irritation flickered through Alexis. No one had ever called her that but Torin and while she hadn't minded when he had, had in fact found it charming, she resented anyone else calling her that. "My name's Alexis," she corrected the woman pointedly.

Torin had leaned forward to look the room over. "This will do—for both of us."

The woman gaped at him. "Joel said ..."

Torin gave her a narrow eyed look. She backed away, bobbed her head, and scurried off. "I'll fetch some food."

Alexis glanced up at him in amusement as she stepped past him and entered the room. "That must be a handy trick," she murmured.

He looked a question at her when she glanced at him.

"That scowl of yours that strikes terror into the hearts of mice and men," she responded with amusement.

He looked disconcerted for a moment before a faint smile tugged at one corner of his lips. "Except you."

Alexis chuckled. "It struck terror into my heart, too, the first few times I saw it," she said a little absently, surveying the room with both surprise and approval. Beyond the bed, which looked more than a little broken down and ancient, the room was virtually bare, but it looked fairly clean. It was certainly a vast improvement over any 'accommodations' she'd had since she'd arrived on old Earth. The bed beckoned, and she crossed the room to settle on it a little gingerly. It was as lumpy as she'd suspected, but the bedding smelled fairly clean and she felt a desperate need to rest. She shifted to the far side and lay down.

Torin settled on the edge, testing the mattress himself. "But not now?" he pursued.

Alexis sighed wearily and closed her eyes. "Now I know you have a capacity for gentleness and patience and compassion to equal your capacity for violence and ruthlessness. Now I know that you're more dangerous even than I thought you were, but also that you wouldn't hurt me—so—not terror, just worry," she murmured tiredly.

When he didn't say anything else, she allowed herself to drift toward sleep.

The bed dipped as he settled beside her, rousing her slightly.

He leaned over her. "She promised food, Alexis," he murmured near her ear.

She smiled faintly. "Lexis," she corrected him.

He was silent for a moment. "You were pretty pointed about preferring to be called Alexis," he said tentatively.

"To her. I like it when you call me Lexis."

A finger stroked lightly over her bruised cheek. "Do you?"

She smiled again, but didn't open her eyes. "And little bird."

He chuckled. "I thought you hated that."

"Sometimes. Sometimes I like the way you say it."

"I'll have to think of something else that will annoy you," he said pensively.

She chuckled, opening her eyes with an effort. "You're not going to let me sleep, are you?"

"Not until you've eaten."

She sighed with a touch of irritation. "You're very bossy."

"I've been told that—and worse," he added wryly, carefully smoothing her tangled hair away from her face.

She closed her eyes again and allowed herself to drift. Despite the flicker of discomfort she felt about her appearance, she found the stroke of his hand soothing.

"My face ... doesn't bother you?"

The question after a prolonged silence jerked her awake again. She opened her eyes, uncrossed them with an effort, and studied the face so near her own. Lifting one hand, she settled it along his cheek, stroking her thumb along his high cheekbone. "I like this face."

He frowned, doubt and something else flickering in his eyes. "Why?"

She struggled to think it over since the answer seemed important to him. "I don't know," she finally said. "I just know it appealed to me from the start, and now ...."

"Now?" he prompted when she trailed off.

"I like it even more," she said, smiling faintly.

"Because?" he prodded, smiling slightly in return.

"Because its your face."

He leaned toward her, as if he might kiss her, but drew back abruptly, rolling from the bed and onto his feet in one, swift motion. Startled, Alexis pushed herself up from the bed. A few moments later, someone tapped briefly on the door and entered. Torin blocked her view of the intruder, but she heard the rattle of dishes. She sat up straighter and looked around him.

To her surprise, it wasn't Mary who'd brought the food, but Joel. He stopped in the middle of room and looked around, frowning irritably. "There's no table," he said unnecessarily.

Scooting to the edge of the bed, Alexis smiled at him. "We can manage," she said politely.

His gaze flickered over her face with a disconcerting intensity. "I'd thought I would join you. Floor or bed?"

Torin divided an angry, suspicious look between the two of them.

Catching the look, Joel grinned abruptly. "The floor it is. At least it looks fairly clean."

Bending at the waist, he settled the tray he was carrying on the floor with great care and then sat down, folding his legs close to his body and crossing them at the ankles. Alexis got up and joined him. Pulling the hem of the gown up far enough that she could fold her legs as he had, she settled across from him. Glaring at her, Torin dropped to the floor next to her, grabbed the material bunched around her thighs and pointedly snatched it down to cover her knees and legs.

She looked at him in surprise, then glanced at Joel questioningly. His gaze, she saw, was fixed on the juncture of her thighs. As if Torin's action had broken the spell that held him, though, he transferred his attention to the tray.

Amusement touched her, though she did her best to hide it. She was almost as certain that Joel had no idea he'd 'trespassed' by staring as she was that she knew what had enraged Torin. He *was* furious, despite his efforts to hide it.

She hadn't made any attempt to either be careful, or careless, when she'd sat down. It hadn't occurred to her to even consider that she might expose her nakedness, or that it would bother either man if she did. She supposed it wasn't actually funny that naked flesh had such a profound effect on either man, but she couldn't help but find it amusing.

It was just skin when all was said and done, and they had skin all over their bodies, just as she did. Moreover, assuming she had actually exposed her sex, which she doubted, she also doubted either man was the least bit unfamiliar with a woman's

genitals. Torin had certainly proven, beyond any doubt in her mind, that he knew his way around a woman's body. No man, she felt sure, could so easily and thoroughly pleasure a woman without a vast amount experience in doing so.

She didn't know Joel, and she could be wrong, but he was a handsome, virile male—as handsome in his own way as Torin was, and she imagined he'd had as much sexual experience as Torin.

She would've liked to think it was something special about her sex they found so riveting, but she couldn't convince herself of it. Naturally enough, genitals varied from person to person the same as any other part of their body, and each was somewhat unique, but she doubted hers was *that* different.

So why would a glimpse of her sex provoke the absolute fascination she'd seen in Joel's face and the possessiveness she'd seen in Torin's?

Maybe it was the fact that it was denuded of hair? It was something to consider, she realized, since this world was more primitive than the one she'd emerged from and the means of permanently removing something so unsightly and unsanitary as body hair wouldn't be available to them.

She'd been a little shocked, she remembered, when she'd seen the nest of hair surrounding Torin's genitals. She supposed they might find it shocking that hers was not covered with hair.

Dismissing the thoughts when she saw that both men were merely staring at the food, obviously sunk in their own thoughts, she leaned forward to examine the offering.

There was some dark beverage in mugs from which a faintly pungent smell emerged. She lifted one of the mugs and sipped from it cautiously, discovering it carried a faint bite that indicated a beverage of an alcoholic nature. The dizziness that followed as it hit the bottom of her cavernously empty belly confirmed her suspicion. "What's this?"

Joel glanced at her. "Berry wine."

Nodding, she set the mug down and stared at the food. "And this?"

"Eggs—the meat is wild pig."

She wasn't familiar with either, but she'd discovered that, by and large, she far preferred the 'natural' foods offered than she had the processed foods she was familiar with. Picking up the tiny 'shovel' looking utensil nearest her, she studied it a moment and used it to try to scoop up a small mound of the eggs. "This is very good," she announced when she'd rolled the food around on her tongue a moment and finally chewed and swallowed.

Joel chuckled when she tried to scoop up the meat with the utensil. "You can't use the spoon for that. You'll have to eat with your fingers."

She examined the 'spoon' and finally set it down. Picking up the piece of wild pig, she took a bite. Her stomach quivered faintly at the idea of eating animal, but she firmly quelled it. She couldn't afford to be picky about her food, not when it was obviously very hard to come by—and there certainly wasn't any processed food available. "Mmmm," she murmured when she'd managed to bite off a small piece. "This is better."

Sliding a speculative glance at Torin, Joel turned his attention to his own food. "You aren't used to this kind of food?" he prompted. "They don't have anything like this where you're from?"

“Oh, no,” Alexis agreed incautiously. “I haven’t had anything but space rations in years and years, but even the food we had before wasn’t anything like this. It wasn’t actually designed for taste, just to satisfy nutritional needs.”

She saw Torin was glaring at her irritably when she finally looked up. She glanced at Joel guiltily.

“Why travel years and years to get here?”

Alexis glanced at Torin apologetically, but finally shrugged. She felt, instinctively, that she could trust Joel. Her instincts might be wrong, but she was willing to trust them. “I didn’t. I came through the portal.”

Confusion registered on Joel’s face. “We assumed the colonies were evacuated when this world was,” he said finally.

Alexis looked at him in surprise. “You know about the colonies?”

“We may seem backwards and ignorant to you, but, yes, we did know,” he said dryly.

Alexis colored. “I didn’t mean to insult you. It’s just ... Torin said everything happened so long ago and ....”

“We’re so primitive,” Joel finished for her.

Alexis stared at him uncomfortably, but she couldn’t think of anything to say that he couldn’t twist into another insult. “Not as primitive as New Earth,” she said finally.

“New Earth?”

Alexis glanced at his startled face. “Yes. That’s what it was named.”

Joel frowned, but thoughtfully. She didn’t realize he was searching his memory for a reference to the name until his frown cleared and was replaced by a look of disbelief. “You’re one of the flight crewmembers of the U.E. Plymouth sent to erect the portal on the new world?” he asked sharply, then frowned. “You can’t be.”

“Why not?” Alexis demanded irritably.

“They died.”

## Chapter Twelve

Alexis felt a knot well in her throat. “Not until they came back here with me,” she said, finding she’d lost her appetite. She sipped at the wine instead. It made her a little lightheaded, but it was also calming.

Torin hadn’t joined the conversation, but then she could tell he disapproved by the tension she sensed in him. He didn’t have to say anything.

Ignoring his disapproval, she told Joel about everything that had happened since they’d landed on New Earth. “So,” she concluded, “we were abandoned the same as all of you.”

“Not quite the same,” Joel contradicted, his voice tight now with suppressed violence. “Thousands upon thousands died—millions—from disease, starvation, exposure, the violence of nature. Thousands more died, pinned in their prison cells to die slowly of starvation—like animals. And when the dying stopped from that, and the killer storms were finally tamed, the mutant clans began to prey on us because we didn’t have their strengths, and then to kill us for stealing what we needed to survive. In my grandfather’s time, there were many more of us, almost as many left behind as were allowed to go.

“There wasn’t enough room, they said, to take everyone. They promised to come back for the people they’d abandoned, but they never have.”

Alexis stared at him for a long moment and finally looked down. She was a little surprised to discover she’d drained her mug. Feeling strangely detached and uncoordinated, she set the vessel down carefully. “We were sent to erect the portal so that everyone could be removed to the new world.”

Joel sent her a look of disgust. “You don’t honestly believe they would have taken the ‘undesirables’ even if it hadn’t come too late?”

Alexis swallowed with difficulty around the guilt and remorse that clogged her throat. “I only know what we were told—that we were risking our lives for the sake of mankind—*all* mankind. We did all that we could. We couldn’t help that it took so long to reach the new world.”

He tamped his anger with an effort. “I didn’t say you could. *They* could’ve sent help, though.”

“Maybe they couldn’t?” Alexis suggested quietly.

He shook his head. “I will never believe the armada of colony ships that left here were *all* destroyed. They never intended to come back. They only told people that to allay their fears and calm the riots.”

“There were riots?” Alexis asked uneasily.

“Wide spread, from what I was told. Everyone expected total annihilation when it leaked out that there was a meteor the size of the moon bearing down on the Earth. We knew they believed it or they wouldn’t have been making such frantic haste to abandon the Earth. The terror had everyone crazed and fighting to get onto the ships. The military mowed them down without any regard to whether it was men, women, or

children until the threat of instant death by firing squad sent them running in the other direction. That was when they announced that they had time to reach the new world they'd picked and return for us before the meteor struck. Everyone believed, I suppose, because they wanted to. Or maybe because they couldn't accept that they were disposal.

"The meteor missed, but it passed so close it created devastating natural disasters, worse than what had been going on before. When it had passed, though, the worst of the storms did, too."

Alexis frowned as an errant thought tugged at the back of her mind. Pursuing it, she felt a touch of pleased surprise when she managed to capture it and examine it.

"There is a parallel here," she announced finally.

Torin and Joel both looked at her rather doubtfully.

"Long, long ago," she said, "the 'civilized world' was only made up of part of it. They didn't realize there was land beyond the sea until explorers discovered it. The people who came to settle the 'new world' and make it civilized were the 'undesirables' of the old world, mostly the poor. Some had been persecuted because of their religious beliefs, or political beliefs, but mostly it was just poor people who had no chance of bettering themselves."

"I don't see a parallel," Joel said dryly. "We were abandoned on the old world."

"Yes, but if we all went to the new world, then it would be a parallel."

Amusement gleamed in Joel's eyes. "You have drank too much and eaten too little, Lexis."

Alexis opened her mouth to contradict him, but Torin forestalled her. "Alexis," he said tightly.

"I thought her name was Lexis," Joel said, obviously puzzled.

"I call her Lexis," Torin said challengingly.

"*Dr. Alexis Conyers*," Alexis corrected at almost the same time, then beamed at him. "My friends call me Alex."

Joel's lips spread in a slow grin. "Then should I call you Alex?"

"You don't need to call her anything," Torin growled. "She won't be around long enough to become a 'friend'. We'll be leaving once its dark."

Joel met Torin's challenging look with one of his own. "Did I forget to mention that Alex would be staying?" he asked in a cool voice.

Torin looked him over assessingly. "I think not," he said in a deadly voice.

Joel didn't so much as flinch. "She's not in any shape to be traveling anyway, and she belongs with her own kind. Don't be a fool, Torin."

"She does not belong on this world at all," Torin retorted, coming slowly to his feet. "She stays with me."

Joel's lips tightened. He, too, stood.

Alexis' head spun a little as she tipped her head back to look up at the two men now towering over her. Uneasiness penetrated the pleasant fog the wine had given her. With an effort, she got to her feet, as well, struggling with a mixture of emotions that made her afraid and regretful, and filled her with both determination and depression. Uppermost in her mind, though, was the thought that she couldn't allow Torin to try to fight for her. As strong as he was, as certain as she was that he was a giant among men, he couldn't fight his way out of the compound if he killed Joel. They'd kill him. She couldn't live with that. "He's right. It's alright, Torin." She forced a smile when Torin

flicked a narrow eyed glare at her. "This is where I was coming anyway. I belong with my own kind."

Torin's face hardened as he turned his attention fully to her. "Your own kind?" he repeated, his voice silky now with menace.

"You said ...?"

"A lot of stupid things," Torin growled, interrupting her.

"Not if you told her the other clans would despise her for what she is," Joel said angrily. "And you know as well as I do that they will—even your clan."

"I am lord of the lion clan," Torin snarled. "They would not *dare* to challenge my right to take the woman of my choosing."

He returned his attention to Alexis. Grasping her and dragging her tightly against his length, he caught a fistful of her hair and tugged her head back.

Alexis had no more than a split second to consider his intent and her wits were too scattered to do so. His mouth as it connected with hers, however, spoke to her body, and her body instantly recalled the pleasure of his touch. She moaned in surrender, didn't even consider fighting the desire he instantly ignited in her, melting against him as the heat and hunger of his mouth, his taste and scent, engulfed her in a tidal wave of heated need.

Beyond the tug and faint burn of the material against the back of her neck as he grasped the thin fabric that covered her and rent it from neck to waist, she barely registered what he'd done until she felt his hand cupping and massaging her breast, felt the flick of his thumb across the tight, keenly sensitive bud of one nipple. Even then, she spent little time searching the why or how he'd removed the barrier. It was enough that she could feel his touch without impediment, enough that the strum of his thumb made the muscles low in her belly clench and moisture gather in her sex in hungry anticipation of his invasion of her body.

She lifted her hands to clutch at him as her mind spun dizzily.

She was vaguely aware that Joel watched them, but it scarcely registered at all, and certainly not in any way that dimmed her pleasure. She wouldn't have cared if Torin had lain her down in a crowded room so long as he touched her, kissed her, caressed her with his knowing hands and fingers.

Torin was well aware of Joel's observation. He was bent upon staking his claim on Alexis, however, bent upon showing him that she was his in every way, by her choice. He rapidly lost the original focus of his intent, however. He couldn't touch Alexis without being absorbed completely by his need for her, without the entire focus of his world centering upon her.

The soft sounds of pleasure she made sent him up in flames, seared his mind and body until he couldn't think at all. Instinct drove him. He had to taste and touch every part of her, claim every inch of her as his own, feed his pleasure on hers. Breaking the kiss, he lifted her, carrying her to the bed and spreading her so that he could feast on her more easily.

She arched her back, offering her breasts to him as he settled over her, shoving the torn garment out of his way so that he could explore her silky skin with his lips and tongue. The need to rush vied with the need to savor. He felt as if his cock would explode with the blood pounding in it. His balls drew tightly to his belly with the urge to pump his seed into her.

He ignored the pleasure/pain of his need, tracing the pink areole that surrounded the tight bud of her nipple with his tongue before he took the turgid peak into his mouth, sucking on it hungrily. Her fingers curled into his hair, holding him tightly to her. He ignored the tug against his scalp as he moved to capture the other peak and tug at it with his mouth.

Sweet, she tastes so sweet, he thought, relishing her taste as much as he delighted in the silky, smooth feel of her skin. He was content for a while to focus only on that tantalizing part of her, but her gasping cries drew him back to her mouth for another taste of that slick, moist cavern.

Which put him in mind of another and made his throat tighten with a thirst he knew he could only appease with a taste of her sex. Almost choking on the need, he broke from her lips and wove a trail downward along her body, pausing momentarily at her breasts to suckle each before he resumed his quest. The dress impeded his progress briefly, but he ripped it out of his way and explored her belly and then slipped his tongue between the plump lips of her sex and dragged it along her cleft.

She uttered a shaky cry as he found the little nub of flesh at the apex, digging her fingers into his hair again. Grasping her thighs, he spread them wide and covered the bud again, this time with his mouth. She bucked against him as he sucked the nub, shoving at him to evade his touch, but he caught her buttocks, holding her and licking and sucking at her clit until she ceased to try to evade his touch and began lifting against his mouth.

The blood pounding in his head and his cock became a torment as he pulled at it greedily and still he couldn't bring himself to leave it once he'd had a taste of her. He licked and sucked at it until she abruptly went rigid and then began to shudder and quake against him, until she was almost screaming his name in a hoarse, breathless voice.

He lifted his head when she went limp, studying her face through narrowed eyes and finally shifted upward, covering her body. A hiss of pain escaped him as he grasped his agonizingly sensitive cock and sought the mouth of her sex. She groaned as he struggled to push inside of her. Sweat popped from his pores as her hot flesh closed around the tip of his cock in a stranglehold he had to fight to press more deeply inside of her.

She was wet, so slick with moisture, and he so mindless with need, it took him several moments to realize her muscles were clamped so tightly around him he wasn't making any progress. Gritting his teeth against imminent explosion, he sawed shallowly in and out of her until he'd gathered her moisture on his member and thrust again. He thought for several moments his heart would stop when he succeeded at last and the length of her channel clamped tightly around him. Pausing to fight the dizziness and darkness threatening to swallow him, he dragged in a couple of gulps of air and, very cautiously, began to move.

She uttered a low, strangled cry and moved with him, countering each successive thrust until he lost what little mind he had. Instinct took over, and his instincts were screaming to empty the scalding seed burning his balls into her. Each time he thrust into her he felt the release he needed draw closer until, abruptly, she arched against him, froze, and then began to groan and shudder with another climax. The muscles along her channel kneaded his cock as her pleasure rocked her, pulling at his cock until it drew his seed from him. He uttered a choked groan of his own as the muscles low in his belly seized and released, pumping his seed into her.

He was so drained by the time the seizures ceased to wrack him he wanted nothing so much as to simply sink into the oblivion that was tugging at him. Sluggishly, and with seriously dangerous belatedness, he recalled the man he'd left standing in the center of the room, who might or might not be his enemy, and could easily have slain him while he was thoroughly occupied elsewhere.

It was still a struggle to roll off of Alexis and look around for the possibility of threat. Joel, he saw with a mixture of satisfaction and annoyance, still stood where he'd left him, his glazed gaze fixed upon Alexis' sprawled form. Joel dragged his gaze from her after a moment, stared at Torin as rage slowly replaced the vacancy of desire in his eyes and finally spun on his heel and stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Torin slumped with relief.

It was just as well he hadn't been forced to defend himself, he thought in self-disgust. He would've been a dead man.

Dragging his attention from the door after a few moments, he glanced down at Alexis. She'd passed, he saw, from sated bliss to unconsciousness. Pleased with himself, he dragged her close, curled his body around hers and gave up the effort to stave off his own weariness. If Joel had meant to kill him, he'd missed his best chance, he reasoned. It was safe enough to rest for a while.

He roused a little later when the door opened, jerking upright. The woman, Mary, gaped at him and quickly closed the door again. Slipping from the bed, he crossed the room, grabbed a rickety chair and wedged it under the door knob, then returned to the bed, climbed in and dropped deeply asleep almost as soon as he'd settled.

The room was dim when he woke, the gathering shadows deep enough he knew it must be near dusk. Surprised and a little alarmed that he'd slept so long, he tensed, listening for a time to the noises in the building around them. Satisfied after a while that there was nothing that indicated a threat of any kind, he settled again, staring at Alexis' sleeping face and struggling with the urge to wake her and make love to her again.

That thought startled him almost as much as the realization that he'd slept so deeply he'd lost touch with the world. He examined it with suspicion and not a little uneasiness.

Finally, he shrugged it off. It was a common enough phrase, not one he generally thought in terms of, but still .... Likely it had occurred to him because he thought of Alexis as a lady, not the same way he thought of the whores that usually warmed his bed—those who were willing to fuck him for coin or the possibility of a favor he might grant them as lord of the clan.

He discovered he was reluctant to wake her. He wasn't certain why until his mind began to tumble around the memories directly before he'd dropped into an exhausted slumber. Discomfort settled over him as he recalled what he'd done, and not just because he realized that, for the first time in his living memory, he'd completely thrown caution to the wind.

If he'd been in the habit of doing that he would've been dead long since. It was nothing short of a miracle that he'd survived this fit of stupidity.

Only to prove Alexis belonged to him.

The sense of fierce possessiveness stirred inside of him again.

Bafflement followed it. He realized he'd had no clear idea of what he intended to

do with Alexis. He'd simply been governed by a need to protect her and an equal need to possess her. It had been a deep, gnawing hunger inside of him almost from the moment he'd set eyes on her ... before she had offered herself to him. Once he'd had a taste of her, he hadn't been able to think of much else.

He'd acknowledged, somewhere in the deep recesses of his mind, though, that he couldn't take her with him. He'd told himself that, told her. The need to protect her had overridden his hunger for her at least that much. He thought, dimly, that he must have believed he would quench his thirst at some point, leave her, and go on his way. He would take her a safe distance from the bear clan and leave her.

He'd never intended to leave her, though, he realized, not even from the first.

He'd tried. He'd thought he was going to, but the moment he'd managed to wrest the tog from its owner and relieve him of everything else he had that was of use, he'd turned right around and headed back to find her.

Joel was right, although he hated to admit it. She was better off here, among her own kind. If he took her back with him, she'd never be safe. He couldn't protect her every moment of every day, no matter how hard he tried, and she couldn't protect herself—certainly not from the members of his clan.

They despised him for being a halfling and his life had been a torment to him because of it. They would hate her far more. He'd had the protection, at least, of being his grandfather's hereditary heir, but he had enemies who would be willing to risk their own death if they could strike at him through her.

The thought was enough to bring a cold sweat to his skin and a certainty to his mind that he hadn't wanted to acknowledge.

He'd thought in terms of making love to her, he realized a little sickly, because he loved her.

Lifting a hand, he traced her bruised cheek very lightly, remembering the fear and rage that had filled him when he'd heard her cry and thought he'd be too late to save her. He should've known then—maybe he had known.

She stirred and he half hoped she'd awaken and half feared she would.

When she settled again, he moved carefully to the edge of the bed and stood up. His breeches were still halfway down his hips where he'd shoved them out of his way in his feverish haste to claim her. He hadn't even thought about taking them off.

A mixture of desire and discomfort unsettled him at the realization that he'd torn her dress off like a madman—no, an animal.

Because he was more animal than he was man.

It hadn't seemed to matter to her. She seemed to have accepted him as he was—more than accepted. But how much could he believe? Her life had been in danger. She'd needed him. She'd offered herself that first time in return for protection. He'd known that at the time. It was part of the reason he'd been so enraged with her—wanting her and knowing she didn't actually want him, most likely was repulsed. It was the reason he'd *made* her look at him as he pierced her sweet body, so she couldn't pretend he was someone else, anyone else.

He shook the thoughts off. It didn't matter whether she actually cared something for him or not. She'd meant to come to the human clan all along. She knew she belonged here. He knew it.

He'd always hated what he was, but never more than he did in that moment.

He wanted to kill Joel.

The bastard was just waiting for him to leave to claim her for himself. He *knew* that look. He'd seen the way Joel watched her.

Tamping the sick rage with an effort, he strode to the door, moved the chair, and left without a backward glance.

Joel was in the act of lighting a lantern when he reached the main living area of the building. He looked up as Torin paused in the doorway. For several moments their gazes locked in a silent battle of wills. Finally, Torin looked away.

Joel followed him as he crossed the room and left the building, keeping pace until they reached the gate.

Unreasoning rage filled Torin again as he saw that only one tog had been saddled. It didn't mean Joel had counted on his victory. They'd only had one when they'd arrived, but he knew Joel *had* expected victory.

In silence, Joel handed him the weapons they'd taken from him when he'd been captured. He fastened the hauberk across his chest and slid the sword into the scabbard that rested on his back. The knife, he slid into his boot.

Joel called for the gate to be opened as he settled on the saddle.

He sat the tog tensely as he waited for the gate to open wide enough to allow him passage. A knot the size of his fist formed in his throat. He swallowed convulsively against it several times before he gave up on the possibility of dislodging it. "Take care of her," he said hoarsely.

"With my life," Joel responded.

He glanced down at the man, then, hating him with every pained breath he took and grateful at the same time because he believed him. "She's not very good at taking care of herself."

"She wouldn't be."

Torin nodded, fighting the urge to turn in the saddle and look back.

Joel moved closer instead of stepping away. "Word is your brother isn't expecting you to return," he said grimly. "Watch your back."

Surprise flickered through Torin, not that his brother had moved to claim his place while he was gone—he'd already figured that out when no ransom was paid—but that Joel had warned him. He nodded again. "I always have."

Joel lifted a dark brow at him, reminding him that he had certainly not done so a short time ago.

It was almost a pity, Torin thought, that he hated the man so much he wanted to gut him before he could even consider taking Alexis as his woman. In other circumstances, they might have been friends.

## Chapter Thirteen

Tears collected her eyes as Alexis watched Torin ride out of her life. She hadn't tried to fight them. She hadn't expected to have to. When she'd woken and found him gone, she'd known instantly that he hadn't merely stepped out, that he was gone. *Then*, she'd fought the hard knot of emotion that had welled up to clog her throat. *Then*, she'd struggled against the sting in her eyes and nose as her mind tormented her with round after round of hope and despair.

She would find him with Joel—riding out—having a bite to eat—gone long since.

When she'd come upon him mounting the tog to leave, seen her worst fears confirmed, she'd been too stunned and hurt to cry. She'd slunk into the shadows of a pile of rubble to watch him, hoping he wouldn't notice her, that he would, that he'd turn around and come back for, that he'd at least come back to say goodbye.

Instead, she'd been left to watch hungrily for some morsel of his notice, some little tidbit of a sign that she mattered to him.

And he'd given her that.

*Take care of her.*

And then he'd taken it away.

*She can't take of herself.*

The tears had attacked her without warning then, flooded her eyes and blinded her so that she could barely see him as he rode away. *Useless*, she told herself. He'd only thought she was a useless burden.

He'd been relieved when she'd told him she was alright with being left behind.

She swallowed against the pain in her throat and mopped her eyes and nose when she saw that Joel had turned and was headed toward her—would pass by her. He didn't have the keen sight that Torin did. He wouldn't see her in the shadows. He didn't have the keen sense of smell. He wouldn't detect her presence. He didn't have the keen sense of hearing. He wouldn't hear her heart breaking.

He paused when he came abreast of her, not looking at her, staring pensively toward his quarters. "Are you hungry?" he asked finally, his voice gruff.

Embarrassed but determined not to show it, Alexis clutched the torn dress a little more tightly and stepped out of the shadows. "Yes," she lied.

It was hard to gauge his mood when the evening shadows were lengthening and her eyes still blurred anyway. He didn't seem to be in the best of moods, though.

She tamped her self-pity with an effort, struggling for the sake of her pride at first and then, when she'd calmed a little, with the realization that, for better or worse, she was at the mercy of this man—these people. Aside from the men who'd captured her and Torin, Joel was the only one she'd spent any time at all around and she had little to judge his character by.

He hadn't seemed afraid of Torin although everyone else had been uneasy around him before they even knew who he was. Afterwards, they'd seemed *more* unnerved by him.

She wasn't certain what to make of that. Obviously, Torin was widely known, by reputation at least, and whatever that reputation was it made people step warily around him. She'd seen him fight. She had to suppose his skill as a fighter was pretty extraordinary and hadn't just seemed so to her.

Joel, therefore, must feel confident that he was Torin's equal in every way, not just because he was the leader of the human clan. Whether he was or not was another matter, but he certainly seemed to believe he was fully capable of handling himself.

She didn't think he was a fool, and he didn't seem to be full of himself, so maybe he was.

He seemed fair minded. He'd been angry when the men sent to raid for food had brought them instead, but he'd done no more than berate the man verbally. He hadn't ordered him to be punished that she was aware of, and the food situation seemed fairly serious.

She had no idea, she realized as she followed Joel into his headquarters, what her status was. He'd freed Torin and allowed him to leave in peace, but he hadn't actually said she was no longer a prisoner. Could she assume she wasn't? And if not, then was she a guest? Or had she been accepted as a member of the clan?

Or would she have to take part in some sort of ritual to become accepted?

She paused once she'd entered the main area, but Joel continued across the room to a door on the opposite side from the corridor that led to her room. He paused when he reached the door and opened it, turning.

Taking that to mean he expected her to follow, she did, but a faint uneasiness had begun to creep into her.

She saw when she entered the room that it must be his private quarters. The room was somewhat larger than the one she'd shared with Torin and surprisingly well furnished. Though certainly not opulent by any standard, the furnishings looked comfortable and the room was clean and tidy. Some sort of freestanding wardrobe stood against the wall near the door. A large bed covered in what looked to be animal skins projected out from the far wall and in the space between was a small, square table with four straight backed, mismatched, chairs. In the center of the table was a light—a clear glass bowl filled with some sort of burning liquid.

It was set for two.

Joel bypassed the table, striding to the bed. "Mary cleaned this for you," he said, lifting a folded garment from the end of the bed and turning to extend it toward her.

Some of Alexis' uneasiness waned. She smiled in appreciation. "I'll have to thank her when I see her," she responded, approaching him to take it.

Instead of commenting, he merely nodded when she took clothing and moved away again. She heard the chair scrape along the floor as she shrugged out of the torn dress and reached for her shorts. She sensed that he was watching her as she slipped the shorts up and reached for the jumpsuit.

When she'd fastened it and turned, she saw that he was. His expression was unreadable, but there was a gleam of unabashed desire in his eyes.

It set her pulse to racing uncomfortably, although she couldn't pin down exactly what the emotions were that caused the adrenaline to shoot through her heart.

"You'd intended that I would eat with you?" she asked as she settled in the chair across from him.

He shrugged. "I'd intended to ask."

She smiled a little uncertainly, taking up the utensil beside the plate. "Am I . . .," she paused, frowning as she tried to figure out how to compose the question, "accepted to live with the clan?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

Alexis blinked at him, trying to decide if the comment was merely a polite invitation, or if he meant that she *was* a prisoner. "From the things Torin told me, I wasn't certain if I should come or not," she said finally. "But I didn't know where else to go."

He didn't look particularly pleased by the comment, but she couldn't decide whether it was because she'd mentioned Torin or suggested his comments hadn't been very flattering. "The clans live in uneasy peace at the best of times. Mostly, we make war on one another. You won't hear anything good about another clan from one of their enemies."

"He said that all true bloods were hated and that even the human clan would hate me."

"We all hate those who left us here to struggle for survival—or not," he said after studying her for a long moment. "But you aren't one of them."

Alexis frowned. "I'm not saying what they did was right, and I doubt it would make you feel any better to know it, but if they went to the alternate planet as I suspect they must have, then they would've had to struggle to survive, as well. It wasn't an ideal world."

"But New Earth was?"

"Purely from a scientific viewpoint—yes."

"But in reality?"

Alexis blushed. "To be perfectly honest we didn't do any exploring or testing. That wasn't our mission. We were sent to erect the portal and as soon as we'd established a base camp, that was our focus. I can say that the climate was very temperate and the weather mild. It took us nearly three months to erect the portal, and we never experienced a single dangerously violent storm. What we saw of it was lush with life. A colony would thrive there, I think."

"But you didn't stay."

Alexis frowned at her plate. "We weren't prepared," she mumbled. "We didn't have anything to start a colony with—very little supplies, no equipment, no knowledge of how to go about it—it's primal, completely virgin land. I'd never been outside a city in my life—none of us had."

"We weren't prepared either," he said dryly. "When our civilization crumbled around us, few had the knowledge of how to replace the things that were lost, and those who did, didn't have the knowledge of how to make or find the raw materials and begin from nothing. That's why we scavenge, just like our fathers and their fathers and that's how we've made enemies of our neighbors."

"Not that they wouldn't hate us anyway. We're more human than they are. That's reason enough to hate us."

Alexis looked at him in surprise. "You think that's why they hate the human clan? Envy?"

He grimaced then shrugged. "Maybe envy—maybe they've got just enough

human in them to resent not being completely human. And maybe they just hate us because we look like the ones who abandoned them. Either way, it isn't exactly reasonable—but there you are.”

Alexis eyed him doubtfully, wrestling with her inclination to challenge him. Finally, her irritation won out. “You don't think it could be because you steal from them?”

He stared at her a long moment and uttered a mirthless laugh. “You haven't been here long enough to understand a damned thing about this world! We *all* steal from one another. There isn't enough of anything for us all to survive. The difference is, it's called ‘raids’ and ‘war’ when they do it, and its scavenging when we do it.

“In case you've failed to notice it, we aren't ‘enhanced’ humans. They have so many advantages over us its downright disgusting. It wasn't bad enough the others abandoned us. They left us with beast-men that are far stronger, faster, are just as intelligent as we are, and have keener senses—in fact, its almost as if they were *designed* to wipe us out.”

Alexis felt the rebuke keenly, even though she'd had nothing to do with the genetic research and certainly nothing to do with the ‘plan’. “They were trying to save our race. It wouldn't have occurred to any of them that things would end up like this or they would've had nothing to do with it. The most brilliant minds worked on this, but most researchers only have a piece of the puzzle to work with, one small area they work on.” She sipped her wine, considering what he'd told her. “Wouldn't it be far easier to trade for what you need?”

He sent her an irritated look, his lips tightening. “Within the clan, we *do* barter for what we need or want—goods—or services. We only have one thing the other clans would be willing to trade with us for, though, and we sure as hell have no interest in bartering that because it's the one thing that that's insured our survival—such as it is.”

Alexis looked a question at him. “What?” she asked when it didn't seem he'd say more.

He studied her speculatively, as if considering how much to trust her, and finally shrugged. “Our weapons.”

\* \* \* \*

Torin wasn't accustomed to questioning his decisions. Except in the heat of battle where he had to allow his instincts to guide him, he was not in the habit of leaping to make one of any importance until he'd considered the problem from every angle. And, as much as possible, he eliminated emotion from the equation. That wasn't always entirely possible, but, as calm reflection was generally the key to making the right decision, he strove to make his decisions based on logic and as much actual information as he could gather, shelving his personal feelings.

He knew when he rode away from the human compound that he'd made the right decision, the only one he could make. The knowledge did nothing to tamp the emotion roiling in his gut, however. It didn't prevent him from *feeling* as if he had made the wrong decision entirely and it did nothing to stifle the clamoring inside of him to turn around and go back for Alexis.

He struggled to put it all from his mind and focus on his surroundings. A man who traveled this world with his mind elsewhere was a fool who usually ended up paying for his distraction with his life. Beyond the potential immediate threats, he had to

consider how to handle the situation with his brother. All of the considerable self-discipline he'd gained in his life, however, seemed to have deserted him.

He scanned his surroundings as he rode, pricked his ears to listen, sniffed the air to catch any telltale scent that might warn of danger, but it was merely habit that controlled that façade of alertness. His mind barely registered what his senses collected. It was fully focused on Alexis, replaying his memories of their time together. And as it tormented him with those, it invented various possible scenarios to contrast the decision he'd made with the one he'd wanted to make—and lied to him, telling him what he wanted instead of what he knew would happen if he'd made any other decision.

His people wouldn't welcome Alexis only for his sake, only because he had brought her among them and made it clear he expected her to be accepted. They would know, or at least suspect, as he had, that she was a true blood and that would put her in danger. Hate for the true bloods for what they'd endured because of them was still strong despite the generations that separated the times, maybe because of it. It hadn't just been the abandoned ones who'd suffered. Generations had, building the hate, not just handing it down from father to son in tales of the past, but experiencing it themselves through their struggles. Life was still very hard, and death hung over their shoulders because of the legacy the true bloods had left them.

He knew all of this and still his mind kept trying to produce an acceptable scenario.

She was a good woman, kindhearted, caring. She had strength of will and determination if little physical strength. They would appreciate that if they would only take the time to come to know her as he had.

But he knew their prejudice would prevent them from seeing the good in her.

The only good human was a dead one.

He'd heard that too many times to count, had *said* it himself.

He would've been better off, he thought with disgust, if he could've recalled that when he'd first seen Alexis and kept it in mind thereafter. He would've been better off if he hadn't allowed her to creep into his heart and mind until it seemed a part of himself was missing now.

He wasn't even certain when it had happened, and certainly not why. All he could recall from those first moments after she'd been shoved into the cell with him was that he'd been too stunned to think at all. He'd merely stared at her while a wave of desire had risen up to suffocate him and turn his brain to mush, which defied logic in itself. There were any number of things he *should* have felt, but didn't, and desire certainly wasn't one of them.

He could have understood better if he'd been affected by the other woman. Her size and coloring were closer to what he was accustomed to in females of his clan and it had been dark in the cell. He could have put that down to a combination of enforced abstinence and a trick of shadows.

Alexis might have been alone, though, for all the notice he paid to the other one. He shook the thoughts off with an effort. It didn't matter why or how or when. It had been an interlude, no more, and he would do well to put it behind him as quickly as possible since he had no choice but to do so. There was no point, either, in worrying what might happen to her now. It was beyond his ability to control her destiny, and she'd chosen it, and he had to respect that she'd made the right choice for herself.

As little as he liked the idea, he was fairly certain Joel meant to have her and if he was right, Joel would keep her safe from the others.

That thought did nothing to calm the roiling in his stomach. In fact, it threatened for several moments to overwhelm his efforts to restore his mind to a state of calm reason. Fortunately, it also diverted his mind to his brother—half-brother, Shae—since it naturally followed that he would seek some focus for his frustration.

He toyed for a while with pleasant fantasies of confronting him openly for his perfidy and beating him unconscious, but the situation was far more serious than the childhood battles for dominance they'd engaged in fairly regularly while growing up together. He couldn't be completely certain that Shae's treachery didn't go deeper than merely ignoring ransom demands.

He strongly suspected, in point of fact, that the trap he'd ridden in to when he'd been captured had been more than just a matter of luck, good or bad, depending upon one's viewpoint. He'd lost three good men in that battle and if there was any chance at all that he'd sprung a trap instigated by Shae, he meant to know it.

\* \* \* \*

It took an effort to set aside her mourning for Torin and focus on getting on with her life, but Alexis accepted that she simply didn't have the luxury of wallowing in her misery, as tempted as she was to do so. She had to make her way in the world she'd chosen and that meant learning how to get on in it. And she was completely out of her element. She couldn't spare the time for wounded feelings to mend if she was to survive.

Joel had said nothing about where she was to stay. When she'd asked him if she could keep the room he'd given her until she found her own place, she'd had the distinct feeling he was wrestling with the temptation to offer to share his own quarters. He didn't, though, merely shrugging and giving his permission, and she wasn't certain whether she was relieved or sorry that he hadn't.

From a purely practical standpoint, she knew she would be safest if he claimed her as his woman. It would at least offer her protection from any other aggressive male and provide her with shelter and food until she could provide for herself. She was too raw from losing Torin to feel up to sharing herself with anyone else, though, even as a bartering tool, even though she'd had sex before without feeling any particular sexual interest in her partner and certainly without affection.

She thought, in point of fact, that the reason it revolted every sense to contemplate it was because she didn't think she could remain detached about it—Joel was very attractive to her—and she *needed* detachment at the moment.

Mary woke her at dawn the following morning. Joel had assigned her, she said, to show Alexis around and help her find a place within the community.

There was no sign of Joel when they left the building. She didn't ask Mary where he was, and she tried to ignore the fresh sense of desertion that swept over her. She hated the sense of helplessness she couldn't seem to shake. She reminded herself that she was an intelligent, independent woman and could take care of herself. She had done so for years and never felt this quivering, deep rooted sense of panic that she couldn't cope with her environment.

She'd known before exactly how her world worked and her place in it, though, and had felt confident because of that. There were rules and regulations to protect her, a government to control and run everything. All she had to do was the job she'd chosen

and trained for and everything else fell into place. She earned credits to live on and purchased everything she needed or wanted and could afford to make her life comfortable.

She wasn't certain her training or education were going to be of any help to her now. In point of fact, she was afraid they weren't and that, more than anything else, was what terrified her.

She discovered Mary's idea of 'showing her around' was to assign her to a work station. She wasn't certain if it was under orders from Joel or not, or if she actually had any choice in the matter, but she decided the laundry was as good a place to start as any.

It didn't take long to discover the error of that assumption or the hitherto firm, completely false, belief that she was in peak physical condition. A fire had been built beneath a huge caldron to heat the water and she was set the task of standing over it with a staff nearly as long as she was, stirring the clothes in the vat of boiling water and soap. After thirty minutes every muscle in her upper body was burning from the strain, every part of her lower body burning from the heat of the fire, and sweat was pouring off of her as if she'd been standing in the rain. The salt her body exuded, combined with fumes from the soap and the smoke from the wood burned her eyes until she could barely see.

If they'd decided to tie her down and torture her she didn't think she could've suffered more. She didn't know anything to do, though, but grit her teeth and endure. The other women working around her divided their time between complaining and discussing people they knew—that weren't present, she presumed. No one talked *to* her.

She realized after a little while that they didn't mind talking *about* her, though, as if she was a block of wood.

She was too focused on her misery at first to realize when she became the topic of conversation, but the mention of the 'Halfling' caught her attention.

## Chapter Fourteen

“She wouldn’t be here, then, if he wanted her, would she?”

One of the other women snorted. “And you thought he would? She’s been fucking the Halfling. Even if he didn’t mind taking the mutant’s leavings—and we’re talking Joel, not any of these whore dogs around here—I doubt he’d want his wonder worm compared to mutant anaconda.”

That comment produced a wave of snickers, some purely amused and others filled with malicious glee.

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen it. I’ve seen Joel’s and, honey, that man ain’t got to worry about being compared to nobody else.”

“Maybe not nobody *human*, but Mary said ....”

Alexis strained until her ear throbbed and still couldn’t catch the end of that comment. Said what, she wondered? Interpreting the mixture of awe and disbelief to mean Mary had been regaling everyone with the finer details of Torin’s anatomy, Alexis felt outrage surface.

“Yes, but I’ve heard they don’t get any bigger when they get hard.”

“You want to ask her?”

“I don’t care. I wouldn’t let any of the mutants near me. All I’m saying is it ain’t nearly as impressive as it sounds if it don’t get any bigger. Lee’s is like a baby’s arm.”

One of the women snickered. “Baby bird.”

“Bitch!”

The woman shrugged. “At least I ain’t Lee’s bitch. He’s a pig.”

“He is not!”

“Yes, he is,” three of the women said in unison. “And you’re an idiot, Gerda! He’s a mean bastard. I don’t know why you let him toss your skirts at all.”

“He loves me.”

“Loves to use you for a punching bag, you mean. Why don’t you find somebody that *don’t* love you, honey? You ain’t gonna have any teeth left to eat with at the rate he’s goin’.”

“He ain’t never hit me but one time and he was so sorry he cried, begged me to forgive him.”

“That was because he didn’t want you tellin’ Joel, and because Joel had him tied to the whipping post and beat, Gerda,” an older woman said dryly. “He wasn’t sorry he done it. He was sorry he got caught.”

The comments not only made Alexis uncomfortable, they made her distinctly uneasy, reminding her forcefully of Pitts and Sloan.

She hadn’t adequately considered her situation, she realized.

She’d based her decision to stay on Joel’s behavior, and she’d seen nothing in it to disturb her. He was a bit rough around the edges, a bit more ... forceful that she’d been accustomed to before she’d returned to Earth, but she’d figured that was to be expected. These were more violent times, times where strength mattered as much as wit and if one

had to be lacking in any area, it would be better to be a little less intelligent and a little stronger than the other way around. They were chiding Gerda for putting up with such treatment, true, but their attitude made it clear it wasn't something they found shocking ... which meant it could be fairly commonplace.

She tamped the queasiness of fear with an effort.

She hadn't really had a choice other than trying to make it back through the portal. Torin had been more than patient with her, but he couldn't have taken her with him if he'd wanted to, and she was painfully aware he hadn't really wanted to have to deal with her inadequacies. If she'd at least been competent in the skills she needed here, she thought he would've been willing to overlook the fact that she wasn't as strong as those who'd had DNA enhancement, but there was no point at all in thinking about that.

She'd be safe enough, she assured herself. The women had made it clear Joel didn't tolerate the strong preying upon the weak.

She was almost too tired to eat when they finally stopped to do so, and her belly, tied in knots of anxiety, tried to rebel anyway.

"You broodin'?"

It took Alexis a moment to realize the woman had spoken to her and even when she did, she hadn't a clue of what the woman was asking. "What?"

The woman pointed at her belly. "Broodin' a youngun'?"

Alexis stared at the woman blankly while that slowly sank in. The processing was slow even *after* she'd finally figured out the woman was asking if she was gestating because it wasn't something that had ever crossed her mind. A wave of cold washed over her when it finally dawned on her that the one thing it hadn't occurred to her that she was missing from her old life were the pills she'd taken daily since she'd reached puberty.

The pills that insured there was no chance that she would ever conceive.

Population control had long since ceased to be an important issue—hadn't been in her life time, but an unplanned pregnancy could ruin a promising career and few people wanted to procreate even if that hadn't been an issue. The fate of the world and everyone in it was too shaky. It was selfish to consider bringing an infant into the world to suffer.

Everyone took the pill.

Except here.

The woman wouldn't have asked if they'd had anti-conception pills.

"You gonna barf?"

Alexis forced herself to breathe, consciously curled her lips upward in what she hoped was an approximation of a smile. "It's the heat," she lied.

The woman looked doubtful. "Nausea's one of the first signs."

"What's another?" Alexis asked shakily, not certain she really wanted to know.

"Fucking," one of the other women said with a snicker.

Heat flashed in her face before another wave of cold washed over her.

She threw up.

"Ew, gawd! She's gonna make me lose my lunch!"

The women got up and moved to another location.

Humiliated, feeling tearful for no reason that she could think of beyond the fact that she was embarrassed, Alexis looked around for something to clean up the mess she'd made. Seeing nothing, she finally scooped dirt over it. When she'd done her best to at least cover it, she got up, set her plate down and went to the water barrel to scoop cool

water out to rinse her mouth and wash her face. She didn't feel nauseated anymore, but she felt as weak as water.

And empty.

She decided not to try to eat again, however. One bout of vomiting was enough.

The remainder of the day was downhill. The weakness subsided somewhat after a while, but returned as the day wore on. She hadn't eaten since the night before. Mary had rushed her to the laundry before she'd gotten the chance and then she'd lost her lunch.

Between the heat and the emptiness, she'd finally begun to feel so faint she had stopped working at the vat and moved to sit down. The woman who'd talked to her earlier followed her, holding out the plate that held the remains of her lunch. "See if you cain't eat a few bites, why don't you?"

Alexis felt her throat close at the gesture of kindness. Nodding, she took the plate and carefully ate a little. It wasn't nearly as appetizing, she found, now that it was cold, but she felt a little better once she'd eaten. "Thank you. I'm so sorry about ruining everyone's meal."

The woman looked surprised, but shrugged. "Didn't bother me none. Didn't bother them enough to put them off their food. Don't worry about it."

Alexis smiled faintly. "I'm Alexis."

Again, the woman sent her a look of surprise. "Maude." She lifted her head and looked around at the other women. "You probably know which one's Gerda—the snaggle-toothed one with the dirty lookin' blond hair. Mary brung you, of course. Sue's the whore over there with her tits around her waist and the greasy yellow hair. She's a nasty bitch in more ways'n one. She's had her eye on Joel for a while, so I'd steer clear of her if I was you."

Alexis studied the woman surreptitiously. "Does he ...?" She broke off, turning red. "Not that it's any of my business."

Maude snorted. "He's a man, an' a right manly one at that, but he ain't interested in the likes of her and, no, he ain't got no woman of his own, if that's what you're askin' ... not that there ain't plenty that would volunteer for a more permanent position in his bed—which means you ain't gonna be real popular if he decides to pick you."

Alexis blinked at the woman, trying to take all of that in. She wasn't sure she completely understood the customs. Apparently, they did share themselves, but it was looked down on if it was the woman—not if it was the man. But the men also chose 'a' woman at times.

She wondered if choosing a woman as 'their' woman meant that the man didn't have sex with other women after that.

Was it like the ancient marriage custom she'd studied, she wondered, or more like the contracted co-habitation agreements of her time? Or was it something completely different than either one?

She didn't feel comfortable asking Maude. She was certain this was something she would be expected to know and, if she didn't, Maude would begin to wonder where she'd come from.

She would have to observe to learn. There was no other way that was safe.

Not that it mattered. The thought of sharing herself revolted every sense. She supposed she would stop feeling that way after a while, but she had no interest at the

moment.

The only part that worried her was whether she'd be expected to or not. If a man asked, was she required to submit? Allowed to refuse?

She could ask Joel, she supposed, but she wasn't comfortable with that idea either. He might think she was asking because she wanted to participate in recreational sex.

She might have except that now when she thought about sex, she thought about Torin and all she really wanted to do was cry, not have sex.

And that was *before* she had realized there was no way to prevent conception. Knowing that now, the thought of recreational sex didn't just upset her, it terrified her. Her own existence was a far cry from certain. It was staggering to think she might have a child to worry about.

And the worst of it was she had no idea whether she had already conceived or not, no notion of what symptoms she might expect if she had conceived already. Having a child had not once crossed her mind and, since she had no interest in procreating, she'd made no attempt to gather any information on the subject.

She felt marginally better when she had thought it over and realized that no one save Torin might have impregnated her, but not by much. She had been more than willing to give herself to Torin—eager—and they had had sex several times within a short span of time. If it had been anyone but Torin, she doubted very much that she would've cooperated more than once. As it was, it had only been their circumstances that had prevented her, at least, from pursuing the growing addiction she had developed for his touch.

The number of times, she was certain, increased the odds that she might be, but she had a dim recollection that she had heard there was a only a brief period of actual fertility in a reproductive cycle.

Maybe fate had smiled upon her, for once, and she had missed it?

But what if she hadn't? What if part of the reason she had been so—desperate—for Torin had to do with her being fertile?

She pushed it from her mind resolutely. She couldn't deal with anything else at the moment. She decided that she would not think about it at all until and unless she had to. She would focus on her own survival. And surely if she did that and it transpired that she *had* conceived then she would be better off?

She was certain of it, and it made her feel worlds better.

She would have months and months to settle in and find her equilibrium—learn some skill or trade that would provide for her, find a permanent place to live.

It shook her fragile sense of calm when she realized she didn't even know how many months, but she pushed that aside, too, certain it must take a very long time to gestate something as complicated as a human. She didn't need to know the length of time it would take. For her own sake, she must work hard and very quickly.

She had had a vague notion when she had arrived that she might provide for herself by teaching, but upon further consideration she began to think that that might not be something in great demand. The children worked just as the adults did, lighter tasks, to be sure, but they worked and she didn't think it was just to keep them occupied.

She spent much of the remainder of the day trying to figure out a practical use for her knowledge. She might have spent all of it that way—her task didn't require a great

deal of mental exercise—except that she was equally preoccupied with her misery.

Her hands had developed blisters from the paddle she used to stir the clothing and then the blisters burst and the raw skin beneath bled. She would've been infinitely grateful when the day ended except that she had a very bad feeling she would be doing the same thing the following day and the dread of it on top of the pain made it difficult to enjoy the respite.

Mary didn't return to collect her at the end of the day. Maude directed her to the 'kitchen'. Discovering once they got there that a long line had formed to receive the food being doled out, Alexis was tempted just to skip the food and go straight to bed. She'd had very little to eat, though, and it occurred to her that allowing herself to get weaker from lack of food wasn't going to make it any easier to work.

She stayed, shuffling along with everyone else, too tired to talk, almost too tired to hold her eyes open.

"You should put somethin' on them hands afore they get infected."

Alexis stared at Maude blankly, then lifted her hands and studied them. "Like what?"

"I got a special salve I make myself. It usually works for me. I could doctor them up for you and wrap them up in some rags."

Alexis smiled her appreciation. "What's in the salve?"

"Oh ...this and that."

Alexis' smile wavered. "I think I'll just soak them. I was going to the bathhouse after I eat anyway."

The woman shrugged. "You cain't. It's men's night."

Dismay filled Alexis. It wasn't just that she was sweaty from her day's labor. She'd looked forward to soaking in the hot water to ease some of the stiffness. "Oh," she said, trying to tamp her disappointment. "Is there somewhere else I could get water to bathe?"

"Nope. Just the bath house. It's spring fed but it ain't fit to drink. Too many minerals. We have to be careful with the drinking water so nobody's allowed more than their ration and I don't think you want to use your drinkin' water for bathin'. They didn't ration the water where you came from?"

The question was only mildly curious, but it still made Alexis uneasy. "Actually, they did. I just thought it might be different here."

"Well, if them lazy bastards that's workin' on the new well manage to hit water we might not have to anymore, but they been diggin' for months and still ain't hit nothin' but mud."

She felt better after she'd eaten and after a little thought decided to take Maude up on her offer, more because she wanted to pursue the tentative offer of friendship than because she had any real hope that Maude's miracle salve would help. She regretted the impulse the moment Maude swabbed her hands down with the concoction. They began to burn as if Maude had applied fire to her hands. Sucking in a sharp breath, she waved her hands a little frantically to cool them.

"Burns like hell, I know. I'm thinkin' it's probably the piss."

"Piss?" Alexis asked in a strangled voice. "Oh, my god! You mean urine?"

Maude shrugged. "Ain't heard it called nothin' but piss, but I guess you can call it urine if you want to."

“Yes, well, I have to go,” Alexis said urgently, springing up from the hard wooden bench she’d settled on and darting toward the cloth ‘door’ that hung over the entrance to Maude’s one room shack.

“Don’t you want me to bandage your hands for you?” Maude called after her.

“No! That’s alright! See you tomorrow!”

She wouldn’t have been surprised to hear a cackle follow her out the door. She strongly suspected, at first, that it was a malicious prank, but she hadn’t detected so much as a hint of amusement in Maude’s expression.

Urine!

Heading back to the wash area, she scooped up a daub of the soap they used to clean the clothes and scrubbed it over her hands a little frantically. The soap brought tears to her eyes, burning worse, if possible, than the salve Maude had smeared on her hands. After glancing around guiltily to make certain no one was watching her, she rinsed the soap off in the barrel of laundry water. It didn’t soothe her palms a great deal, but by the time she’d arrived back at Joel’s headquarters the burning had lessened to a throbbing pain that was easier to bear.

There was no sign of Joel, which was both a relief and a disappointment. She’d more than half hoped she would run into him so that she could beg off another day at the laundry. There had to be some other task he could put her on that wasn’t as grueling.

At the same time, she was relieved she didn’t get the chance. She wouldn’t have been able to resist asking and, as badly as she wanted to be moved somewhere else, she didn’t want Joel to think she was weak and useless, too. Trudging into the room she’d shared with Torin, she closed the door behind her, stared dully around at the room for a few moments, and finally crossed to the bed and sprawled out on it fully clothed. There didn’t seem to be much point in undressing. She couldn’t get a bath and she didn’t have a clean change of clothes if she’d been able to.

Torin’s scent lingered on the bed clothes, tantalizing but elusive. She burrowed her face against the pillow they’d shared, breathing deeply in an effort to capture it and hold it inside. From out of nowhere the urge to cry assailed her. She struggled against it for a few moments and finally yielded to the fit of depression she’d been holding at bay with the reflection that no one was around to hear and know she was an emotional weakling.

She missed everything she’d left behind—the cramped quarters she’d shared with Linda and Mel on New Earth, the bathing and sanitary facilities she’d thought were so crude before she’d discovered what passed as ‘sanitary’ facilities here, the tasteless but nutritious rations.

She missed Mel and Linda and the doctors.

She would’ve never thought she would miss her crewmembers so much, but she did—not nearly as much as she missed Torin, though—and she cried more because she felt guilty about missing him the most.

\* \* \* \*

“Miss me?” Torin murmured in a low, threatening rumble as his brother startled awake and jerked upright in his bed.

Shae stared at him blankly for a handful of moments and finally forced an unconvincing chuckle. “Torin! My god! I thought you were dead!”

Torin’s lips curled in a smile as false as his brother’s chuckle. “I don’t doubt it. I

would say I'm sorry to disappoint you, brother, except I'm not."

Shae struggled to look shocked, but he had no difficulty with the anger. That, at least, was an honest emotion at last. "You can't think I had anything to do with your capture!"

"I can and I do," Torin growled, pushing himself up from the chair he'd settled in to wait for his brother to realize he'd slipped into his bed chamber without alerting anyone to his presence and could easily have slit his brother's throat with none the wiser. He saw the very moment that fact dawned on Shae. Shae's eyes slid to the door. "Don't bother. They won't come."

Shae's eyes widened. "Have you gone completely mad?"

"Not completely," Torin retorted dryly. "They're still alive. Unlike you, I don't consider any of my men disposable."

Shae's lips tightened. "My men!" he snarled.

Torin lifted his brows. "Are they? Then maybe I should rectify my error?"

Shae's face darkened. "Where have you been?" he asked, abruptly trying a new tact. "I've had search parties out looking for you for weeks."

Torin's lips tightened. He surged forward abruptly, catching Shae by the throat and pinning him to his bed. "Really?" he asked through gritted teeth. "And yet none of them managed to pick up my trail and discover I'd been taken to Castle Doom? Not one of the three couriers Doom sent with his ransom demands managed to make it to the gates of Broden Fortress?"

"There hasn't been a ransom demand!" Shae denied in a strangled voice, clawing at the hand closed around his throat. "I swear it, Torin, on our mother's soul!"

"You lying, fuck!" Torin snarled. "Don't bring Mother into this!"

"There hasn't! Ask anyone! No one had any idea what had happened. It was as if you'd simply vanished from the face of the Earth!"

Torin glared into his brother's bulging eyes, knowing he was lying, sorely tempted to keep squeezing till his eyes popped from his skull. Uttering a snarl of rage, he released Shae abruptly. He had nothing but suspicions, no proof. If he'd had proof, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt ....

Straightening, he stared down at his younger brother for several moments, his eyes narrowed. "Be certain, little brother, that I will know the truth before I'm done, and if I find proof of your treachery ... you can explain it all to Mother when you see her in hell."

## Chapter Fifteen

Joel glared at the mouth of the geyser in disgust. They'd been timing the damned thing for the better part of two days and the only conclusion he could draw was that the bastard was determined to boil them alive. If there was a fucking pattern, he was damned if he could figure it out.

He was distracted and he knew it, but he wasn't that damned distracted!

He glanced at Lawrence. "How long since the last time it blew?"

Lawrence studied his sundial. "One hour, ten minutes."

Joel rubbed a hand along the back of his neck, trying to ease the tension. When that had little effect, he rolled his shoulders, tipping his head up and twisting it from side to side to try to counter the pull of tension on his neck muscles. "Fifteen minute variations," he muttered in disgust. "Who's our fastest runners?"

"Bailey and Charlie, but both of them's been scalded bad."

"Besides them, god damn it!" Joel growled.

Lawrence scratched his balls, deliberating.

Joel ground his teeth in irritation.

"Pete n' Dink."

Joel considered them and finally nodded. "Pete!" he bellowed.

Pete, who had been standing watch, turned a fearful glance at him. "You and Dink are up next!"

Paling, Pete nodded, shouldered his gun and trotted off to find Dink, who'd been stationed further off to watch for possible hostiles. Releasing an irritated breath, Joel looked around for a handy place to perch and finally moved to the shade of a large boulder and squatted down to wait. The burns on his arm and leg were fairly minimal, but they hurt like a son-of-a-bitch, a constant reminder that if he'd been any slower ....

If they hadn't been running dangerously low on sulfur he would've given up on this particular spot and hunted another. They *were* dangerously low, however, and no sulfur, no bullets for their guns, no black powder for any of their weapons and they sure as hell couldn't afford to be armed with nothing but swords and spears as restless as the rival clans had been lately.

His mind flickered from that thought to Torin and then right back to Alexis because he couldn't think of one without thinking of the other. Actually, he admitted wryly, he could think of Alexis just fine without thinking about Torin. He hadn't thought about a hell of a lot else since fate had dropped the woman he'd been waiting for all his life virtually in his lap.

He would've preferred it, though, if she'd arrived without baggage in the form of one of the most, if not *the* most, dangerous fucking mutant in all the mutant clans. He might have been inclined to dismiss Torin's reputation if not for the fact that he'd seen the man in action more than once. Some of the stories going around about him were more than likely exaggeration or plain out fabrication, but, after seeing him cut a swath through a half a dozen beast-men with little more effort than if he'd been chopping hay,

he didn't doubt at least as many of them were true.

Despite the circumstances, he wasn't completely sorry he'd met the legend in person. It had given him the chance to take the man's measure.

So now he knew beyond doubt that he was deep shit if Torin ever decided to reclaim his woman.

He'd rarely suffered any doubts about his abilities as a fighter. He knew his weaknesses and he knew how to counter them. That was why not one of his clansmen had challenged him in years.

Torin didn't have any weaknesses as far as he could see, though—except Alexis.

And she wasn't a weakness he could exploit, because, unfortunately, he could also see that she could easily become a weakness for him—the worse kind.

He scrubbed his hand over his face, scratching absently at the two days growth of beard along his jaw. Unbidden, the memory of Alexis and Torin making love filled his mind. Instantly, his body responded, growing painfully hard. For a moment, he allowed the images to taunt him before he uttered a curse beneath his breath and shoved to his feet.

He was pretty sure he'd already been thoroughly entranced with her *before* he'd witnessed that. She was a pretty, dainty little thing anyway, soft and round in all the right places. For the first time since he could remember, he'd had to struggle to keep from getting hard just looking at her, being in the same room with her. He'd wanted to touch her so badly he could taste it, which was why he'd kept his distance. He'd known getting too close was just too much temptation and he was liable to do something stupid.

Afterwards ... well, since then, he hadn't been able to think about much else. He couldn't close his fucking eyes without thinking about it. Hell, he couldn't banish the images for more than five minutes with his eyes wide open. If he'd thought for one moment that she hadn't been attached to Torin, that she'd just done what she needed to to survive, he'd be at the compound right now trying to coax her into his bed.

He didn't have a chance in hell of managing it at the moment, though, which was why he'd figured now was as good a time as any to look for the sulfur they needed. He needed the space and time to think, and she needed time to come to grips with her feelings for Torin and accept that he wasn't coming back.

Until she did, she wasn't going to willingly allow anyone, including him, a chance at her. He didn't know if he was more disgusted with himself for being so desperate for her that he was willing to turn a blind eye to her obvious affection for Torin or angry at the capriciousness of fate. Alexis was the first woman he'd ever set eyes on that he wanted more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. Frustratingly, she also just happened to be the only woman in his life who had absolutely no interest in him.

The fact that the others did might have inflated his ego except for two circumstances—one: beyond the fact that he needed a woman in his bed to take care of his needs, he didn't care whether they were interested in him or not because there wasn't a one of them that he had any particular interest in, and two: he knew damned well he wouldn't have been nearly as desirable to any of them if he wasn't the lord of the clan.

He would've been willing to use that 'allure' to coax Alexis into his bed if he'd thought it would work, which was the part that disgusted him about himself.

He shouldn't want her at all when he knew damned well she was in love Torin but he'd

discovered that didn't make a fucking bit of difference. He still wanted her and he still meant to have her.

Somehow.

She was intelligent and she had a strong streak of practicality. Once Mary had shown her around and she began to understand the way things worked in this world, she'd see she couldn't do better for herself than to . . . .

"Shit!" he snarled. Did he really want her like that? Crawling into his bed so he could take care of her and probably thinking about Torin every time he touched her?

Was he likely to get her any other way?

No, he acknowledged, he wasn't.

He was going to have to take what she offered or forget it and he didn't think he could convince himself to forget it.

Not unless she had a twin wandering around in the badlands just waiting for him to scoop her up.

She needed him, though. She was too—fragile for this world. As Torin had said, she needed someone to take care of her, and he sure as hell wasn't going to stand by and let her pick anybody else just because it shredded his pride to know her need for protection was the only thing that was likely to convince her to consider him.

He'd be satisfied with that—he thought.

It would be a start, anyway. Maybe he'd grow on her.

Hell! He knew damned well he looked as good as Torin. If she could fall for a man with that mug she shouldn't have a problem with his. Maybe he couldn't offer her as comfortable a life as the one she'd had, but he could offer her a hell of a lot more than anyone else—except maybe Torin.

The fucking asshole! He'd just *had* to prove Alexis was with him because she wanted to be. Well, it had backfired on the bastard. As far as he was concerned all it had really proven was that Alexis was a passionate woman with needs of her own. And he was ready, willing, and able to take care of those needs.

More than ready.

He was going to commit violence on somebody if she took too fucking long to make up her damned mind to take him.

He'd give her another week or two, he decided. Once she'd had the time to settle in—look the competition over—she was bound see he wasn't a bad catch at all.

And if she saw any man she liked better, he'd kill the bastard and that would take care of that little problem.

\* \* \* \*

Exhaustion had become such an integral part of her life so quickly that Alexis lost track of everything else—the ache from Torin's loss, the days. She still ached for him, but she ached so much from blisters and strained muscles that it was as hard to tell one pain from another as it was to tell one day from another.

On her second—or maybe third?—day doing laundry, Maude showed up when they broke for lunch, cussed out the women she was working with, and led her off to another work station. "You did your turn!" she muttered furiously as she dragged Alexis away. "I'll tell Joel about that bitch, Mary! See if I don't!"

Alexis certainly wasn't unwilling to go with her, but she was thoroughly confused.

"Wasn't I supposed to work in the laundry?"

Maude glanced at her. "Probably not, now that I think on it. Joel's good about that kind of thing and he's no idiot. He would've seen you wasn't strong enough for that kind of work. He would've put you on somethin' easy ... just to get you broke in, you know?"

Alexis didn't know and she was so tired she found it difficult to follow the woman's speech, but she had the uncomfortable suspicion that Maude, too, had decided she was pretty much useless. "I can hold my own," she said stiffly. "I didn't complain."

Maude sent her a look. "'Course you can. Did I say you couldn't?"

Alexis studied her a moment suspiciously and finally admitted she wasn't at all sorry to be given something else to do. "I think I've got the hang of the laundry anyway."

Maude uttered a snorting laugh. "Ain't much to figure out there."

Alexis reddened but decided not to tell her that her closest encounter with laundry before was undressing herself and dropping her 'soiled' clothes into the cleaning unit. She hadn't known what soiled was until she'd left the habit on New Earth. *Before*, she'd bathed and changed clothes because it was hygienic. *Now*, she was lucky if she got a bath at all and when she did it was to scrub *dirt* and sweat off, not just to feel refreshed.

"Where are we going?"

"Sewing."

"Sewing?" Alexis echoed, wrinkling her brow as she scanned her memory for the word.

"You mean like ... casting seeds?" she asked finally.

"Not sowing," Maude said with a chuckle. "It ain't plantin' season."

"Oh." She still had no idea what it was that she was expected to do, but she didn't like to admit it.

On the other hand, she thought wryly when Maude had pushed her onto a hard, wooden bench and handed her the 'tools' she needed, it was pretty damned difficult to hide the fact that she didn't have a fucking clue of what to do with them. When she emerged from studying the needle, she discovered that Maude was looking at her through narrowed, assessing eyes. "Why don't you and me find us a more comfortable place to sit?" she suggested after a prolonged moment.

Alexis nodded agreeably, although she was fairly certain by now that there was no such thing as a comfortable place to sit. Thus far, she'd sat in the dirt, on sticky tree stumps, hard, rickety chairs and even more uncomfortable wooden benches that didn't even have back support at all.

Grabbing a basket full of clothes, Maude led the way out of the lean-to where all the other women were gathered and, after looking around speculatively for a moment, led Alexis to the shade of a tree. Alexis looked down at the trampled vegetation beneath the tree and finally settled with her back against the trunk of the tree. Maude settled beside her, pulled a garment out and examined it and then handed it to Alexis and proceeded to instruct her in how to thread the needle and place the stitches.

Alexis felt her face heat, but instead of acknowledging her ignorance, merely smiled at Maude gratefully and tried to follow her instructions very carefully.

"I had me a daughter," Maude said conversationally as she watched Alexis critically. "I reckon she'd be about your age now if she'd lived."

Alexis glanced at her in surprise and empathy. "I'm so sorry. You don't look old enough to have a daughter my age," she added politely.

Maude snorted. "I reckon that's one of the things I like best about you, Alexis. You always say nice things. I look old as dirt and I know it."

Alexis couldn't help but chuckle. "You don't look *that* old!"

Maude stared at her blankly a moment and started laughing. "Maybe not that old," she said after a moment, "but older than I should, I'm guessing. It's a rough life. Makes you look old before your time. I guess that's better than bein' dead, though."

Alexis shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't seem to me it would be that bad—being dead. It's the getting there that can be a real bitch."

Maude burst out laughing but sobered after a few moments. "Guess you're right. I hadn't thought about it that way."

They fell silent as Alexis focused on carefully weaving the needle and thread in and out of the fabric until she'd closed the tear in the tunic Maude had given her. She looked down at it in pleasure when she'd finished. "It doesn't look bad, does it?"

Maude nodded approvingly. "Nope. Turn it and let's see what it looks like on the other side."

Dismay filled Alexis when she tried to pick the tunic up and discovered it was 'stuck'. "Uh ... I think I have a problem."

Maude snickered. Reaching for the small knife she'd brought along to cut the thread, she very carefully cut the stitches Alexis had sewn through the tunic and into her gown.

"That was a good first try, anyway," she said when she'd conquered her giggles. "This time try not to sew it to your clothes."

Alexis knew it was wrong to ask, but after a while she gave in to the urge. "What happened to your daughter?"

Maude glanced up from her work and stared off into the distance. "Don't know," she said finally. "I weren't but thirteen when I had her. I'm thinking she was just too little, you know? Weren't strong enough."

Alexis was so horrified, she spoke without thinking. "Thirteen! You were ... a baby yourself."

Maude shrugged philosophically. "I was old enough to bleed. Around here, that makes you a woman full grown. It weren't like that where you came from?"

Alexis was on the point of informing her it certainly was *not* like that when it dawned her that it wasn't a good idea, at all, to allow Maude to take the conversation in that direction when it could be hazardous to her health if anyone found out exactly where she'd come from. Besides that, the truth was it had been *exactly* like that, which made it rather hypocritical to be so appalled. The only real difference between her world and Maude's was that youngsters entering puberty were given anti-conception so that when they began to experiment with their sexuality they wouldn't *also* become a parent. She hadn't had her first experience until she was fourteen, but she knew for a fact that many of her peers had begun much younger than she had. "I suppose so," she mumbled. "I was just surprised that you were so young when you conceived."

Confusion flickered in Maude's eyes, but finally she shrugged. "It weren't that unusual before, but the old lord, Joel's father, said it weren't good for the girls to git knocked up so young—lots died, and even the ones that didn't, either their babies died or they was messed up so's they couldn't have no more. So he told the men he was gonna cut their peckers off if they didn't keep them in their pants till the girls were at least sixteen, and they best be willing even then."

Alexis stared at her in horrified fascination. "And that worked?"

"After he carved up the one it did."

Alexis' jaw slackened. "He ... you're saying he actually ..."

"Did. Don't do no good to threaten and not do. Everybody figured out pretty quick if Lord Marcus said he would do something, he did. Lord Joel's the same way. Don't nobody cross him."

Alexis supposed she must have looked as horrified as she was.

"He's a good man, Lord Joel," Maude continued a little defensively. "Like his father. That might sound harsh to you, but he protects the ones what need protecting. It weren't like that in the old days. Lord Marcus, though, when he took over, he says as how we ain't animals and he ain't gonna put up with us actin' like we was. Before him the ones that was strong enough just took what they wanted and if anybody objected they got beat up or dead. So he killed the worst of the lot and the rest found out real quick that if they stepped out of line they was gonna end up dead, too, or on the whipping post with him peeling their hide off. Things was just gettin' to be comfortable when Lord Marcus was killed in a raid by the bear clan and we all figured things was gonna go right back to what they was before, but then Lord Joel took over.

"Now things is pretty peaceful around here and most times there's enough food for everybody and you don't have to worry too much about goin' to sleep at night an' wakin' up to discover somebody's come to cart off your stuff, or slit your throat, or rape you. He has men that patrol the camp to watch out for folks.

"They ain't nobody bothered you, even though anybody can see you couldn't defend yourself any better than a youngun', 'cause they know you're under Joel's protection 'cause you live in the big house.

"They been eyein' you, though—all the men. I seen the way they look at you. They think you're somethin' real special. I thought at first it was just because they seen the way Lord Joel's looks at you, but now I'm thinkin' its because you are.

"It ain't none of my business, I know, but I'm gonna say it anyway. If Lord Joel picks you for his woman, you should take him up on it. He's a good man. He won't hurt you and he won't let nobody else hurt you."

Alexis reddened. "I can take care of myself," she said stiffly.

"No you cain't. I know you like to think you can, but you cain't," Maude said forthrightly. "You ain't no better at it than the younguns, maybe not as good. An' they got protection 'cause they're younguns. You're a woman. You ain't off limits and there's some men around here that's real stupid. They still think they can just take what they want and beat the shit out of a woman and she'll be too scared to tell Joel. An' most times he don't interfere if the woman don't object 'cause he knows some women's just stupid enough—like Gerda—to think the man loves them an' their gonna protect the man from him and say he didn't do nuthin'."

Uneasiness settled in Alexis' stomach. She looked down at her work. "He's a very handsome man," she said tentatively. "And powerful. He could have any woman he wanted, I expect."

"He could. There's plenty around here hate your guts because he never looked at any of them the way he looks at you. I 'spect they wouldn't look too kindly on you anyway, you being an outsider like you are, but that's just icing on the cake when they been fightin' each other for years over who he was finally gonna pick and now you just waltz in an' he takes one look at you an' looks like somebody done conked him on the noggin' an' knocked him senseless."

Alexis felt a blush rise to her cheeks. Her heart fluttered uncomfortably. “Did he?” “You might have noticed if you hadn’t been so wrapped up in Lord Torin,” Maude said dryly.

Alexis dragged in a pained breath. “I don’t want to be anybody’s woman,” she muttered. Maude’s lips tightened. “Now that’s the first outright lie you done told me, Alexis,” she said angrily. “You want to be Torin’s woman, think you are, but you ain’t. If he weren’t the lord of the lion clan, he might’ve took you as his woman, too. But he is, and he cain’t because you wouldn’t last five minutes with his clan and he knew it. He as much as told Joel he should take you for his woman and Lord Joel agreed.”

Indignation swelled in Alexis, edging out the urge to weep that had descended over her when Maude brought up Torin. “Well! It isn’t *their* decision,” she snapped angrily.

“It’s mine, and I don’t want either one of them!”

“Well, you ain’t near as smart as I thought you was,” Maude retorted, “besides bein’ a liar. I was there myself when they brung you in. I seen it with my own eyes—the way he was with you and the way you looked at him—Lord Torin—and the way Lord Joel looked at you. An’ everybody else saw it, too. An’ Lord Joel turned him lose ‘cause he couldn’t git rid of him fast enough an’ he’s too honorable just to kill a man for his woman. Besides *he* ain’t stupid! He knew he wasn’t gonna have no chance with you at all if he killed Torin.”

Alexis dropped her work in her lap and covered her face with her hands. “I don’t see why I have to belong to a man. You don’t ... do you?” she asked doubtfully, dropping her hands to look at Maude.

“I ain’t young an’ I weren’t never pretty and gentle like you. Men cain’t help it. They’re as drawn to a woman that needs protectin’ as a woman’s drawn to a man to protect them. It’s just human nature. Either a man’s drawn because he wants to protect or because he need’s to dominate and they think a woman like you is easy to dominate—an’ you got just enough fire to challenge them an’ not nearly enough ass to back it up. *Some* man is gonna take you up, whether you like it or not—or there’s gonna be a lot of fightin’ between the one’s that want to an’ Joel will have to settle it.

“Don’t be stupid just because you cain’t have the one you want. If you’re broodin’—an’ I’m thinkin’ if you ain’t you missed a damned good chance of it—you need to think about the baby if you’re too stubborn to think about yourself. You couldn’t beat off a fly now. Once you get big with Torin’s baby, you ain’t got a chance in hell of fendin’ no man off an’ you shore ain’t gonna want the one that comes out on top of that dog fight.”

## Chapter Sixteen

It didn't occur to Alexis until much later than Maude had explained the clan's history as if to someone who wouldn't know it.

There was only one conclusion to draw from that. Maude knew, or at least suspected, that she wasn't just from another part of the clan. It unnerved her to realize that—not because she was concerned that Maude would harm her in any way, but because it meant that others would probably have figured out by now that she was one of the 'others' they so despised.

Maybe that was even the reason for the animosity she'd encountered, not jealousy because the women thought Joel was interested in her, as Maude had suggested.

She honestly couldn't see how Maude had come to any of the conclusions she'd drawn. She hadn't even been at the compound for a week, and Joel had been gone most of that time—had, in fact, left, she'd finally discovered, the day after her arrival. *What* was she basing Joel's supposed interest in her on?

The way he'd looked at her when she'd first arrived? The fact that he'd been a courteous host? The fact that he'd been kind enough to allow her to keep her room until she could find a place for herself?

She didn't see it. He *had* looked stunned when he'd seen her, now that she thought about, but then again, he'd pretty much explained that. The raiders had been sent out with orders to return with food, not prisoners. She'd discovered fairly quickly that no one ignored Joel's orders with impunity. Wasn't that reason enough for him to have been stunned?

Of course *she* knew that at least part of the reason for his reaction had to do with the fact that he'd realized she was an off worlder, had thought she might have come at last to redeem the promise made to his forefathers.

If it came to that, she could, she supposed. She wasn't at all certain that any of these people would be better off on the new world. They'd built their civilization, such as it was, on the ruins of the old one. They had invented, or reinvented, some of the things that had been lost with the fall of the old civilization, but at least as much of what they needed and used in their day to day lives had been gleaned from 'yesterday's trash'. The majority of them either lived in old vehicles or shanties made up of a combination of refuse and debris from the crumbling buildings around them.

As Joel had said, the knowledge of how to take raw materials and make them into something useable was, for the most part, lost to them.

Despite her background in anthropology, she knew precious little about that sort of thing herself.

How would they survive without the knowledge or skills to build shelter for themselves? They would be reduced to the same discovery by trial and error as the early peoples, and many of them were bound to die in the attempt.

They would have to discover new sources of food, and without any of the testing

equipment they needed to safely analyze the plants, they'd be reduced to discovering which were edible and which would kill them the same way, by trial and error. And then there was Sloan and Pitts—assuming they were still alive, they weren't likely to welcome potential colonists with open arms, especially if they came with their own leader.

That battle alone would cost lives, and, regardless of the weapons Joel had mentioned, she knew they were still primitive compared to what Sloan and Pitts had at their disposal. That thought brought her mind abruptly to the two pulse rifles they'd brought with them—the rifles they'd promptly lost upon their arrival—and a coldness crept over her. She hadn't told Joel about the rifles, which were no doubt now in the hands of the bear clan. She didn't think they would be capable of replicating the technology, but they really didn't need to if they could figure out how to use them. And she thought they were probably intelligent enough to do that.

Feeling horror slowly overtake her, she wondered if she had inadvertently tipped the delicate balance that had insured the survival of the human race.

\* \* \* \*

Maude's words of caution, Alexis discovered, had taken deeper root than she'd realized at the time. She'd been too sunk in misery to really pay much attention to what was going on around her before, but after their conversation she emerged sufficiently to actually notice her surroundings, and she quickly discovered Maude's warning hadn't just been her way of trying to push Alexis in Joel's direction.

The men did watch her and she didn't care at all for some of the looks she encountered. It was like Pitts and Sloan multiplied.

The new awareness pulled her out of her self-absorption enough to allow a growing uneasiness to creep into her.

She wasn't certain if it was actually safe to ignore them, but she felt, instinctively, that it was certainly a bad idea to acknowledge them. She took great pains never to allow any of them to catch her eye and to stay as closely to Maude and the other women as possible at all times.

She wasn't particularly welcome among the women, which Maude had also pointed out. Then again, she'd already been aware of that. The majority of them seemed to prefer to ignore her existence, though. She wasn't certain of how many were actually completely disinterested in her and how many only pretended they didn't notice her presence, but that faction was still more welcome to her than the women who gave her malicious glances when she passed and whispered and snickered.

Maude was the only one who actually seemed inclined to offer friendship, but after a few days there were a handful of others who at least didn't seem to view her with hostility even if they weren't particularly friendly.

She'd been at the compound almost one week to the day when the boldest of her 'admirers' finally approached her. She was seated next Maude, trying to focus on her evening meal and pretend she was unaware of the multitude of looks cast in her direction when a tall, lanky man approached the two of them and dropped onto the bench next to her.

Throwing him an uneasy glance, although she refused to actually make eye contact, she shifted away from him as far as she could.

"Name's Lee."

Her polite smile of acknowledgement was automatic, but it died when she looked at him and saw the way his gaze was crawling over her. Resisting the urge to shudder, she sent Maude an uneasy glance.

"I thought I saw Gerda over by the water cooler," Maude prompted.

Alexis' eyes widened as the two names clicked in her mind. She sent Lee another quick look and discovered he was glaring at Maude. As he returned his attention to her, she shifted her gaze to her plate.

She supposed she could see why Gerda was infatuated with him. Physically, he was an attractive man, appealing built and with even, manly features that most women, she supposed, would consider handsome. If he was indeed 'Gerda's man', however, his personality certainly left a lot to be desired.

"Just thought I'd see how you was fittin' in."

"Fine, thank you," Alexis murmured, trying to pretend she still had interest in the food in front of her when, in fact, her throat had closed with nerves, preventing her from swallowing the mouthful she'd taken. She debated whether to try to swallow it and risk choking or committing the cardinal sin of disgusting everyone else at the table by spitting it out.

Gerda appeared at the end of the table. "I found us a spot over there," she said tightly.

Alexis glanced up, encountering a glittering, narrow eyed look of accusation from Gerda that she quickly transformed into a smile for Lee as he rose.

"You git me a plate?"

Gerda nodded. "It's gittin' cold, though," she prompted.

"Just thought I'd welcome Lexis," he said with a slightly forced chuckle, reaching down to settle the palm of one hand on Alexis' back and rubbing in a small circle.

Alexis froze at the contact. Before she could decide whether to ignore the familiar touch, or reject it by shifting away from his hand, or to establish her revulsion by telling him to keep his hands off of her, he removed the offending member, casually dropped an arm around Gerda's shoulders, and wandered off with her. "See you around, Lexis," he called back over his shoulder as he led Gerda away.

Gerda glanced back, as well, glaring at Alexis.

"You shoulda slapped the shit out of him for touching you," Maude said matter-of-factly while they were still within earshot. "Now you're gonna have to go bathe."

Alexis might have found the catty remark amusing if she hadn't felt more than a little queasy from the experience. She finally managed to swallow the food she'd been holding in her mouth, but it took several convulsive efforts. "She thought I was flirting with him," she whispered uneasily.

"No she didn't. She thought he was flirting with you, which he was, but she ain't gonna blame him. You're gonna have to watch your back. She's a spiteful bitch."

Alexis focused on her food, struggling to finish what had actually tasted very good right up until the encounter with Lee and Gerda. "When do you suppose Joel will be back?" she asked after a moment.

Maude's face twisted with a look of worry. "He shoulda already been back," she said after a moment.

Alexis' belly tightened. "You think something's happened?"

Maude shrugged. "All sorts of things coulda. It ain't never safe leaving the compound, even when it's a good sized party like Joel took. And then, too, they went to the

wastelands to look for sulfur and that's always dangerous by itself."

Alexis stared at Maude in surprise as questions rose in her mind. "What do they want sulfur for?" she asked finally.

Again Maude shrugged. "They use it to make gunpowder. Don't know how. All's I know is they can't make it without the sulfur an' it's hard to come by. They have to go into the wastelands for it."

"The desert, you mean?"

Maude looked confused.

"The land beyond the border of the bear clan that's so dry?"

"That's the badlands," Maude responded after a moment.

"And the wastelands are different?"

Maude grunted. "Like the difference between purgatory and hell. Nobody but us goes into the wastelands."

"Why?" Alexis asked curiously. "I mean, why is it called the wastelands?"

"Got to be called that a long time ago. Everybody figured the 'others' let loose somethin' terrible there before they left Earth—to keep the unwanteds from gettin' too close to them while they was buildin' their great ships to leave. Everythin' there died an' anybody that went through for years afterwards just sort of wasted away. Won't nobody from any of the other clans go there. Nobody from our clan would either. But then, after a while they couldn't find no more sulfur to make the black powder and that's the only way we been able to keep the other clans from wipin' us out, so Lord Marcus, he took some men in to try to find the sulfur. That's when we discovered that whatever it was that had been killin' everybody weren't there no more. There's fountain's there, kinda like what feeds our bathhouse except they spout water so hot it'll boil the flesh off anybody unlucky enough to be in the way when it blows, but it brings the sulfur up from the ground."

Alexis stared at Maude while she absorbed that information and tried to make sense of it.

"Volcanic vents," she said finally, feeling the hair prickle along the base of her neck.

"How close are we to the wastelands?"

Maude shrugged. "Don't know that. I ain't been outside this compound since I came here when I was a youngun with my ma and pa from the southern compound. I just know it's what keeps the other clans off our western and southern boundaries so's all we have to worry about is the other two."

"But ... if what you've described is steam vents, and I think that's what it is, then the clan is trapped between the other clans and a volcano!"

\* \* \* \*

Torin stared sightlessly at the wonda-petz toiling in the fields, his focus turned inwards. A hundred times a day, it seemed, his mind wandered to Alexis, no matter how many times he redirected it to the task at hand. There were times that he almost welcomed the memories, times when he found some solace in them, but mostly he found he couldn't bear them.

He'd grown immured to misery, he'd thought. It had been such an integral part of his life as long as he could remember that it ceased to dominate his life, became a distant pain that he was hardly aware of anymore.

Until Alexis.

He hadn't known true misery, he thought glumly, until he'd experienced happiness.

"It'll be a good crop this year," Kruz said, intruding into his thoughts.

Torin dragged his gaze from the wonda-petz, which he hadn't actually been watching, glanced at his companion, and uttered a grunt that could be construed as agreement. Kruz frowned, turning to watch the workers. "I suppose you heard about the trouble we had while you were ... away, my lord?"

Torin stared at his overseer blankly for a moment before a dim memory emerged. He frowned. "Some unrest among the workers," he muttered finally. "They seem content enough now."

Kruz's lips thinned. "Because you are back. No doubt your brother told you it was his quick action and the whippings he meted out that brought them to heel," he said tightly. Torin felt a surge of anger. "Whippings? Mayhap you should tell me what brought this about?"

Kruz shrugged uncomfortably. "There was talk of revolt ... so I heard. I didn't hear any such talk myself, but there's no getting around the fact that they were angry and troublesome. They are very loyal—to you. They didn't believe enough effort was being made to find you."

"They are like children. They would be loyal to anyone who didn't mistreat them," Torin said tightly. "I will speak to my brother about this."

Kruz shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't tell you this to create more trouble for you, my lord. I merely wanted to point out that those of us who are loyal to you are fiercely loyal and by far outnumber those who would like to see your brother in your place."

Surprise flickered in Torin's eyes as he studied his overseer. "I had always thought my enemies were legion," he retorted dryly after a long silence. "It is certainly good news to know that there are those, now, who have managed to overcome their distaste at having a Halfling rule them."

Dark color crept into Kruz's face. "You have long since proven to be a wise and just Chieftain to this clan. I will not try to tell you there was never any prejudice, or that it no longer exists at all. The purists follow your brother and there are loyalists who only follow the heir, and they would give their allegiance to Shae readily if he were to become High Chieftain. But there are also many who are loyal only to you and they would gladly stand beside you in any fight and lay down their lives for you.

"The wonda-petz may be as children, but they are fiercely loyal to you and they are the backbone of the clan. Without them, there would be no food—no wealth. They are the growers and tenders of the flocks, the servants who make our lives comfortable."

"I did not say they had no value," Torin said coolly. "I would no more take them into battle to be slaughtered, however, than I would take children, for they are no better equipped to deal with such things. They are simple of mind, frail of body, and ill-formed for handling weapons even if they could learn the skills, which their mal-formed bodies would not allow.

"As much as I appreciate their loyalty, I could not in good conscience ask such a thing of them. If it is only the wonda-petz who are loyal, then I am undone."

"Nay, my lord!" Kruz said hastily. "I have poorly expressed myself! I only wished to point out that, from the highest to the lowliest, we are with you!"

Torin nodded. "You have given me much to ruminate over. I will not keep you longer," he said dismissively.

Kruz nodded and turned his tog, riding down the field to examine the progress of the workers who had begun to harvest.

Torin wasn't certain what he felt when the man had left—anger certainly, for it was patently clear that his brother had been busy dividing the clan. He supposed, from what Kruz had said, that they had always been divided. Nevertheless, it began to seem as if Shae was no longer content to wait and hope that he would lose his life in battle. And if all of this was true, then the clan was facing civil war, bloodshed among families, and a weakening of the clan that would make them vulnerable to their enemies.

*If* he could ferret out the rebels he might be able to stop it before it started, but only with bloodshed.

There was no great love between him and his brother, and yet he felt nauseous at the thought of killing him, sick at the thought of all his brethren he might be forced to execute to put down the rebellion.

Step down?

It went against grain. He'd never been one to run from a fight and he damned sure wasn't going to now. Moreover, those who were loyal to him depended upon him. There would be nothing to stop Shae from wholesale slaughter of those who'd opposed him, and he did not think Shae would flinch at the thought.

The irony of it was that he had never really wanted the responsibility of leading people who had always despised him. He had taken responsibility for the clan upon his grandfather's death because it was expected that he would, and because it was his birthright and he had been grimly determined to have what was his by right—not because he particularly wanted it, but because it was *his* and he would not allow anyone to take what was his.

The heaviness that had plagued him since he had left Alexis settled tightly in his chest again.

Because of his duty to his clan, he had left her—the one thing in his life that he'd ever truly wanted.

\* \* \* \*

Alexis was so tense and on edge herself it was a while before she realized everyone else was equally uneasy, and for much the same reason.

The day when Joel and his party were expected back came and went with no sign of them, and then another day, and another. And with each passing day, everyone in the compound became more and more restless. Rumors, hatched purely from speculation, began to circulate that Joel and his raiders had been killed and the more it was discussed, the more convinced everyone was that it was the truth. The order Joel had created within the clan began to disintegrate. Tempers shortened and fights broke out for little or no reason at all, among the men *and* the women. The patrollers, the men Joel had left in charge of keeping the peace, had their hands full. No sooner had they broken up one fight than a second or third would erupt in another part of the camp.

Lee, who had begun to stalk Alexis even before the rumors of Joel's death, became bolder. She couldn't believe that she had done anything at all to encourage him to believe that she welcomed his interest. He either didn't care, however, or he was so sublimely certain of himself that he thought that he could convince her despite the fact that, the more determinedly he pursued her, the less polite and more blunt she behaved whenever he cornered her.

Gerda, unfortunately, was aware of it. She divided her time between trying to keep tabs on Lee and trying to instigate trouble for Alexis. She hadn't been looked kindly upon

before, but once Gerda began to encourage the other women to believe Alexis had her eye on their men, mutters and hateful looks followed her everywhere she went.

Short of simply hiding out in her room—which was tempting—Alexis finally had to accept that she wasn't going to be able to avoid a confrontation indefinitely.

Unfortunately, even knowing that, she had no idea what to do about it, how she might diffuse the situation, or, failing that, defend herself if and when the time came that she would have to.

Nothing came to mind. Even Maude, whom she'd begun to depend upon for advice, couldn't seem to come up with any better suggestion than that Alexis 'pick the biggest, meanest looking bastard' around and attach herself to him.

As advice went, she supposed that was as good as any, but she couldn't bring herself to try, not when it meant she would probably only be trading one 'beast' for another just as bad or worse.

She knew, or at least hoped, that Lee would back down once Joel returned. It seemed reasonable to assume that, once he did, Gerda would cease to feel threatened and stop trying to provoke a fight.

The few women who'd seemed at least willing to accept, or tolerate, her presence began to avoid her—more, she thought, because they were afraid they'd get caught up in the violence that seemed to loom on her horizon than because they believed the lies Gerda told. Not that it mattered a great deal. They still began to avoid her, which deprived her of the possibility of finding safety in numbers. Except for Maude, who steadfastly refused to abandon her, she began to feel as if she was completely surrounded by hostiles.

It took more nerve than she'd thought she had in her to rise each morning and join the other women to work and, between the work itself, Lee's constant attempts to catch her with her guard down, alone, and Gerda's spiteful comments, she began to feel as if she'd woken up in hell.

The only place she could find peace and feel even a little safe was the room Joel had allowed her to live in because, despite everyone's growing certainty that Joel wasn't coming back, there remained just enough doubt, and just enough fear of Joel, that no one quite dared to follow her there—not even Lee.

Until the night he found just enough liquid courage to overcome his fear of Joel.

## Chapter Seventeen

As bone weary as Alexis was, the moment she parted company with Maude after they'd finished their evening meal, she strode briskly toward Joel's headquarters, looking neither left nor right. She wanted to run. The only reason she didn't was because of a half-formed fear that it would take no more than that to encourage someone to give chase.

"Snotty bitch," someone murmured as she passed in a perfectly audible voice.

Alexis dragged in a shaky breath and pretended deafness.

Nothing, she'd come to realize, would please them—short of ceasing to breathe. They were determined *not* to be pleased and to interpret everything she did or said in the worst possible light. If she'd scurried along with her head down and her shoulders hunched instead of stiffly erect, they would've called her a sniveling coward and probably thrown something disgusting at her. If she'd tried to nod and smile politely, they would've glared and accused her of trying to 'suck up'.

Refusing to acknowledge them didn't seem to make them any more, or less, hostile.

Friendliness hadn't helped.

Maybe, she thought, feeling her heart flutter uncomfortably, she needed to become as hostile and violent as they were? Maybe they didn't understand or respect anything else?

Maybe what she really needed to do was to find a weapon and the next time someone spat at her or cursed her, she should attack and beat them down, or at least try her best to do so?

She couldn't do it. She knew, absolutely, that she didn't have it in her, just as she knew that, if they attacked her first, she would *try* to defend herself—and probably fail.

That was the worst of it, she thought, *knowing* they were girding themselves to move beyond toying with her and attack.

Very likely someone—Lee and/or Gerda—would already have done so except that there was still a grain of doubt about whether or not Joel would return and no one had quite gotten up the nerve to risk incurring his wrath.

She didn't delude herself into thinking it was fear of her.

Relief flooded her when she saw that she'd nearly reached Joel's building. Just a little further, she told herself. She only had to maintain an appearance of fearlessness for a few moments longer, and then she would be inside and she could race to her room and brace the chair under the knob and she'd be safe ... until morning.

She exhaled a gusty sigh of relief when she'd stepped inside.

It was premature.

The lamp that ordinarily lit the center of the cavernous room was out. As feeble as the light was that it gave off when lit, it still chased the deepest shadows to the corners, lightening the room enough that Alexis could find her way across to the corridor that led to her own room.

Surprise brought her up short with her hand still on the door she'd already begun to shut.

Had Mary, or whoever usually came to light the lamp—for Joel, she supposed—not come? Had it gone out? Was she earlier than usual and whoever lit it simply hadn't come yet?

A shiver chased its way down her spine as she cast a quick glance around the room. Twilight was descending and already there were deep shadows everywhere. The little light spilling through the door only seemed to make them thicker, more impenetrable. She hesitated, wondering whether to close the door or leave it open, but it was a brief debate. Leaving it open might appear to be an invitation.

Besides, she only felt safe when she'd barred several doors between her and the others. She decided to compromise by merely pushing it mostly closed and searching for something to light the lamp so that she could assure herself, before she bolted it, that she was alone.

Rushing toward the table where the bowl lamp was set the moment she'd pushed the door closed except for that small sliver of light from outside that she'd allowed herself, she groped a little blindly for the stones she'd seen the others use to strike a spark to make fire. Her questing hands encountered nothing as she brushed them quickly along the rough surface until she came up against the lamp itself, jarring it.

It was hot to the touch.

Her heart leapt into her throat. Again, she froze, this time straining to reach out with her senses to search her surroundings. She couldn't penetrate the darkness with her eyes, couldn't hear above the pounding of her heart and the rush of her breath as full blown fear speared through her.

Trap, her mind screamed.

She struggled to dismiss it, trying to calm herself.

Run back outside and try to locate the patrol?

Run to her room and bar the door?

Was there really a threat? Or was she just frightening herself? Leave the outer door unbarred?

Her mind was the only part of herself she could move. It clattered the questions through her brain so rapidly she couldn't even assess them, but motor function had abandoned her.

A slithering noise in one corner unfroze her muscles. Her head whipped in that direction, her eyes straining with her effort to pierce the dark shadows. A flicker of movement, shadows among shadows, finally penetrated. Sucking in a sharp breath that ended on the edge of a scream, she bolted toward the outer door.

Something hard slammed into her before she'd covered half the distance between herself and freedom. Arms caught at her, surrounded her. Even as she sucked in another breath instinctively to scream a huge hand covered her face from her chin to her eyes, cupping it, cutting off her air.

Her mind deserted her as both arms tightened around her like a vice, one lifting her clear off the floor, the other tightening over her face until every frantic effort to suck air into her lungs only succeeded in pulling his flesh more tightly against her face. Rational thought had fled. Instinct took over. She writhed in his hold, flailing her arms and legs, clawing at the hand clamped so tightly over her face and then the arm.

She made no conscious decision to go for his face. Rather, her frantically flying arm encountered hair. She tangled her fingers in it, pulling for all she was worth. When that

produced no other result than to pull his head tightly against the back of hers, she searched frantically for a vulnerable spot, again guided only by instinct. Her fingers encountered the moistness of an eye. He flinched, trying to jerk his head beyond her reach. One nail raked across his eyeball as he did so.

Letting out a yelp of pain, he released his hold on her face and grabbed for the hand she was clawing at his face with. Alexis sucked in a sharp breath. It keened with her terror as she filled her lungs. She bucked and wriggled frantically, trying to keep him from capturing the hand she'd clawed his face with.

His grip on her waist loosened as his focus shifted to the hand she was alternately clawing and pounding at him with. She twisted in his hold as her feet touched the floor, shoving and clawing at his arm. Her weight and imbalance brought her to one knee, freeing her completely from his grip for a split second. She launched herself away from him, clawing her way along the floor in a half crouch, stumbling, trying to push herself upright to run.

He dove at her, trying to catch a hold, his hands scrabbling over her and finding no purchase since she was wearing her fitted jumpsuit. Uttering a sound that was half scream, half growl, all animal, Alexis lurched clumsily away from him. Pain shot through one knee, almost paralyzing that leg. A pained grunt escaped her as she hit the floor and bounded upwards.

Guided by nothing but instinct and her wildly seeking senses, she darted away from him as he scrambled to get to his feet again. Completely disoriented, it took her a moment to realize he'd been dragging her across the room toward the corridor. The sliver of light spilling through the nearly closed door guided her. Outside, she could hear noises—the sound of running feet, a cacophony of voices.

They'd heard her screams. They were coming!

He flew at her as she neared the door, slamming into her. She ricocheted off his body and toward the door. She threw out an arm to brace for impact. His arms tightened around her, briefly, but his impetus threw both of them into the door and jarred his grip. Under their combined weight, the heavy panel crashed against its frame with a sound like a gun shot.

They rebounded from the door, colliding with the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Alexis rolled to her hands and knees and scrambled for the door again almost before they stopped moving. Her grasping fingers curled around the edge of the door, which had rebounded just as she and her assailant had.

He grabbed her around the waist and dragged her back. She managed to keep her hold on the edge of the door, pulling it wider as he hauled her backwards. She caught a brief glimpse of the people milling about outside.

Why didn't they come to help, she wondered despairingly? They had to have heard!

Fury usurped her terror as he managed to jerk her backwards and break her hold on the door. Uttering a snarl of rage, she ceased trying to pull away from him and whirled on him, clawing at his face as he levered himself upwards and tried to launch himself over her. Her nails raked along his face, tearing the skin. He made a grab for hands. As she snatched them away, she slammed one against his nose.

He uttered a roar of rage and covered his nose as blood spurted from it. Diverted by his pain, his hold on her slackened. Alexis pushed her advantage. Pounding and shoving at him until she'd managed to free her legs from his weight, she twisted, pitching through

the narrow opening of the doorway. He caught her ankle as she struggled to get to her feet, jerking on it and slamming her against the stone steps outside.

Rolling to one side, she pulled her free leg up and then slammed it down again with all her might. Her boot connected with his face, his hold on her ankle loosening enough she could jerk free. The move sent her tumbling the remainder of the way down the stairs but she barely felt the impact when she landed.

Pushing up onto her hands and knees, she jerked a look behind her just as Lee staggered to the door and shoved it wide. Screaming as he pushed through the opening, she scrambled to her feet and fled toward the people crowded outside.

Some of them gaped at her, but most simply ignored her, their gazes focused on something near the gates of the compound. They hadn't come to help her. They hadn't come because they'd heard her screams of terror. Even as that registered in her mind, she glanced to see what it was that held their attention.

Riders, she saw in the dim of the torches some of the people held, were coming through the gates.

Recognition slammed into her as she caught sight of the rider in the lead.

"Joel!" she screamed even as she was grabbed from behind and yanked off her feet.

Joel's head snapped upward in alert as her scream echoed across the compound. Shock registered on his features for a split second before rage transformed it. Uttering a bellow of rage, he kneed the pog in its sides. The pog, which had been plodding tiredly through the gate, jolted, then broke into a mad dash. Joel leaned low over its neck. Reaching back with one hand to grasp the sword strapped to his back, he pulled it free, twirled it over his head with a twist of his wrist, and brought it, upraised like a club, to his side.

Lee released her as abruptly as he'd grabbed her. Around her, women's screams and men's deeper cries of alarm pierced the air. They stampeded in a blind panic, rushing in every direction to escape the avenging demon coming at them at a full gallop with death in his eyes.

Frozen with shock, Alexis couldn't command her feet to move in any direction.

Someone slammed into her back, sending her sprawling. She hit the hard packed dirt, her palms skidding across the dirt as she tried to catch herself. Grunting, she looked up just in time to see the pog launch itself into the air. She screamed as it sailed over her, landing so closely behind her it barely missed her feet.

The crowd, she saw when she'd managed to struggle up to a sitting position and look around, had parted before Joel's charge, forming a tight ring. Joel brought the pog to a skidding halt, throwing one leg over it and landing in a half crouch on the ground before it had even stopped moving.

Lee, either because he'd been pinned in by the crowd, or because he was afraid to give the man his back, had stopped and turned to meet Joel, his face contorted with rage and fear.

"Give this sniveling piece of pog dung a sword!" Joel roared.

"I ain't gonna fight you, Joel!" Lee bellowed.

"Suit yourself, you son of a bitch!" Joel growled, lifting his sword and charging toward him.

Uttering a sound closer to a woman's scream than a man's, Lee fled around the circle.

"Give me a sword! Somebody! God damn it!"

A sword sailed out of the crowd and landed in the dirt. Lee dove for it. Joel stopped as

he grabbed the sword and scrambled to his feet. The moment he whirled to meet Joel, however, he swung his blade in a downward arc aimed at the juncture of Lee's neck and shoulder. Lee managed to bring his sword up in time to block the brunt of the blow. It still drove his own blade into him and a bright red line appeared along Lee's cheek and neck. He cursed, gritted his teeth and held.

Joel shoved at him and they disengaged their blades. In horror, Alexis watched as they danced back and forth across the open ground, pounding away at each other with the lethal blades. The silence of the crowd was almost as deafening as the clang of metal. Fear for Joel finally penetrated her shocked mind as she watched Lee swing at him furiously. She pushed herself to her feet, trying to decide what she could do to stop them. She opened her mouth to scream at them to stop, but before she could even find her voice an arm clamped around her waist and another covered her mouth.

[“Don't even think about it,” a voice snarled near her ear. “You distract him and get him killed and I'll break your damned neck!”]

Alexis twisted her head to see who held her. Recognition flickered through her. Though she could not call the man's name to mind, she knew he was one of the patrollers.

A coldness swept over her, not at the threat, but because she'd come so close to doing just that.

She shook her head slightly and he eased his hand from her mouth. “I wouldn't,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper, though it flickered through her mind to wonder if he was worried about her distracting Joel or Lee.

His grip loosened. “Come on. He wouldn't want you to see this,” he growled, gripping her arm and pulling so that she had, perforce, to follow him.

She didn't want to see it herself, but she couldn't seem to tear her eyes from the fight they skirted. Both men, she saw, were bleeding by now from dozens of cuts, their clothing shredded by the blades slicing across arms, thighs, and chests. Lee, however, had many more times the number of cuts than Joel.

It dawned on her after a moment that Joel was deliberately holding back, why, she had no idea until it occurred to her that he was determined not to finish it quickly. A new horror sliced through her as the realization hit her. He didn't mean to make Lee's death quick and relatively painless. His aim was to inflict as much pain as possible.

The muffled sounds of a woman's cries caught her attention as the man dragging her along, shouldered into the crowd. Her gaze moved automatically toward the sound and she saw that another of the patrollers had grabbed Gerda, as she'd been caught. She struggled in his hold, trying to break free, trying to pull his hand from her mouth.

As if she sensed Alexis' gaze, though, her focus shifted abruptly from the fight to Alexis. For a split second, there was no recognition in the woman's eyes, then pure, undiluted hatred flashed through her tears. Alexis recoiled instinctively from that look.

Gerda launched abruptly toward her, almost escaping the grip of the man holding her. “Hold on to that bitch!” the man gripping Alexis' arm snarled, jerking Alexis around and shoving her behind him.

Relieved to have the man's broad back to cower behind, Alexis didn't make any effort to evade him. Hysteria hovered at the back of her mind, cowed there by her shock, but she was holding on to her self-control only by a thin thread, battered and exhausted from her frantic fight to protect herself from Lee and escape him. At any other time, the possibility of having to defend herself from Gerda would've probably terrified her. Now,

it was more reluctance to do battle again and weakness from the loss of the adrenaline that had been pumping through her that made her cling to the man and strive to shield herself from Gerda.

He dragged her away, pushing through the crowd that gave reluctantly to his advance. Alexis had no idea where he was taking her. The moment he began to move again, she twisted her head to look back at the fight in the center of the compound, strained to catch a glance between heads and shoulders that towered higher than hers.

A shudder went through her when she discovered he'd hauled her back to the very building she'd escaped only minutes before. She braced her feet in sudden fear, the hysteria clawing its way to the surface even as she dug her nails into his arm and tried to pry his grip lose.

He scowled at her.

"No!" she said forcefully. "No! No! No!" She couldn't seem to cudgel her brain for more speech than that.

[Puzzlement joined his irritation before understanding flashed in his eyes. "Get inside!" he growled. "I ain't gonna hurt you! You think I want Joel hackin' me to pieces? You ain't got nuthin' I want that bad!"]

She was too frightened to really grasp anything he said, but at the mention of Joel's name, her head snapped in Joel's direction. They'd mounted the steps by then, giving her a view she wished she hadn't seen. The image flashed from her eyes into her brain, imprinting itself permanently.

Uttering an inhuman sound that was part growl, part roar, Joel swung his blade and clove Lee's head from his shoulders. A look of startled surprise slackened the features of Lee's face as his head parted company with his body and flew in one direction and his body crumpled and began to fall in the other.

Joel watched for a second, his face contorted in a look of savage satisfaction, and then his head popped up and his gaze collided with hers across the sea of humanity that separated them.

Fear speared through her at the look on his face. She whirled abruptly as he took a step toward her, jerking her arm free from the patroller and dashing in at the door. She would've bolted it behind her except that the patroller, evidently correctly assessing her intent, slammed his open palm against it, shoving at the door. She stumbled back, struggling to catch her balance. When she finally did and lifted her head, she saw the crowd had parted for Joel and he was striding toward her at a pace just shy of a jog. She gaped at him, too stunned to move for many moments. By the time she'd collected her wits, he was surging through the door. The slamming of the door behind him jarred her to her senses, but blackness had enveloped her.

He caught her even as she whirled blindly in search of escape, his arms encircling her and dragging her up against his hard form. Panic suffused her. She struggled to wrench free. He'd pinioned her arms to her sides when he grabbed her, but she brought her hands up and clawed at his arms. She wasn't even aware that she was growling the word 'no' over and over until it finally penetrated her mind that he was murmuring her name, his voice gruff but strangely gentling.

"Shh! Alex. It's alright, baby. I won't hurt you."

She subsided more because she'd run out of any strength to fight than because she believed him or even really registered what he was saying. She'd just watched him hack

a man to pieces. She hadn't thought him capable of such savagery. An animalistic whimper of terror escaped her as he turned her to face him. She flinched all over as she heard a metallic clang as he dropped his sword to the floor at their feet.

He cupped the back of her head and pressed her face against his chest. The heat of his body enveloped her as he tightened his hold on her. Shivers began to wrack her as his warmth invaded her shock chilled flesh. "Promise?" she asked in a shaky voice, desperate for reassurance.

He made a sound of disgust, his arms tightening fractionally before they loosened slightly. She heard him swallow. "Promise," he muttered, his voice hoarse.

She lifted her hands to his waist, clutching his tunic, burrowing closer. "He scared me," she wailed, abruptly bursting into tears, knowing she sounded like a frightened child—*feeling* like one.

"Son of a bitch," Joel growled. "I should have killed the bastard the last time he beat the hell of Gerda. Then he wouldn't have been around to hurt my baby. *Did* he hurt you?" Alexis shuddered at the reminder of what he'd done. Struggling with her sobs, she shook her head, scrubbing it back and forth across his chest. He held her tightly until she'd mastered them, stroking her back soothingly.

"Why the fuck is there no light in here?" he growled when she commenced to sniffling instead of sobbing and pushed at him.

He loosened his hold, allowing her to pull slightly away from him, but he didn't release her.

Alexis sniffed again. "I think Lee put it out so I wouldn't see ... so he could ..."

"Stay put," he ground out when she broke off, releasing her at last and moving away.

She heard the scrape of his boots and then a meaty thud.

"God damn it!" he growled.

Alexis uttered a snorting giggle and clamped a hand over her mouth. Tears commenced to pouring from her eyes again except this time, instead of fighting sobs, she struggled to keep from giggling hysterically like a lunatic.

She heard more movements and then the sound of rocks being struck together. She saw a spark of light and then several more. Finally, one fell into the lamp and lit the oil. Joel's face looked down right demonic with the shadows the light cast over it.

Alexis shuddered again, wiping at her face with her hands.

"Don't look at me like that, darlin'. You know I wouldn't hurt you, don't you?"

His voice was still harsh. It grated along her spine, making her shiver again. "You're bloody," she said shakily as he moved slowly toward her again.

She didn't realize until he'd reached her that he wasn't moving slowly to keep from startling her but rather because he was weakened. He settled an arm heavily across her shoulders, turning her toward his quarters. The heat wafting off of him, she realized as she allowed him to pull her toward his room, was unnatural. He leaned more and more heavily against her as they progressed.

"Joel?" she said questioningly, staggering slightly under his weight.

"I need to lie down," he muttered just before his knees buckled and he crashed to the floor, taking her with him.

## Chapter Eighteen

Instinctively, Alexis tried to break his fall. She couldn't tell that it helped a lot except that it kept him from pitching forward on his face. Instead, when his knees hit the floor in spite of her efforts to hold him up, he toppled sideways—away from her. Since she didn't let him go, she went with him, sprawling on top of him. She was too stunned to think at first.

As it penetrated her mind how hot he was and that he was sticky all over with blood, she crawled off of him and hurried into the outer room to grab the lamp. The bowl was already hot. Gritting her teeth, she rushed back to set it down on the floor near where he lay.

Slinging her hands to cool her burned fingers, she scanned him, trying to decide how much blood was his and how much Lee's. There were slices in a number of places and the fabric had stuck to the blood seeping from him. Thankfully, she didn't see blood spurting from anywhere or even running freely. Most of it appeared to be clotting already.

Catching the neck of the tunic, which had been designed to pull over his head, she tugged at it, trying to tear the cloth. When it didn't give, she glanced around for something to cut it off with and finally pulled the knife from his boot. He roused sometime between the time she grabbed the knife and when she grasped the hem, cutting it enough to allow her to tear it. She met his gaze as she tore through the neck opening and shoved the torn edges back to study his chest.

He favored her with a slightly drunken, one sided grin. "I knew you couldn't wait to get me naked, baby."

Alexis stared at him blankly, unable to summon even a little amusement. "You're burning up with fever," she said hoarsely, placing a palm against one rugged cheek. "You need ... I need to go get someone to help."

He caught her wrist, his smile vanishing. "No."

She blinked at the implacable expression that had descended over his face, repressing the urge to shiver. It was scary how quickly he could shift from roguish charmer to deadly predator. "But ... you need medical attention. I don't know what to do."

He sucked in a harsh breath and levered himself up on one elbow. "I just need to rest for a few minutes." He looked around. "How the fuck did I miss the bed?"

Alexis wrapped her arms around him, trying to help him get up. "You ... uh ... fainted." He glowered at her. "The hell, you say," he growled, peeling her off and pushing her out of his way. He managed to get to his feet without help, but he wavered once he'd gained them.

Despite his rejection a moment before, Alexis surged forward to slip her arms around him again. He looked down at her doubtfully, but finally draped his arm over her shoulders. They staggered their way to the bed. He took her with him when he collapsed on top of the mattress, but she strongly suspected it was purposeful that time. His arm tightened around her when she tried to get up. She looked up, meeting his gaze. His eyes were

narrowed and glittering feverishly, but she had a strong feeling it wasn't *just* the fever.

She knew it wasn't when he dragged her up his chest, speared his fingers in her hair, and brought her face down to his. His lips opened over hers. She stilled, her breath suspended in her chest in surprise. A flicker of resistance went through her, but as his open mouth settled firmly over hers she yielded without even a token physical protest.

Internally, she struggled to close her mind and her senses to him, slamming a mental door to keep him out.

It had worked for her in the past when she'd felt obligated to offer recreational sex to men she had no interest in because it was considered anti-social to refuse—like Sloan.

She'd reckoned, she discovered, without the fact that she didn't feel either indifferent or repelled by Joel. His mouth scalded her as it settled against hers in gentle adhesion. The rake of his tongue along her lips set them to tingling and when he slipped it between her lips and stroked it along hers, she was deluged with sensations she found it impossible to ignore. Everything inside of her awoke, her defenses crumbling before the onslaught of heat that rushed through her.

Despair followed it, reluctance, guilt. They swirled through her thoughts as her mind spun dizzily and then evaporated before she could grasp them and use them to shield herself from feeling things she didn't want to feel.

She swallowed, sucking his tongue as she did.

A sound of pleasure rumbled through his broad chest beneath her, vibrated through her. The sound echoed in her mind and her body responded by opening her more fully to her senses, blood rushing to her extremities and heating her from the inside out.

She absorbed his taste and scent, the feel of his lips, the rough, restless caress of his tongue along hers and unwelcome pleasure spiraled through her.

Grasping for something to anchor herself, something to fight the pull to yield completely to the pleasure he'd awakened so effortlessly within her, she reminded herself that he was far more dangerous than she'd even begun to imagine, savage, brutal. Passivity would protect her, her mind recited the platitude she'd been taught. Yielding would counter his aggression.

It wasn't wrong to feel gratitude for his protection, she told her.

None of things accounted for the heat that curled low in her belly, though, or the disappointment that filled her when he broke the kiss, dropping his head against the mattress beneath him. She opened her eyes with an effort to discover he'd squeezed his eyes tightly closed. "Shit!" he muttered irritably, struggling for breath. "I'm so fucking tired."

Hurt, resentment, and embarrassment went through her in rapid succession that he couldn't arouse enough interest in her to finish what he'd started until it dawned her that he had every reason to be tired. "You're hurt—and feverish." She frowned, realizing the fever couldn't possibly have anything to do with his recent injuries.

He didn't try to stop her this time when she struggled to get off of him.

"How long have you had the fever?"

He shook his head, shivering. "Don't know."

She checked his wounds again. None of them, she saw, were deep, which explained why they'd hardly been bleeding when she'd examined them before, but then she'd already realized they had nothing to do with the fever. "You're sick. I need to

bring someone.”

He caught her wrist again, his eyes narrowed. “Neither of us can afford that,” he said tightly.

Confusion filled her. “Why?”

He released a huff of breath that was a mixture of irritation and pain. “You haven’t been here long enough to figure that out, baby?” he growled. “If they realize I’m in no shape to defend either of us . . .”

Alexis stared at him in horrified dismay. “But . . . you’re their leader.”

He shook his head. “Trust me, that only works as long as they know I’m willing and able to kill them if they test me.”

Alexis studied him in silence for a moment, thinking. It seemed to her that, if he didn’t get medical attention for whatever it was that was causing the fever he might well get worse, not better. “Let me at least help you get comfortable,” she said finally.

He opened his eyes enough to study her through narrowed slits and finally released his hold on her. Taking at that as acquiescence, she moved to his feet and began tugging at his boots. “A bath would help your feelings, I think, and help you rest better,” she suggested tentatively.

He made a derisive sound. “It wouldn’t hurt my smell either. Leave the boots.”

Alexis straightened. “I wasn’t implying you were offensive,” she said quietly. “I only meant—you’ve been on the trail. I know you’ve probably not had the chance at a good bath. It would make you feel better.”

“Nothing short of dying would make me feel better at the moment. Just leave it. I haven’t slept in days. When I’ve slept, then I’ll take a bath.”

Alexis studied him, wondering if she dared badger him. He looked exhausted. She doubted he felt like being prodded. She still thought it would help him to rest better. More than that, though, she wanted to see if there was another wound, possibly infected, that might account for the fever. “I’ll just help you undress then,” she suggested tentatively.

“My head’s swimming. I don’t feel like getting up,” he growled irritably.

“Then don’t.” She returned her attention to trying to pull his boots off.

She could hear him grinding his teeth as she tugged at the first. It wasn’t until she’d finally managed to get it off, though, that she realized why. “Oh god! Joel! You’re burned. What happened to your poor foot?”

“Feet,” he corrected her. “Wading through scalding water.”

She glanced at him in confusion and then recalled what Maude had told her. “Was anyone else burned?” she asked, remembering brief flashes of the party as they’d entered the gates but nothing that indicated there were others that were injured.

“Two dead. Three more that probably won’t make it. None of the rest of us were burned bad.”

Alexis turned to study his foot again. If that was his idea of ‘not bad’ then there was no telling how bad off the others were—which meant that anyone who knew anything about medicine probably already had their hands full.

She reached for his other boot, trying to remove it more carefully. It looked as bad as the first, or worse. Removing the boot had also removed some of the skin. Struggling with a wave of nausea, she dropped the boot to the floor and moved up to unfasten his trousers. “Lift your hips,” she ordered when she’d hooked her hands in the

waist.

Her gaze flickered over his genitals as she tugged his pants down, but she resolutely looked away, focusing on her task. That didn't prevent the memory of what the women at the laundry had said about it from surfacing, however, and she was inclined to think they were right. Even flaccid, the man had nothing to concern himself about his 'manliness'. It wasn't likely he'd come up short by comparison to many men.

His calves, she saw, were also burned, though not as badly.

Empathy for the pain he must be feeling filled her.

And then the memory of the way he'd charged down on Lee, the sheer ferocity of his attack. No one, certainly not her, would have suspected, watching that, that he was so ill he could hardly stay on his feet and severely injured besides. The man must have a will of iron.

She glanced up at his face and discovered he was watching her. "You're a remarkable man, Joel," she murmured.

"So I've been told," he shot back at her, wagging one straight black brow at her as he reached down to stroke a hand over his genitals.

She gaped at him for a moment and finally chuckled in spite of her shock at the crudity. "Have you?" she asked, lifting a brow.

He sighed, his cockiness vanishing as abruptly as it had appeared. "No, but I'm glad you think so."

She was more inclined to believe the first, but his crestfallen look made her smile wider as she moved up to help him remove his torn tunic. "I should bathe the cuts, at least."

"If I say yes will you stop poking at me, wench, and let me sleep?" he muttered.

"Are you always this irritable? Or only when you're sick?"

"I'm never sick," he retorted testily.

She had to fight to resist the urge to smooth his dark hair from his brow.

Obviously, he wasn't accustomed to being sick and just as certainly he saw it as a weakness to be despised. She wasn't certain he'd appreciate the urge to coddle him.

She wasn't even certain why she felt it.

She left to find the wherewithal to bathe him, feeling his gaze as she moved about his room searching for cloths, soap, and a container to hold the water. Her conscience smote her at the soap—Torin had been right. It stung like hell on tender flesh—but she still thought it for the best. No doubt he was immune to most germs—they didn't seem to have much in the way of medicine—but it certainly couldn't hurt to do what she could to try to prevent infection—another infection. She was afraid he might already have one from the burns.

She couldn't bring herself to put the stinging soap on his raw feet, though.

Instead, she dipped several cloths in the cool water and laid them very carefully over the burns, hoping it would at least ease some of the pain. He sucked in a sharp breath as she did so, but he didn't complain. She saw his eyes were closed when she glanced at his face. He ground his teeth. "I'm not going to be able to get the boots back on now that you've removed them."

She shook her head in irritation, although he wasn't looking at her. "They needed to come off. I wouldn't doubt but what that accounts for the fever. Your feet are raw already. The boots are only holding the heat in and making it worse."

“The cloths feel good,” he admitted almost reluctantly.

“I doubt the cool water will feel as good elsewhere, but there’s no warm water,” she warned him.

She settled on the bed beside him and began by bathing his arms. He didn’t object again, and she decided to go ahead and give him as full a bath as she could. She tried to be impersonal about the task, but she discovered that wasn’t actually possible. She found herself studying him as she bathed him—the shape of his hands and fingers, his arms—his chest, his genitals, thighs, and calves. He was a remarkable man in more ways than one.

He was pleasingly formed. There was no getting around that. She knew he wasn’t quite as tall as Torin, but he seemed bigger and she thought he had more muscle mass in his arms and chest—not quite as much definition, but then again Torin had said he’d lost a good bit of weight while he was imprisoned.

He was surprisingly hairy.

And she was surprised that she didn’t find it unappealing.

Actually, it was strangely appealing, though she wasn’t exactly certain why.

He was shivering by the time she’d finished and she could see a muscle jumping in his jaw where he’d clamped his teeth tightly to keep them from chattering. He was also much cooler to the touch, though, and she couldn’t help but think that was a good thing.

When she’d dried him off, she covered him with his coverlet, taking care to leave his feet exposed.

She was hurting all over herself by the time she’d finished. She didn’t regret it, though. He seemed far more comfortable and she felt better that his skin wasn’t nearly as hot.

She thought he’d drifted to sleep, but when she started to turn to go, he caught her hand.

“Stay with me.”

She wasn’t certain from the tone if it was a request or a demand. If it came down to it, though, she realized she wasn’t averse to the idea. After what had happened earlier with Lee, she didn’t want to be alone. Still, when he tugged on her arm to urge her to join him, she resisted. “I shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“I might bump your hurts in my sleep.”

He studied her for a moment. “I’d still prefer it if you stayed.”

The little reluctance she had to the idea vanished when he sent her to fetch the sword he’d dropped earlier, sat up long enough to clean it, and settled it within reach of the bed. While he was occupied with cleaning his sword, she undressed. Her internal debate over whether to do so or not was brief. She never slept in clothing unless there was a compelling reason to do so and she’d toiled all day in her clothes, which were filthy besides from the fight with Lee.

She would’ve like a bath herself, but she’d already used most of Joel’s drinking water to bathe him and it was rationed. It was going to be hard enough to make what was left of his, and hers, last until they were allowed a new ration.

He was studying her frankly, she discovered, when she’d undressed. A look of irritation flickered across his face before he shifted over to give her room beside him.

Disconcerted, she paused. "Would you be more comfortable if I dressed?" she asked uncertainly.

He dragged in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'd rather I wasn't too tired to do something about it," he muttered.

Mollified at his earlier rejection by that, she curbed the urge to smile and settled beside him on the bed. He shifted onto his side, curled an arm around her waist, and dragged her against him. She lay tense for a while, wondering if he would try to initiate sex despite the fact that he'd claimed to be too 'tired' to have any interest. Slowly, but surely, however, she began to relax and finally slipped over the edge of sleep.

He woke her later tossing restlessly on the bed. She could feel the heat radiating off of him without even touching him. After debating briefly, she got up and took the container she'd used earlier to hold his bath water to the privy just off his room, dumping the contents, and then refilled it and returned to the bed. He roused when she pressed the cool cloth to his face, opening his eyes, but apparently he was satisfied once he saw it was her. He closed his eyes again and lay still while she used the water to cool his skin, bathing him until the cloth was warm and then dipping it into the cool water again.

"You don't have to do this," he said thickly.

She hesitated. "I know."

He was silent so long she thought he'd gone back to sleep. "If anything happens to me ...."

"It won't," she said, cutting him off.

"If anything happens," he began again, "go to William, my second in command. He'll take care of you."

Anger surged through her. "What is it with you men?" she demanded angrily. "First Torin, and now you! Maybe I don't want to be passed from one man to the next! Has it ever occurred to you that I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself?"

He opened his eyes wide enough to glare at her. "In your world, maybe. Not in mine," he growled. "I'll talk to William about it."

"You will not!" she snapped angrily. "I'm not yours to pass to the next man, damn it!"

His eyes glittered dangerously. "No?"

Uneasiness shifted through Alexis. "I suppose you think ...."

He cut her off. "I know," he growled.

Alexis gaped at him. "And you base this on?"

"What I want," he responded, his face hard and uncompromising. "I killed a man for you tonight, baby. There's no doubt in the mind of any man, woman, or child in this compound that you're my woman." He grabbed her wrist and snatched her into the bed with him, rolling with her until she was beneath him. "And Torin," he snarled, "didn't give you to me. He left because he had to, because he knew I was right, but I'd already told him he wasn't leaving with you. Don't think for one second I wouldn't have killed him, too, if I'd had to."

## Chapter Nineteen

Alexis gaped up at him in stunned surprise, feeling as if she'd found herself in the bed of a complete stranger. The scant, flickering light from the lamp she'd left burning, cast his face in light and shadows that made him look even more dangerous—she thought.

“You're mine,” he growled. “Get used to the idea.”

His mouth was hard when it fastened over hers, possessive. She sucked in a sharp breath in surprise. He seized the opportunity to breach the slackened barrier of her lips and thrust his tongue inside her mouth, overwhelming her senses by aggressively inundating her with his essence just as he'd overpowered her physically with his superior strength. She didn't have time to throw up any defenses. She was still reeling with shock when he launched his assault. With the barest of hesitations, even the wall of shock crumbled. Heated pleasure rushed through her, bringing every cell in her body, it seemed, prickling to keen attention. The primary focus, however, was the feel of his mouth on hers, his taste.

She was drunk from drinking in his essence, her mind reeling with dark, heated desire within moments of his first touch. The tension she wasn't even aware of went out of her, replaced by anticipation.

It wasn't until she tried to reach for him, feeling the need to draw him closer, that she realized, dimly, that he'd manacled her wrists to the bed on either side of her head. Frustration filled her then, not fear, not anger at the dominance of his hold.

Her mind shifted from that focus abruptly as he moved restlessly over her and she felt the delectable abrasion of his hair-roughened flesh as it scrubbed along hers—his chest against her breasts, his belly against her thighs. Her skin pebbled in delight, seeking more stimulation. Her areolas puckered as blood rushed to the tips of her breasts and her nipples stood painfully erect. Sparking jolts went through her as his restless movements brushed the tips back and forth, making them grow harder and harder with need, throbbing, aching. She arched against him, begging him wordlessly to do something about the ache.

He broke the kiss with a groan. “Baby,” he murmured raggedly. Shifting downward, he released his grip on one wrist to catch a breast in his hand, lifting it to his mouth.

She gasped, tangling her fingers in his hair as she felt the pull of his mouth on the throbbing peak, felt an almost electric current zigzag through her body to her core. Her womb clenched in reaction almost painfully. The throat of her sex worked, contracting in a rippling wave as if thirsting for his flesh—beckoning him.

She lifted her hips, pressing her mound against the thigh he'd insinuated between hers. He echoed the movement and she felt his tumescent flesh grind against her thigh. Neither movement even came close to appeasing the throbbing ache of her clit for stimulation, however. Uttering a sound of distress, she moved against him, struggling to trap his hardened length between her thighs so that she could ride it, rub her clit against it

as she'd rubbed her nipples against his hair roughened chest.

He shifted again, transferring his attention to her other breast. The first tug of his mouth almost seemed to suck the air from her lungs. Her mind finished its descent into chaos, depriving her of even enough reason to seek succor. She lost track of everything except the pull of his mouth and the nudge of his tongue on the tight bud as each sent another wave of heat rolling through her.

She was going to come, she realized abruptly, and he hadn't even entered her. Even as the thought formed in her mind, he broke of the assault abruptly and, shaky with haste, grasped her thigh, trapped beneath him, and thrust it out of his way to fit his hips between her thighs.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry," he muttered in a hoarse, shaking whisper. "I can't wait."

She was too mindless with need even to follow what he said, but as she felt him guiding his cock along her cleft, she curled her hips eagerly to receive him, sucking in a sharp breath and holding it as their flesh connected and hers yielded to his hardness.

"Joel?" she gasped shakily as he paused, digging her nails into his shaking arms as he pumped his hips, delving her channel shallowly.

She heard him grinding his teeth. He let out a harsh breath. Every muscle in his body quivered with the strain as he pressed deeper with agonizing slowness, paused, sucked in a harsh breath and retreated.

She panted for breath as she felt him glide deeper, felt the strain of the muscles along her channel to accept his girth. And then abruptly the flesh yielded to his greater strength, the moisture of her want easing his passage and he slammed so deeply inside of her that pain collided momentarily with pleasure. The pleasure won out as his next thrust stroked the deep itch for satisfaction at her core, coaxed it closer to rupture. She released a deep groan as she felt her body quivering on the verge of climax. It sharpened to cries that bordered a scream as his next thrust sent her over the edge.

He shuddered, either at the sound, or the quaking of her sex as it gripped him in a tight hold. Driving deep, he stilled, uttered a choked groan and began to pump into her in wild, hard plunges as he came.

Shuddering in the aftermath, he sank heavily against her, nearly crushing her with his weight. The darkness from her spent passion deepened as she struggled to drag air into her lungs. Finally, obviously gathering himself with a tremendous effort, he pushed himself up slightly and rolled off of her, sprawling flat of his back beside her.

Her lungs expanded on a deep breath the moment they were released from the vise of his body weight. Air wafted over her damp skin, sending a shiver through her, clearing the mists of spent passion from her mind. Like a dam cracking and then abruptly bursting, thoughts and emotions poured inside her, became a raging torrent.

Joel rolled onto his side, grasped her, and dragged her against him, coiling his big body around hers in a way that was both possessive and protective. The gesture stilled the chaos inside her before she could even begin to sort it. She released a shaky sigh, snuggled more tightly against him and allowed the exhaustion tugging at her to claim her.

\* \* \* \*

"They don't trust me, my lord," Berl said ruefully. "They don't talk around me—not around anybody that's loyal to you. We've been too vocal in supporting you."

Torin studied the man keenly, but he couldn't see anything in his expression or

his eyes to indicate that he was lying. He nodded, his lips thinning in irritation. "It's a pity," he muttered.

Berl looked startled. "My lord?"

"I need information," Torin ground out in frustration. "All I've managed to unearth in nigh three weeks of search is suspicions, whispers, rumors—nothing solid, no real idea of what they're planning. I can't stop it if I can't discover what they're plotting.

Berl reddened uncomfortably. "Your pardon, my lord. I'm just a soldier. I'm no hand at spying, know nothing about politics. I should've thought ... But we all thought if we made it clear the army was behind you and would not be turned that it would die off. They can't do anything without an army, can they?"

Torin tamped his rancor with an effort and clapped a hand to the man's shoulder. "I'm deeply appreciative of the loyalty of the men."

Berl looked pleased, seemed to consider for several moments, and then an expression of discomfort settled over his features. "I feel it's my duty to inform you that I can only be certain of mayhap three quarters of the men. There are always malcontents, my lord ...."

Torin shrugged. He wasn't altogether certain he would accept that three quarters supported him. He would certainly be surprised if they did. "See what you can do to ascertain the loyalties of the men and make note of any that seem doubtful. We will not want them in key positions if they can not be trusted."

Berl nodded, but stood frowning thoughtfully instead of leaving. "I hesitate to mention it ...."

"Don't."

Berl looked confused for a moment, then his brow cleared. "I only meant to say I expect you'd thought of it yourself."

Torin resisted the urge to grind his teeth. "Mayhap I have, but it will not hurt to hear what you have to say."

"I only wondered if you had thought to question the servants to see if they had heard anything. They are everywhere and no one pays them much mind. Chances are, if anything has been whispered about, there will be one among them that heard it."

Torin frowned, but thoughtfully, realizing it was the second time in as many weeks that he'd been advised to consider the wonda-petz as a resource of great value beyond what one would ordinarily think. He nodded, dismissing his captain at arms and returned to the great hall to consider it.

As he stood in the entrance, staring out over the hall, he studied the servants thoughtfully as they rushed about setting up the trestles and benches for the evening meal. Here and there, clan members had gathered in small knots to talk while they waited for the evening meal to be served. Rarely did any of them even glance at the servants weaving in and out among them.

It was certainly worth pursuing, he decided. They were simple, but it didn't necessarily follow that they wouldn't recall tidbits of conversations they'd overheard.

\* \* \* \*

Daylight was filtering into the room when Alexis woke, but it was the discomfort from the heat wafting from Joel's body that roused her rather than the light. He muttered something, the words slurred, impossible to understand, but she knew from the way his body was twitching and the tension in his form that he was in the grips of a nightmare.

Easing away from him, she climbed off the bed. She'd started toward the water reservoir when there was a sharp knock on the door.

It jolted her. She darted a glance at Joel and then moved quickly to the door to forestall whoever it was from pounding on the panel again and waking Joel. Recognition flickered through her when she'd opened the door a small crack and looked up at the man who stood there. It was the same patroller who'd hustled her away from the fight the night before.

Surprise registered on his features for a split second. His gaze left her face and tracked a leisurely course down her length and up again. Whatever his thoughts regarding her state of undress, however, he kept to himself. His expression was carefully blank, his eyes shuttered when he met her gaze again. "I need to talk to Joel," he said without preamble.

Alexis' mind instantly went into turmoil. Joel had been too insistent about keeping his condition a secret for her to be comfortable mentioning it. But what lie would he accept? "He's still sleeping," she stammered, trying to think of something to add to that to explain why he was still sleeping.

His gaze flickered over her again. "When he wakes up, tell him William came by."

A blush sprouted at the tops of Alexis' breasts and coursed upwards to suffuse her cheeks. He followed the rising tide, something flickering in his eyes that she found impossible to interpret. He nodded and pushed away from the door before she could say anything else.

She stared after him as he strode across the main room and disappeared through the outer door.

There was no doubt in her mind that this was the William Joel had mentioned the night before—the man he trusted to take care of her.

[The same one that had threatened to wring her neck if she distracted Joel and got him killed.]

Her belly tightened with uneasiness, but she realized immediately that it wasn't fear of William. He'd *sounded* gruff and harsh, but there hadn't been anything deliberately hurtful about the way he'd held her and there had been protectiveness in the way he'd dragged her from the scene, put her out of harm's way when Gerda had threatened her. She thought his harsh words were more from worry about Joel than particularly directed at her.

The uneasiness was *her* worry about Joel. She thrust it away. Joel would be alright, she assured herself. He was exhausted. No doubt that had lowered his ability to fight the fever and she'd been fairly successful in keeping that down with cool water.

Memories of the night before flickered through her mind as she closed the door and turned toward the reservoir again. She refused to dwell on them or to consider the emotions hammering at her for acknowledgement. She had enough to deal with at the moment without the other.

She was stiff and sore from Lee's attack the night before, though, too much so to ignore the pain completely. The moment it flickered into her mind why she was so sore and what might have happened if Joel hadn't arrived in time to help her, however, she resolutely shoved the thoughts from her mind. There was certainly no point at all in thinking about what ifs and it made her feel ill with terror to recall her own battle to save

herself.

The water, she saw, was low. Consternation filled her. She had her own ration, or what was left of it, but it wasn't enough to see the two of them through until the next was passed out. She would have to think of something, some way to get a larger portion without explaining why she needed so much.

Worry filled her as she returned to Joel and began the task of cooling him again. He needed a medic. She knew next to nothing about illnesses of any kind. As far as she was aware, though, they had no one who did know—no medicines—at least none that she considered safe—no instruments or equipment to determine exactly what was wrong with him.

Even if they had a medic, she realized in dismay, Joel would be furious if she summoned them.

And she didn't quite dare test his temper. She might have been willing to do so *before* she'd seen what he was capable of the night before, but certainly not now.

Her mind disputed that assessment almost as soon as she made it. He'd been as gentle as could be with her afterwards, had held her and soothed her with far more patience that she would've credited him with. Nor had he hurt her when he'd demanded the use of her body later. Despite the things he'd said, he hadn't merely used her. He'd given her as much pleasure as he'd taken and afterwards, when she'd needed reassurance, he'd held her close, made her feel safe, protected, as if he cared for her—not as if she wasn't merely a possession he'd staked a claim on.

She tried to shake those thoughts, but found it impossible to do so as she carefully bathed his face, brushing the cloth across his wide brow, his cheeks, and temples. He looked so young in repose, she thought as she studied his angular features—his deep set eyes, the high cheek bones, slightly crooked nose, aggressive jaw and chin—*younger* than she'd guessed he was and she wondered if he was even thirty. It seemed unlikely that he could be less than that, though. Maude had spoken as if he'd been lord for quite some time.

She hadn't wanted to think about the night before—any of it—the sex or his claims, but she couldn't stave them off as she bathed his broad, muscular chest and heavily muscled arms. It was impossible to touch him without remembering what it had felt like when he'd touched her, kissed her, melded his flesh with hers and driven her to such heights of pleasure.

He didn't awaken. She was surprised, relieved, and unnerved all at the same time. He was cooler when she'd finished, less restless.

Rising, she studied the water she'd used for a moment and finally decided to use it to bathe herself. She was embarrassed at the amount of dirt and dried blood she washed off. He hadn't seemed to notice, or cared, but she still embarrassed.

Her jumpsuit was pretty much a total loss, she discovered when she lifted it up to examine it. She'd had next to nothing else to wear since she'd come through the portal, and, as resilient as the fibers were that it had been woven from, the suit had seen far more stress than had ever been anticipated.

Dropping it to the floor again, she glanced around and finally moved to a chest near the foot of Joel's bed and opened it in search of something to wear. His own clothing had been carefully folded and placed inside. Choosing a tunic, she pulled it over her head and was examining his trousers doubtfully when there was a knock at Joel's

door again.

She moved to the door in a rush and opened it carefully as she had before. It was Mary, she saw, carrying a tray laden with dishes. Mary gaped at her a moment before her face reddened.

It wasn't embarrassment. Alexis could see the anger snapping in her pale gray eyes. "I've brought Lord Joel's breakfast," she said tightly.

Alexis turned to look at Joel. He was sprawled naked across the bed, but she didn't think Mary could discern just from that that he was sick. "He's still asleep," she said. "Just give me the tray and I'll see that he gets it when he wakes up."

Mary's eyes narrowed. "I'll bring it in myself."

Surprise flickered through Alexis, but she stood her ground. "He hasn't slept in days," she said tightly. "If you wake him up, *you* can deal with his temper!"

That comment gave her pause. Uneasiness replaced her expression of belligerence. She tried to glance past Alexis' shoulder but Alexis shifted to block her view. "Fine!" she said finally, holding out the tray.

Alexis opened the door wide enough to take it, glared at Mary when she saw her craning her neck to look at Joel, and slammed the door in her face.

"Bitch!" Mary muttered loud enough to be heard through the panel.

Alexis sent a glare toward the closed door, but couldn't think of a retort and decided to pretend she hadn't heard it.

Joel, she discovered when she turned to look for some place to set the tray, had awakened and was studying her. She forced a smile. "Mary brought you something to eat. Are you hungry?"

He sucked in a deep breath, stretched, winced and finally began to struggle to sit up. Alexis quickly set the tray down and hurried to help him. He looked at her in bemusement when she wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled. Wrapping his arms around her, he dragged her onto the bed and across his lap, twisting to press her down on the mattress. "This looks familiar," he murmured, nuzzling his face against her breasts through the tunic.

"I thought you were hungry," Alexis said a little breathlessly.

"I am," he growled, shifting his focus from her breasts to her throat. He sucked at a small patch of skin, sending shivers through her, but although he nuzzled his way up her throat to her ear, he leaned back after only a moment, releasing her and falling back against his pillows. "Unfortunately, I feel like hell," he muttered.

Alexis shook her head at him as she sat up. "I don't see how you could even think about rec as sick as you've been all night," she said chidingly as she climbed off the bed and bent to pick up the tray.

"Rec?"

Alexis glanced at him. "Recreational sex?"

A muscle worked in his jaw. He looked away. "It's a man thing, baby," he said almost off-handedly. "Our mind's always on our dick."

She set the tray on his lap when he'd sat up. "So I've noticed," she said teasingly. "I think the food would probably be better for you, though."

He didn't look particularly interested in the food. In fact, he looked unnaturally pale once he'd pushed himself into a sitting position. "I'm more thirsty than hungry."

"I'll get you some water. I don't think you should drink the wine."

He lifted a dark brow at her, but he didn't object when she took the mug of wine away and brought him water instead. He drained the mug almost in one gulp. She wasn't at all sure he should have more, but she went to refill the mug again.

"You might as well help me eat this," he said when she set a fresh mug of water on his tray. "I'm not going to be able to eat it by myself."

She wouldn't have considered taking him up on the offer except that she could see he was telling the truth. She was hungry. No doubt it had to do with the unaccustomed exercise the night before, she thought wryly. Settling on the edge of the bed facing him, she helped herself to some of the food and told him about William's visit earlier.

He flicked a glance over her. "I'd wondered why you were wearing my tunic," he said with a faint smile. "It looks better on you than me."

Wondering if he was complimenting her or complaining about her appropriation of his belongings without consulting him, she smiled faintly in acknowledgement—just in case he had meant it as a compliment. Unfortunately, the comment also reminded her that she hadn't been wearing his tunic, or in fact, anything when she'd answered the knock on the door. She didn't know how he'd feel about that, but she suspected, given his possessiveness the night before, that he wouldn't like it any better than Torin would have.

She was sorry she hadn't thought about that before she answered the door. It couldn't be helped now, but she didn't think William would tell him if he thought it would make Joel angry, so she didn't tell him either.

"What did you tell him?"

She shrugged. "That you were sleeping. I couldn't think of anything else, but he didn't seem to think anything about it."

His lips slowly curled into a grin. He chuckled. "Oh, I think you're wrong there. I'm pretty sure I know what went through his mind—and Mary's—not that they would've been wrong if I'd been up to it."

Alexis looked away uncomfortably as that sank in. She hadn't considered how they would interpret it, but then she'd known she'd spent most of her night battling his fever, not pleasantly occupied as they suspected.

That thought made her acknowledge something she'd been trying very hard to ignore.

Sex with Joel had actually been more than pleasant—a lot more—and she didn't particularly welcome that fact. It made her feel guilty, and she didn't have to look very hard to know why.

Torin.

It didn't matter that she'd tried desperately to convince herself since he'd left that whatever there had been between them was over, that he'd never really cared about her. *She* still felt the bond. She still cared for him, very much, and because she did, she also felt as if she'd betrayed him by enjoying sex with Joel. She didn't think she would've felt guilty if she hadn't, certainly not *as* guilty.

Was it really logical to punish herself, though? It certainly didn't seem reasonable to think she had no right ever to enjoy sex again only because of Torin, particularly when he'd rejected her. It didn't seem reasonable to feel bad about herself because she'd enjoyed Joel's touch. She hadn't tried to stop him, but she didn't think she could have if she *had* tried.

And she didn't think she would've felt better even if she had, because she was fairly certain she would still have enjoyed it and, insane as it might be, that was the main reason she felt guilty—because it had felt glorious and somehow that seemed to detract from what she'd felt for Torin.

Did it really, though? Did it change anything?

Maybe her time with Torin had simply taught her how to enjoy sex better? It seemed possible—probable, actually, once she'd considered the possibility, since she'd never felt that way before. Wasn't that more likely than the possibility that she'd gone her entire life just tolerating sex, really, and then had found two men who were capable of wringing so much pleasure from her that she felt almost more pleasure than she could bear? That had both taken her to such heights that she'd almost felt as if she'd transcended the mortal world and reached the mystical realm of heaven?

There was wariness in Joel's eyes when she emerged from her thoughts. His expression, in direct contrast, was stony. She wasn't certain what she'd done to bring it about, but she wasn't in much doubt that it had to do with her.

"That bother you?"

She blinked at him, trying to recall what they'd been talking about. She felt her face heat slightly when she did finally remember the conversation. "That they think we were having sex all night?" she asked cautiously.

His lips tightened. "Yeah, that."

She frowned uneasily. "Should it?"

He uttered a sound of anger, or disgust. Grabbing the tray on his lap, he set it aside and lay back against his pillows, dropping an arm across his eyes. "Obviously it does," he muttered.

Alexis studied him uncomfortably. "I don't really understand the customs here yet," she said apologetically. "Is it considered ... 'wrong'?"

He dropped his arm, fixing her with a hard look. "Not when you're my woman," he said almost challengingly.

"But ... if I wasn't?" she asked instead of arguing with him about whether or not she was.

"But you are."

She considered that for a moment. "Because of the fight last night? Or because we had sex?"

"Fuck!" he snarled, rolling onto his side and putting his back to her. "Because I say so, goddamnit!"

She stared at his back in dismay, wondering what she'd said that had made him so furious. She was tempted to try again, to try to make him understand that she was just trying to figure out what the customs were, but she tamped the urge with the reflection that he was already too angry to be reasonable.

Probably because he was sick, she decided, although she wasn't going to mention *that*! He seemed to think if he denied being sick it wasn't so. Obviously, he wasn't just worried that the others would discover he was weakened by it. He hated it that his strength had deserted him.

She supposed she could understand that. He was so virile, so amazingly strong, it must chafe unbearably to be tied down by illness.

His fever and weakness worried *her*, if it came to that, and not just because she

was concerned that he couldn't protect himself or her, she realized. The entire clan depended upon him. She'd already seen how quickly order vanished with no more than a rumor that he might no longer be able to lead them. If anything did happen to Joel—which didn't bear thinking of—the entire clan would disintegrate into total mayhem with the strong preying upon the weak as it had been before Joel and his father had tamed the unruly—or at least cut them down to a more manageable size.

No doubt he realized that, too, and that was part of the reason for his bad temper—frustration and worry.

Under the circumstances, although it had been her intention to so at the first opportunity, she decided it probably wasn't a very good time to tell him about the pulse rifles.

## Chapter Twenty

Joel's jaw was set implacably. "I've been gone for weeks and I've never ignored my duties—even when I'm enjoying ... rec." The word left a bad taste in his mouth, but he'd used it deliberately, more than half hoping she'd feel the jab as he had. She didn't and it pissed him off more that she didn't.

He knew it was unreasonable. He knew how she felt about Torin, and it still angered him that she could so lightly dismiss what had happened between them—call it recreational sex when it had totally blown his mind! Women were *supposed* to feel some kind of bonding thing when they had sex, damn it to hell!

At least that was the way every other damned woman he'd ever had sex with had been—acted like it changed everything, and he was automatically attached to them by some invisible leash just because they'd had a mutually satisfying sexual experience.

He knew damned well that it hadn't just been him that had enjoyed it.

The fever might have dulled his perceptions, but it hadn't made him hallucinate. As worried as he'd been that his lack of control meant he wasn't pleasuring her, she'd damned well enjoyed it if her cries of ecstasy were anything to go by—and he didn't believe for a moment that she'd only been pandering to his ego.

Unfortunately, he couldn't convince himself that she didn't find just as much enjoyment, regardless of who she was with, but he was determined he wasn't going to let that bother him any more than he intended to allow it to wreck his peace that she was in love with another man.

He meant to *try* not to let it disturb him, anyway.

Eventually, maybe he would have more from her than just acceptance. He was willing to settle for acceptance at the moment, though.

Particularly when he could see he hadn't even gained that fucking much. She hadn't argued, but there was something about her expression that told him she hadn't exactly capitulated either.

"You ordered the punishments," she said in a tone he could tell was meant to placate him. "Do you actually have to be there?"

"I do," he said tightly.

She let out an irritated huff of breath. "The raw places on your feet are still raw. If you don't give the skin time to heal over, they'll start bleeding again."

"And nobody's going to know because I'll be wearing my god damned boots! Now where the hell did you hide them?"

"Couldn't it wait until tomorrow?"

"No."

"I'm just trying to take care of you," she said, trying to hold on to her patience.

"Why?"

She gaped at him. "Because ... because you're sick. You need ...."

His eyes narrowed. "Lady, I don't *need* you to take care of me," he growled. "I've been taking care of myself just fucking fine since I was knee high to a hopper. I

didn't *ask* you to do a damned thing—you took that upon yourself. And I sure as hell don't need anybody to tell me what the fuck I can and can't do!"

Alexis stared at him with a mixture of hurt and anger—and fear if it came to that, grappling with all the emotions and unable to come to grips with any of them. She felt her face heat with embarrassment and anger, pale with fear, and then light up with embarrassment again. When she opened her mouth to try to make a retort—she wasn't even certain what she'd intended to say—her chin wobbled so badly she thought better of it and clamped her jaw tightly.

Without a word, she went to her room, where she'd hidden his boots, and brought them to him. He'd pulled on a fresh tunic and trousers while she was gone and was sitting on the edge of the bed, his jaw clamped so hard a muscle bulged along his jaw. His swarthy skin had taken on a sickly pallor. He scrubbed a hand over the beard he'd grown since he'd left. "Get me a mug of wine," he said tiredly.

Alexis threw him a sharp glance.

"Please."

She didn't know if it was what he'd said, the way he'd said it, or the look on his face, but the urge to cry washed over her again. Swallowing against the hard knot of emotion, nodding, she took his empty mug and went out into the main room where the wine casks were stored. There was a faint tremor in his hand when he took it and despite the tongue lashing he'd given her, it unsettled her more to see it. The wine brought a little healthier color to his face.

She realized when he set the empty mug down that he was trying to bolster himself to put the boots on. His face contorted with pain when he pulled the first on, and he stopped to catch his breath before he faced the second.

Alexis took the mug and refilled it.

He was on his feet when she got back, wavering slightly, but standing. He took the mug when she offered it, but this time he drank no more than a swallow and handed it back.

He stopped when he reached the door and turned to look back her. "Everyone bears witness," he said gruffly.

She didn't want to, but she didn't want to anger him more by refusing, either.

In any case, her absence would probably be noted and it would be one more thing for them to despise her for.

She followed him from the building. He went no further than the raised area just outside the door, however. Propping one shoulder against the jutting wall of the building, he nodded.

Alexis followed the direction of his focus and saw William. The clan members had gathered around the wide space much as they had the night before. In the center, six thick posts had been erected and there was a man tied to each. At Joel's nod, he turned to the crowd, called each of the men by name, named the crime they were being punished for and the penalty—ten to twenty lashes each.

Six other men she recognized as patrollers stepped forward holding a handle from which multiple strips of leather dangled. There was dead silence in the compound when William had stopped speaking except the noise the leather strips made as they cut the air and the screams of the men having the hide torn from their backs with the things.

Alexis thought she would be sick.

She jumped when Joel's hand settled on her shoulder, whipping her head around to stare at him. He slipped his hand from her shoulder to her arm. Tugging at her toward him, he pulled her close, pressing her head to his chest. The palm of one hand cupped her head, holding her cheek pressed above his heart. His arm blocked the view. His hand covered her ear, muffling the horrible sounds. He began to stroke her hair after a moment.

She sensed that it was his way of protecting her from what she hadn't wanted to see, making it appear that he was merely fondling her when.

"Why do you do this?" she asked in choked voice. "Make everyone watch."

"This isn't about the punishment of the men for what they did. It's for the benefit of the people, so that they can see that anyone that breaks the laws will be punished, so that they can see the retribution against those that harmed them and feel that they've gotten justice and that they're protected. For the most part, those who commit these sorts of crimes will do it again, no matter how much hide they lose. They're like stupid beasts. They can't control themselves, or won't."

"But ... the children," Alexis said hoarsely. "They shouldn't see this ... violence."

"They see violence every day, Alex. They need to see this more than anyone else. They need to know they will be held accountable for the things they do. And they need to know that there's order in their world to feel secure, that they'll be protected from harm if they behave acceptably, and that they will find themselves standing where those men are today if they don't."

She could feel tremors begin in him and grow progressively worse the longer he stood. She shifted from taking comfort to giving him what strength she could offer him, loathe though she knew he was to accept it. He surprised her. Instead of pushing her firmly away when she slipped her arms around his waist to help brace him upright, he settled his arms around her, leaning more and more heavily against her.

Finally, the meaty thuds and screaming stopped. She felt Joel gathering himself and stepped away, glancing toward the yard. William, she discovered, was watching the two of them.

It made her feel uneasy until she remembered what he'd said to her the night before.

Whatever Joel thought, she believed William was extremely loyal to him.

He turned away, ordering the men cut down and their wounds tended.

Joel draped an arm around her shoulders when he turned to re-enter the building, leaning so heavily against her she had to brace herself to bolster him up. They made it into his room and to his bed, although there'd been a good deal of doubt in her mind that they would. He was as pale as death when he dropped to the mattress and sprawled on his back.

She lifted his legs one at the time and helped him to settle them on the mattress until he was lying more comfortably. She stared at his boots, dreading removing them, but knowing they had to come off.

"It's alright."

She glanced him questioningly.

"It'll be a relief to get them off."

She didn't doubt it. Walking in them as raw as he feet and ankles were must have

been sheer torture. Feeling her stomach begin to churn, she positioned herself and began trying to work the first boot off carefully. He pulled his foot from her grasp after a moment, hooked the toe of his other boot against the heel and shoved. The boot made a sickening sucking sound when it came off.

She saw why immediately. His foot was bleeding from the loss of the fragile skin that the boot had taken with it. By the time she had the second boot off she wasn't certain whether she felt more like throwing up, passing out, or squalling like a baby. Sniffing, brushing away the tears that filled her eyes with the back of her hand, she rushed to get water and soft cloths to pat against his feet until they stopped bleeding.

"Come here."

Alexis glanced up when Joel spoke. He'd been so quiet throughout her feeble attempts to minister to him that she'd thought he'd lost consciousness. He'd seemed the next thing to it when he'd collapsed on the bed.

Wordlessly, she moved to take the outstretched hand he'd extended toward her. He tugged her closer and then pulled her down onto the bedside him. Rolling onto his side, he stroked the rough pad of his thumb along her cheeks, brushing the moisture from them.

His expression, as he studied her, was unreadable. Alexis was tempted to urge him, again, to send for someone who knew something about medicines. She was nearly sick with worry about him and afraid that she'd do something wrong, or not do enough, and he'd get worse instead of better.

"I'm sorry," he said gruffly.

She looked at him in surprise. "For what?"

He shook his head, his expression hardening into a look of self-disgust. "For losing my temper ... for bellowing at you while ago."

She was tempted to tell him she'd forgotten it, but she hadn't.

He released a gusty sigh that was part irritation, part resignation. "I'm not used to this."

Alexis frowned in confusion. "Used to what?"

His eyes shuttered instantly. "Being around anyone like you," he muttered uncomfortably. "I know you think I'm a savage ...." He shook his head. "I wouldn't hurt you. No matter how angry I might seem, I'd never hurt you. I swear it."

She reddened, embarrassed that he'd seen how badly he'd scared her when, really, he hadn't done anything more than display his temper—spoken harshly, a little louder than she was accustomed to.

*She* wasn't used to that, wasn't accustomed to being yelled at, the threat of violence barely held in check when his ire had risen. Wryly, she thought she'd had enough lessons by now she ought to have at least adjusted somewhat.

She realized abruptly that she hadn't really believed he would hurt her. If she had, she would've run, or at least retreated the moment an opportunity presented itself. She wouldn't have gone to him willingly when he'd held out his hand to her, wouldn't have allowed him to pull her into his embrace when they'd stood outside.

"Why did you say that—that you'd taken care of yourself since you were knee high to a hopper?" she asked instead of responding to what he'd said. "What happened to your mother?"

She wasn't prepared for the emotions that crossed his features in quick succession

—guilt, anger, remorse, terrible sadness. He rolled away from her, lifting one hand to rub his eyes. She saw his throat work as he swallowed.

“I killed her,” he said harshly.

Alexis felt coldness wash over her. “I don’t believe that.”

He uttered a derisive sound, but he said nothing else.

Alexis pushed herself up on one arm and stared down at his face, wondering what terrible thing had happened to make him believe he’d killed his mother. Maude had said he’d come with his father. She hadn’t thought to ask her how old Joel had been, or even asked after his mother. She supposed she’d just assumed Maude had merely omitted mention of his mother because she’d been talking about Joel and his father’s feats.

He dragged in a ragged breath. “A roaming gang broke in to our home. My father was gone—didn’t make it back until three of them had already raped my mother and beat her nearly to death. I was scared. I’d never been so scared in my life, and my mother had screamed at me, begged me to protect the babies—my little brother and sister. I couldn’t stand it anymore though—couldn’t stand to watch what they were doing to her and do nothing. I grabbed the knife the man had dropped, the one that was on top of her, and I drove it into his back with all my strength. I drove it into him with so much rage it went all the way through his back and into her chest.”

He shuddered, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I didn’t realize what I’d done at first—not until one of the others rolled him off of her and started laughing about it. They were still laughing when my father came in and cut them to pieces.

“She forgave me, though, so that made it alright,” he continued harshly. “With her dying breath she cuddled me in her arms and told me what a brave boy I was, that I’d saved her and my brother and sister.

“I didn’t, though. The men killed them when I abandoned them to help my mother. I remember thinking that I was glad she died before she knew I’d let her down.”

“You couldn’t have been much more than a baby yourself,” Alexis gasped, struggling against the terrible, painful pity that welled inside of her and warred with the horror she felt.

He turned his head to look at her for a long moment. Finally, he lifted one arm and settled it around her shoulders, pulling her down until she rested her cheek on his chest. He dragged in a deep breath. “I was five summers—when I killed my first man—when I killed the only gentle person in my world. I am every nightmarish thing you think I am, baby. I’m not sure I know how to be gentle. I think I’d completely forgotten what it was ... until I saw you.”

\* \* \* \*

Seated in the overstuffed chair near the dead hearth, Torin watched the squat creature that scurried busily about his room, dragging the linens from his bed and bundling the them up and then moving into the adjoining bathing chamber to gather up the clothing he’d discarded.

“What name are you called?”

The creature paused, glanced around the room and finally sent him a startled look.

Torin lifted his brows. “You have a name?”

The servant glanced around the room again, as if certain Torin couldn’t be speaking to him, before he returned his gaze to Torin. “Yes, Master,” he responded, bobbing his head vigorously, a vacuous smile curling his lips.

Torin tilted his head. "What is it?"

The creature blinked at him, frowned in confusion, and finally smiled again. "Lucky, master."

Amusement touched Torin. "Why are you called Lucky?" he asked curiously.

The question obviously threw the creature into confusion. "Because my dam said that I was lucky she didn't toss me away," he responded finally.

Torin resisted the urge to chuckle, uncertain of whether it was supposed to be a tale of woe Lucky had related or the creature had meant to amuse him. "I suppose you were lucky, then," he responded finally.

Lucky bobbed his head several times agreeably, chuckled, and then tilted his head curiously. "Did you want me to fetch something for you, Master?"

Torin crooked a finger at him, beckoning him closer.

Lucky studied him uneasily a moment, but trotted forward and crouched before him, bowing his head respectfully.

"What rooms do you clean, Lucky?"

Lucky looked confused again. "All the rooms on this corridor, Master," he responded finally. "Did I do something wrong? Have I displeased you?"

"Do you want to please me?"

Lucky blinked at him, but finally smiled, bobbing his head happily. "Yes, Master."

Torin studied the servant, trying to decide how to phrase the question uppermost in his mind. Finally, he mentally shrugged. Bluntness was the only thing likely to gain him any information. "I need information."

Lucky smiled and bobbed his head, though his brows knit in confusion. "From who?"

"You."

Lucky looked doubtful. "You want to know how many rooms I clean?"

"I want to know what the people talk about. The things you've heard them say."

Lucky stared at him in surprise for a moment, but finally frowned thoughtfully. "Master Kinley called me a dog and told me to keep my filthy paws off his silk shirts. Master Mart wants to fuck the Lady Zella, but thinks her man might slit his throat. Lady Zella says her man is a pig and she would rather fuck anyone else but him, and I am entirely certain she *has* fucked everyone else ...."

Torin held his hand up to halt the recital, struggling with a mixture of irritation and amusement. "Treasonous talk, Lucky."

"Oh," Lucky responded and fell silent, thinking. "Your brother said you should have died in Prince Doom's prison," he said finally, frowning ferociously. "It startled me and I dropped the tray that I'd brought him and he didn't say anything else beyond berating me for spilling his wine."

It was hardly startling or enlightening news. He already knew Shae had at least wished him dead a hundred times over. "He's said nothing else? Nothing before or since?"

Lucky looked uncomfortable. "He always ceases to speak now when he notices I am in the room. Sometimes I hear a word or two, but it is nothing that I can make sense of, Master."

Disappointment and frustration flooded Torin.

"I know that he spoke of Doom several times before you returned and several times since. Or mayhap it was something about being doomed? And something about a meeting. He scribbled a note and gave it to the other man."

"You didn't happen to see what he wrote?"

"Nay, Master. I can not read, but he gave it to the bear man."

Torin sat forward abruptly. "A member of the bear clan?" he asked sharply. "Here? Within Broden Fortress?"

"Aye, Master. In Master Shae's rooms."

"When was this?" Torin growled ominously.

Lucky studied him uneasily. "Mayhap a fortnight ago, Master Torin."

Torin was startled. He'd been so certain that Lucky was relating one of the attempts by Prince Doom to collect ransom on him—something Shae had denied had ever happened—that he was thrown into complete confusion. "You are certain?" he asked sharply. "This is important, Lucky. Are you certain of the timing?"

"Mayhap it was the day before yesterday," Lucky said uneasily.

Torin resisted the urge to grab the creature and shake him. "Since my return?" he insisted.

Lucky bobbed his head. "Yes, Master. I am certain of that."

Torin settled back in his seat. "But you heard nothing of their discussion?"

Lucky screwed his face up in concentration. "Nay, Master. I humbly apologize."

Torin shook his head. "You've been helpful." Not very, but it was something and he'd had nothing before.

"Shall I ask the others, Master?"

Torin looked at him doubtfully. "You would be discreet?"

"Discreet?"

"Careful that none of the clansmen overhear you questioning the other servants,"

Torin clarified, holding onto his patience with an effort.

Lucky bobbed his head excitedly. "Yes, Master. Very careful. Shall I send them to you if they think they have heard something useful? Or try to remember what they've said and come to tell you myself?"

"I don't think it would be very discreet, Lucky, if I begin to have a parade of servants coming to my room. Gather what you can find out—whenever there's no danger you might be overheard—and then you can tell me what you've discovered when you come in the mornings to clean the room."

## Chapter Twenty One

Alexis made up her mind when she woke to discover that Joel's fever had risen again that she had to find someone, if there was anyone, who knew something about medicine. He'd been sick when he arrived—she had no idea how long he'd been feverish—but it seemed to her that whatever was causing it wasn't something he was going to be able to fight off without some help.

It bothered her to leave him, vulnerable he was, but she knew there was no other way. If he was awake, he wouldn't allow her to leave, certainly not in search of a medic.

William, she discovered when she emerged from the building, was leaning against the wall where Joel had stood to watch the whippings. Something about his stance told her he wasn't merely loitering.

He glanced at her questioningly when she stepped out, lifting one black brow.

She hesitated, trying to decide whether to say anything or not.

“Joel know you're out wandering around alone?”

She stared at him uncomfortably. “He's ... uh ... sleeping.”

A flicker of amusement lit his green eyes. “You're a piss poor liar, Alexis Conyers.”

She gaped at him, feeling cold wash over her.

He shook his head as if he'd read her mind. “Does he need anything?”

Alexis chewed her lip and finally capitulated. “He has a fever. I've used all the water trying to bring it down and I don't know what to do.”

“Ask Maude. She'll have something.”

Alexis blinked at him. “Maude?”

He nodded. “Your friend. She's our healer. Comes from a long line of 'em. She knows more'n anybody else around here about medicine.”

“Oh god,” Alexis said in dismay.

William chuckled. “Tried her salve on you, did she? I ain't sayin' she always has the cure—it's as hard to come by medicines as it is to get anything else—but she's got something that'll bring down the fever. I guarantee it.” He took her arm, guiding her down the steps. “I'll walk you as far as the cistern to fetch some water. I don't think anybody will bother you, but I'll be close if you need me.”

Alexis was surprised to say the least, but she certainly wasn't averse to having his company. She hadn't been out since Lee's attack and she was quaking inside at the prospect.

She left him drawing water and headed quickly to the area where the women generally worked, her head up, refusing to look at anyone she passed. Maude, to her relief, got up and rushed over to her when she arrived.

“The bastard beat the shit out of you,” she said by way of greeting after she'd looked Alexis over searchingly. “Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say. Joel shoulda killed the bastard a long time ago.”

Alexis looked around uncomfortably at the reminder and was tremendously

relieved when she saw no sign of Gerda. "I need something for a fever," she said in a low voice.

Maude's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Nodding, she turned and headed toward her shack with Alexis on her heels.

"Lord Joel got burnt, too, huh?" she demanded the moment they'd entered her living quarters.

"Badly," Alexis admitted. "His poor feet and ankles are raw."

Maude shook her head. "I don't doubt it. And he's in good shape compared to some of them. We had to bury two of them this morning before the whippings."

"Oh god!" Alexis exclaimed, horrified, though she was more distressed about the possibility that Joel could get worse—might die.

Maude seemed to sense that, either that or she was just as deeply concerned as Alexis. Moving to a crude chest, she dropped to her knees and opened it. "I'll come see him tonight when it won't rouse no suspicions. I got some 'cillen, though, an' I want you to get him to take it—slip in his drink if you have to. If he's fevered, he's infected an' there ain't nothin' better for knockin' that out.

"Stubborn man! I shoulda known when I saw how bad the other men were that he'd be just as bad off if not worse. He ain't one to send somebody else to do somethin' he wouldn't be willin' to do himself."

Sorting through various clay pots, she took small squares of fabric and pinches of the contents, mixing several together and then tying up first one little pouch and then another. "A couple of pinches of this in his wine for the infection," she said absently, setting it to one side and returning her attention to her pots of medicines. "Only about a pinch of this—its for the fever and the pain. It'll knock him out, so don't give him, too much or he might not wake up."

Alexis studied the woman in horrified dismay. "A pinch?" she asked shakily.

"Yeah—whatever you can pick up pinching it between your fingers. Give him some when you git back to him—two pinches of this one, one pinch of this one," she instructed, pointing to the little pouches. "And then again tonight after they bring his supper. If he's up to it, try to coax him down to the bathhouse before he takes the sleepin' draught. There's minerals in the bath that should help with the healing. It'll hurt like hell, I know, it bein' hot, but it's still good for the burns."

"Maybe I could get something to carry the water in and just take it to him? Let it cool down before he soaks his feet in it?"

Maude stared at her a moment, but she could see the woman was considering it. "That'd probably be better, now that you mention it. The minerals is good for healing, but hot water's about the worst thing to put on a burn."

Alexis felt both better and worse when she left Maude and headed back, studying the little pouches Maude had given her uneasily and trying to fix it firmly in her mind which was the 'cellin and which was the painkiller.

William, she discovered, was waiting for her when she reached the cistern again. He walked her back, setting the pail of water he'd carried inside for her. She studied him uncomfortably when he straightened and looked at her questioningly. "I wonder if you'd bring me a pail of water from the bath house?" she asked tentatively.

His black brows drew together, but a faint smile curled his lips. "You askin'?"

Alexis blinked at him. "Yes," she said cautiously.

“I think I can manage that,” he responded.

\* \* \* \*

As profoundly relieved as Alexis was that Joel was recovering rapidly with the medicines Maude had provided, she had discovered that his recovery represented a dilemma for her that she hadn't really anticipated. She supposed she should have, but she'd been too preoccupied with his health and her worry for him to spare much time for considering the change in her circumstances once he was well again.

Ruefully, she supposed it had been as much deliberation on her part in simply refusing to consider her situation as it had been preoccupation with other matters but that didn't change the fact that she had complicated her life far more than she'd intended or expected to.

She hadn't *agreed* to be Joel's woman. She wasn't even certain of what that entailed because she still didn't understand their customs regarding such things. She didn't honestly think she had considered it, though, not even in the deepest recesses of her mind, despite his claim upon her. She hadn't disputed it, but then she hadn't been in any emotional state to handle a confrontation and Joel had been too ill. With his health on the line, it hadn't been the right time for a battle of wills between them even if she could've summoned the fortitude to try to oppose him.

She was a pacifist both by nature and nurture. The civilization that had spawned her had exactly suited her natural inclinations—violence was completely unacceptable and disharmony frowned upon. Confrontations of any kind—personal or professional—were expected to be conducted with civilized, logical debate—not as shouting matches and certainly not expected to degenerate into blows. She'd avoided even those whenever possible because unpleasantness distressed her. Dealing with people inclined to resolve disputes physically if they couldn't 'win' verbally was completely beyond her ability to cope.

She had responded in the only manner she knew how to—passively—and, when she'd seen Joel's fever had broken and didn't return, had removed herself to the room she'd come to think of as hers, thinking—wrongly it transpired—that Joel would accept that as her answer.

She supposed, as she stared uneasily at Joel, propped against her doorframe, his arms folded over his broad chest in a way that made his muscular arms look downright massive, that she should have pushed the chair against the door. Joel's temper had mellowed as the sickness left him, though, and he was an extraordinarily civilized man considering the life he led. She hadn't thought it necessary. She'd thought when she didn't return to his room, he would understand that she was her own person, an individual, intelligent, able to make her own decisions, and that she didn't want to be 'owned' by anyone—couldn't be.

His hair was still wet from their excursion to the bath house. As she stared at him wide-eyed, trying to think of something to say that wouldn't exacerbate the anger she saw glittering in his silvery eyes, she saw a drop of water drip from his long, black hair, trace a wandering path through the dark hair that furred his thick forearms and then drop to the floor.

She followed the drop as it splattered on the floor. He was still barefoot, but then once he'd felt more himself, more capable of self-defense, he hadn't bothered with his boots, leaving them off to allow the burns to heal as they should.

She retraced the path up his form, staring at the damp hair surrounding his belly button—exposed by the low ride of his trousers on his hips—and then lifted her gaze to his face again. He'd shaved the weeks worth of beard, she noticed, feeling her belly clench. She'd thought the black beard made him look far more dangerous than when he was clean shaven. She discovered, though, that, clean shaven as he was now, there was nothing to prevent her from receiving the full impact of his hard expression—the taut set of his jaw and chin, the muscle working in his cheek from gritting his teeth, the tight line of his mouth.

“Did you want rec?” she asked abruptly in a high, quavering voice that didn't sound at all like she'd intended.

It didn't have the desired effect either. His expression darkened. Dropping his arms to his sides, he came away from the door and stalked toward her. She felt her eyes widen at his approach. Mindlessly, she lifted the coverlet before her, as if it was a shield instead of a thin piece of fabric woefully inadequate even for its intended purpose.

He grasped it as if she'd been offering it to him instead, snatched it from her lax fingers and tossed it aside. She was still gaping at him in stunned surprise when he grasped her wrists and bore her backwards onto the bed, pinning her to the mattress with his weight, using it to force her thighs apart to wedge his hips between them. For a moment, the weight of his upper body rested on her wrists, which he'd pinned to the bed on either side of her head, before he bent his elbows and caught the weight on his arms, and she winced involuntarily. Something flickered in his eyes, but he didn't release her.

“I believe I do,” he growled ominously. Dipping his head, he opened his mouth over hers. She flinched, instinctively bracing for the assault, but she made no attempt to evade him, holding the sharp breath she'd sucked in as the moist heat of his mouth sealed to hers and she felt the thrust of his tongue against the seam where her lips met. The breath she'd held left her in a rush as he plunged his tongue inside her mouth, commanding her senses as his taste filled her. It shouldn't have been so infinitely pleasing to her, she thought despairingly. The rough caress of his tongue along hers and the fragile skin inside her mouth shouldn't have made her mind reel with sudden need, but it did.

She sucked in another breath through her nose to fill her starving lungs and, momentarily, her senses switched focus from the feel of his tongue against hers to the scent and taste of him she dragged in along with the air. It made her dizzier, hotter.

Breaking the kiss almost as quickly as he'd begun, he roamed her face and throat and the upper slope of her breasts with his lips, sucking at the tender flesh, driving her passions before him, shredding what little control she'd had—the half formed thought of holding herself aloof from his ardor—as if it had been no more substantial than mist. Her world closed around him, her senses funneling nothing into her beyond the overwhelming pleasure of every brush of his skin against hers, the touch of his lips, the enveloping heat and scent and taste of him.

“Baby,” he murmured, low, near her ear, his voice hoarse, shaky with need, feverish, “you make me crazy.” Her skin pebbled in response, intensifying the flood of sensations through every nerve ending. He nipped at her ear lobe, sucked it, explored the cavity with his tongue. Her nipples puckered as blood rushed to them, hardening painfully. The rough brush of the pelt of hair on his chest with his movements teased her maddeningly. She arched her back, lifting to feel more and then struggled to evade him

in the next moment when the pressure only made them throb harder and gave her no relief.

The movement caught his attention. He released his grip on one wrist and shifted to cup and lift one breast to his mouth, pinching the taut peak just hard enough between his teeth to tear a gasp from her. She arched to meet him that time to avoid the possibility of pain. He took it as an offering, releasing the hold with his teeth and opening his mouth over her. The hard pull of his mouth as he sucked her made her sex spasm with delight.

Moisture had already flooded her passage when he released his grip on her breast and skated his hand down her belly, insinuating it between their bodies. She curled her hips hopefully, certain he meant to fill her at once with his cock. Instead, he shifted slightly to one side and took advantage of the position of her hips and her thighs he'd pushed wide with his hips and dragged one thick finger along her cleft.

She sucked in a sharp breath when he found the mouth of her sex with his fingertip and pushed the digit inside of her. Pulling at her breast with his mouth, he alternated between stroking his finger in and out of her and teasing her clit until she was thrashing beneath him feverishly, struggling to reach culmination one moment, fighting it the next. Her body surged upward to grasp release with a will of its own. The suckling of his mouth on her breast and inescapable invasion of his finger inside of her pushing her beyond all ability to control her body's response.

She stiffened, quivered for a moment on the edge, and then came, gasping with the force of it. On the heels of release came disappointment that he hadn't entered her, that he'd brought her to release without allowing her to feel the thick stroke of his cock inside of her.

She hadn't even completely caught her breath when he withdrew his finger from her and lifted his hand to cup the breast he'd completely ignored. It was over-sensitized with neglect, had become so engorged with blood that she felt almost as much pain as pleasure when he caught the turgid tip between his teeth and raked them lightly along the bud. She sucked in a hiss of a breath, held it. A wave of dizziness assaulted her as he tugged and suckled at it. Reluctance wafted through her as she felt her body respond instantly, felt the heat that hadn't even cooled completely surge to a fiery pyre in her belly.

She fought it, certain it would end badly for her, that she couldn't be brought to climax again so quickly, only to discomfort and dissatisfaction. He was persistent, refusing to allow her to glory in her release, teasing the sensitive tip until her heart was hammering in her chest again, until her body was clamoring for satisfaction.

Irritation flickered through her when he lifted his mouth from her breast. His breath was ragged, his face taut with need, reminding her belatedly that he hadn't found his own release. He studied her face for a moment and brought his mouth down over hers, tangling his tongue with hers, sucking at her tongue hungrily, stirring more heat within her.

When he broke away it was to suck opened mouth kisses down her throat to her breasts. He teased both relentlessly, moving from one to the other before he shoved backwards and moved lower, scattering love bites along her quivering belly as he advanced on his goal. Her belly tightened when he continued downward instead of changing directions and weaving a trail upward again, but she didn't have time to brace herself, didn't think she could have if she'd realized his intent. The heat of his mouth

was scalding as it settled over her clit, the hungry tug of his mouth shattering. She sucked in a sharp breath, tangling her fingers in his hair and tugging at him. Without missing a stroke, he caught her wrists, squeezing until she released her hold and then pushed them to the bed beside her hips, holding her captive to his assault. Her body peaked within moments, shattering so hard with release that it dragged a sharp cry from her and then another as he continued tormenting her, pushing her body to convulse endlessly in climax until she was uttering one hoarse cry after another.

Profound relief overtook her when he lifted his head at last, released her from his thrall. Darkness crowded her mind as he moved over her. She flinched at the jolt of sensation that went through her as he guided the head of his cock to her sex, protesting with a weak groan as she felt him pushing inside of her. It sharpened as he pressed into her relentlessly, the slick moisture of her passage aiding his entry even as the muscles along her channel, still quaking in the aftermath of her release, protested his invasion.

Another groan escaped her as he claimed complete possession and began to drive into her almost frenziedly, each stroke hard, punishing, fraught with his desperate need. The very desperation of his need caught her as she fell. She dug her fingers into his flesh as she felt herself spiraling toward a third climax. She didn't have time to wonder if the force of it would break her apart. He drove so deeply inside of her she felt as if she would split half, shuddered, and uttered a choked cry his seed began to pump into her and she came again as she felt the scalding flow against her womb, uttering keening cries herself as the hard convulsions wracked her.

Her release was sublime, snatching consciousness from her grasp and plunging her into nothingness.

She roused when Joel stirred, pulled his flaccid member from her body and settled beside her.

"Paybacks are hell," Joel growled, his voice still ragged with his release but filled with gloating satisfaction.

Thoroughly confused, Alexis pried her eyes open a crack and found him with her gaze. He wasn't looking at her, however. He was staring toward the door and her gaze automatically followed his.

Torin was standing in the doorway, his face a mask of pure rage. Behind him stood William, but Alexis barely registered his presence. The moment full comprehension filled her mind, she jackknifed upright, staring at Torin in horror.

## Chapter Twenty Two

Torin's bellow of fury made Alexis' eardrums rattle. She felt as if every hair on her head stood on end.

Even as he slung off William's grip and charged across the room, Joel bounded from the bed to meet him, landing in a half crouch between her and beast man charging toward him with death in his eyes.

They slammed into each other with a meaty thud that crushed the air from her lungs and squeezed her heart painfully. She sucked in a screaming breath as Torin's momentum carried both men backwards, unable to move as she watched the wall of male flesh flying toward her. At the last second her instincts kicked in. She lunged to one side, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the two men as they landed on the edge of the bed. They aborted her attempt at flight when they trapped her leg beneath them. As they rolled, however, freeing her, she scrambled out of the bed and fled toward the door.

William caught her full length against him. She grunted as she slammed into him. His arms came around her, caging her before she could even gather her wits enough to figure out what had happened.

"Goin' somewhere?"

She tilted her head back to gape up at him. "Out ... go," she gabbled mindlessly.

"Not like you are," he retorted.

Deafened by shock and the crashing noises in the room behind her, she couldn't comprehend what he was saying.

He turned her in his arms, snuggling her back against his chest and cupping a breast in each of his hands. "You wouldn't get ten feet outa here like this, sweetheart," he murmured as she twisted her head to look up at him.

"I'll break your fucking neck if you don't get your hands off of her, William!" Joel bellowed.

William lifted his head at that. A mixture of amusement and challenge threaded his voice when he spoke. "You'll have to finish with Torin first."

The comment dragged Alexis' unwilling gaze to the fight in progress just as Torin drew back his arm and slugged Joel in the mouth. Joel's head rocked back and then a feral grin spread his lips as he countered by punching Torin in the mouth.

Alexis watched them in horror as they alternated between slugging each other with their fists and slinging each other into the walls and furniture. Dragging her gaze from them with an effort, she twisted her head to look up at William again. He was watching the fight, apparently completely unaware of the fact that he was also still cupping her breasts, plucking almost absently at her nipples.

He met her gaze. She saw then that there was nothing either idle or unintentional about the caress. His eyes when they met hers were dark, tumultuous with need.

She licked her lips. "S..stop them."

"Why would I want to do that?" he drawled.

"They'll get hurt."

He lifted one hand to stroke her cheek lightly. "I could be wrong, sweetheart—I have been before. But I think they've already hurt each other a good bit and they're plannin' on doin' a whole lot more damage."

"Joel's your friend," she stammered in dismay.

"Yep. He's a big boy, though. I'm thinkin' he can handle this himself, and he wouldn't appreciate me interferrin'—aside from the fact that he brought it on himself by baitin' Torin to start with. I won't let 'em hurt you with their brawlin', darlin'."

He said the last loudly enough that it seemed to pierce both Torin and Joel's absorption in trying to beat each other to death. Both men paused, their fists drawn back, a hand on each other's throat. Their heads swiveled in William's direction.

"You bucks finished?" he drawled.

Torin and Joel turned their heads to glare at each other again. After a long, pregnant pause, they slowly lowered their fists and released their grips on each other's throat. Both of them were breathing heavily, sporting bleeding lips, swollen eyes and dozens of reddened patches that promised to develop into deep bruises.

"This little lady is gonna make up her own mind who she wants. You two can beat the shit out of each other all you want to, but it ain't gonna make up her mind for her."

Alexis turned a look of stunned surprise up at William.

He flicked the tip of her nose with one finger playfully, amusement lighting eyes. "Want me to fight for you, too, darlin'?" he murmured.

Alexis shook her head slowly.

He dropped his head to whisper near her ear. "Then you'd better stop lookin' at me like that, sweetheart, because the only thing I can think of when you look up at me with those wide blue eyes and your lips parted like that is slippin' my tongue between your lips an' pushin' my cock deep enough inside you to make you scream."

A shiver skated through her. She wavered slightly when he released her. She took a couple of steps away from him, stared at him speechlessly for a moment, and then dragged her gaze from his to look at Torin and Joel.

"We could always share her," William drawled, dragging her attention back to him.

He'd folded his arms over his chest and was leaning against the doorframe. "She ain't much more than a bite, but seein' as how they only made one an' quit, an' we all want her, it'd beat the hell out of killin' each other."

"Like hell!" Joel and Torin ground out in almost the same breath.

William shrugged. "Maybe I'll just wait it out and let you two kill each other, then, and console her when you're done? You'll be heartbroken, won't you, darlin'?"

Alexis didn't know how to respond to that. Fortunately, she didn't have to.

Joel muttered a curse beneath his breath and stalked from the room, shoving William aside as he pushed through the doorway.

Alexis swallowed against a hard knot of emotion that suddenly clogged her throat, turning to look at Torin despairingly. His face hardened. Turning away, he followed Joel.

Alexis stared at his retreating back unhappily.

William diverted her attention back to him by the simple expedient of cupping her chin in one hand and tipping her head back so that she had to look at him. His gaze

skimmed her face caressingly. “You’ve got a big heart, Alexis Conyers. You think, maybe, there’s room in there for one more?”

She stared at him in confusion, trying to figure out what game he was playing. He’d very effectively stopped the fight—without lifting a hand, which was nothing short of amazing—and she thought that was his intention, but she didn’t quite understand his behavior toward her. “You’re teasing?” she finally asked doubtfully.

His dark brows rose. Leaning toward her, he touched the tip of his nose to hers. “Nope.”

Her lips parted in surprise.

He took instant advantage, covering her mouth and thrusting his tongue inside in almost the same movement. Surprise jolted through her. Giving her no more than a brief taste of his heat and essence, he withdrew, sucking at her lips briefly before he lifted his head.

“Not even a little bit,” he murmured huskily, patting her cheek and then turning on his heel and departing just as Joel and Torin had.

Alexis toyed with the idea, briefly, of flinging herself down on her bed and wailing until she was exhausted—more exhausted. She felt so buffeted by conflicting emotions she couldn’t quite decide which to react to, but crying her eyes out seemed like the most desirable expression of her feelings at the moment.

She had missed Torin *so* much! She hadn’t really believed that she would ever see him again.

And now he was angry with her, so furious he wouldn’t even look at her!

And it was Joel’s fault!

He’d left the door open on purpose, intended for Torin to hear, *hoped* he would be drawn to watch!

Briefly, anger flared, chasing away the urge to cry, but then she remembered the look of hurt in Joel’s eyes when she’d pulled her tormented gaze from Torin and looked at him.

And it *was* hurt. She should be able to recognize it. She’d seen that same forlorn, hopelessness reflected in her own eyes when Torin had left her.

She had willfully ignored that look in Joel’s eyes, in spite of what Maude had told her. She didn’t want Joel to care about her, didn’t want to care for him, but she did. Somehow, she had come to feel things for him she’d never wanted any part of, thought she’d already given to Torin and couldn’t feel for another man, not at the same time.

William had seen it, though. He hadn’t merely been taunting her. He’d seen the way she felt about both Torin and Joel.

Had he recognized it because he really did care about her? Or was that part really only to tease her?

She didn’t know, but she had enough to deal with as it was, loving two men who would just as soon kill each other with or without her as an added bone of contention.

That thought diverted her from her personal tragedy. Why, she wondered abruptly, was Torin here?

Her heart executed a little double trip as her mind instantly leapt to the possibility that he’d come back for her, clenched painfully as she remembered the way he’d looked at her when he’d left the room, and then settled to an uncomfortable hammering of worry. She didn’t think he’d come back for her, as much as she would’ve liked to believe that.

Reluctance tightened in her belly the moment it flashed through her mind to go and find out what he was doing at the compound. Her multitude of emotions did battle inside of her again, but finally a determination to appease her curiosity won out. Taking enough of her drinking water to bathe Joel's seed from her sex and thighs, partly for her own comfort and partly because she was well aware that Torin, with his acute senses, would smell it on her and she didn't want to aggravate his anger, she took the clean gown she'd intended to wear the following day and pulled it over her head.

She didn't have a mirror in her room, or even a reflective surface, but Joel had given her a comb for her hair and she raked the tangles out of it and put it order by feel.

She heard the sporadic murmur of men's voices before she reached the end of the corridor.

Indecision hit her again, but finally she eased to the opening and peered into the main room. The moment she did, Joel, Torin, and William all turned to look at her. It would have been bad enough if it had only been the three of them, but, when she managed to drag her gaze from them, she discovered that the room was filled with men—Joel's on one side, prickling with distrust, Torin's on the other, also prickling with distrust—and they all turned to look at her, as well.

Embarrassment flooded her cheeks with color. Partly it was because it flickered through her mind to wonder if they'd all been there, listening, while Joel had wrung every drop of pleasure out of her he could. The majority of it, though, was because she'd thought she'd been quiet enough in her approach that no one would notice her.

Now that everyone had, she couldn't decide whether to retreat again, or to try to act as if it didn't bother her in the least to discover a room full of men from the two rival clans.

"If you'd rather, darlin', you can listen from out there and we'll pretend we don't know you are," William said, amusement threading his voice.

Alexis sent him a resentful look. "I didn't intend to eavesdrop," she said defensively. "It's just that I hadn't expected ... I didn't realize .... What's going on?"

Joel and Torin both sent her a look that was an almost identical mixture of amusement and annoyance. "We hadn't gotten around to discussing that yet, little bird," Torin said, shooting an angry look at Joel.

Alexis reddened guiltily, but she felt a flicker of resentment, too. It wasn't her fault—any of it. She hadn't *coaxed* Joel into her room. *He* was the one who'd abandoned his guests—she hadn't even known anyone had arrived.

And Torin had no business looking at her as if she'd done something wrong! He'd left her—without even saying goodbye.

"Why *are* you here?" Joel asked ungraciously. "I'm sure you didn't just come for the sparing match—although I did enjoy it."

Torin's eyes narrowed. "We'll have to try it again sometime, then," he said in a purring growl.

Joel favored him with a feral grin. "There's an idea. Next time maybe I can knock a few of your teeth down your throat."

"You can try," Torin snarled.

William sauntered across the room and draped an arm across Alexis' shoulders. "Come on, little bit. I don't think there's gonna be a discussion."

Joel and Torin both sent him a furious glare.

“William! Stop trying to provoke them!” Alexis hissed angrily.

He grinned down at her. “Darlin’, I can do it without tryin’.”

Grasping his hand and lifting his arm from her shoulders, Alexis ducked under his arm, stalked down the corridor to her room and slammed the door behind her. For a while, she simply stood in the middle of the room, allowing angry thoughts to dart back and forth through her mind. Weariness settled over her, though, as her anger finally cooled. Joel had pleased her to the point of exhaustion. If not for the adrenaline that had shot through her the moment she looked around and saw Torin, she would’ve long since been dead to the world.

She discovered she didn’t really want to think about Torin, or why he was there. She didn’t want to think about why Joel had done what he had. Remorse that she might have hurt them warred with anger that they’d hurt her.

Trudging to the bed, she pulled her gown off, dropped it onto the floor and climbed onto the bed. The scent of sex clung to the linens—and Joel’s scent—and her memories of Torin.

Dry eyed, but with an ache in her chest that made it hard to breathe, Alexis turned her back to the door, trying to push all thoughts from her mind so that she could sleep. They defied her, rambling round and round in her skull.

She had tried her best to convince herself that what she’d felt for Torin wasn’t real. It had just been the circumstances—her dependency on his strength for survival that had made her feel connected to him—that had made her feel as if she loved him and as if she wanted to die when he left her. Maybe, if she’d never seen him again, she would’ve succeeded, eventually, in convincing herself, but it had taken no more than one look at him to know she’d lied to herself. Everything she’d felt before had rushed back to her, everything.

And Joel had seen it in her face. She knew he had.

He hadn’t been angry. He’d been hurt, or at least, she was pretty sure he’d been furious *because* he’d been hurt. She didn’t think he’d been trying to hurt her with what he’d done. She thought he’d been trying to convince Torin, and maybe himself, that she loved him—not Torin.

And the worst of it was, she realized she did love him—and Torin.

She didn’t know how she’d managed to dig such a deep pit for herself. She’d been struggling with her feelings for Torin. She hadn’t wanted to turn to Joel—not to anyone. Somehow, though, even though she hadn’t set out to fall in love with him, even though she’d thought she was only taking care of him because he needed her, Joel had crept into her heart and now she didn’t know what she was going to do. Joel was hurt and angry because he knew she still loved Torin and Torin was hurt and angry because he thought she’d turned to Joel the moment he’d left her and didn’t care about him.

The urge to run to Torin was a miserable ache inside of her. She needed him to hold her close, needed to feel the touch of his life force. He wouldn’t allow it—not now. Maybe he wouldn’t have welcomed such a display of affection before, but he certainly wouldn’t after what had happened.

And William had decided it was all very amusing, damn him! The situation was volatile enough without his taunts. She couldn’t *fathom* what that insane man thought he was doing!

Maybe he was in the habit of baiting Joel and he just didn’t see that this situation

wasn't one that he should be aggravating him about? She didn't know him. She'd seen him about the compound, but never spoken to him. She certainly didn't know him well enough to know how he ordinarily behaved around Joel.

Now that she thought about, though, Joel hadn't seemed the least bit surprised—furious, yes, but not surprised.

She lay wrestling over her dilemma until, after a time, she began to hear voices and footsteps along the corridor. Doors were opened and closed and after a while quiet settled over the building.

She'd just begun to drop off when she heard someone outside her door. She tensed, coming wide awake immediately. Anticipation and uneasiness warred within while she tried to decide if it was Joel or Torin. When no one either entered or knocked, she began to feel more and more unnerved. She sat up, straining to hear if whoever it was had moved away. Every time she would decide that it was nothing more than imagination, that no one was outside her door, she would hear the faint creak of a floor board, as if someone had shifted their weight.

Finally, deciding she wasn't going to be able to sleep until she knew for certain, she got up and crossed the room to the door, placing her ear against it. She couldn't hear anything. After a brief debate about whether to open the door and look or just go back to bed, she decided just to reassure herself and open it.

William was standing just outside the door when she snatched it open and she nearly had heart failure. His hard mouth hitched upward at one corner. He settled one shoulder against the doorframe, hooking a thumb in the pocket his trousers. "You gonna invite me in?"

Alexis blinked at him in disbelief. "What are you doing outside my door?" she demanded in a harsh whisper.

"Guardin' you," he whispered back.

Alexis was taken aback. "From who?"

He chuckled ruefully. "All comers, I suppose."

Alexis glared at him. "You are so humorous!"

His eyes gleamed. "Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment!"

He tilted his head. "No? It sounded like one."

"It was sarcasm."

"Ah." He nodded. "Guess I'll have to try harder," he added cryptically.

Alexis eyed him suspiciously for a moment. "Where's ... uh ...."

He grinned, displaying a double row of even, surprisingly straight teeth that looked very white next his swarthy complexion. There was something about that smile, or maybe the look in his eyes, that made Alexis' belly execute an abrupt freefall.

"Uh and uh are in Joel's quarters, currently tryin' to drink each other under the table. I'm guessin' which ever man wins will be staggerin' down the hall here in a few hours beatin' on the doors and tryin' to figure out which room you're in."

Alexis felt her face heat. She opened her mouth, couldn't think of anything to say, and closed it again. "Well ... uh ... if Joel and Torin are ... uh ... Who told you to guard my door?"

A glint of irritation entered his eyes. "You think I can't figure things out without bein' told?"

Alexis gaped at him, dismayed at the abrupt shift from teasing rogue to dangerous. “No! I mean—I just thought—Joel didn’t ask you to ...?”

“Joel’s thinkin’ the only one he’s got to worry about’s in there with him. But there’s a half dozen lion clan members bedded down along this hallway and I don’t trust one of ‘em. Beyond that, although I think there’s a damned good chance Joel and Torin are gonna succeed in drinkin’ each other under the table, I think there’s an even better chance that one of them is gonna decide to come see you and they’re gonna tie into each other again.

“I’m the peacekeeper around here and I figure the best way to do that tonight is to make sure you sleep all by your lonesome.”

Alexis felt color wash into her cheeks again. This time it was from both anger and embarrassment. “That wasn’t my fault ... before.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“But you think it was.”

He studied her thoughtfully for a long moment. “Darlin’, you obviously don’t know what the hell I’m thinkin’ or you wouldn’t be standin’ here talkin’ to me. You’d have that door barricaded, and you’d be tucked in your bed with the cover over your head.”

Alexis studied him uneasily, trying to decide if he was implying what she thought he was.

He pushed his face down level with hers. “Go to bed, Alexis, before I decide I can guard this door just as well from inside as I can from out here.”

Alexis retreated. Slamming the door, she dragged the chair over to it, wedged it under the doorknob and fled to her bed.

## Chapter Twenty Three

William was gone when Alexis peered out cautiously the following morning. Relieved, wondering when he'd finally decided to end his apparently self-imposed vigil, she headed down the corridor to the main room.

Torin was standing at one of the windows that fronted the building, his hands clasped behind his back, his feet braced slightly apart. He turned to look at her when she stopped in the doorway, and her breath hitched in her chest, her heart leaping into a wild gallop. The harshness left his face. "Afraid, little bird? Or does that flutter indicate happiness to see me?"

She wasn't sure she believed he could hear her accelerated heartbeat, but if he couldn't he was very good at guessing. "A little of both, I guess," she answered frankly, heartened enough by the mildness of his manner to approach him, drinking him in with her eyes as she'd wanted to the night before. "You look . . ." She broke off without finishing the inane remark, realizing abruptly that he didn't look well at all. She scanned his face more carefully, trying to decide if the haggardness she saw on his features was all from his fight the night before and the drinking William had said came later, or if he actually had been ill. He looked thinner, she realized, than when she'd seen him last. "You're not . . . not . . . you haven't been ill?" she asked, stammering because she thought he might take exception to the question, but also because it scared her that he might be.

*Ill with missing you*, Torin thought, swallowing against the hard, painful ache that welled inside him to touch her, to pull her close enough he feel her warmth, drag her scent deeply into lungs and feel her as a part of himself. "No. You look . . . well." *Beautiful, more beautiful than I remembered.*

Alexis smiled, looked down at herself doubtfully, and then up at him again. "Maude says it's because I'm 'broodin'—says it gives a woman a special glow," she murmured, chuckling. "I think it's just that I'm sunburned. Did you . . . miss me?"

*Every second of every hour of every day until I am so sick with missing you I can hardly bear it.* He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "Only a little," he said, struggling for a teasing note. "I'd wondered how you were getting along here." He wished he hadn't said that. He didn't want to think about how she'd been getting along.

*Everyone hates me because they think I'm as useless as you do.* Alexis forced a smile. "Good. I'm learning a lot of things." *I never wanted to know.* "Laundry, cooking, sewing—how to make soap." *And I'm just awful at all of them.* "Before long I'll be able to completely take care of myself."

He frowned, anger surging into his eyes. He'd trusted Joel would take care of her and he'd set her to tasks she had neither the strength or the stamina for, even if she'd been of common stock, which she wasn't. She was a lady. What the hell had Joel been thinking? "Such menial tasks? They're training you to be a servant?"

Irritation flickered through her. "We don't have servants. Everybody shares the work that needs to be done." *Which is why they hate me, because I can't carry my load.*

"You were made for better things," he said tightly.

*Which was a polite way of saying she was useless.* She looked away, struggling with hurt and anger. “There’s nothing ‘better’ than having a few creature comforts. If having them means I have to learn how to provide them for myself, and not doing so means I have to do without, I’m happy to learn how to have them.”

He was silent. After a moment, though, a thoughtful frown knit his brow. “Who is Maude? And what does she mean by ‘broodin’?”

Alexis smiled. “A friend.” It was a relief even have one. “She’s ... well, they call her a healer. She’s sort of like what we called medics, I guess, although she isn’t a doctor. I’ve been trying to talk her into training me. They pass the knowledge from mother to daughter—or have, but Maude doesn’t have a daughter.” *Unfortunately, she thinks I’m as useless as everybody else.* “She says I’m too—sympathetic, though, that it takes someone with heart, who wants to help, but you also have to be able to distance yourself or you get too emotional and you won’t be able to do them any good.

“She’s convinced I’m gestating, but I’m hoping she’s wrong—not that I’d mind under other circumstances—I’d love to have your baby,” she hastened to assure him when she noticed a frozen look on his face, “but I don’t know how to take care of myself, yet. There’s still so much I have to learn—a trade or skill that I can use to support myself before I can consider supporting someone else.”

Torin swayed slightly and put out a hand to grip the edge of the window. “My baby?” he asked hoarsely.

Alexis studied him uneasily. “If I’m gestating you would have to be the donor—the father.”

Joel’s timing was unfortunate. Obviously fresh from the bath house—he was still dripping water—he stepped into the front door just as Torin collapsed against the wall and slid down it to the floor. Sucking in a cry of consternation, Alexis rushed to him, grasping him around the waist to try to stop his descent. He was too heavy. She wasn’t even certain she managed to slow his fall, but her determination to try meant that he took her with him.

“What the hell ...?” Joel bent down, grasped her, and hauled her to her feet.

“Something’s wrong!” Alexis cried, struggling against the urge to burst into tears, trying to pull free of Joel’s grip.

Releasing her, Joel crouched in front of Torin, staring at his white face. “What happened?”

“I don’t know!” Alexis wailed. “We were just talking and he turned white and started shaking and then he fell down.”

The incident had drawn more attention than either Joel or Alexis had realized—or at least Alexis. She was so focused on Torin, she didn’t notice the sounds indicating others had entered the room. She was taken completely by surprise when someone grabbed her from behind and hauled her to her feet. Joel, apparently sensing a threat, surged to his feet and turned to meet it.

“Let her go!” he snarled, the knife he usually kept in his boot now in his hand.

“Get your hands off of her!” Torin growled threateningly at almost the same moment.

“What did you do to him?” the man holding Alexis roared, almost drowning out both of the other men.

“We were just talking!” Alexis exclaimed tearfully.

“She’s carrying my child!” Torin snarled, struggling to get to his feet.

Dead silence followed that announcement. Alexis looked around to discover a half dozen gazes trained on her—or more specifically, her belly. The lion man who'd been holding her scuttled away from her as if he'd just discovered he was holding a poisonous reptile. *All* of the lion men, who'd obviously rushed to their leader's aid, abruptly retreated a half dozen steps.

Joel turned white and then red. "She's *my* woman," he said between clenched teeth. "Anything in *my* woman's belly is mine!"

"Not if it's *my* child," Torin said in a low, threatening snarl.

A hand clamped down on Alexis' arm just as she surged forward to step between Joel and Torin.

"No you don't!"

Alexis looked up to discover, without a lot surprise, that it was William. "But ...!"

Turning, he hauled her across the room and down the corridor as Torin and Joel began to circle each other warily. Alexis pulled at William's hand, trying to break free. "I'll never forgive either one of you if you hurt each other!" she yelled at Torin and Joel as William dragged her into the corridor and the wall blocked her view.

William released her when he'd pushed her into her room, but caged her there by bracing his arms on either side of the doorframe when she tried to dart around him. "Woman!" he said, shaking his head at her, his expression a mixture of amusement and irritation. "You have got the *damndest* knack for disrupting the peace of any woman I've ever seen in my life!"

Mopping the tears from her face with the back of her hand, Alexis glared at him. "I didn't do a thing! All I said was ..."

"Oh, I heard that little golden nugget of information you dropped in there," he said, interrupting her.

Alexis planted her hands on her hips angrily. "Damn it, William ...!"

"That tears it!" he growled, surging toward her.

Alexis gaped at him as he slipped an arm around her and dragged her up tightly against his chest. Spearing the fingers of his other hand in the hair at the base of her skull, he effectively blocked any attempt to evade him, even if she'd had her wits about her to try.

There was such hunger in the mouth that closed over hers, in the tongue he thrust into her mouth and raked possessively over her tongue, that it instantly pulled her into a dark, heated morass of conflict. A brief as his exploration was, it thoroughly rattled her and suffused her with fire. She stared up at his face dizzily when he broke the kiss, trying to gather her wits. "This is not the time to be thinking about rec," she gasped shakily, not entirely certain if that was what he'd had in mind or if the kiss was just his clever way of trying to distract her.

"Oh, I don't know," he murmured. "I think about it pretty much every time I look at you—and a hell of a lot of the time when I'm not—roughly ninety percent, I'm thinkin'." He seemed to consider it and shrugged, his lips curling, mischief gleaming in his eyes. "Maybe ninety nine percent."

"They're trying to kill each other!" she said more forcefully.

"I doubt that. They're crazy about you, darlin', but neither one of 'em is stupid. Aside from the fact that it'd start a war neither one of 'em wants, they know they'd lose

you, and that's a hell of a lot more important to 'em than provin' which one 'em is the better man."

Alexis' chin wobbled, but she wanted to believe his reassurance. "You're sure?"

He shrugged. "Pretty sure."

Alexis looked away from him, listening to the noises emerging from the main room. It sounded as if the fight might be winding down but she wasn't as sure as she wanted to be, or convinced that it was because they'd decided to stop and not because one of them was hurt.

"You said you were the peacekeeper," she said accusingly. "Why didn't you try to stop them?"

He lifted a black brow. "Because either one of them could kick my ass an' I'd rather be here, kissin' you, than out there gettin' my ass kicked."

Alexis bit her lip, trying not to smile. "Are you never serious, William?"

"I'm always serious, Darlin'."

"Why do you always call me that?"

He chuckled, releasing her and tweaking her nose. "Because you are—even though you're like the eye of hurricane and utter destruction follows in your wake."

Dismay filled her at the rebuke. "You think I shouldn't have told Torin I was gestating?" It wasn't really a question. It was obvious even to her, now, that it hadn't been a good idea.

He settled a palm along her cheek, idly stroking his thumb along it. "I think it's not gonna make a fuckin' bit of difference what you say or what you do. Those two are so fuckin' much alike it's downright scary—An' both of 'em are used to havin' their way an' takin' what they want—an' they both want you. This is as much about those two cocks tryin' to settle who's gonna be cock of the walk as it is about you. Until they figure that out, or at settle it between 'em somehow, they're gonna be battlin' it out every time they come in contact."

"Then it isn't really about me?" Alexis said, wondering if she was more relieved or more distressed at the idea. Not that she *wanted* them fighting because of her, but it was nice to think they might care, at least a little, about her.

"I didn't say that. It's about you, alright. But what neither one of 'em has figured out yet is that they can't make you chose between 'em. They're pretty damned smart about most things, but dumb as dirt about you. They think, both of 'em, that they can somehow have you all to themselves. But I've seen the way you look at 'em. You love both 'em an' you can't bring yourself to hurt either one of 'em an' you're not gonna be able to choose."

Alexis swallowed against the painful knot that closed her throat, nodding.

He let out a gusty sigh. Oddly enough, it didn't seem to relax him. Instead, several indecipherable emotions chased across his features and he looked more tense than before. "So—I'm askin', Darlin'—take me instead, or take me, too. I'll take whatever I can get. I don't care which—well I do, but, unlike those two poor fools, I ain't stupid enough to think I've got a chance in hell of beatin' 'em out shy of killin' 'em, and I can see that won't work."

Alexis gaped at him with a mixture of surprise, dismay, and dawning anger. She'd thought he was serious! "That's not funny, William!"

His face hardened. "I have to tell you I'd've been pissed off if you thought so,"

he said dryly. "It ain't real funny to me either."

"You want me to be your woman, too?" she demanded in disbelief.

"God, yes! So bad I can taste it. Damn it, woman! What the hell do you think I been talkin' about for the last fifteen minutes!"

Disconcerted, Alexis took a step back, studying him. "I don't think I understand what being somebody's woman means," she said hesitantly. "I thought I'd figured it out, but ...."

"What it generally means is a man's staked his claim against all claim jumpers," he said wryly. "Like I said, they're tryin' to figure out which rooster gets the hen. They figure if they say you're their woman, you are—but you ain't, are you?"

Alexis thought that over. "I love them," she said tentatively.

His lips tightened. "We already established that. Didn't they have ... any kind of binding arrangements where you came from—where the man agreed to take care of his woman and the woman agreed to take care the man?"

"Oh—no. Not really. I thought it must be sort of like the contracts."

"Yes or no? Which is it?"

Alexis shrugged. "Some people did, mostly not. There didn't seem much point in it anymore because, before, it was so that they could procreate and help each take care of their child—or children if they had more than one. But then, after things got so bad, it was socially unacceptable to bring a child into the world when the future was so uncertain, so not very many people did anymore and the one's that did were looked down on. It was considered a disgrace."

"Well, if they knew how to keep from havin' babies, it's more than we do—short of not havin' sex at all, which nobody's too keen on," he said dryly. "Nobody makes contracts, at least not written ones. But when a man claims a woman, it means that he means to take care of her, protect her, and if they have children, take care of them, too. Whatever you decide, we *will* protect you, Alexis—they will, and I will. You don't have to say you'll be our woman. We're gonna do it regardless. An' if you go around offerin' rec to anybody else, there's gonna be a trail of dead men behind you, darlin'," he finished grimly.

Alexis reddened. "That's not—acceptable?"

"It sure as hell ain't acceptable to me, Sweetheart, an' I think I can safely speak for both Torin and Joel."

"But ... everyone else seems to have sex with whoever asks," she said, thoroughly confused.

"An' I don't give a fuck about everybody else—or anybody else!"

"I was just saying ...," she began indignantly.

"The wrong thing, Darlin'."

"But it's alright if it's Joel or Torin?" she asked, just for clarification.

"Not hardly. But I'll learn to live with it—if they don't decide to cut my throat, that is. A third of the loaf is better than none."

Alexis blinked at him, searching her mind for the reference. Being likened to one of the crusty, brown and blackened loaves of bread the women cooked certainly wasn't flattering. "I'm *not* a loaf!"

He chuckled, catching her and dragging her against his chest. His expression was alight with amusement as he stared down at her indignant face. "Maybe I shoulda said

honeycomb?”

“What’s a honeycomb?” she asked distrustfully.

He looked startled, but then he grinned. “Bees make ‘em—and it’s the sweetest thing this side of heaven.”

Alexis blushed, pleased with that reference. “You think I’m sweet?”

“Everything I’ve tasted so far. I’ll have to taste the rest of you to be sure.”

Warmth flooded her, but it wasn’t from embarrassment.

He grimaced. Releasing her, he reached down to adjust himself. Alexis followed the gesture automatically. She stared at the evidence of his arousal for a split second before she jerked her head up to meet his gaze. His green eyes were gleaming with promise. “Unfortunately, it’ll have to wait.”

“I didn’t say I’d be your woman,” Alexis reminded him.

His gaze skimmed her face. “No—but you will.”

She stared at him with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

Hooking a hand along her neck, he dragged her close and whispered in her ear. “You say yes every time I kiss you.”

“I do?”

He chuckled. “You ain’t kneed me in the balls yet.”

As the sound of approaching footsteps reached them, William casually released her. Turning, he propped one shoulder against her doorframe. A faint smile curled his lips, but his eyes were hard. “Y’all ain’t done already, are you?” he drawled.

Joel sent him an annoyed look.

“Must ‘ve been a hell of a night.”

Joel’s eyes narrowed. “You and me are going to have to have a . . . discussion.”

“I figured we would. I’ve been waitin’ for you to get over your little—in-*dis*-position. I reckon you have. Torin still breathin’?”

Joel shot Alexis an uncomfortable glance. “Him and his men will be joining us on the raid,” he said after a moment. “I’d figured I’d leave you here to keep an eye on Alexis, but now I’m not sure I can trust you . . .”

“Oh, you can,” William assured him, anger glittering in his eyes now.

“ . . . to keep your damned hands off of her.”

“Now, that I ain’t promisin’.”

Joel jerked his fist back and swung it toward William’s face so fast Alexis couldn’t do more than suck in a sharp breath.

William, apparently expecting it, ducked just as fast and Joel’s fist slammed into the wood instead, splintering it.

“Joel, please!” Alexis exclaimed in dismay.

His head whipped in her direction when she called his name.

William slugged him on the side of his jaw, sending him reeling backwards.

“Thank you, Darlin’.”

Alexis gaped at William as he stalked past her to meet Joel as he slammed into the wall, shoved away from it, and hurled himself at William again. “Joel, I’m sorry! Did he hurt you?”

He didn’t glance at her that time. Uttering a bellow of rage, he slung first his right fist and then the left at William. William managed to duck the first. The second caught him at the corner of his mouth, twisting his head sideways. He staggered back

several steps, wiped the blood from his busted lip with the back of one hand and then narrowed his eyes at Joel. "Shut the door, Darlin'. This ain't gonna be pretty," he said grimly.

Alexis leapt back as the two men collided, grabbed each other, and began slamming into first one wall and then the other. Spying Torin and his men standing in the doorway at the end of the corridor, Alexis shouted at them for help. "Somebody do something! Stop them before someone gets hurt!"

Torin, who was propped against the door, watching the two men with detachment, met her gaze. Shrugging, he nodded to his men. "At this rate," he muttered dryly as his men filled the corridor and grabbed Joel and William, pulling them apart, "we won't reach Castle Doom before daybreak tomorrow."

## Chapter Twenty Four

“We’ll have to take her with us. Obviously, we can’t leave her here.”

Alexis looked at Joel with a mixture of resentment and guilt when he spoke as if she wasn’t even there.

“It ain’t safe. Leave her. I’ll keep an eye on her,” William offered.

Joel snarled at him. “Aye! And both hands,” he ground out. “The question is, who’s going to be watching your back while you’ve got your tongue down her throat and your dick up her cunt?”

William sent her a meditative look. “There is that,” he conceded.

It looked for several moments as if he and Joel were going to go at each other again. Apparently, Torin’s men thought so. The two standing behind Joel and William clamped a hand down on each man’s shoulder. The men behind Torin had grabbed both of his arms. He shrugged them off, glanced at Alexis and subsided, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides.

“I’ll take care of myself,” Alexis assured them.

All three men turned to look at her.

“You know how to use a knife? For somethin’ besides slicin’ bread, I mean?” William asked with interest.

Alexis was taken aback. “No.”

“Then that sure as hell ain’t gonna work, because Gerda’s told everybody that would listen that she’d gonna cut your throat the first chance she gets for enticin’ Lee and gettin’ him killed.”

Alexis gaped at William with a mixture of outrage and fear, glanced at the speculative expressions on the faces of the other men in the room, and then addressed William. “I did no such thing!”

“I know that. You know that—an’ she knows that—but that don’t make a shit load of difference to Gerda. Ordinarily, I’d say it was just talk, but I’m of no mind to put it to the test where it concerns you.”

“I’ll take my men and go,” Torin said with finality. “If I discover anything, I’ll let you know. She’s carrying *my* child and I’m not willing to risk either her or the baby.”

Joel glared at him. “We’re gonna have to agree to disagree on that one. She’s my woman and whatever’s in her belly is mine, too.”

“Like hell!” Torin snarled. “She said it was mine.”

“It’s *mine!*” Alexis snarled, stamping her foot furiously. Every eye in the room was instantly trained on her. Uneasiness flickered through her. She discovered she didn’t particularly like being the center of attention. “... if there is one,” she added conscientiously. “So you’re just going to have to find something else to fight about!”

Torin, Joel, and William all exchanged a look.

“This concerns us, too,” Joel said after a moment. “We’re joining you on the raid.”

“What concerns us?” Alexis asked. “I wish somebody would tell me what’s

going on!”

Again the men exchanged a look. Alexis ground her teeth irritably. Joel shrugged. “Torin’s discovered his brother is plotting something with the bear clan—something to do with us.”

“Me and you?” Alexis asked blankly.

William sent her an amused look. “The clan.”

“Oh,” Alexis said, embarrassed. Unfortunately, she remembered the pulse rifles at that moment. Not exactly unfortunately—she supposed it was as good a time as any to tell Joel about them, but she thought he probably wasn’t going to be happy that she’d forgotten to mention it to him before. Not really forgotten. There hadn’t seemed any point in telling him when he was too sick to do anything about it, and she just hadn’t quite found the right moment since. “Oh—uh oh.”

“Uh oh?” Joel prompted.

“They’ve got our pulse rifles,” she said in a rush.

“Pulse rifles?” Joel demanded.

“They?” Torin growled ominously.

William rolled his eyes. “God almighty, woman! You didn’t think to mention that earlier?”

“I’ve been busy!” Alexis said defensively.

“Yes, you have,” William agreed. “An’ you’re about to be a whole hell of a lot busier! I feel like turnin’ you over my knee and tannin’ you backside!”

Joel and Torin glared at him a moment and then turned to glare at her. “Me first,” Joel growled.

“Torin?” Alexis said uneasily.

“Don’t look to me,” he ground out. “I feel like spanking your ass myself. Why the hell didn’t you mention that before? You didn’t think we’d like to know we were liable to get our asses shot off?”

“No, I didn’t! You stay busy pounding on each other with whatever’s handy—your fists, swords, knives . . .”

“And it’s one thing to face your foe—when you know you’ve got as much chance of winning, or more, than he does. And something else entirely when a bastard can blow your head off without ever coming close enough for you to defend yourself or strike back!”

She could see his point. “Well, you haven’t left yet,” she said placatingly. “And now you know.”

“How many pulse rifles?”

“What range do they have?”

“How much ammunition?”

Alexis glanced from one man to the next as they pelted her with the questions.

“Uh—two.”

They stared at her in disbelief. “Mine and Linda’s,” she added for clarification.

“And?”

“And what?” she asked uneasily, knowing what they were asking but reluctant to tell them she didn’t know anything about the rifles.

“Range?” Joel prompted.

She chewed her lip. “I’m not sure. Pretty far, I think.”

“Bullets?”

“I don’t think they use bullets. In fact, I’m almost certain they don’t.”

The men glared at her.

“I’m positive they don’t,” she amended.

They exchanged looks again. “What do they fire, honey?” William asked, gently, as if he was talking to an idiot.

Alexis reddened. “Light—sort of.”

She could tell by their expressions that a) they really did think she was an idiot, b) they didn’t believe for a moment the rifles used light, and c) they didn’t think they had to worry about it if it was true. “Sloan and Pitts used them to clear the trees so we could set up our base camp. It’s the only time I ever saw one of them used—except when Sloan climbed up on top of the habitat to shoot at animals in the jungle.”

“You’ve never used one?”

Alexis studied Joel in dismay. “I *thought* I’d have the chance to figure it out!” she said defensively. “I never watched them! Every time I looked at Sloan he ... uh ....” Deciding they probably wouldn’t want to hear what Sloan did whenever he caught her looking his way, she changed the subject abruptly. “But we were taken completely by surprise when the field people started chasing us and we didn’t get the chance to use them.”

To her relief, they settled to discussing possibilities—the likelihood of the bear folk having figured out how to use them, the chance that they might have used up all the ammunition while they were at it.

“I don’t that’s very likely,” Alexis offered meekly.

“Why?” Joel asked distractedly. “They’d have to fire them to get a feel for the weapon, and if I know them, they would’ve been playing with it once they figured it out, shooting up everything.”

“Well, I never saw Sloan or Pitts recharge any of the rifles. I think they might have a built-in chip and probably a power crystal. It’d have to be small, so it wouldn’t last like the one that powered the ship, or the portals, but it’d probably last for years.”

“Alexis!” Joel said sharply, all signs of good humor vanished from his features. “We have guests.”

It was his expression more than his words that conveyed his message loud and clear. He didn’t trust Torin or the lion men. He didn’t want them to know anything about the weapons and he was angry with her for discussing it in front of them. “But ... they aren’t just guests. They’re friends—allies. Torin came to warn us, to help.”

“True,” William drawled, “but today’s allies could be tomorrow’s enemies.”

Alexis stared at him and then Joel and then turned to look at Torin. Anger suffused her. “Not Torin! You don’t know him like I do.”

“You’re too trusting,” Joel said tightly.

“And you’re not trusting enough! I *know* Torin! He would *never* betray a friend. He is the noblest, the most honorable man I’ve ever known! He would never offer friendship and then hurt us! Would you, Torin?” she prompted, turning to look at him.

He was studying her with a strange look on his face, a half smile playing about his lips. “I would never do anything to hurt you, light of my life,” he murmured.

Alexis looked at him in confusion for a moment, but then it settled inside of her like a warm glow. He’d called her the light of his life! She smiled at him tentatively.

“See?” she said, looking at Joel again.

“Yeah, I see. I also heard,” Joel muttered in disgust. He studied Torin for several moments through narrowed, assessing eyes and finally seemed to shrug, returning his attention to Alexis. “We need those weapons.”

Something about the way he was looking at her told her he wasn't talking about the ones the bear men had. His next question confirmed it.

“How many of them are there?”

“A lot—but we can't go there!” Alexis exclaimed. “Sloan and Pitts . . .”

“That's two men.” Joel glanced around. “We have over a dozen right here.”

“*They* have pulse rifles!” Alexis snapped. “And they're soldiers. They know how to use them and they will!”

“*We* have guns and we know how to use them,” he retorted. “We need those pulse rifles, baby.”

That, apparently, settled the issue of whether to leave her or take her with them. The uneasy alliance they'd formed suffered another setback almost immediately, however. Joel and six of his men, including William, had mounted up to leave. Torin and the six men he'd brought with him were also mounted on their togs.

Alexis stared at Joel, Torin, and William in dismay. She didn't have the faintest idea of how to control a tog never having ridden one before except with someone who *was* controlling the beast. She knew very well, though, that if she chose to ride with one of them, the other two would be angry—*more* angry with her. They were already furious that she'd refused to choose between them—and about the pulse rifles.

“I'll ride on the pack tog,” she said, noticing that animal was being led by one of Joel's other men.

“We'll have to ride fast to beat them to the meeting place,” Torin said. “We've already lost enough time. You won't be able to stay on the beast.”

Because they'd been busy fighting over her. Nobody said it. They didn't have to. They were all looking at her accusingly, though.

“I'll ride with him, then,” Alexis said, pointing to the lion-man that seemed to be Torin's second in command.

“Like hell!” Joel snarled.

“Little bit,” William drawled with a mixture of amusement and irritation, “it's already too damned crowded as it is. Ride with Torin.”

Torin and Alexis both looked at him in surprise. Joel looked furious.

William shrugged. “You might as well get used to it, Joel. I don't know what you got to complain about no how. You was with her last light and we all know that went well.”

Looking very much as if he could bite metal in two, Joel uttered a snarl of disgust and turned his tog, urging it toward the gates. One by one, his men turned and followed him. Torin nudged his beast up beside Alexis, slipped to the back of the saddle, and held out his hand. “Put your right foot in the stirrup and lift,” he said when he'd kicked his foot free of it.

She followed his instructions. He caught her waist and helped her slip backwards onto the saddle in front of him and then instructed her to lift her left leg over the beast. The rest of the men were already heading out the gate by the time she was situated. Settling one hand around her waist, Torin nudged the beast and set him into a trot. As

upset as she was that Joel was so angry with her, she was grateful to William. She'd desperately wanted to be near Torin since he'd come, wanted to feel his arms around her, and she hadn't quite dared to do anything about it.

"I can't begin to tell you how much I've missed this," Torin murmured as he pulled her back against his chest and nuzzled his face against the side of her neck, breathing deeply.

Warmth flooded her. "Did you?" she asked breathlessly.

"Aye, I did, little bird."

Alexis smiled, lifting a hand to caress his cheek. "I missed you, too."

Warmth gleamed in his eyes. "I'll have to do something about that."

The promise lifted her spirits, made her feel hopeful for the first time in a very long time. It didn't last. As comforting as it was to be near him, as weariness began to set in so, too, did doubts. Nothing had changed, really, she realized. The men who'd come with Torin were obviously deeply loyal to him and even they had watched her with stony faces of dislike. Torin would leave again when they'd accomplished what they'd set out to do, and she couldn't go with him.

She settled her hand on top of his where it rested on her belly, stroking it. "I love you, Torin," she whispered.

His hand tightened on her waist. "We'll work this out ... somehow."

She nodded as if she believed him, but she knew better. The best she could hope for was to see him occasionally—if he would come to see her. She couldn't even go to see him. And she couldn't run to him each time he came without hurting Joel.

And now William was battering at her defenses. It made her head ache even to try to think how she could possibly make them all happy and find some happiness for herself.

Because there was no way to do that.

Refuse all of them and make everyone unhappy, including her?

Chose one, and make the other two unhappy—including her?

They would find someone else.

But she didn't *want* them to.

She should let them go, all of them, she told herself. They might be unhappy for a while, but they'd get over it and find some else. It was the right thing to do, because she loved them and she wanted them to be happy.

She was going to be miserable, but she'd get used to it.

She couldn't have Torin whatever she decided about Joel—or William.

That thought made it hard to breathe for the tightness in her chest. She wanted to turn around and wrap her arms around him and burrow against his chest and try to block out the world and her thoughts.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded instead of trying to speak around the tightness in her throat.

"It isn't much further now. We'll have to stop and go on foot."

'Not much further' turned out to be nearly two more hours. Alexis' focus had long since shifted from the misery of her thoughts and emotions to physical distress. She was ready to collapse from the grueling pace they'd set—and did the moment she slid out of the saddle. Fortunately, Torin caught her and kept her from sprawling in the dirt at his feet. When she'd managed to get enough circulation in her buttocks and legs to walk, she

discovered the men had already situated the togs. Taking a length of rope, they'd formed a sort of pen among the trees, tying each of the beasts off by their leads. They didn't remove any of the riding gear, but Joel and his men moved to the pack tog and began sorting through one of the bundles.

Curious, Alexis followed Torin over to watch them. Joel removed a clay pot that had a piece of leather tied tautly over its top. Sticking his fingers into the thick, black substance, he smeared streaks across his face, his throat, and his bare arms, and then passed the pot to the next man. Pulling narrow strips from the bundle, he wrapped his sword and scabbard, slapping at them once he'd done so to test for noise. Lastly, he drew out a full animal skin and used the forelegs to fasten it around his shoulder.

Alexis stared at him in surprise when he stood up and turned to face her. With his long, black hair, the animal hide, and the streaks he'd painted across his face and body, he looked so much like images she'd seen of the ancient 'savage' race that had occupied the Americas when white men had first come that she was stunned.

"That's why I thought they were savages," Torin muttered.

Joel grinned abruptly. It was laced with more savagery than amusement, but it was still a smile.

His smile faded as he looked at her. "She'll be safer here with the togs. William --Tommy--keep an eye on the togs. If we've got company when we head back this way, William, get Alexis on one of the togs and get her out of here. Don't wait for us."

"Berl—Quin," Torin said, jerking his head.

Saluting him, they moved to take up guard positions around the perimeter of the make-shift pen. The one Torin had called Berl, nudged Quinn and pointed to something high in one of the trees. Nodding, the man took a running jump, caught a hold of the trunk about fifteen feet from the ground and shimmied up it, disappearing into the foliage.

Torin, Joel, and the other men had already disappeared into the brush when Alexis turned from watching him in open mouthed disbelief.

William tapped her chin. "Come on, little bit. Might as well get comfortable."

Grabbing the pack Joel had left on the ground, he glanced around and finally carried it to a spot in the shade of a tree. The sun was already setting, however, and the day had cooled with the promise of a bite once the sun had completely vanished. Dropping the bundle, William hooked an arm around her shoulders and guided her into the brush. Alexis looked up at him questioningly. He grinned. "I figured you'd like to take care of things first."

It might have taken her a few minutes to figure out what he was talking about except that he stopped, dragged his cock out of his pants, and proceeded to piss. Alexis gaped at him.

"You gonna watch me or take care of your own?" he drawled, his voice laced with amusement.

Snapping her jaws together, Alexis whirled and headed a little deeper into the brush. She didn't have a problem with nudity, but there were just some things that required privacy.

"Don't go too far."

"Feel better?" he asked when she'd rejoined him.

She sent him a look.

He chuckled. Guiding her back to the clearing, he sorted through the bundle and arranged a pallet on the ground out of the extra furs. "Hungry?"

Alexis nodded.

"Well, you're in for a real treat. No fire—trail rations. Hope you got all your teeth," he said cryptically.

He returned a few minutes later and handed her something stiff and hard. Alexis examined it curiously. Dropping down on the pallet beside her, he set a skin filled with water between them and lifted a similar object to his mouth. She watched him as he bit down on it and tore off a piece. After sniffing it, she bit down on her own. She thought for a moment it was going to pull her teeth out.

"Jerky. Takes some getting' used to, but it ain't half bad if you're hungry enough."

It didn't taste bad at all. It was just the next thing to impossible to chew up. Alexis' jaw was tired from chewing long before she decided she'd chewed it enough to swallow it. The bag of water, she was at least familiar with. Torin had 'confiscated' something very similar from the bear man he'd relieved of all his possessions. Pulling the plug out of the spout on one end, she lifted it to her mouth. Wine squirted down her throat, choking her. William was eyeing her with amusement when she finally overcame the fit of coughing.

"You okay?"

"Now's the time ask," she retorted. "I thought it was water."

He chuckled. "I figured I'd get you drunk and take advantage of you."

"Really?" Alexis asked doubtfully.

Grinning, he shook his head. "Nope. I want you sober as a judge when I do that. Want water instead?"

"Yes, please. If you'll tell me where it is ...."

He got up. "I need to stretch my legs anyway."

"Do you think they're there yet?" she asked him when he returned and settled beside her again.

"Doubt it."

Silence fell between them while they struggled with the food—At least, Alexis struggled. William either had better teeth, stronger jaws, or he was just used to it.

"How'd you meet ol' Torin, anyway?"

Alexis looked at him in surprise. "You don't know?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I did."

Alexis reddened. "I was just surprised Joel didn't tell you."

"Me and Joel don't spend a lot of time chattin' about things like that. Mostly we discuss who did what and whether they should be locked up a while, beat, or hanged."

Alexis shuddered. When she glanced at him and saw that he was watching her expectantly, she told him the tale.

He nodded when she'd finished. "He's a good man."

Alexis looked at him in surprise.

He shrugged. "He could've killed Joel without tryin' too hard. Joel knows it, too. He was just too damned proud to back down—or quit. Don't get me wrong. Joel's as strong as a bull and he's a hell of a fighter. There ain't too many men can stand up to him, or want to. But Torin—well, he ain't a man. And even his own people are scared of him.

Hell, even the dragon folk don't want any part of him and they're just about the meanest bastards on the planet. They decided to raid the lion clan—once—and they ain't tried it since. Which, I guess, pretty much makes Torin the most dangerous of all."

Alexis frowned thoughtfully, but, try as she might, she just couldn't picture Torin as being savage enough to make all the other savages pale by comparison. He'd always been gentle with her—even Mel, she recalled. He'd held her and kept her warm. Then again, she supposed they'd posed no threat and there was no reason for any show of strength.

On the other hand, Sloan and Pitts had to have known that they were far stronger than any of the other crewmembers, and they'd taken full advantage of it to bully everybody.

Maybe the real difference was that a man who had no doubts about himself didn't feel the need to prey upon the weak?

She sighed. "Joel's still angry with me, isn't he?"

"Looked pretty pissed to me," William agreed cheerfully.

Alexis sent him a look. "Thank you for helping my feelings."

"You want me to lie to you?"

"No. You could've said something like 'he'll get over it'."

"He will."

"He's so sweet . . ."

William snorted. "Joel? Darlin', there ain't nobody but you that would hook up with two of the meanest sons-of-bitches on this old ball of dirt and talk about how 'sweet' they were. You done got your definitions all screwed up. *You* are sweet. Them two—they're mean as snakes, both of 'em."

Feeling her weariness settle more heavily the longer she sat, Alexis glanced around and finally lay back against the furs. "What about you, William?"

He turned to study her, allowing his gaze to wander her length and up again. "Right about now, I'm mean as a snake, too."

"You aren't mean."

"Goes to show what a bad judge off character you really are."

"Why?"

"'Cause I'm horny as hell, Darlin'."

Alexis stifled a chuckle. "I meant, why do you think I'm a poor judge of character?"

"If you were a good judge, you would've picked me first."

"I didn't meet you first."

"That's beside the point."

"Do you think it would be alright if I took a little nap?"

He sent her a look, but didn't comment on the abrupt change of subject. "I think it'd be damned good idea. We'll be riding out when they get back—whatever time it is."

"Do you want to share the pallet with me?"

"Nope."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Nope. I'm horny as hell. It's just about hard enough right now to drive nails with and if I lie down with you I'm gonna start somethin' I can't finish. Which is only gonna make it worse."

"You need rec?" Alexis asked teasingly.

He twisted his head to glare at her. "I don't need 'rec', Darlin'. I need you. Now

quit teasin' me, you mean woman, and go to sleep. I'm tryin' to keep watch."

Alexis stared at his back for several moments, trying to decide how much of what he'd said was just teasing, and how much—if any—was the truth. His banter always amused her—almost always—but she'd begun to suspect that, as often as not, he wasn't really teasing. He just said it in a way that made it *sound* as if he was.

He hadn't told her anything about himself, she realized. "You're a fascinating man, William—I don't even know your last name."

"Long."

That jolted her from the edge of sleep. "Your last name's Long?" she asked in stunned surprise.

"Yep." He stretched his legs out in front of him and leaned back on his elbows.

"That's ... that's ... the most amazing coincidence," she stammered. "One of my crewmembers ...."

"... Was William Long. I know. I've got a lasergraph of him—my great, great grandfather, or somethin' like that—the entire crew of the U.E. Plymouth, just before y'all left." He dragged in a deep breath and let it out on a long, gusty sigh. "I always did think you was the prettiest little thing I'd ever seen. You were smilin'. You had this look on your face—like you were happy and excited, and scared and sad all at the same time. You looked—lost. I used to wonder what was goin' through your head, if you somehow knew you'd never come back." He turned to look at her, his gaze flickering almost caressingly over her face. "You look better than you did in the lasergraph."

## Chapter Twenty Five

Despite her anxiety over Torin and Joel, or maybe partly because that wore on her, too, Alexis dropped into a sleep so deep it was as if she'd dropped off the face of the Earth. She roused when they returned, but it was not with real awareness. The voices, the sounds around her became part of a dream that she struggled to make sense of but couldn't. She was aware of being lifted and carried, settled again. The jolt when the pog began to move roused her further.

She tried to sit up then, but arms tightened around her, holding her firmly against a hard chest.

"Shh! It's alright, baby. I won't let you fall."

"Joel?"

"Yeah."

There was wariness in his voice. "I'm glad you're alright. Is ...?"

"We didn't have any problems," he cut her off.

Relieved, she snuggled against him and relaxed. For a while she wavered between dropping deeply asleep again and rousing more fully because of the jarring gait of the beast, but finally exhaustion won the battle. The cessation of movement woke her again.

"Can you stand up a minute?"

She nodded sleepily, bracing herself when she felt her feet touch solid ground, but she wavered until someone grabbed her and braced her against their body. "Joel?"

"It's William."

"Oh." She slipped her arms around his waist and leaned more heavily against him. He led her a few steps after a little while and told her to lie down. She looked around a little drunkenly, realized it was so dark she couldn't really see anything, and finally just sank to the ground. Finding the furry pallet she'd been sleeping on before, she stretched out on it and then curled on her side. He settled beside her, dragging her up against his length and dropping an arm across her waist.

"William?"

"It's Joel."

"Oh."

His arm tightened around her briefly. "Still mad at me?"

Confusion filled her. Mad? What was she angry about? She shook her head, more because she couldn't remember why she was supposed to be angry than in answer to the question. He settled his head against hers, nuzzled her neck with his face. "Don't hate me, baby," he said raggedly, his voice filled with remorse. "I'm sorry."

Shifting around to face him, she snuggled her face against his neck. "I don't hate you. I love you," she murmured.

He stiffened. "You do know this is Joel, don't you?"

She lifted her head enough to bite his neck. An unpleasant taste filled her mouth. "Yuck! What is that stuff?"

“Shit.”

“Joel!”

He started shaking with suppressed laughter. “Naw, but it tastes like it, don’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never tasted shit.”

He uttered a choked laugh, then cleared his throat, trying to make it sound like a cough. His laughter tickled her own sense of humor and she snickered.

“Will you two shut the fuck up? Some of us want to sleep!”

The reprimand, unmistakably William’s voice, should have sobered her. Instead, it touched off another snorting laugh—from both of them.

“Behave yourself and go to sleep,” Joel said when he’d conquered his mirth.

“You’re just trying to blame it all on me,” Alexis muttered, suppressing her own urge to laugh.

He dragged in a deep, sobering breath and let it out slowly. “Yeah,” he murmured, stroking a hand slowly along her back. “Maybe.”

Realizing he was no longer talking about the fit of giggling, she tensed, waiting for him to say more. He didn’t and eventually she drifted off again.

A stirring around her roused her level of alertness, but it was the bright glare of the morning sun that fully woke Alexis. She groaned, feeling the effects of the long ride the day before immediately when she moved. Rubbing her eyes, she pushed herself upright. Joel, she saw, had already risen and left the pallet he’d shared with her. Shoving her hair out of her eyes, she glanced around for him.

The troupe, she saw, was stirring, some men still sitting on their pallets, scrubbing sleepily at their faces, others half-heartedly bundling up their pallets, still others securing the bundles on the togs. Torin was seated crossed legged before a small fire, staring intently at the tiny flames flickering to life. Dragging her gaze from him when he didn’t acknowledge her or even appear to notice her presence, she looked around again.

They were in the desert, she discovered in surprise, or the ‘badlands’ as everyone seemed to call the area.

A couple of men appeared on one of the surrounding dunes, ascending to the top and then making their way down again on the camp side. Joel was one of them. He didn’t look at her either. Sighing, she got to her feet with an effort, surveyed the possibilities and finally trudged off in search of a little privacy. Most of the men were gathered around the tiny campfire when she returned. The smell of cooking food wafted to her and her stomach growled in response.

She joined them, settling in the first spot she came to.

“What did you make of it?” Joel asked after a time.

Torin, apparently realizing Joel had addressed him, looked at him for a long moment, frowned thoughtfully, and finally shrugged. “It wasn’t as helpful as I’d hoped,” he responded, frustration evident in his voice. “Beyond the fact that they’ve obviously formed some sort pact—which I already knew. At least it did confirm that, but it sure as hell sounded like I’d dragged you on a while goose chase.”

Joel studied him a moment and finally turned to look at Alexis. “We did find out that your friends are still alive—some of them, anyway.”

Alexis’ heart clenched so painfully at the news that it squeezed the breath from her chest. “They’re alive?” she gasped in disbelief, hope warring with doubt. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah. I’m sure. Doom was gloating about his ‘doctors’—that’d have to be them, I’m thinking—and his weapons. Sounded to me like he’s not as convinced he needs Shae’s support—for whatever he’s got in mind—as he was.”

“You’re sure he said ‘doctors’—plural?” Alexis pursued in rising excitement, still struggling to accept the possibility when she’d long ago given them all up for dead.

Joel nodded.

Alexis dropped her plate of food and sprang up. “We have to get them out! We have to rescue them!”

“We will,” Joel said grimly. “I’m sure as hell not leaving them at the mercy of the bear clan.”

“When? When are going after them?”

Joel frowned. “Not ‘we’, baby. As soon as we get back, I’ll start working on a plan to get them out.”

“But ... they’ve been there so long!” Alexis exclaimed. “They could ... there’s no telling what those ... monsters have done to them! Mel was scared out of her mind!”

Joel struggled with his temper. “We’ll have to figure out a way to raid the castle and get them out. We can’t just ... ride in and take them. Doom considers them valuable. That’s a good thing. It means he probably hasn’t ... hasn’t done anything to put their lives at risk. He’s not going to do anything to them. It’s a bad thing, too, though, because it also means he sure as hell ain’t going to let them go without a hell of a fight.”

Alexis settled weakly again, knowing he was right and still upset that they had to wait. “We could find a way in through the caverns,” she suggested hopefully.

“They will have blocked that, little bird,” Torin put in, his voice almost gentle. “You must know that.”

Alexis blinked at him. “Yes, but we could find another way into the caverns, or dig into them.”

“Maybe,” Joel said. “We’d be exposed, though. Assuming we could, they’re not going to just stand around watching and waiting for us to dig our way in.” He studied her expression for a moment. “I’m working on a plan, alright? When we get back from collecting the weapons, I’ll take some men and study the situation. I’ll come up with something. We’ll get them out.”

Alexis nodded glumly, retreating into her own thoughts where she wavered between hope that all of them were alive and could be rescued, and despair that they might not be able to get them out. She emerged when she heard Joel mention Torin’s brother.

“I don’t think you *were* wrong,” Joel said with finality. “I think Doom mentioning the weapons and the doctors was the key to what’s going on. Think about it. Shae wants something from Doom—he’s got to offer something in return.”

“It could be anything, though,” Torin pointed out, “up to and including a part of the clan territory. In fact, that’s probably what it is.”

“Maybe,” Joel said. “Shae wants to get rid of you and become Chieftain, though, which means his greed for power and wealth has overcome his fear of you. Why would he offer to give Doom part of that if that’s what he’s after? Wouldn’t it be just as easy, if he’s willing to settle for a piece, to fight you and split the clan?”

Torin shrugged. “Obviously, he is not confident that he has enough support to do

what he wants.”

“That seems indisputable—but that still takes us back to what it is that Doom wants out of the deal. I don’t suppose you know whether Doom approached Shae or it was the other way around?”

“Unfortunately, no. I suspect Shae approached Doom, though. Something just didn’t seem entirely right about the ‘war’ going on between the bear clan and tiger clan and they were battling too near my borders to make me completely comfortable. I’d gone to reconnoiter when I was captured. The trap was set and sprung with too much efficiency to my mind to be a matter of seizing an opportunity that presented itself. I could be flattering myself, of course, but I feel very strongly that it was planned well before we stumbled into it. And, if it *was* planned, then they knew we coming, and they could only know that if someone from my own clan made sure they knew.

“I can not dismiss the possibility, though, that Shae merely thought to seize the opportunity once Doom had captured me. He might have been guilty of nothing more than hopefulness that if he ignored Doom’s ransom demands, Doom would kill me.”

“That treacherous *bastard!*” Alexis snapped, outraged. “*He’s* the reason you were in that awful place?”

Torin looked at her with amusement. “I believe so.”

Alexis didn’t know why he thought it was amusing. She certainly didn’t. “I suppose you couldn’t kill him just because you thought he was guilty,” she muttered.

“I didn’t think I should,” he said pensively, his eyes dancing with suppressed laughter.

“What about the war between the bear clan and the tiger clan?” Joel interrupted, redirecting the conversation. “You said it didn’t seem right? How did it not seem right?”

Torin frowned and finally shook his head. “It was a feeling more than anything. There just seemed a lot more dashing up and down for show than actual fighting.”

“You think that could’ve been part the trap?” Joel asked thoughtfully.

Torin stared at him. “The tiger clan conspiring with the bear clan to draw me out?”

“Maybe it does seem far fetched, but it worked. I don’t like too many ‘coincidences’.”

A troubled frown settled on Torin’s face. “I’m not fond of them myself. Let us hope you’re wrong. We will be in deep trouble if it transpires that the clans are gathering to unite against us.”

Joel eyed him speculatively. “Us?”

Torin stared at him blankly for a moment. “Either you or me,” he said. He rose, ending the conversation and everyone set about breaking camp—except Alexis. Uncertain of what to do, she moved to bundle up the pallet she’d slept on. William took it from her, spread it out again and rolled it into a tighter bundle, securing it with leather thongs and then carrying it to tie it to one of the togs.

One more thing she didn’t know how to do right, Alexis thought irritably.

William helped her onto the pack tog, gathered the lead and mounted his own tog.

Alexis focused on holding on. There wasn’t a lot to see anyway.

She was torn between relief that there wasn’t another argument to decide who she was riding with and anxiety for the same reason, trying to decide if all three men were now angry with her or if they just had other things on their mind. There seemed to be

plenty to keep everyone preoccupied.

Guilt dominated most of Alexis' musings. As many times as she told herself there hadn't been anything she could do about it, she still felt guilty that Mel, Linda, and Dr. Long had been imprisoned all the time she'd been enjoying her freedom—and the delights of living in the compound where everyone hated her guts and she was worked to the point of dropping with exhaustion every night.

She'd certainly enjoyed some of her time, however, which was enough to make her feel guilty. She'd only spent a few days in Doom's dungeon herself, and it had been the most awful experience in her life—up to that point, anyway. It was nothing short of amazing that they were still alive under those conditions.

She didn't know, of course, that they were all still alive, but she could hope.

Thinking about Dr. Long brought her back to what William had told her the night before. She'd thought it was the most amazing coincidence until William pointed out, dryly, that he wasn't the only descendent of people who'd lived in the area before the great flight. Most of the people in the compound were descendents of the people who'd lived in the area in her time. Some weren't. Survivors had been migrating to the area for generations, drawn by the need to gather with their own kind for safety.

She still didn't quite know what to make of the discovery that William had known who she was from the start. Joel had seen the lasergraph, too. It made her wonder why he hadn't recognized her right away as William had, but then William had possession of the lasergraph. He'd made it clear, whether he'd intended to or not, that he'd studied it a good bit over the years. Maybe Joel had recognized her but just didn't realize it? He'd said he knew right off that she was one of the 'others'. Maybe he just didn't know how he knew it?

She studied William's back thoughtfully as she went back over what he'd said and it dawned on her abruptly that he'd formed an attachment to her *because* of the lasergraph. She examined that thought doubtfully, but she couldn't dismiss it. As egotistical, and absurd as it seemed to her at first, he'd said he'd *always* thought she was 'the prettiest little thing he'd ever seen'. How else *could* that be taken?

And what did it mean? That he had, maybe, fantasized about her in his mind and 'created' her? There was no doubt he wanted her, but did he want *her* or the woman he thought she was?

Those thoughts and the dismay she felt brought her to the realization that she'd grown very fond of William. It was disturbing to think he might not really feel any of the things he'd made her believe he felt.

Almost as disturbing as her own feelings. She couldn't see that it was 'wrong' to feel strongly about all three men. How could it ever be wrong to care about people? Moreover, they were exceptional men. They were lovable, each very different, but all of them possessed of traits that had made it impossible for her to *not* love them.

What disturbed her was that she'd come to love them so easily. Was that suspect? Or inevitable because they were so exceptional? If her circumstances hadn't been so dire, would she still have fallen for them?

She thought so, but how could she know?

And did it really matter how she felt? It was some of the very traits that attracted her most to them that created the crux of the problem—they were strong, independent men, accustomed to commanding, used to doing whatever they wanted whenever they

wanted to and making decisions for everyone else. Even without her added to the equation, they would've clashed. With her, with all of them vying for 'ownership' it was a total disaster. It didn't matter, to them, that she didn't want to 'owned'. And she didn't. As much as she cared for them, she was an individual in her own right. She wanted to make her own decisions, not have them made for her. She wanted the freedom to chose where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do.

She was going to have as much trouble exerting her rights around any, or all, of them as she was trying to keep them from trying to kill each other, she thought in dismay.

Toward sunset, Alexis emerged from her dark thoughts and the absolute misery of jouncing along for hour upon hour on the damned tog, to see the ruins of the command center highlighted by the setting sun. It shouldn't have surprised her that they'd reached it so quickly—they were traveling on togs not on foot as she and her crewmembers had—but it did. It also filled her with an unnamable dread.

Torin and Joel, who'd been in the lead, drew their togs to a halt and looked back. William drew her and her tog forward until they were level.

"That it?"

Alexis looked at Joel in surprise. He'd seemed to know exactly where they were going. She hadn't questioned it—she'd been too wrapped up in her thoughts—but she'd supposed he knew where it was. "Yes."

He nodded. "I'd thought this must be it—it's the only ruins I know of in the badlands, anyway." He turned to look at William. "I want you and Carl to stay here with Alexis until we've checked it out."

"It would be more ... even," Torin suggested, "if Berl and William stay and we take the other men with us."

Joel sent him a speculative look but merely nodded.

"You don't think Sloan and Pitts would still be around—assuming they came through the portal at all?" Alexis asked uneasily. "I mean—why would they? There's nothing here."

Joel shrugged. "We don't know who might be around—probably nobody—but I'd rather be careful than sorry."

Alexis felt her nerves jumping as she watched the men ride off, leaving her, William, and Berl behind. "It doesn't bother you?"

Both men glanced at her. "Always to be left behind?"

Irritation flickered in William's eyes—anger in Berl's. She didn't realize till then that they might take the comment to suggest doubt of their abilities, or maybe their bravery. "Some men are born to lead, some to follow," William drawled. "There's reasons for everything Joel does. It might not seem like it, but there are. You'd be in danger, and a danger to them if we took you in and ended up in a fight."

Alexis reddened. "I didn't mean that the way you took it. I was just mostly thinking that it bothers me to watch them go—not knowing if they'll come back or not. It's ... nerve wracking just to wait."

"I wouldn't worry too much them. Between them, they're a pretty damned formidable force. You're the one you should be worried about. Ain't nobody but me and old Berl here to protect you."

Alexis smiled. "That's why I'm not worried about me."

"You hear that, Berl? I think I'll take that as a compliment."

Alexis chuckled. "I've seen you knocking heads together in the compound. I'm pretty convinced you're a formidable force yourself."

His eyes gleamed with amusement and something more heated. "Been watching me, huh? I'm liable to get a swollen head—or somethin'—if you keep that up."

Chuckling, Alexis shook her head at him. "You've got a shocking mouth on you, William Long."

He grinned, not the least put out. "Oh, I'm just gettin' warmed up," he drawled. "I've always been a little slow. Give me time an' I'll show just how 'shockin' I can be."

Berl, Alexis noticed when she glanced his way, wasn't amused. "Lord Torin," he said after a moment, "would not be pleased."

William's eyes narrowed. "Fortunately for me I don't give a rat's ass whether he's pleased or not. That's your department."

Berl shifted in his saddle, obviously struggling with his temper, but finally tamped it. "She's carrying his heir," he said.

"His child, maybe," William retorted. "His heir, no. From what I hear, the lion folk aren't too crazy about havin' a Halfling as their lord. They'd be less enthused, to my mind, to consider the get of a human woman as heir. An' Torin obviously knows that or he wouldn't have left her with us to start with. He sure as hell didn't leave her because he wanted to. I never thought I'd feel sorry for a man like Torin, but that had to be hell.

"Now ... if had been me, I'd have said to hell with it, particularly considering the way things are. But then I don't spend a lot of time worryin' about honor and duty and I figure Alexis is right about Torin. Honor and duty first, his own personal happiness be damned."

"You admire him," Berl said, obviously surprised.

William shrugged. "It's hard not to admire, and respect, a man that can do the things Torin has—and can do. There ain't no doubt in my mind he's a great man. On the other hand, he don't have Alexis. We do. An' I think that's just plain dumb. I ain't sayin' I ain't glad of it. I'm just sayin' I wouldn't have walked away."

"His people love him," Berl said.

"An' I'm sure there's a real comfort to him," William retorted dryly.

Alexis glanced from one man to the other uncomfortably. "Berl's right," she said finally. "Torin did what he had to."

"You're way too forgivin', Darlin'. The fact is, he abandoned you and his baby without any consideration for whether or not you'd survive."

"That's not true! I told him to leave me! I told him I wanted to stay. And he didn't know I was impregnated. He couldn't have known because I didn't!"

"You *told* him what he wanted to hear—to protect him," William growled. "And he believed you because it salved his conscience. And if he didn't know you was broodin', then he sure as hell ought to have considered the possibility."

Alexis stared at William's angry face, realizing abruptly that, as easy going as he'd always seemed to her, he was furious with Torin for not treating her as he thought Torin should've. "You're angry with him because you don't think he treated me right."

He blushed. Alexis watched his face color up with absolute fascination. "I'm pissed off because I *know* he didn't," he muttered.

"You are so sweet, William!"

His blush darkened and, for once, he couldn't seem to think of anything at all to

say.

As charming as she found his quick wit and droll sense of humor, she was pretty sure he'd never done anything more captivating than to blush and become speechless. She had to struggle against the urge to kiss him, just because she thought he was so adorable when rattled.

"You think everybody's sweet," he muttered after a moment.

She leaned toward him. "But you're the sweetest," she whispered teasingly.

He uttered a sound midway between a chuckle and a snort of disbelief. "What do you think, Berl? You think I'm sweet?"

"Ha!"

"Even Berl thinks that's hilarious," he drawled. "He's laughin' so hard, he's about to fall off his tog."

Alexis eyed Berl. "Because he's holding it inside," she added teasingly.

A reluctant grin curled Berl's lips. He shook his head, then turned to stare toward the ruins in the distance. "They're signaling for us."

William's knack for diverting her had thrust her anxiety to the back of her mind. Berl's announcement brought it right back to the forefront and Alexis' stomach instantly cramped with nerves.

## Chapter Twenty Six

It was one of Torin's men who'd returned to summon them. He waited until they drew even with him and then led them to where the other togs had been picketed. Two men, obviously sent to stand guard, had taken up lookout positions on either side of the main area of the ruins.

Alexis wondered, as William helped her down from the pack tog, if it had been Torin's idea or Joel's to send the lion men to stand guard. She supposed it must have been Torin's, which could either mean that he had begun to trust enough to let down his guard—or that he didn't and just wasn't concerned about being outnumbered by humans.

She doubted he needed to worry about.

All the men were armed now, though, not just Joel's men—a surprising concession on Joel's part. The weapons were crude and primitive by the standards of Alexis' day, obviously handmade and constructed out of whatever materials came to hand that worked—but still lethal, which was all that mattered.

William was solicitous in helping her surmount the crumbling, slippery debris. She could've managed well enough without his help, she thought wryly, if she'd been wearing her jumpsuit. Unfortunately, it had had its day and she had nothing now to wear but the hideous, shapeless gowns all the women wore and the garb had obviously not been designed for climbing. Short of bunching it around her waist, which she was tempted to do, the flowing fabric was almost more of a hindrance than the rubble.

The faint odor of death wafted over them as they moved deeper into the building.

"Something dead," Berl commented.

"Dr. Chung," Alexis said uncomfortably. "We couldn't bury him."

Thankfully, the scent of decomposing flesh didn't grow a great deal more pronounced as they finally left the bulk of the debris behind and were able to walk instead of climbing. Joel, Torin, and their men were waiting for them in the main control room.

She hadn't thought to caution them not to touch anything and the worry that they might have instantly assailed her when she saw them wandering around examining everything curiously.

"Torin and I will go through first and take out Sloan and Pitts if they're waiting on the other side," Joel announced.

Alexis bit her lip. "I have to go through first," she said, feeling her stomach churn.

Torin and Joel both turned stony faced. "No," Torin responded, apparently answering for both of them.

Alexis dragged in a calming breath. "Neither of you know how to activate the portal on the other side and it has to be done."

Torin's eyes narrowed on her face speculatively. "Why?"

"Because . . ." Alexis paused, trying to think of a reasonable explanation they wouldn't question. "It was designed that way—for both portals to work in conjunction

with each other. The signal is strongest when both are powered up, and this is a large group to go over.”

She could tell from the look on his face that he didn't entirely swallow that explanation. Joel didn't make any bones about being suspicious. “You turned it off when you came through?”

She stared at him while she struggled with an answer. “No. But they—Sloan and Pitts—probably did to save power. It pulls a tremendous amount of energy.”

“Just explain to us how to do it and we'll take care of it once we're there.”

“It's complicated.”

Joel and Torin both gave her an affronted look. “We had to train on this equipment for years!” she snapped, exasperated. “I wasn't implying you weren't intelligent enough to do it, but it isn't something I can explain to you in five minutes. *I* need to do this. Once I'm there, I can power up the other portal and bring everyone through ... at once.”

“Unless Sloan and Pitts catch you and prevent you from powering it up,” William drawled.

Thank you, William! Alexis thought irritably. “They won't hurt me,” she asserted with far more certainty than she actually felt. “That's another reason it'll be better if I go through first. *I* can divert them. And if I'm gone long and don't come back, or don't open that portal, then you'll know there's trouble.”

She could see they were considering the advantages of her suggestion, even though they still didn't like the idea of her going ahead—alone.

“How will we know when you have the other portal powered up?”

She moved to the console. “You'll see it on this gauge. This will read at full when both portals are in operation—half when it's just this one.” She began the process of ‘lighting up’ the portal, trying not to think about what she was about to attempt. There was no point in thinking about it, she knew. It was her fault the bear clan had the pulse rifles—and Mel, Linda, and Dr. Long. She'd inadvertently shifted the balance of power by bringing the pulse rifles and then losing them. Without the pulse rifles in the habitat on New Earth, the human clan no longer had the advantage and that just wasn't acceptable.

She hadn't lied about Sloan and Pitts. She really didn't think that they would shoot her on sight. They might, but she didn't think they would and if they were preoccupied with her then there was less chance they'd manage to kill the others when they came through the portal.

Assuming, of course, that she actually made it through herself.

While she was waiting for the generator to reach full power, she turned to the men and gestured for all of them to gather around her. “When you step through the portal, you'll feel a ... tingling sensation. It's uncomfortable, but brief. Basically, you can expect that brief sensation, then nothing, then you'll be stepping through on the other side. As soon as you step through, you should move away from the portal to allow the people behind you to step out—and to avoid being sucked back in.”

She could tell from their expressions that that bit of information wasn't well received. “It doesn't happen often, but this is just so you know. You don't have to run, just step through, step out, and keep moving.”

“What about the weapons?”

“Hold them at ready. You’ll be holding them in the same position when you’re reassembled on the other side.”

Joel’s eyes narrowed. “Reassembled?”

Alexis waved that away. “There’s nothing to it—really. This mode of transportation has—was used very safely for years. We’ll be going a little further than the ones designed for inner-solar travel, but the principle is the same and I came through it with the others without any problem.

“The whine you’re hearing now isn’t anything to worry about. It’s perfectly normal. It’ll take approximately the same length of time for me to power up the other portal as it’s taken this one to light up.”

She could see they were unnerved. She didn’t blame them. She’d transported herself dozens of times and it still scared the hell of her. She could remember the way she’d felt her first time.

Of course, she’d fully understood what was going to happen and she’d carefully avoided explaining it to them, but she didn’t see the point in adding to their anxiety by telling them she was about to break them down into particles smaller than dust and send them to another galaxy—where they would be completely dependent upon a machine about a thousand years old to reassemble them.

Dragging in a calming breath, she turned to check the system to make certain everything was working correctly before she moved to the platform. Shock went through her when she saw that the indicator light was showing the twin portal was already open and at full. She stared down at the gauge in disbelief. They’d left almost two months ago. Sloan wouldn’t have left the portal running for that length of time.

“What is it?” Torin asked sharply.

“The portal on the other side is already open.”

“Would it come on when this one did?” Joel asked.

She shook her head. “It has to be manually operated. There are too many possibilities of failure in one area or another and there’s the energy consumption to consider.”

“Then Sloan and Pitts must have come through.”

“Either that or the portal dispersed their particles all over the cosmos,” she said, numb with disbelief. “We didn’t think they’d try it if we shut this one down. It’s too dangerous.”

“What do you mean it’s too dangerous?”

Alexis glanced at William distractedly. “It’s ... it works sort of like the guns you made. It *shoots* your atoms across the universe. If both portals are open, then it works like a bridge from one to the other—the portals stabilizing both ends. With only one open, it can still work, but it’s less stable, more dangerous. It could miss the mark by a fraction of a degree and shoot your atoms into deep space instead.”

“And you were going to try it?”

“What?” Alexis asked blankly, brought abruptly from her distraction by the tone of Joel’s voice to discover that Joel, Torin, and William were all glaring at her angrily. “What did I say?”

Torin’s eyes narrowed.

William shook his head. “Woman, you are the worst liar I’ve ever seen in my life! If you can’t remember your lie for five minutes, you need to stick to the truth!”

“Oh,” Alexis said, feeling her face heat as she realized she’d inadvertently related more information that she’d intended to. “Uh oh.”

“Uh oh, your ass!” Joel snarled. “I knew there was a reason I didn’t like the sound of that tale.”

“Well,” she said placatingly. “Obviously, it worked and Sloan and Pitts are here—somewhere.”

“Not unless that’s them I’ve been smelling since we arrived,” Torin retorted grimly.

“We should go. Everything looks fine, but this does use a lot of power and we’ll want to get back.”

“I’m not stepping foot inside that damned thing until I know it’s got enough power to get us back,” one of Joel’s men growled. The others seconded that sentiment.

“I’d have to find the power source to do that.”

“Then we’ll look for it,” Torin said grimly.

Alexis was about to argue with him but decided against it. Arguing would be a waste of time when they knew she’d already deceived them about the portal. In any case, it occurred to her abruptly that the power source had to be close by and inside the command center. Nearly half the building was gone and there was nothing beyond the building.

Leaving Joel choosing which men to assign guard duty of the portal, just in case Sloan and Pitts had made it through, and working on a plan of attack in case they were waiting on the other side, Alexis and Torin began searching the main control room for the power source. They found it just down the corridor in a small utility room.

Alexis was surprised to see there was very little deterioration. Even though the portal had never actually come on line, it had been centuries since it was first erected. The crystals had been considered virtually indestructible and almost limitless in power, depending, of course, on the size of the crystal—more so even than the atom power that had been used before it, but she’d never really believed that. She would’ve thought time alone would’ve leached most of the power from the crystal.

“We’ve got about a hundred years left on it, give or take a decade.”

Torin scanned her face. “You are certain?”

“I wouldn’t lie about it!”

He gave her a look.

She let out a huff of irritation. “That was different. This is a matter of everyone’s safety.”

“And that was a matter of yours.”

“*That* was a matter of everyone’s safety,” she corrected him. “I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell you everything because I knew I was the only one who *could* go—the only one fully qualified to light up the other portal. It’s my fault the bear people have the pulse rifles. It’s my fault everyone is in danger because of it. We need those guns. It was my responsibility to take the risk.”

“Of . . . scattering your atoms all over the universe?” he growled, catching her shoulders in his hands.

She shook her head. “I would never have known the difference—and all my troubles would be behind me.”

“Does your life mean no more to you than that?”

Anger suffused her abruptly. "Does yours?"

The question caught him by surprise—gave him pause. "That's different," he said finally.

"Yes, it is! Because it's *me* that suffers! I'm the one who has to wait, sick with worry that something will happen to you. I'm the one left behind to wonder if I'll ever see you again!"

He pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her and she burrowed tightly against him, relishing the feeling of being held by him. "There are things I have to do, that my duty, my sense of responsibility, compels me to do. I can't change that."

"I know. Do you think that I would love you as much as I do if you weren't who you are? It's unreasonable, I know. That's why I don't say anything, don't try to talk you out of it when I know there's no other way. But your life is important to me. Don't throw it away."

"Repeat that first part again."

Alexis pulled away to look up at him questioningly.

"It started with 'I'."

"What did the second word start with?" she asked, pretending complete confusion.

"Lexis!"

She wrinkled her brow. "Did I say Lexis? I don't remem ...."

He silenced her with a kiss—unfortunately brief. "You are a cruel woman," he murmured, brushing his lips lightly against hers.

"But I love you," she whispered, nipping at his lips with hers.

He kissed her deeply then, hungrily. Dizzying heat spiraled through her. She'd just begun to wonder if there was any possibility of mounting him where they stood when he broke the kiss and lifted his head. "Hell!" he muttered. He gazed into her eyes.

"We'll finish this conversation later."

She smiled at him a little drunkenly. "Promise?"

His eyes gleamed. "Absolutely."

"Torin!" Joel bellowed just as they stepped out of the utility room and back into the corridor.

"Your hearing does come in handy," she whispered.

"Occasionally."

She licked her lips, wondering if they were as puffy as they felt. Apparently, they were. Joel gave her a narrow eyed look when she reached him. "We found it!" she said cheerfully. "Everything is fine."

Torin slipped a hand behind her back and squeezed her ass. Her eyes widened.

Joel looked at Torin suspiciously. "So I see," he muttered, turning on his heel and proceeding them back into the control room.

They assembled in front of the portal, positioning Alexis near the rear with William and two other men. Torin and three of his men took point, stepping through and vanishing. The men around Alexis shifted uneasily, but they moved forward as Joel and three others stepped through.

It had been decided that if the first men through encountered trouble, one would come back to warn them, but Alexis still worried as she reached the portal that she would arrive to discover a battle in progress.

Relief suffused her when she emerged on New Earth and took in the encampment at a glance. Torin, Joel, and the others had dispersed and were moving quickly away from the portal, guns ready, their stances tense as they scanned the area for any sign of threat, but it seemed obvious neither Sloan or Pitts were anywhere around.

“Fuck!” William growled as he stepped through the portal on the other side. He turned to fix Alexis with an accusing look. “Woman! You need to look up the damned definition of ‘tingle’! That sure as hell wasn’t a tingle.”

Alexis bit her lip. “It didn’t feel like a tingle to you?” she asked innocently.

He looked like he was considering defining ‘tingle’ for her, but at that moment he glanced up and froze. Startled, Alexis turned to see what he was staring at. She saw they’d arrived near dusk and the planet’s rings were at their most magnificent, sparkling with a rainbow of colors in the light of the setting sun. Two of the smaller of New Earth’s four moons were already tracking their path across the sky. The largest wouldn’t rise until sunset.

Glancing around at the other men, she saw that they’d paused to look up, as well, and were as entranced as William. Although they continued to search the compound after that short pause, they cast as many glances up at the sky and out at the jungle as they did the immediate area.

Joel and Torin moved back toward Alexis as the other men continued to sweep for any sign of Alexis’ former crewmembers. Alexis couldn’t help but notice that both men—all of the men—wore the sort of look generally reserved for sex. The air fairly thrummed with excitement. She could almost smell the testosterone.

She should’ve known, she thought irritably, that they’d be as enthralled with the place as Sloan and Pitts had been. There was something about it that was a siren call to the primal male!

Joel, Torin, and William all turned to look at her at almost the same moment, all three wearing almost identical grins of pure pleasure. As annoyed as she was, as certain as she was that she had been completely eclipsed, she smiled back at them.

They even grinned at each other—for a split second, before they recalled that they were deadly enemies only allied for a common cause. The men sent to secure the perimeter returned shortly afterwards, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had fallen between them.

Wordlessly, they followed Alexis as she led the way to the habitat. It was dim inside approaching dusk. “Lights.”

She turned to see if they were following her and discovered they were all staring at the ceiling lights. She looked up automatically, wondering what they were staring at until it dawned on her that none of them had ever seen an artificial light—and they’d certainly never seen lights controlled by a computer and programmed for voice response.

Frowning thoughtfully, she glanced around at the main living area, trying to imagine what it must look like to them. Sterile white met her gaze everywhere she looked. She’d almost forgotten herself what it was like to live in an environment that was so antiseptic, so devoid of personality or real comfort. She’d missed it desperately when she’d first returned to Earth, had hated the dirt, hated not having ‘decent’ facilities, clean clothes that she didn’t have to launder herself.

How, she wondered, had she managed to get used to it? Let alone become comfortable living in squalor?

Relatively comfortable. Actually, not really comfortable, she mentally amended. She'd just grown used to it and barely thought about it anymore.

What, she wondered, did it say to them about her? Were they wondering if, inside, she was as cold, flat, sterile, and uninteresting? Were they wondering if she'd found them and their world disgusting? Or were they just so appalled at the sheer lack of any sort of warmth that they couldn't get beyond that?

She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "This was only intended to be temporary shelter. The others—the colonists that were to come would have built more comfortable domiciles to live in. They would've been allowed to bring personal belongings."

The comments drew their attention. "How long did you live here?" William asked quietly.

Alexis shrugged. "A few months. We'd spent ten years on the ship coming, though, and it wasn't a lot more ... hospitable." In all honesty, it wasn't much more institutional looking than the apartment she'd had before she left. She'd never known what the warmth of nature could bring to a home—not that she would've wanted the dirt, she thought ruefully, but the wood, the colorfully dyed woven fibers they used to make clothing and curtains and rugs for their floors—those things added beauty and warmth. They might not work as well as the completely synthetic materials used in her time, but they worked, and they added character to a place. She shrugged. "We were all scientists. We were used to spending most of our time in labs and those *had* to be sterile.

She turned away. "The store room is down this corridor. Lights."

The men crowded the corridor behind her as she stopped at the store room. "Open."

Alexis stared blankly at the door when nothing happened. She lifted her head. "Computer. Open the store room door."

"Identify."

"Who the hell was that?" Joel demanded, looking around, and then glaring at the other men, who were also looking around, their guns lifted threateningly. "I thought you secured the area?"

Alexis bit her lip. She honestly hadn't thought to warn them that the computer 'spoke', mostly because she hadn't expected it to demand her identification. "It's just the computer," she explained apologetically. "A synthesized voice used by the machine that operates everything in the habitat."

They didn't look completely convinced and it was obvious they suspected Alexis had found their reaction amusing. Sighing inwardly, she responded to the computer.

"Doctor Alexis M. Conyers."

"Retinal scan."

Letting out a huff, Alexis stepped up to the security monitor and held perfectly still while the computer scanned her.

"Scan complete. Code."

Alexis frowned. "Why do you need the code?"

"Code."

She closed her eyes, trying to summon the correct code—which they'd disabled not long after they'd arrived. It was just too annoying to have to call out the code every time they wanted something from the store room. "Michael, David, Zero, Four, Niner, Zeta."

“Incorrect.”

Alexis glared at the computer vid above her head. “That is the correct code!”

“Negative.”

“What’s going on, Alexis?”

Alexis glanced at Torin. “I don’t know. Sloan must have changed the code—he had to have. We’d disabled it.” She lifted her head again. “Computer, did Lieutenant Richard Sloan change the code?”

“Affirmative. Store room security reactivated, code modified month--zero niner, day--twenty one, Earth year, two thousand fifty three.”

“Override.”

“Unable.”

“This is science officer Doctor Alexis M. Conyers.”

“Identified.”

“I have seniority over military personnel.”

“Authority overridden, month—zero niner, day—twenty one, Earth year, two thousand fifty three. Counting set.”

“Damn it!”

“Profanity. An expression denoting aggression. No response necessary. Two minutes.”

“I’ll give you a fuckin’ response!” one of Joel’s men growled.

“Hold off!” Joel ordered harshly. “Get away from the door, Alexis. You men, back off. NOW!”

Alexis turned to look at him blankly. “What?”

He grabbed her arm roughly, hauling her quickly back the way they’d come.

“Joel!”

“You said Sloan and Pitts were soldiers, right?” he demanded when he’d reached the main living area and stopped, turning to face her.

Alexis nodded.

“Well, if it was me, I’d have booby trapped that door if I wanted to make damned sure nobody went in.”

Alexis frowned at him in incomprehension. “I don’t know what you mean by booby trapped.”

“Rigged it so it would explode if anybody tried to open it.”

Alexis’ eyes widened. She glanced back down the corridor.

“Fifty nine,” the computer announced.

“It’s counting.”

“Backwards,” Torin confirmed.

“Run!” Alexis gasped, plowing through the men and heading for the outer door.

Uncertain of how far away she needed to be to avoid the explosion, Alexis didn’t stop until she’d reached the outer perimeter of the encampment. The men, she discovered, were right behind her. As one, they turned to stare at the habitat, waiting. Alexis had just dragged in a breath of relief, just decided that Joel had guessed wrong, when she heard an explosion. A ball of fire and smoke rolled out of the front of the habitat.

## Chapter Twenty Seven

Soot marred the walls, floor, ceiling, and the debris that had once been furnishings. Alexis scanned the once pristine main living area as she picked her way through the burned out hull of the habitat. Foam still dripped from the ceiling from the extinguishers.

There didn't seem to be much chance that anything inside the store room had survived the blast. Alexis discovered when she finally reached it, though, that the room was virtually untouched.

"They rigged it to blast outward—to kill whoever was trying to get in. They're good. I'll give the bastards that."

Alexis looked at Joel in surprise. "They ... designed it to do this?"

"I don't think we were just lucky," he said dryly. "They didn't want us—anybody getting the weapons, but they also didn't want to lose it by blowing it up themselves. I'm pretty convinced they rigged it to do just what it did—and if we hadn't run, we'd have been burned to a crisp. I've never seen explosives throw off that much fire."

The comment sparked a memory. "It must have been incendiary bombs—I heard Sloan say something about it one time—that they were made especially for the fire. He and Pitts used to discuss weapons and battles they'd been in. They didn't actually talk about much else, to be honest, except ...." She broke off, shrugging.

The men had emptied the weapons wrack and were studying the other contents of the store room curiously. "There aren't any more weapons that I know of. The rest of this is just food rations .... And medical supplies!"

She'd been so focused on getting the weapons she hadn't even thought about the other supplies!

Not that there was a great deal of them, or even a very wide range. They'd been inoculated against every disease known to man that had a vaccine before they'd left. There were sterile bandages, though, antibiotics, antiseptics—anti-conception pills!

As elated as she was when that thought hit her, in the next moment she realized that it was probably too late to do her any good—at least now. She hadn't believed she possibly could be gestating, but she'd begun to suspect that Maude had right.

Still, there was the future .... And it could help some of the women. If they managed to free Dr. Long, he might be able to analyze and replicate the medication.

As the men filed out with the weapons, examining them, she began to search for something to fill with medical supplies.

It dawned on her abruptly, though, that the men would want to test the weapons the moment they got outside. Whirling, she dropped what she held in her hands and rushed out. "Don't!" she exclaimed as she arrived in the compound breathless from her sprint to reach them. "You can't fire those in here!"

To a man, they lifted their heads and glared at her.

"I mean you really can't fire them in here. The shields are up. If you hit the shields, the pulse will ricochet."

The men looked at each other, looked around, and turned to look at her again.

"I know you can't see them, but they're on. Trust me."

"We'll move outside the shield, then," one of Joel's men said, shouldering his weapon and stalking toward the perimeter.

Alexis didn't get the chance to warn him that he couldn't pass through it either. That was the whole point of the grav-shields, after all—to make sure nothing got in, which also meant nothing could go out as long as they were on.

The man slammed into the field so hard he rebounded, sprawling on his back in the dirt.

Alexis couldn't help but wonder if she'd looked as completely stunned and confused by everything 'new' she'd encountered as the men did at that moment. She could see they felt just as out of their element as she had, and they didn't like it one bit.

"Wouldn't it be just as well to go back now? You could practice with the pulse rifles in the desert and no one would be around to see."

"We're not going back until we've found Sloan and Pitts," Torin said.

"But ... if they were here, we would've found them already," Alexis said reasonably.

"Unless they're out hunting."

"They wouldn't stay out after dark and it's nearly dark now."

Torin and Joel exchanged a look that Alexis interpreted to mean they knew more about what Sloan and Pitts would and wouldn't do than she did.

"Turn off the grav-shield."

"But ... it's almost dark! *Things* will get in!"

Joel approached her. "We need to at least know how to fire these weapons, Baby. It's not going to do us any good to have them if we don't know how to use them."

"I know that, but couldn't it wait until morning?"

She could see he was holding onto his patience with an effort. "You just said Sloan and Pitts would come back before it got dark, didn't you?"

She didn't think Sloan and Pitts were out hunting. She didn't think they were on the planet anymore, but she could see Joel was determined to 'test' the thing. "Alright. I'll turn off a section so you and the others can go out."

He lifted a hand and patted her cheek. "You sure you don't know how to work this?"

She studied the pulse rifle, trying to remember what she'd noticed when Sloan was using one. "This one makes it fire. I think one of the buttons keeps it from being fired accidentally, so it won't work unless you press the right one. The others I'm not sure about, but they control the number of cycles of the pulses, and distance, and I don't know what else. It can be changed and set to shoot something that's close—or at a distance—I think it might be that button," she said, pointing.

He nodded and she moved to the closest post along the perimeter, keying in the code on the touch pad while Joel watched her. A green light flickered. "It's disengaged."

He nodded again, but he moved cautiously toward the perimeter, waving his hand in front of him. Alexis tamped her amusement with an effort, knowing he wouldn't appreciate it. The other men filed out behind him, carefully following *exactly* the path he'd taken. She didn't bother to tell them that the grav-shield had been shut off between

the two uprights that bounced the beams off of each other when it was activated.

They clustered in a tight knot once outside, everyone staring down at the weapon Joel held. She supposed he was passing along the information she'd given him. She just hoped some of it had been accurate and they didn't manage to shoot each other while they were busy 'practicing' with the things.

Finally, the men backed away and stood watching as Joel lifted his gun to fire it. Nothing happened. Frowning, he examined it, pressed another button and tried again. That time the pulse rifle fired off a dozen rounds before he jerked his finger off the button, cutting a wide swath through the jungle growth. Joel stared at the brush and small trees he'd cut down, looked down at the rifle, and then looked at the other men and grinned.

Alexis rolled her eyes.

They huddled again, then backed off and tried it themselves.

Alexis watched them impatiently for a while and finally turned and went into the habitat. "Lights."

A couple of lights flickered and then came on, shedding a feeble amount of light on the room. Moving down the corridor, Alexis headed for the quarters she'd shared with Mel and Linda. The door had been closed, fortunately, when the explosion had ripped through the habitat and the room was relatively unscathed. Crossing to her locker, Alexis opened it and removed a fresh jumpsuit and shorts then headed out of the room and down the corridor to the facilities. "Shower," she said, "ninety eight degrees Fahrenheit."

Stripping her gown off, she dropped it into the cleaning unit and moved to the stall, sticking one arm in to check the water temperature. Deciding after testing it that she wanted something a little warmer, she commanded the computer to increase the temperature two degrees.

The door of the facilities opened as she stepped into the shower unit. She turned in surprise.

Folding his arms over his broad chest, Torin propped his shoulders against the door frame, scanning her slowly from head to toe. His eyes were dark, gleaming with desire when he met her gaze again.

Frozen by the need thrumming through her own veins, Alexis stared back at him mutely, unable to command her mind to function beyond the basic primal need to wrap herself in him. Her throat closed with a thirst for the taste and scent of him. Blood flushed her skin as the urge swept through her to feel his touch. Her belly quivered for the feel of him inside of her. It seemed she'd yearned forever for it, deprived, starved, diminished for something only he could give her.

He came away from the door. Slowly, he unfastened his sword and set it aside. The gauntlets, he dropped to the floor. The leather chest plate followed. She stared at his hands as he tugged his tunic from his trousers and lifted it, feeling a shiver rake through her as she remembered the feel of those broad, calloused palms and long fingers on her flesh. Her gaze caressed the rippling muscles of his belly and chest as he pulled the garment off over his head and dropped it to join the growing mound beside him. "I don't suppose there's a way to lock the door?"

She felt her belly clench at the sound of his voice, the promise in it. "Privacy," she said in a voice barely above a whisper.

The door slid closed and locked in place.

Nudging his boots heel to toe to loosen them, he bent and pulled them off, dropping them one by one and then straightening once more. Her gaze flickered to meet his briefly before skimming downward again, drawn by the play of muscles in his chest and arms as he unfastened his belt and then his trousers, parting the opening. His cock, fully erect, lurched eagerly through the opening as he peeled his trousers down over his hips, an angry red from his own need, looking painfully swollen, the veins along the shaft distended with the blood pulsing into it.

Her heart fluttered uncomfortably as he straightened from removing his trousers and moved toward her. He stopped when they were nearly toe to toe, staring down into her upturned face, his expression unreadable, his golden eyes mirroring the eagerness and doubt warring inside of her.

The heat and want swirling inside of her had reduced her intelligence to the same primal level as her urges. She uttered the first coherent thought that connected in her mind, seeking assurance, verification that it wasn't just her that wanted, needed. "You want rec?" she asked in a voice that sounded strange even to her own ears.

Slowly, he shook his head, making her heart stammer, briefly, to a painful halt. "I want to make love to you."

Gladness, eagerness closed around her throat, choking her. Her mouth watered with the hunger. She swallowed with an effort against the painful tightness in her throat, the sound loud in her ears. Here, she wondered? But then the memory of the first time they'd been together flooded her, sending a wave of heat straight through her. Holding his gaze, she took a step back, into the spray pelting from the shower head. He followed her as if her gaze had drawn him, settling his hands on her waist.

For a long, long moment, they merely stared at one another, then his gaze flickered down her length, his attention snagged by his hold on her waist. He skimmed his hands upward along her ribs, cupping and lifting a breast in each hand, squeezing them. She dragged in a difficult breath. His hold lightened. He closed his splayed fingers, catching the tips of her breasts between his thumbs and forefingers, plucking at them gently and drawing the blood to them until they tightened to a nearly painful hardness and each gentle pluck pulled at something low in her belly, made the muscles of her sex contract with the same rhythm.

He studied the effect for a long moment before he lifted his eyes to hers. Releasing his hold on her nipples, he lifted his hands to her face, settling a palm on either side of her head, stroking her cheeks with the edge of his thumb. He drew her closer after a moment, lowering his head to meet her, tilting his head to one side to match his lips to hers. She sucked in a breath as he brushed his lips lightly along hers, dragging in the ragged breath he exhaled in the same moment.

Her lips tingled at the touch, itched for the firm pressure of his. Her mouth dried for want of the taste of him. He shifted closer, slid his hands from the sides of her head to the back as he opened his mouth over hers and breached her parted lips with his tongue, stroked his tongue languidly across hers. Heat blossomed in her center, flowing outward in every direction. His taste filled her mouth in an explosion of wondrous sensation, spiraled through her blood and nerve endings like a potent drug.

She held her breath, soaking in the taste and feel of him like a thirsty plant, feeling life flow through her, an awakening of her senses that made her aware of the lightest of

touches where ever their skin met—the brush of her nipples against his hair roughened chest with each deep breath they dragged into their lungs, the firm grip of his big hands, the faint brush of his thighs against hers, the heaviness of his engorged cock against her belly.

She wanted him inside of her, just to feel him as part of herself. Coming was the last thing on her mind. She just wanted to feel him inside of her. She wanted to watch his face as he found pleasure in the feel of her sex wrapped tightly around his shaft.

He withdrew his tongue from her mouth, sucked lightly at her lips and lifted his head to press his forehead to hers. “I’d forgotten,” he said raggedly. “I told myself I remembered it better than it was. It couldn’t possibly feel this good to be with you as I remembered.”

Her throat closed. She’d told herself the same thing, tried to make herself believe it to soothe the hurt, to take away the pain.

He nuzzled his nose against hers, slipped his face downwards to rub his face against hers, cheek to cheek, turned his head to stroke his lips along the path his cheek had taken and then beyond that to explore the throb of blood in her temple before meandering to her ear to explore it. She shuddered as the heat of his tongue invaded the sensitive cavity.

A fine tremor ran through the hands that held her, rattled through his chest and belly where his torso, wet as hers was, brushed hers, clung with the dampness of the water trickling over them. His cock, as if with a mind and will of its own, stirred against her belly in restless discontent. She pressed against it, savoring the heat and thickness of it, wishing it was inside of her instead.

Pulling away slightly, he sank slowly into a crouch, exploring her neck, sucking at the moist skin and licking in passing until he reached her breasts. Closing one hand around a breast, he slipped the other over her mound, nudging her legs to encourage her to part her thighs for him. She shifted to accommodate his touch, eager for it and dreading it at the same time, knowing he would bring her off within moments and anxious to have him inside of her when she came.

She still couldn’t resist the lure of pleasure his mouth and hand offered.

He took a nipple into his mouth at the same time he found her clit and teased it with the tip of his finger. She swayed dizzily at the fire that arced through her, grasping his shoulders and then looping her arms around his head to hold him to her as he drew on the tight bud with his mouth. She made a whimpering sound that was partly from the thrill of excitement and anticipation that threaded through her and partly despair.

*Don’t make come like this*, she thought. She didn’t say it, couldn’t bring herself to complain when it felt so good—the pull of his mouth on her nipple and stroke of his finger on clit. It felt too good to complain, and yet even while part of her embraced it, urged her to hold perfectly still and just enjoy what he was doing to her, another part wanted to share, wanted to hold onto her release until she could feel him deeply inside of her.

He lifted his head after a few moments to look up at her, sensing her resistance. “Come for me, little bird. I want to see it.”

She opened her eyes with an effort. “I want you inside me,” she said plaintively.

His face tightened. He swallowed. “I’ll explode the minute I’m inside of you,” he said harshly. “I won’t be able to hold it.”

“I don’t care,” she said, closing her eyes against the dizziness. “I want to feel it.”

"I care. I want to give, not just take."

She set her jaw stubbornly.

He switched hands, grasped her other breast and teased it with his mouth and tongue, slipped his other hand between her thighs and along her cleft, pushing one thick finger inside of her. The muscles along her channel clutched at it frantically. A warning quake moved along it. She whimpered again in distress as he pumped his finger into her, sucked her breast, tormented her clit with his thumb.

She squeezed her thighs around his hand, trying to still his movements, but it was too late. She'd allowed him that much and couldn't prevent his hand from dragging the pleasure from her. She sucked in a harsh gasp as she felt her body quivering on the edge, threatening to explode with release, tensed all over.

He felt it, pressed his advantage, sucking hard on her nipple and thrusting into her. She groaned, shook, lost any interest in holding it at bay as her instincts took over and her body surged, convulsed with spasms of rapture that left her gasping for breath. Her bones felt as if they'd melted in the conflagration that exploded inside of her. She wobbled, struggling to remain standing.

He surged to his feet, grasping her and lifting her upwards. She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist as he did, hooking her ankles together as he carried her against the wall of the shower, braced her with the weight of his body and pressed his cock into the mouth of her sex. They struggled, heaved together, in concert, in disharmony, both of them too desperate to connect for many moments to manage it or completely grasp why they failed. The moisture coating her channel affected it where their desperate lunges hadn't, coating him so that he slid inside of her.

They both groaned as if they'd been mortally stabbed when he slid deeply into her sheathe at last. She felt the heat flicker to life inside her again as he shifted for leverage, withdrew, and then impaled her again. Tightening her arms and legs around him, she squeezed her eyes lids tightly together and focused on the feel of him moving inside of her like a piston, in and out in frantic, heaving thrusts, his lungs expanding and deflating in his chest like a bellows. He groaned agonizingly as his body tensed, convulsed, pumping his seed into her in a hot fountain. Dropping his head, he bit down on the crook between her shoulder and neck, jerking with the force of it. She groaned, tightening her legs still more to pull him deeper as she came again.

He sucked on her neck, flicked his tongue soothingly over the patch of flesh he'd caught between his teeth, then lifted his head and dragged in a deep, shaky breath.

"Cheat," he murmured chidingly, his voice thick with satisfaction as he brushed his lips over her face in appreciation.

Confusion filled her for a moment and then she chuckled huskily. "Why?"

"You came twice," he accused, his voice threaded with amusement and a definite note of male smugness at the same time.

She smiled lazily when he lifted his head to meet her gaze. "I told you I wanted to wait for you. You wouldn't let me so I had to cheat."

He laughed, easing away from her and allowing her to slip down his body until her feet touched the floor of the shower. Instead of stepping away, he shifted closer, pinning her snugly between his body and the wall. "You can make it up to me," he murmured.

Her eyes widened. "Now?"

He grimaced. "Unfortunately, no."

She chuckled, slipping from his hold and moving under the water. He followed her, gliding his hands over her water slickened skin as she lifted her hand palm up to the dispenser of cleanser. "Soap."

A mound of foam filled her palm and she scrubbed it over herself.

"Smells like ... flowers," he murmured with a mixture of approval and disapproval.

"You don't like the smell of flowers?"

"On you, yes. On me—my men will be looking at me strangely."

She uttered a gurgle of laughter. "They'll certainly know where you've been."

"There is that. On the other hand, they're having so much fun with the rifles we might not see them again for days."

"You weren't enjoying practicing with the rifle?"

"The pulses put me in mind of something else I'd rather be firing," he said pensively.

"Ahh," she said, enlightened. "I nearly strangled on your ammunition."

He stared at her blankly a moment and started laughing. "I've been saving it for you," he said in a shaking voice. "It was a toss up as to whether it would blow my brains out first or yours. I decided to let you have it."

They bathed each other, paying closest attention to those parts they were certain most needed attention and then parted to wash their hair. Alexis caught Torin's wrist as he moved to step from the shower. He looked at her questioning.

"Dry cycle."

The water stopped and warm air began to blow around them. Alexis squeezed the excess water from her hair and fluffed it to allow the air to dry it. Torin mirrored her movements, drying his own hair.

"This place is ... amazing," he murmured.

"In a good way? Or bad?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I think I could get used to this too easy."

Stepping from the shower when she was mostly dry, Alexis knelt to collect Torin's clothes and dropped them in the cleaning unit. "I didn't bring a change of clothes," he said pointedly.

She smiled. "Come on. I think I can find something that will fit."

He caught her hand when she started to step from the room, leaning out to check the corridor. When he saw they still had the habitat to themselves, he released her hand and followed her.

"Open," she said when she'd crossed the corridor and stopped before a door. The lights came on as the door slid open.

Torin's hand clamped around her arm and tightened. "You didn't tell the lights to come on," he said when she glanced at him questioningly.

"It's the sleeping quarters. The motion sensors activate the lights in the sleeping quarters—because its usually only at night that we go in. The other rooms aren't set up that way because we move in and out of them throughout the day and sometimes need light and sometimes don't."

Torin followed her inside. Lifting his head to look around, he sniffed. His face tightened. "I don't like the smell."

Alexis chuckled. "This is Sloan and Pitts' quarters. I'm not surprised. Sloan was about your size, though." She moved to the locker built into the wall and touched the pad to open in. Picking up a military jumpsuit, she unfolded it and held it up to examine the size

with her eyes and then handed it to Torin. He took it, but instead of putting it on, followed her as she left the room and returned to her own quarters.

“Privacy,” he said when he’d followed her inside.

The door closed and locked as Alexis turned to look at him questioningly.

He dropped the clothes he was carrying and moved toward her, grasping her and carrying her down on top of one of the narrow bunks. “Now,” he said as he settled his weight on top of her, “about that rec you promised.”

Alexis’ lips curled up at the corners. “Did I promise?” She lifted a hand and stroked his hard cheek.

“You did. I distinctly recall it.”

“I thought you were making love to me.”

He studied her face. “I’d like to believe I was making love *with* you.”

## Chapter Twenty Eight

As Alexis stepped into the main room, she noticed that the lingering smell of smoke was overlaid with the more pleasant scent of freshly washed bodies. Combined with the dripping hair, she deduced the men had figured out how to use the shower and get the men's soap—not that surprising. The computer would've responded to the male voice by dispensing the soap the crewmen preferred, and undoubtedly they'd all caught on to the fact that the computer responded to simple one word commands. They were wearing the crews' clothes just as Torin was.

She'd be willing to bet, though, that there was dirty laundry piled to ceiling in the facilities.

Contrary to her expectations—when she'd given it any thought, which she actually hadn't given much to—Joel didn't greet her or Torin with a surly look the following morning. He looked pensive, as if he was wavering between elation and irritation, but he barely glanced in their direction when they emerged from the corridor connecting the crew quarters with the main living area.

William didn't glance at her all. He was staring morosely into the beverage he had cupped between his big hands.

Guilt nipped at her, but she shrugged it off. She was too happy to allow anything to dull it, refusing even to allow the shadows lingering in the back of her mind to disturb her. She'd spent the night in Torin's arms, felt his passion and the warmth of his affection. She would face his leaving when she had to and not before.

She knew he would, knew he had to, knew there would not be any such thing as a lasting happiness, but she wanted to hug it to her and enjoy it while she could.

"I can not fathom how anyone could subsist on this stuff," one of Joel's men muttered.

"It is rather tasteless," Alexis agreed cheerfully, helping herself to one of the packets that had been piled on the charred table where she and her crew had eaten. "The important thing, though, is that it contains just the right balance of vitamins, minerals, and nutrients to keep one at the peak of health."

"The important thing," William drawled, "is that it lacks taste."

Alexis chuckled and settled on the bench.

Torin took the bench across from her, smiling faintly as he watched her. "I wonder what has my little bird chirping this morning?" he asked teasingly.

Joel got up from the bench abruptly, stretched, slugged Torin across the jaw hard enough to knock him from the bench, and strode briskly out of the habitat. "I believe I'll explore a little bit."

Alexis gasped in horror, leaping to her feet to stare down at Torin. Torin pushed himself up to a sitting position, massaging his jaw with one hand as he glared at Joel's retreating back.

"Are you alright?"

Shrugging, Torin got to his feet. "I think a mosquito bit me."

Several of his men uttered snorting laughs then pretended to cough.

"Big mosquito," William drawled, pushing himself to his feet. "Damned near carried you off."

Joel's men grinned. Getting up, they headed out of the habitat. To Alexis' surprise, Torin's men quickly finished their rations and got up and left, as well.

Torin picked up one of the packets, examined it and set it aside.

Alexis couldn't help but notice he kept glancing toward the door, though. "Why don't we go out and see what they're up to?" she suggested.

Torin leapt up so fast it was impossible not to feel a little slighted. Inwardly, she shrugged. They were like little boys with a new toy!

A mixture of horror and amusement filled her when she stepped outside the habitat and looked around. The men had used the pulse rifles to cut down the jungle for a good twenty feet beyond the compound. She clapped a hand over her mouth as she watched them strutting up and down, proudly examining their handiwork. It took a strenuous effort not to laugh.

Until she discovered they'd left the grav-field off all night. That killed her amusement instantly and she stomped through the opening, plunked her hands on her hips, and glared at them. Catching the expression of outrage, Joel sent her a questioning look, glanced at the post beside her and then shrugged. "I left some men on guard."

Torin sauntered over to Joel and dropped a hand to his shoulder.

Joel sent him a narrow eyed glare. "You pissed?"

Torin shrugged, and then drove his balled fist so deeply into Joel's belly it lifted him off the ground. "No."

He waited until Joel straightened. They eyed one another warily for several moments, then finally turned and walked off, Joel rubbing his belly and Torin flexing his hand.

As horrified as Alexis was, she felt amusement well inside again when she saw how hard they were trying to pretend it didn't hurt either one of them. Covering her smile with her hand, she turned and went back into the compound. She really didn't have any interest in 'exploring', which Joel had mentioned he intended, or in watching them 'practice' with their new rifles. Besides, once she'd thought about the laundry she couldn't resist the urge to check. They'd be returning through the portal soon, and the men would want to take their own clothes with them.

She was standing in the facilities, allowing her mind to wander at random while she waited for the cleaner to finish the first load of laundry when she looked up to find Joel watching her.

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously.

"Waiting for the laundry to finish so I can do another load."

Surprise crossed his featured briefly, and he stepped inside and turned to study the cleaning machine. "That's what that is?"

The machine chimed to announce the finish of the cycle and Alexis opened it and began to pull the clothes out piece by piece, carefully folding them to prevent them from wrinkling too badly. Joel seemed fascinated by the process, but somehow she didn't think that was what had brought him.

She suspected it might be rec, but decided not to ask. She supposed she should've given the fact that he hadn't, that she was aware of, had rec since the night he and Torin had tried to kill each other, but she was a little sore from all the recreation with Torin the

night before. "Did you want to talk to me about something?" she asked tentatively when she'd finished folding the clean clothes and scooped another armload to drop them in the machine.

"I want to stay a few more days and check this place out."

Uneasiness moved through her. "Aren't you worried about the conspiracy between Torin's brother and Doom?"

"I am," he said grimly. "That's the main reason I'd like to check the place out. We might need a contingency plan if we get overrun. The rifles will give us a hell of an edge, but even with them, if Shae joins forces with the bear clan, we could be seriously outnumbered. That depends, of course, on just how many of the lion clan are backing him—not a strong enough force, obviously, for him to feel confident that he can overthrow Torin, but added to the force of the bear clan . . ."

Alexis paused and looked at him worriedly, uncertain if she was more worried about Torin or her own clan. "You think it might be that bad?"

He uttered an irritated sound and moved toward her, pulling her into his arms. "I'm not trying to scare you, Baby. I'm just saying I like to have a back up plan. We've got the badlands on one side, the wastelands on another and the bear clan breathing down our necks. I didn't like what Torin had to say about the tiger clan either. Maybe it's nothing, but Torin's gut instincts told him there was something afoot there, and I'm thinking he has pretty good instincts—except I'm not sure the threat was directed at his clan."

Alexis pulled away to look up at him. "Besides, you like this place."

He shrugged. "What I've seen, yes."

She looked away.

"He has to go back to his people, Baby. You know that. He's facing a war within the clan. He can't just ignore that."

"I know."

He cupped her chin, tipping it up to make her look at him. "A leader has to consider what's best for the majority."

She knew he wasn't just talking about Torin anymore. She supposed she could understand why he might think this place was better for the clan. They wouldn't have the other clans making war on them. They could live in relative peace and try to focus on prospering instead of just surviving.

But they would be giving up what they had to come here to start from nothing. That wasn't going to be an easy thing for them to do. Here they might be free of the wars of the beast men, but they would be at the mercy of an alien nature. It was similar to Earth in many ways, and different in just as many. None of the plants and animals were same—what would they do for food? Beyond the habitat, which had only been designed for her and her crewmembers, and which was overcrowded even with the few men they'd brought, there was no shelter. There would be germs and diseases none of them knew anything about or had resistance to.

"I can't make a decision without knowing what we'd be dealing with here. I need a few days."

Alexis nodded. "I'll check the power supply. It shouldn't be a problem, but it needs to be checked."

His gaze flickered over her face, settling on her lips. She held her breath, wondering if he would kiss her, half hoping he would. It wasn't that she wasn't still angry about what

he'd done, but she didn't believe he'd intended to hurt her—just Torin—which was mostly why she was still mad. She wanted to make up with him, though. She did love him. She didn't want to make him unhappy.

His hand dropped away from her chin and she was partly relieved, partly sad.

"I ruined it, didn't I?" he said.

Alexis' throat tightened with empathy. She closed the distance between them, encircling his waist with her arms. "You didn't, Joel. Don't think that."

"I don't think I know how to share," he said, anger creeping into his voice.

Sighing, she released him and stepped back. "I don't think you do, but I can't help loving you both—as difficult as *both* of you are."

"And William," he said tightly.

She sent him a sharp look but struggled with her anger. "I can't help being the way I am anymore than you can help being the way you are. I accept both the good and the bad in you, Joel, because I love you. When you love someone you have to learn to accept, or be willing to *try* to accept, the things you don't especially like, too, because they can't change. They might be willing to pretend to change the things you don't like, but they can't *really* change." She shook her head at him. "If I could fall out of love as easily as I can love, *then* would it be worth having? If you knew I could stop loving you just as quickly and easily as I'd learned to love you, how would that make you feel?"

"About the same as I feel right now, I expect," he said tightly, turning away from her and stalking from the room.

"That went well," she muttered.

It wasn't that she hadn't tried to see his side of the situation. She'd tried very hard to imagine how she would feel if their roles were reversed and she'd discovered she didn't feel a great deal different about it than she did about her situation with Torin—just grieved that she couldn't be with him. She didn't think she was a jealous natured person. She hadn't spent her time away from Torin imagining him with someone else—as Gerda and so many of the women she'd met seemed to imagine their men slipping off to be with another woman.

She'd *assumed* he would be—because men *needed* rec and they would seek a source—and she knew if Joel couldn't come to accept the way she felt, he would find a woman who would care only for him and no one else.

And she still felt sadder than angry about it. Maybe if she *saw* him with another woman, she would feel jealous as Joel did. Maybe that was the problem, she just didn't have enough imagination to visualize it.

She certainly hadn't visualized Robert with another woman. It had come as a complete shock to discover that he'd deceived her, professed to care about her and then discarded her and moved on to another woman.

She hadn't tried to deceive either Joel or Torin, though, and she certainly hadn't tried to deceive William. As hard as she'd tried to hide how crushed she was when Torin had left—from pride, not the intent to deceive—Joel was no idiot. He had to have seen it, had to know what it meant. He'd all but admitted as much.

She didn't know what more she could give him. She'd given him her affection and freely given her passion to him any time he wanted rec. What else? What was it that he wanted that she had failed to give him?

Exclusivity? And if she could do that, just stop caring about Torin and snub William's

affections, would he offer her the same?

She was too much of a realist to believe that, too much of a scientist. She understood the workings of the male of species too well to believe he would. He might want to. He might try very hard to, but he would be struggling against his natural instincts all the time, which would not only make him resentful, in time, but eventually, inevitably, he would find himself in a situation where he wouldn't be able to fight his instincts and he would give in to them.

She wasn't demanding that he give her exclusive rights. She only wanted the love he was willing to give, and the passion he was able to feel—and the freedom to do as she pleased otherwise.

There was no way to resolve it, she realized. He already *knew* she loved Torin. She would still love him if he was no where around and Joel would know she did, and obviously it wasn't something he could live with.

Which meant, she realized, that she would love both and have neither.

Thrusting that thought aside, she finished the laundry and went out to check the portal generator. Two men had taken up position as sentries at the portal. Two others loitered near the break in the grav-field, staring out at the jungle. Otherwise, the camp was empty as far as she could see.

The discovery unsettled her. She knew why Joel and his men were gone, but why had Torin taken his men out?

To avoid her because he knew Joel had been in to talk to her?

Or was it only because he was as intrigued with the new world as Joel?

She was having joy of this business, she thought miserably, running about trying to placate first one and then another and succeeding in doing nothing but making everyone angry with her. It would be better for her if she refused to have anything to do with any of them. There was no peace or joy to be had beyond brief moments of it. However glorious those were, otherwise, she was in constant turmoil and misery.

The gauges on the generator brought her out of her abstraction. The crystal they had brought with them to power it had not been a very sizeable one to begin with. No one had foreseen any need to make space on the ship for one that would be for long term usage. It had been anticipated that the crewmembers would set up the portal with the initial crystal, test it, and then, once the portals were brought online for permanent use, a more substantial one would be transported over to the new planet.

The deterioration was alarming. Casting her mind back, she tried to remember what the decay rate had been when they'd left. She hadn't been assigned to the generator, however. Dr. Long had, and she couldn't remember anything specific, nothing beyond the fact that they'd grown worried they wouldn't be able to light up the system long enough to bring everyone over that would need to come for start up. The initial boost used up the most energy and they'd wasted a good bit, she knew, trying over and over to bring the system to full power and failing.

She hadn't considered before that the portal might have been open since they'd crossed over, but it didn't take much thought to realize that couldn't be the case. It had been months. There was no way Sloan would have left it running all that time.

Unless he and Pitts had tried to come after them?

She dismissed that. If Sloan and Pitts had made it through, they would've caught up with her and the others.

If they'd tried it and not made it, it seemed likely that the generator would've overheated and shut down the system automatically. The fact that it was on at the time she'd brought Joel and Torin and the others through had to mean what she'd thought at the time—It was a recent event, at least fairly recent.

For all she knew, Sloan and Pitts had passed back and forth any number of times—maybe searching for her and the others.

It didn't matter except that it made her uneasy that they might still be lurking about—on old Earth. Obviously, they weren't here or they would've returned by now.

Unless they'd returned and discovered that the camp was occupied by a larger force?

She shook the thoughts off. That mystery might remain one, or eventually be answered, but it didn't have any bearing on the current situation with the generator. The temporary crystal was deteriorating and couldn't be relied on much longer—months, maybe less.

They certainly weren't going to get one from mission control now.

After debating whether to shut it down to conserve what they had or to leave it, she finally decided to leave it. Joel had said a few days. It wouldn't use any more, she didn't think, left on for a few days that it would turn it off and then have to bring it to full power again in a few days time.

She would have to tell Joel, though, that they couldn't simply leave it on and expect to be able to utilize it weeks or months down the road as his 'contingency' plan. She wasn't even certain it would safely remove all of the clan and their belongings if Joel decided what he'd suggested—to evacuate everyone to the new world. She hadn't seen any of the other compounds, but if they were the size of the one where she'd lived, or even close, that would mean transporting thousands of people. That alone could drain the crystal and if they even managed to get everyone over, they'd never be able to go back.

Which meant she'd never see Torin again.

Ever.

The thought alone was enough to crush the air from her lungs until it was a struggle to breathe.

She didn't think she could live and stand it, but if she stayed on old Earth just to be near Torin—and she knew that would be all she could expect, to be near him, not with him—she would never see William or Joel again.

And that was just as painful to contemplate.

So much for thinking she could simply turn her back on them and walk away.

Leaving the portal, she prowled the compound restlessly, trying to decide what she would do if Joel did decide to bring everyone over. She didn't delude herself with the thought that she would be an influence on him. He had made it clear that he was trying to decide what would be best for the majority.

She'd been wrestling with the dilemma most of the day, alternately pacing the compound to watch for any sign of the men coming back, and trying to be productive by inventorying the store room, when the solution suddenly presented itself.

There were crystals on the Plymouth.

She didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before, especially when she and her fellow crewmembers had scavenged so much off of the Plymouth for their needs. Doubt shook her almost immediately. If she took one, the Plymouth would never fly again. With one, it could maintain orbit, maybe for years, but it wouldn't have the fuel for an outbound trip—not enough even to contemplate reaching the alternate world where everyone else was

—or at least where she assumed they'd gone.

And there was some chance, now, that Mel, Linda, and Dr. Long were all still alive. If she took it, she would be making their decision for them, depriving them of even the possibility of reaching the others.

She could borrow it, though, she decided. Even if they demanded it back so that they could take the Plymouth and search for the others, it was only right to use it for those who'd been left behind if they wanted to come to New Earth!

It dawned on her abruptly that she'd lost all interest in finding the others herself. She didn't know when that had come about, when she'd come to accept life in terms of what she'd known the past months, but she realized she had. She didn't want to leave the people she'd come to know, and certainly not the ones she loved, to search for the civilization she'd lost. Her heart might be divided here, but it was here.

When the sun passed its zenith and there was still no sign of the men, she decided to handle the task herself. They didn't have the technical knowledge to help her anyway and she was perfectly capable of handling it by herself. She debated, briefly, over whether or not to leave word, just in case they returned before she did, but finally decided it just wouldn't be right to go and not say anything. They would worry if they found her gone.

More importantly, they'd probably be really, really angry.

Having made up her mind, she looked around and finally approached the lion man she knew was Torin's second in command. "There's a problem with the crystal," she told him. "It's deteriorated a lot faster than I'd anticipated. I'm going to the ship to pick up another one."

He stared at her with a mixture of confusion, wariness, and irritation. "Lord Torin said you weren't to leave the compound without escort."

Alexis stared at him a moment, struggling with her temper, and finally merely whirled on her heel and stalked away. How *dare* the man order her around as if she was one of his soldiers? Or one of his clansmen? He wasn't *her* lord!

Returning to the habitat, she marched down the corridor to the transport room, moved to the portal and crossed her arms over her chest angrily. "Computer! Transport me to the Plymouth."

"Transport initialized. Hold for power up."

Alexis tapped her foot impatiently.

"Power at full," the computer announced. "Transporting in ten, nine ...."

Berl stuck his head in at the door just as the transport engaged. The last thing Alexis saw as she was particlized was the stunned look on his face.

She smiled smugly when she arrived in the transport room of the Plymouth. She didn't care if Torin *was* angry when he found out what she'd done. She'd tell him she wasn't going to take orders from him! Joel and Torin *both* were just too damned used to telling everybody what to do! They were going to have to learn that she tried to please because she *wanted* to, she thought indignantly as she stomped out of the transport room, *not* because they said she must do something—or not!

It was bad enough they treated her like a witless child on their world. She was in her element, now, however, and she knew what she was doing!

Sloan stepped from the control room just as she turned the corridor headed toward it. She froze in shock.

He froze in shock.

She recovered first. Whirling, she raced down the corridor at a full out run. She was running so fast she skidded past the transport room before she could stop herself. By the time she'd braked to a halt to try to gain the door, she discovered Sloan had closed the distance between them by an uncomfortable margin.

She didn't have time to reach the portal and initialize, she realized in dismay, whirling before she'd even completed the thought and racing down the corridor in search of a place to hide.

## Chapter Twenty Nine

“Al—lex, where are you?”

Alexis shivered as Sloan’s singsong voice filtered through to her over the ship’s com speakers. She’d managed to elude him—for now—but she couldn’t escape unless she could get back to the transport, and she had a bad feeling he was going to be guarding it now that he’d tired of hunting her.

Space dementia, she thought, shivering again as she recalled his unkempt appearance and the wild look in his eyes as he’d chased her. Why hadn’t they realized that before? They should’ve known his erratic behavior was a sign of serious mental illness, not just a burst of aggression brought on by the stress of finding themselves on an alien planet with no where to go—no home to go back to.

Dr. O’Neal and Dr. Chung might still be alive if they’d diagnosed it. Dr. O’Neal would’ve known better than to challenge him.

Not that that mattered now—or helped her.

She couldn’t just wait him out either, she realized in dismay.

Torin and Joel would try something crazy—like trying to come after her. Assuming they didn’t kill themselves trying to figure out how to use the transport and made it to the ship, Sloan would be waiting and he was armed.

She couldn’t just wait to be rescued! She’d gotten herself into this mess. She had to get herself out of it.

“Think, Alexis!” she muttered to herself, trying to jog her panicked mind into working on the problem.

There had to be something she could do.

There were weapons on the ship, but even if she could get to one, she wasn’t confident that she could take Sloan out. She still had only the vaguest idea of how to use one of the pulse rifles. If she missed him and blew a hole in the hull of the ship, they’d both be dead.

At that very moment, he was probably setting a death trap on the door to the transport room as he had on the store room in the habitat.

And Torin and Joel could be caught in it if they tried to rescue her.

Not but what they wouldn’t all be dead anyway if Sloan was crazy enough to try it. The fire would suck up all of the oxygen even if it didn’t blow up the ship.

She pushed thoughts of Torin and Joel from her mind. It wasn’t helping, and she had enough to worry about without imagining scenarios that hadn’t, and probably wouldn’t, happen.

It dawned on her after a while that she hadn’t seen the shuttle when she’d arrived at the habitat. She hadn’t even noted the absence of the small craft they’d used to transport the heavy equipment to the surface. The ship to surface transporter wasn’t designed for moving anything as big as the parts they’d had to move. Bringing the shuttle had solved the question of whether or not to enlarge the transporter and been deemed the more desirable solution because it could also serve as an escape pod.

She wasn't certain she could pilot it, but it seemed like a good time to try.

If Sloan hadn't thought of it, or thought she hadn't, maybe she could get to it and seal the door against him long enough to take off. She decided it was worth a try.

Rising from her cramped position, she held her breath and listened for any sound that might indicate Sloan was roaming the corridors in search of her again. When she heard nothing, she opened the door to the store room she'd taken refuge in and peered down the corridor in both directions.

After mentally reviewing the layout of the ship and her position, she turned to her left. The heels of her boots clicked against the floor, echoing loudly around her, and she froze, listening again. Easing out the breath she'd held, she bent down and pulled her boots off, holding one in each hand as she sprinted down the corridor barefooted. The floor was icy and she could feel numbness creeping up the soles of her feet to her calves.

The entire ship was freezing cold, she realized abruptly.

Sloan must have turned off the heating, she thought, feeling her heart begin to pound with fear as it dawned on her that he was still rational enough to realize if he lowered the temperature enough she'd go into hibernation.

He would, too, unless he'd thought to grab a suit to protect himself from the cold.

She ran faster, hoping to generate enough body heat to stave off what she'd realized was inevitable unless she could get her hands on a suit. Changing objectives abruptly, she headed for the cargo bay. There would be suits there. Sloan might also be there, anticipating that move, but she didn't have a choice.

"Al—lex! Alex! Come out, come out where ever you are!"

Alexis' heart thudded painfully at the call. It still heartened her. He would have to be near a main com unit to broadcast ship wide.

But there was one in the cargo bay, she realized in dismay.

Her fingers were so numb by the time she reached the door to the bay she had to command her fingers to release her hold on her boot to let it go and she couldn't straighten her fingers at all. It took three tries before she managed to punch in the code to release the door.

She peered inside cautiously, glanced quickly around the dim room and darted across it for the locker room. After taking several quick surveys through the glass window in the door, she decided it was empty and dashed inside. Her teeth were chattering as she grabbed a suit and began wrestling to get into it. Darting glances toward the door, she fought the closure with the stiffness of her fingers and finally managed to close it and seal the boots and gauntlets to the suit. She began to feel warmer almost immediately, or at least not nearly as cold, from the insulating factor of the material the lightweight suit was made of. Grabbing a heating and oxygen unit, she secured it at her waist, connected it to her suit and switched it on, then reached for a helmet.

She paused as she did so, staring at the personal propulsion unit beside it. She didn't need it if she could get to the shuttle by way of the corridors, but she might *have* to take a space walk. Yielding to impulse, she grabbed the unit, shrugged her arms into the harness and strapped the belt securely around her waist.

If Sloan was guarding the passage to the shuttle, she could take a space walk, use the jet pack to maneuver over to the shuttle and get in through the escape hatch, she decided.

He wasn't guarding the passage, she discovered. He'd blocked it, piling a mound of furniture and equipment at the entrance. Fear gained the upper hand for several moments.

It almost seemed that he was trying to herd her somewhere—into a trap?

But did the blockage mean he was waiting at the transport room? Or in the shuttle?

She wavered indecisively for several moments and finally decided he must have blocked the passageway to make sure she didn't try to get to the shuttle, to drive her back to the transport room.

It made sense, she thought, but she wasn't dealing with a rational person, she reminded herself.

Shaking that fear off, certain he must be trying to force her to attempt the transport, she headed back to the cargo bay. Again, she paused to search the bay area and, when she was fairly certain it was empty, she raced across it to the airlock. Once she was inside, she focused on calming her breathing, checking the air gauge on her unit.

She had plenty of air, she assured herself—if she just didn't burn it up by breathing too fast.

She was calmer by the time the airlock opened. Poised on the edge of the airlock, she tested the jetpack, extending the wing like device fully so that she could use the small jets at the tips of each to maneuver. Sucking in a last, deep, calming breath, she leapt from the ship and used the mental controls in the helmet to fire the small rockets as needed to circle the craft. Relief surged through her as she rounded the belly of the ship and saw the shuttle. She didn't realize until that moment that she'd more than half feared Sloan had sabotaged the transport and taken the shuttle, thinking he'd left her to freeze until he decided what he wanted to do with her.

Reaching the shuttle, she used her hands to 'crawl' over it to get to the airlock instead of the jet pack. The door opened with a sucking noise when she depressed the manual release and she stepped inside—and came face to face with Sloan, who was grinning at her through the glass that separated her from the interior of the ship.

Sucking in a sharp breath, she whirled as fast as she could and clawed her way to the closing airlock door, everything inside of screaming at the nightmarish slowness of trying to run in zero gravity. The closing door of the airlock caught one of the arms of her jet pack as she exited, crushing the small jet at the tip and breaking it off.

She should've closed the wings before she entered, she realized belatedly, wondering how much maneuverability she'd lost with the loss of one her jets. She didn't have time to think about it. She had to get back to the Plymouth's airlock before Sloan beat her to it and locked her out. Bending her knees, she pushed off of the shuttle and switched on the jets. As she rounded the belly of the ship she felt the blast of the shuttle's engines as they roared to life.

Panic went through her.

If he'd taken the shuttle did that mean he *had* sabotaged the transport, trapping her on the ship?

She struggled to put the thought from her mind. She'd find out, she told herself, once she got back on board.

At least she didn't have to worry about Sloan racing through the ship to lock her out of the airlock or grab her when she tried to get in.

A series of pulses blasted past her as she was in sight of the airlock. For several moments, she merely stared at the fiery tail of the blasts blankly. Micro meteors?

She twisted to look behind her and saw the shuttle bearing down her.

“Oh my god!”

Flipping the jets to their highest speed, she zipped past the airlock, up the side the ship and over the top. She'd made the second circuit before it dawned her that, even if she managed to beat Sloan to the airlock, there was nothing to stop him from blowing her and the Plymouth up. She glanced toward the planet far below and changed directions abruptly.

At least she was a smaller target and the jet pack gave her more maneuverability than the shuttle—she hoped.

The big question was would the jets slow her descent enough to keep her from splattering and creating an Alexis sized crater?

\* \* \* \*

“Not that I don't share your sentiments,” William drawled, “but I don't think choking Berl is gonna get her back.”

Torin released Berl abruptly and the man collapsed on the dirt, struggling to drag air past his bruised throat. “I told you not to allow her to leave the compound!” he snarled. “What part of that order didn't you understand?”

“She didn't leave, my lord,” Berl managed to choke out. “At least not through the gate. I didn't know there was a portal inside the habitat. I didn't know what she meant by the ‘ship’.”

“How long has she been gone?”

“It was just past noon when she left, mayhap an hour.”

William, Joel, and Torin lifted their heads almost in sync to study the position of the sun, which was now close to the horizon. Before they could return their attention to Berl a loud explosion of sound drew their eyes. A bright speck, trailing fire, appeared far up in the sky. As they stared at it, a far larger speck appeared behind it and on the heels another explosion.

“What is that?” Joel murmured.

“Shooting star?” one of the men speculated.

Joel glanced at the man. “It's still daylight. I've never seen one in the daylight, have you?”

“It's not dropping in a straight line—neither one of them,” Torin commented. He wasn't certain why, but uneasiness stirred inside of him.

They continued to watch the objects for several minutes. Slowly, the two specks, barely discernible at first, began to take form, appear larger and they could see that it wasn't just a trick of the distance that made them appear to be flying rather than simply dropping from the sky.

“The big one is chasing the little one,” one of the men said as that dawned on everyone about the same time. “Does that ... does that look like pulses?”

“It's flying machines,” Joel said abruptly. “Ships.”

Joel, William, and Torin all exchanged a look of sudden comprehension.

“She said she was going to the ship,” Berl muttered. “She was talking about a space ship?”

“If it was her, who would be chasing her?” William asked, uneasiness threading his

voice.

"I don't know—Sloan and Pitts?" Torin said grimly, dragging his gaze from the two objects and scanning their surroundings through narrowed eyes. "The pulse rifles don't have that kind range do they?"

Joel looked at him, but his gaze was focused inward. "I don't think so, but they're coming closer."

"Could she see us from that far? Or at least the compound, you reckon?" William asked.

"My guess would be no. They must have some sort of navigation, though," Torin said. He turned to survey the men. "Who's the best marksmen?"

"Joel—William," half the men answered at once.

Joel turned and looked at the men. "You, you, and you—take up positions on top of the habitat and start firing in that direction. We're going to assume Alexis is the one in the lead—so watch it! We can gauge the range and, hopefully, at the same time, give her something to see to find us. If she'll bring them to us, we'll shoot bastards down."

"If we give ourselves away whoever it is might just turn around and leave," one of the men pointed out.

"That'll be alright, too," Joel said grimly. "I'm mostly interested in making sure the son-of-a-bitch doesn't shoot her. When we get her down safely—*Then* we'll track the bastard down and kill him."

The men Joel had designated ran to the habitat and began climbing.

"I'd feel better if the grav-field was down," Joel muttered.

Torin scanned the posts surrounding the compound. "My guess is it won't go any higher than the posts—I guess we'll find out when the men start shooting."

"I'm going to find some high ground and see just how far this rifle can shoot and how accurate it is."

Torin nodded. "I'm thinking that tree right there—it's the tallest and there isn't a lot of foliage to block the view."

Joel turned to survey tree in question, his lips tightening grimly. "I can give it a try."

"I'll come with you."

He nodded and the two of them sprinted toward the tree.

After watching them for several moments, William glanced at Berl. "I'm takin' that tree over there," he said, pointing. "I could use a climbing partner. You game?"

Berl studied him for a moment and nodded and they headed for the tree William had chosen.

Joel and Torin were both winded by the time they managed to reach the upper canopy.

Joel hated to admit it, but he knew he probably wouldn't have reached it at all if Torin hadn't been there to help him make the nearly one hundred foot climb, a good bit of which would've involved shimmying up the trunk itself since many of the branches were too far apart to reach from one to the next. Torin had led the way, reaching down a hand to draw Joel up each time they reached such a point. As soon as he'd settled he scanned the ground, searching for a target to test the range and accuracy of his weapon. The landmarks on the ground made it easier to judge distance.

He tried not to think about the fact that he wouldn't have landmarks in the sky. He wouldn't be able to do anything but guess the distance, but he figured, once he was sure of the accuracy he could try.

He also tried not to think about the possibility that it might be too late to help Alexis by

the time the ship came within his range—if it came within range.

“Joel?” Torin said in a strange voice, distracting him just as he lifted the rifle to focus on the test target he’d chosen.

He lowered the rifle and turned to look at Torin, trying to ignore the painful knocking of his heart in his chest. “What?”

Torin couldn’t seem to drag his gaze from whatever it was he was watching and Joel followed the direction, trying to see whatever it was he saw. He discovered he couldn’t make out much more than he had before although he could tell that both objects were a great deal closer.

“She isn’t in a ship,” Torin said hoarsely, his voice filled with horror.

Joel looked at Torin sharply. “What the fuck do you mean she isn’t in a ship? What’s she in?”

“Nothing.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” Joel demanded, feeling coldness wash over him as his fear surged to the forefront.

“I see her,” Torin growled back at him. “I see *her*! She isn’t *in* a god damned thing.”

“She has to be!” Joel snarled furiously.

The two men exchanged a look of horror.

“She isn’t falling,” Torin said abruptly, turning to look again. “She isn’t falling.”

Joel swallowed sickly. “She could be gliding on the currents. It could be the wind making it look like she’s in control.”

Torin studied the distant objects for a moment. “She’s in a controlled fall,” he said more positively. “She’s using something. I can’t tell what it is, but I can see fire. I thought she was shooting back at the bastard that’s chasing her. But every time I see the lights, she moves in another direction. She’s *wearing* something that’s helping her to fly. It looks like ... almost like wings.”

Joel strained to see, but discovered it was useless. He could see, now that she was closer, that it was her, not a craft of any kind. He could make out the shape of her body, arms, torso, and legs, but only the general shape.

He couldn’t even be sure that it was Alexis, but he tamped that hope. He would’ve liked to be able to convince himself Alexis was in the ship, but the chances of it *not* being Alexis seemed remote.

“It’s got to be those bastards she was talking about—Sloan and Pitts,” Torin said.

“Doom has all the others.”

“As far as we know—not that I give a fuck. I’m going to blow the bastard to hell, whoever it is.”

Shifting, he tried to get in a comfortable position to support the rifle.

“You didn’t test it,” Torin pointed out.

Joel shook his head. “I don’t have to. This gun is more accurate than anything I’ve ever used. The only thing I don’t know is just how far it will shoot. And I don’t think she can wait. How long, you reckon, since we first noticed her? Twenty minutes at least. He’s gaining on her from what I can see. And either she’s getting tired or she doesn’t have as much control of whatever she’s using as she did.”

He sighted down the barrel, waited and then squeezed the trigger to shoot a single blast.

“Short,” Torin announced.

“How short?”

“Looked like maybe fifty feet. It’s hard to say from here.”

Another pulse shot through the air before Joel could shoot again and Torin cursed, whirling to catch the trajectory. “It’s William. Is he as good as you?”

“Better.”

“Good. I might not have to kill the bastard.”

Joel fired again. “How close?”

“You clipped the ship.”

“Now all I have to figure out is where to hit it,” Joel said grimly.

William fired again and they saw a trail of something spew out of the craft.

“Fuel, you think?” Torin said hopefully.

“Doubtful. Alex said they used those rocks.”

“Fuck!”

“Shit!” Joel agreed. “I don’t know what to aim for.”

“Just shoot the son-of-a-bitch!” Torin growled. “Pepper him. You’re bound to hit something he can’t live without.”

Joel and William were apparently in sync. They both began to fire rapidly—single fire, but one pulse after another. Abruptly, the craft veered away from Alexis and headed straight for them. “That’s it, you fucking coward!” Joel snarled. “Try shooting at somebody that can shoot back!”

As the craft loomed larger within their view and Joel saw that Alexis had dropped away from the thing and was well out of danger of catching a stray shot, he depressed the fire button and held it, strafing the craft from top to bottom and along the sides as it began to twist and dip, trying to avoid the pulses. William, further to the south of the craft, caught it in a crossfire.

The craft returned fire—but the primary focus seemed to be the men on the ground, all of whom immediately returned fire. Abruptly, the craft exploded in a fireball. Debris flew out in every direction, some of it raining down on the men in the compound, some flying through the air like bullets. One piece clipped a branch above Torin and Joel and branches and foliage rained down around them.

The men below were yelling excitedly.

Torin and Joel exchanged a brief glance of triumph and then scanned the sky for Alexis.

“There!” Torin yelled, pointing.

Joel turned, scanning the sky and finally spotted her heading toward them just above the level of the trees. Shaky with relief, he shouldered his weapon, scrubbing his shaking hands over his face. “If she’s alright, I’m going to beat the hell of her when I get my hands on her,” he growled.

He was shakier still by the time he and Torin managed to climb down again. Ruefully, he considered it a good thing he’d been focused on Alexis as he’d climbed up. Otherwise he would’ve been petrified at the height—as he was on the downward trek.

He had to stop for a moment to catch his breath and try to get his knees to stop shaking when he was finally on the ground. Torin, obviously unfazed by the climb up or down, strode quickly toward the compound. Dragging in a shaky breath, Joel willed his legs to work and followed him as fast as he could, casting worried glances up at the sky for any sign of Alexis since he’d lost sight of her when he’d left the advantage of the tree.

He saw her descending toward the group of men standing gaping up at her. His heart squeezed uncomfortably. She might be in control of that thing she was wearing, but she

looked like she was dropping way too damned fast to him. She landed about ten feet from the group of men—slammed into the dirt as if she'd jumped a considerable height. Her knees buckled on impact and she sprawled out on her back. Joel had reached the other men by that time. Shoving past them as she landed, he stopped short when she hit the dirt. She pushed herself upright after a moment, struggled with the thing covering her head, and finally pulled it off. She looked around at the men. "Alright, that wasn't fun. I don't think I'll do that again," she muttered, then her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell backwards.

## Chapter Thirty

William had one hip propped on one of the wine barrels when Alexis came in from her bath. She hesitated, her attention caught by his rapt interest in the strange looking thing he held tilted to catch the light from the lamp. It looked like a thick, rectangular slab of acrylic perhaps eight by five inches—it didn't quite fit in his hand but wasn't a lot larger.

The urge to approach him to see what it was warred with her doubts about her welcome.

He was angry with her—they all were.

She thought it was completely unreasonable. If it had occurred to her, at all, that Sloan would be in the ship, she certainly wouldn't have gone—not alone. She'd had no reason to think he might be, because it *defied* reason for him to have been there.

Of course he'd been completely irrational, but she hadn't known that either, and she still hadn't figured out why he was there, or what he'd done with Pitts.

Pitts hadn't been on the ship—they'd searched it thoroughly when they'd gone back up to get the crystal. Or rather, *she'd* gone for the crystal. Torin, Joel, and their men had gone to make damned sure Pitts wasn't still lurking around.

So, unless Sloan had done it hoping to set some sort of trap, Pitts must have been the one who'd turned the generator on and tried to escape through the portal. Maybe, like them, he'd finally figured out just how dangerous Sloan was and had taken the opportunity to slip away from Sloan while he was doing whatever it was he'd gone to the ship to do.

And maybe he had succeeded. He might even be one of those being held by Doom. She doubted it. She thought it was a lot more likely, if he'd managed to make it through the portal on the other end, that he'd died in the desert trying to cross it without supplies, or been taken by some of the beast people.

She didn't think she needed to be concerned, though. Sloan had been the real threat and he was dead.

And that hadn't appeased any of the men that she could tell. Fortunately, to her way of thinking, she'd been out cold long enough they'd had time to stop being enraged that she'd scared the hell of them and start to worry that she might actually be hurt.

It had been nothing short of a miracle that she'd managed to make it down *without* injury. The suit had been designed to withstand extreme temperatures, but she was sure the manufacturers hadn't anticipated anyone using *just* the suit to enter the atmosphere. She'd become a fireball long enough she'd begun to think she was going to look like some of William's trail rations by the time it went out. If that wasn't terrifying enough, she'd come in so fast she'd broken the sound barrier.

She hadn't had time to consider what it was going to be like to fall miles and miles and miles. If she had, she might have reconsidered. She might have decided to take her chances in the ship.

With Sloan right on her tail, doing his damndest to shoot her, she hadn't even

been able to focus on breaking her descent. Fortunately, the maneuvers she'd had to execute in trying to dodge Sloan's blasts had slowed her quite a bit.

And the landing had still been bone jarring. If she'd hit the ground any harder, she was pretty sure she would have had broken bones. She was still surprised she hadn't broken anything.

She'd sure as hell broke up their little party, though. No one had had nearly much enthusiasm for exploring as they'd had before. William and Torin had been ready to return right then. She didn't think Joel would've objected except he was determined, grimly, to finish exploring the area around the habitat, if for no other reason than to make sure Pitts wasn't still lurking about.

If not for her little adventure, she felt sure she would've had her hands full convincing them to leave inside of a week. Afterwards, she'd had to argue with them to get them to stay long enough to get the crystal and get it installed.

They'd gone hunting the last day and dragged back some huge, horrible thing—mammalian, she thought, and from what she'd heard them say, some sort of vegetation eating herd animal.

They thought it was edible.

She hoped it was, because Joel had taken it and three of his men, parting company with them almost as soon as they left mission control and heading for the nearest compound. Torin and his men had accompanied her and William and the others to the main compound and continued on their way without even stopping to rest for the night.

Or saying goodbye.

None of them had spoken more than half dozen words with her since the 'great sky dive'—which all of the other men had been both excited and impressed with.

She actually thought Torin, Joel, and William might not have been quite as mad about it if all the others hadn't been so impressed. As it was, that just seemed to inflame their tempers even more.

She'd just decided against testing her welcome when William looked up from the thing he was studying.

"I thought you might want to see this," he said, setting it carefully on the table that held the lamp.

She *was* intrigued. She was more interested, though, in what seemed to be a peace offering.

"What is it?" she asked curiously, moving toward him.

He shrugged. "Have a look for yourself."

She saw as she came closer that the acrylic wasn't clear as she'd first thought. Something was embedded in it. The light was behind it, though, and it wasn't until she'd picked it up that she saw it was an image. Glancing at William, she tipped it to catch the light.

The piece was old--ancient, in fact—the once crisp edges of the thick acrylic rounded from years of rubbing, the corners slightly chipped, the surface scarred by fine scratches that made it difficult to really see the image inside clearly.

Her heart skipped several beats when she saw what it was—a lasergraph taken of the crew of the U.E. Plymouth the day they departed. It had been taken on the podium where they'd gone to bid their farewells in a public address. They'd been captured in a 'victory' pose, with one arm uplifted, frozen smiles upon their faces.

It brought back a flood of memories—both images and emotions. She'd been almost as petrified by the attention as she was by the knowledge of imminent departure, she remembered. Thousands had gathered to listen to the departure speeches. She could still remember how she'd quaked inside as she stared out over the sea of faces, heard the low roar of thousands of voices that swelled each time someone stepped up to the podium until it was almost deafening. The media had been in full force, as well.

She'd prepared her own little speech and she was praying she wouldn't have to deliver it, that everyone else would speak so long that mission control would alert them that they'd run out of time, cut it short.

She'd been so relieved when they'd done just that and she'd been spared the embarrassment of having to recite the silly little speech that would've been her contribution to posterity.

She jumped when William moved up behind her, sliding an arm around her waist and drawing her back against his length.

“Did they tell you which one was your grandfather?”

“The skinny fella on the end—next to you—that looks like he swallowed a lemon,” he acknowledged. “Good lookin' fella, though.”

Alexis smiled, setting the lasergraph carefully on the table again. “Not nearly as handsome as his great grandson.”

“He had two when he left—grandsons.”

Alexis tipped her head to look back at him in surprise. “Did he?”

She frowned, trying to recall if she'd ever heard him talk about his family. She couldn't. She supposed that was why she'd been so surprised to discover William was his descendent—she hadn't even known Dr. Long was married. “He left a family behind,” she said, abruptly realizing that he'd done so, knowing he'd never see them again.

Had it been a great sacrifice? Or had he just been so wrapped up in his career that he hadn't spared them a thought?

“It was in his speech,” she remembered suddenly, frowning as she tried to remember the exact words. They eluded her. She'd been too unnerved by all the attention to be aware of much besides the quaking fear inside of her. “Something about hoping his sacrifice in leaving those he loved would secure a future for his grandsons.”

William eased his hold on her waist and slipped his hands upward to cup her breasts in his palms, lifting and squeezing them gently. Warmth fluttered in her belly. Her breath caught as he dipped his head and nuzzled the side of her neck.

“You are the most amazin' woman, Alexis Conyers,” he murmured, plucking lightly at her earlobe with the edge of his teeth. “An' the amazin' part of that is that you don't even seem to know it.”

Alexis shivered with the acute sensations that skittered along her neck and raced through her at his touch, the feel his warm breath against the sensitive flesh of her ear and neck. Her nipples puckered in reaction, pressing against his palms through the thin fabric of her gown as if demanding attention.

It caught his attention. He ceased to massage her breasts and began to pluck at the engorged tips instead, sending jolts of electric current spiraling downward from her breasts to her womb, creating a spreading warmth as blood shot from her wildly palpating heart to collect in her sex until she could feel the blood pulsing there in aching

anticipation.

"You think so?" she asked mindlessly, more focused on the feel of his lips as he brushed them along the side of her neck than on what he'd said, or what she'd said in response.

"Ummhmm," he murmured absently, nipping a row of light bites from the juncture of her neck and shoulder upward to her ear.

A harder quake rattled her as he opened his mouth over her ear, sucking lightly and then tracing the swirls with his tongue, his rapid breaths loud in her ear. Her knees turned to water. Her ragged, panting breaths began to rival his.

Abandoning his hold on one of her breasts, he skimmed that hand downward to cup her mound, holding her as he curled his hips, pressing his erection against her buttocks. The heated moisture that had gathered in her sex seeped along her channel, dampened her nether lips as he stroked them through her gown.

"Spread those pretty thighs for me, Darlin'," he murmured as he lifted his mouth from her ear.

Her throat closed as tightly as if a hand had suddenly seized it, squeezing. Faint with the heated fog curling in her mind, with the struggle to drag air into her lungs, she shifted her legs apart to accommodate his hand.

He stroked his hand between her legs, but it was almost more frustrating than pleasurable with the bunched fabric of her gown between her and his calloused palm. It must have bothered him, too. After only a moment, he withdrew his hand and grasped the fabric, bunching it, lifting it. She helped him, struggling between the urge to pull away long enough to discard the gown altogether and the reluctance to risk breaking the spell he'd woven around her.

A jolt traveled through her as the warm roughness of his palm settled on her thigh and glided upward. He slipped it between her thighs when he reached the juncture of her legs, cupping her sex for a moment and then stroking her nether lips with one thick digit. Sucking in a sharp breath, she held it in anticipation as she shifted her legs wider for his access.

A heady wave of heat rolled through her as he parted the outer lips of her sex and lightly stroked the tender inner petals, tracing them lightly until he found the vulnerable blossom at the apex. Her flesh erupted in a rash of exquisite sensation as he rolled it beneath the pad of his finger. Dizzy, she reached blindly for support and caught the edge of the table in front of her. Her legs threatened to buckle as he continued to stroke the bud.

"So soft," he murmured, nuzzling his face beneath her hair and catching at the sensitive skin with his lips, "like a little rosebud."

She gasped, shivered, felt as if the skin all over her body had drawn up tightly, making it so keenly sensitized that the hot puffs of his breath against her skin were almost as pleasurable as the pluck of his lips. He slipped his hand back along the fragile petals after a moment, stroking them, gathering the creamy moisture of her want on his fingertip.

"This for me, baby?"

She nodded dizzily, sucking in a sharp breath as he found the mouth of her sex and pressed his finger inside of her, exploring the warm, moist channel.

"Darlin'." His voice was hoarse, the word a caress in itself that almost made her

knees buckle again. She shook all over with weakness, struggling to stay upright as he stroked his finger inside of her and she felt the muscles along her passage close tightly around the thick digit.

A whimper of need scraped along her throat. "William," she gasped shakily.

"What, Darlin'?" he murmured sucking love bites along her neck and shoulder as he continued to stroke his finger in and out of her, pulling her deeper and deeper into a heated vortex that threatened to suck her down.

She licked her lips, feeling the desperate need for more mounting and still reluctant to give up what he was doing. "I want you inside me."

"I am inside you, Darlin'," he murmured roughly.

She made a sound of distress. "More," she demanded. "Please?"

He slipped a second finger inside of her, curling them to stroke the quaking walls of her sex. She groaned, a mixture of pleasure and distress. "Don't tease me, William," she whispered plaintively. "I'm going to come."

"I'm countin' on it, Darlin'," he said huskily.

The comment dredged a sound from her that was more of a sob than a gasp, filled with desperation as he slipped his other hand beneath her gown and cupped her breast, pinching a sensitive nipple between his thumb and forefinger and sending a shaft of heat through her that made her shudder. She felt the walls of her sex close tightly around his fingers in response. Her belly clenched as an intolerable itch, deep inside of her, began to torment her.

She dragged in a sobbing breath. "Come inside of me, William. Please? I need it," she whispered feverishly.

He pressed his cock tightly against the cleft of her buttocks. "This, Darlin'?"

She nodded dizzily, spreading her legs wider, curling her buttocks up in invitation.

He cupped his fingers inside of her. "Here?"

"William!" she gasped, though the hoarseness of her voice deprived it of the threat of violence she felt well inside of her.

Relief surged through her as he removed his hand and she felt his movements as he tugged at the opening of his trousers, heard the sound of the fabric, felt coolness against her buttocks as he dragged her gown up and then the hot, silken length of his cock. "Hold on, Darlin'," he muttered harshly as he guided his cock along her cleft and pressed the head into the mouth of her sex. "This is liable to get rough."

Her skin prickled with stinging sensation. She gasped in a breath as he thrust, held it, braced herself to counter his forceful possession as he drove his girth deeper, surging past the clinging, resistant walls of her channel. A long, low groan escaped her as she felt his hard shaft burrow deeply into the throat of her sex.

He withdrew, sending quakes through her with his downward stroke, buried himself deeply again. A whimper escaped her as his rhythmic movements teased the deep itch inside her, brought her a little closer to her goal. She leaned lower, spread her legs wider until his pounding strokes were reaching so deeply inside of her each one forced a little puff of breath from her in a grunt.

She screamed when she came, the keen cry torn from her, beginning low and escalating as the convulsions reached a peak that nearly snatched her from consciousness. He uttered a groan when she cried out, shook all over. "God!" he ground out through

gritted teeth, jerking as his body expelled his seed.

Alexis leaned down until she could rest her face against the cool surface of the table she'd been leaning against, sucking in air in short gasps, shivering as the heat began to dissipate from her body. William leaned over, propping a shaking arm beside her, holding her upright with the other.

"Bad idea," he muttered. "I knew I wouldn't be able to stop when I got started." Dragging in a shaky breath, he nuzzled his face against her appreciatively. "I didn't hurt you, did I, Darlin'?"

"Mmmmm," she groaned, wondering how much longer she could stand up. If her knees hadn't been locked she was pretty sure she would've already wilted into a puddle on the floor.

He let out a hiss as he pushed his hips back, dragging his flaccid member from her. Pressing his face against her back, he sucked in a sustaining breath and finally shoved upright.

She couldn't move, didn't want to. He pulled her up, scooping her into his arms and hefting her against his chest. Weak and insubstantial as they felt, she looped her arms round his neck to hold on as he crossed the room and turned down the corridor.

He stood her on her feet when they reached her bed, balanced her, and then dragged her gown off over her head. Shivering at the brush of the cool air on her skin, she climbed onto the mattress gratefully when he released her, sprawling out weakly, face down on the bed.

Floating in a sea of bliss, she listened dimly to his movements, heard the rustle of his clothing as he discarded it, footsteps as he moved to the door to close it and then returned. The edge of the bed sagged as he settled on it. She heard the clunk as his boots hit the floor one by one, the jingle of his belt as he dragged his pants of.

He settled full length beside her. One hair roughened leg moved across hers. He slipped a large foot between her legs, wedging the leg between hers as he straightened it. His chest settled against her back and side, his palm in the middle of her back for a moment before he stroked it down her length to her buttocks, cupping and massaging the cheeks.

She lifted her head from the bed and turned it to offer the side of her face as he leaned down to nuzzle her. "Why did you wait so long?" she murmured. "I'd begun to think you were just teasing me."

He stilled, lifting his head slightly. Shifting up on one elbow, he began to rub his hand caressingly along her back again. "This is gonna sound stupid," he drawled after a moment, "but the truth is I've been waitin' for you all my life. I figured I could wait a little longer." He hesitated. "I wanted it to be right."

Puzzled, she shifted to face him.

He studied her for a moment and finally lifted his hand to carefully smooth her hair away from her face, uttering a self-derisive snort. "You were always my hero, Alexis Conyers. The stories I heard about you an' the picture just set my mind on fire. I used to fantasize about you when I wasn't nuthin' but a youngin', used to imagine all sorts of adventures you an' I'd have together. Later, I mostly thought about fuckin' you," he added with a husky chuckle. "An', after a while, I got old enough I knew I wasn't never gonna see you. Thought I'd put all that from my mind. An' then one day you just ride up on that old tog like you was always meant to be mine—except you wasn't."

“I was so damned pissed off I didn’t know whether to spit or go blind. Here was the woman I’d dreamed about bein’ mine all my life and she was makin’ goo-goo eyes at the biggest, meanest son-of-a-bitchin’ mutant there ever was. An’ Joel lookin’ at you like he hadn’t eaten in a month and somebody’d just set juicy steak in front of him. I could see right off that those two were right ready to kill each other to get hold of you.

“I told myself you wasn’t nuthin’ like I’d made you out to be an’ I was doin’ a pretty good job of it till Joel comes up to me one day out of the blue an’ says, ‘William, I cain’t trust nobody else to take care of her if anything happens to me. She’s so soft and fragile I’m havin’ nightmares somebody’s gonna hurt her while I ain’t here to take care of her.’ “I ‘spect he’s sorry as hell now, because I couldn’t get my mind off you then, couldn’t think of nuthin’ but how I might get you away from him.”

He chuckled, leaning back against the pillows and dragging her over his chest. “An’ the more I thought about how bad I wanted to get my hands on you, the more scared I was that I’d manage it an’ then you’d be disappointed.”

Alexis lifted her head to place a kiss on his chest. “That wasn’t disappointing. It felt wonderful.”

“Did it?” he asked, a smile in voice.

“Mmm.”

“Good, ‘cause I’m just gettin’ warmed up.”

## Chapter Thirty One

It was similar enough to give Alexis a strong sense of déjà vu and with that came the stomach churning emotions she'd felt the last time she'd been asked to stand up and speak.

Joel hadn't told her he expected it of her, though, and she was hoping he didn't intend to.

In many respects, the crowd differed greatly, but the one way that caused her the most uneasiness was the fact that they were dead silent, not waiting expectantly, hopefully, cheerfully, but more as if they anticipated bad news.

She supposed they hadn't heard much good news in their lives.

"I have a few very important things to tell you and although I know you're going to have questions, save them till I'm done.

"Many of you have met Alexis and questioned where she came from and why she came to us," Joel began, making Alexis' belly cramp immediately since she hadn't expected to be the focus of his speech.

Everyone turned to stare at her and very few of the stares were actually friendly. They were mostly suspicious.

"Her name is Dr. Alexis Conyers and for those of you who don't remember the legends, or don't remember the name, she was a member of the crew who left Earth centuries ago on the U.E. Plymouth, bound for New Earth.

"She's come to redeem the promise made to our people so long ago—to take us to the new world. I've been. I've seen it. I'm not prone to exaggerate so believe me when I say it's paradise.

"It's also raw and primitive. There's plenty of game—food to feed our people, good, rich soil for growing, temperate weather, plenty of fresh water, and all of the raw materials we'd need to build. I'm not going to try to make the decision for everyone. I will be going, and Alex and I will be leading any of our people who want to go, who are willing to work hard to build a new life on this new world.

"It'll take hard work, but you're used to that. The difference there is that the hard work can count for more than just surviving. You'd have the chance—everyone would have the chance—to build a good life—something none of us have much chance of here.

"In the past two weeks, I've gone to the other compounds and spoken to the other people of the clan. Already, volunteers have begun to go over to begin clearing land for those who want to go."

Alexis sent him a startled look.

"You'd be living in temporary shelters that aren't even as comfortable as what you have now and those shelters will be all you'll have until you've built something more permanent. The only crops we'll have is those we take with us—we don't know the growing seasons yet, or how long it will take to bring in a crop. You could be facing a lot of hardship between now and then—but you aren't strangers to hunger either and, as I already said, there's plenty of game."

He paused, signaling to some of his men who stood at the rear of the crowd. They began dragging something forward. The crowd parted, staring at the enormous carcass with varying degrees of shock, horror, and avid interest.

When the men had deposited the beast, he spoke again. "My men and I've been out hunting a half dozen times on this new world and we haven't once failed to bring in something to eat. Beasts like this roam in herds of hundreds, maybe even thousands."

He stopped speaking, waiting for the questions. They started hesitantly, but before many moments had passed the questions were flying so thick and fast it was hard to slow them down enough to answer.

Alexis discovered Joel expected her to answer the questions regarding transportation there and what was known. As unnerved as she was about public speaking, she felt comfortable enough answering their questions about those things. Joel didn't seem to have pulled any punches, so she didn't either.

"The world was surveyed before we ever left Earth and everything that could be learned from such a distance was recorded and studied. I can give you what was learned about it. This world has not been explored, though, so I can't tell you much beyond what Joel already told you, except that there are four large continents and the land to water ratio is roughly the same as this world's. We have not analyzed any of the plant or animal life and we don't know what is edible and what is poisonous, or what is dangerous and what isn't."

The questions went on for over an hour, until Joel finally called a halt to it and told them they could talk to the men who'd gone if they had other questions. If they wanted to volunteer to go over to the new world to join the workers preparing the settlement site, they should give their names to the patrollers.

Alexis' emotions were in turmoil as Joel helped her down from the makeshift platform he'd had put together to make it easier to address the clan members. Anger churned inside of her, but desolation overshadowed everything else. She'd thought she would have more time to decide, to come to terms with the fact that she had to accept that she was going to lose someone she loved. Joel had snatched that away from her and she felt her anger surge to the forefront as he led her into his headquarters.

He was expecting it. She could tell by the tension in his stance.

Unfortunately, she could also see that he hadn't just braced himself for her anger. He was expecting to be hurt. He thought she was going to choose Torin over him, she realized abruptly.

He studied her for a moment and finally headed toward his personal quarters.

She followed him, struggling with her anger and her reluctance to hurt him, watching as he moved to a small wine cask and got himself a drink. He looked tired, she realized. That was hardly surprising when he had been so busy and, momentarily, her anger took the upper hand again, but she realized that the decision he'd made hadn't been a particularly easy one for him. If it had been, he would've simply told everyone that they were going. He wouldn't have given the decision of whether to go or stay to them.

"You didn't give *me* a choice," she said finally. "You didn't ask me. You didn't discuss any of this with me. You made my decision for me."

He settled on his bed in a half recline, stretching his long legs out before him and crossing them at the ankles. "We need you."

"That's not the point! Aside from the fact that I don't know what it is that you

think I could possibly contribute that would be so necessary to the success, I'm not even convinced this is the best thing for all! You said it was a contingency plan—a way to protect the people if Torin was right and we were looking at war. You said you were *thinking* about the possibility of colonizing New Earth. And then you disappear for nearly two weeks and come back with the announcement that you've already set everything into motion—sent people over to begin preparing.”

His lips tightened. “I took people back to explore the possibility further and assess the situation. My gut tells me that, whatever problems we encounter, we'll still be a hell of a lot better off there.”

“Your gut?”

He glared at her and sat up. “We're dying here, Alex—dwindling slowly toward extinction—or haven't you noticed?”

“I've noticed life is hard as hell, but if you think it'll be any easier there, I'm not sure I agree. As far as I can see they'll only be exchanging one set of problems for another.”

“In the days of the great flight,” he said harshly, “there were millions of us—*us*—humans, Alexis. The beast peoples only numbered in the hundreds, possibly thousands, but there were many, many times more humans than them. The ones who fled left more people than they took—a hell of a lot more. I don't know what lies beyond the clans—no one has traveled more than a few miles beyond their own clan's boundaries in generations and there may be other human clans. But I do know that *this* clan, *my* clan, gets smaller every year.

“I know what you thought when you came, Alex. I could see it in your face. It pissed me off, but I wasn't about to try to defend our way of life, the pathetic existence we have.

“But part of the reason it pissed me off was because I knew you were right. It's disgusting what we've come to. I'd just gotten so used to things the way they were I didn't really see it until I started looking at it from your viewpoint. I knew then that a lot of it was my fault and I'd done a piss poor job of taking care of the clan.

“There was a time when there villages and farms all over the clan territory—not in my memory, or my father's, or even his father's—but a time when we at least seemed to be holding our own, even if we weren't prospering like the beast clans.

“As they grew stronger, multiplied, we weakened, dwindled—and they did a hell of a lot to help us along.” He shook his head. “Not that we didn't do plenty of the killing ourselves.”

“In my grandfather's time, we weren't even united into one clan. The clan territory was split up between five warlords. He was the first to begin to build walled compounds like we live in now, because we couldn't live in unprotected villages anymore—we had to have walls we could defend—and there were more than a dozen compounds. My father killed the warlords and united the clan, but in my father's time, there were half as many compounds as there had been in his father's time. Now there are only four. There was nearly a hundred thousand people in this clan in my grandfather's time. I'm guessing, *maybe*, there are ten thousand of us left.

“So, yeah, my *gut* tells me we'll have a better chance there, because *here* we don't have a chance in hell, Baby. Even if we weren't facing a war with the bear clan—a major attempt to overrun us from everything I can put together—New Earth is the only damned

thing that offers us *any* possibility of a future.”

Alexis merely stared at him when he fell silent, too horrified to grasp what he'd told her. “The numbers must be wrong,” she whispered finally. “How? Why would so many die in only a couple of generations?”

Joel shook his head in disgust. “More people dying than births—the numbers are right. Almost as soon as they walled themselves in—disease. The great plague wiped out so many people so fast there weren't even enough left alive to bury the dead—the bodies had to be burned. The irony of that was, it was the disease that kept the beast people away for a while, partly because they were afraid it would spread to them and, I guess, partly because they figured it would take care of ‘the problem’.

“Famine followed the plague because, unfortunately, the plague also took out a good bit of the food supply—a lot of the domestic animals we raised for food. The walled compounds we'd built for protection didn't protect the farm lands—even if we could've kept the raiding clans out of the fields there weren't enough people left to grow the food we needed after the plague.

“Since then, it's been wars and the scarcity of food, more than anything else, that's contributed to the decline.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face tiredly. “I didn't make your decision for you any more than I made anybody else's. We're all going. I just figured it'd be better if I could convince them that it was their idea. I don't think we can spare the time to fight among ourselves.”

Alexis crossed the room to sit beside him. “Is it really that bad, Joel?” she asked worriedly.

Joel slipped an arm around her, pulling her close. “I'd be lying if I said it wasn't. I know what the pulse rifles can do. It ain't going to help us, at all, that they've only got two to the dozen we have. Those things will cut right through our defenses. And once they do that, we're going to be overrun. Everything I've been able to discover points to a massive attack, not just a raid. I don't think we can afford to wait around to find out if Torin's was right.

“We don't have ten thousand men. We've got maybe half that, and of those maybe half that would be able to fight. The rest are too old, too young, or just physically unable to fight. The rest is women and children, and I sure as hell am not going to put them out there to face the bear clan—which means I've got to get them to safety before anything happens and that's going to take time.”

He lifted a hand to stroke her cheek. “We need you, Baby. *I* need you.”

\* \* \* \*

Alexis was stunned when she stepped from the portal and looked around. The encampment itself was filled almost to capacity with people—mostly women and children—all busily occupied with one task or another. Beyond the encampment, though, New Earth had already changed drastically. Where the original party she'd brought over had cleared a swath of jungle perhaps twenty feet from the grav-shield, the men now working beyond it had cleared many times that much and were still busy clearing. Dark smoke rose from fires they'd built here and there to burn huge piles of brush and leaves and thinner branches from the trees they'd cut. The trees themselves, and the larger branches had been formed into piles that others were using to build crude lean-tos for shelter.

Stunned, she left the portal and headed toward the field. The grav-shield had been disengaged, she saw—or at least the section she reached first, which meant, she was sure, that some of the men among those working had been among the first party to come. No one else would've known how to deactivate it.

The smell of roasting meat began to vie with the smell of burning wood as she progressed and she discovered that one of the pyres she'd seen was actually a cooking fire above which was suspended one of the huge beasts that Joel had killed before to take back to the clan. Two men had been left in charge of tending it, slowly turning it, she supposed wryly, to make certain it burned evenly.

When she neared the opposite end of the encampment, she saw in surprise that there was a river or pond not too distant from where she and her crewmembers had set up their base camp. A fairly large number of men were working near it and, curious, she moved in that direction to see what they were doing.

William, she discovered, was waist deep in the water, a long pole in his hand as he slowly waded across. Uneasiness instantly pelted her. She quickened her step until she was standing on the bank, realizing when she reached it that it was a river, not merely a pool. A slow grin of welcome curled his lips when he saw her. "Joel enlist you, too?"

Alexis managed a nervous smile in return. "What are you doing?" she asked instead of responding to his question.

He shrugged. "Testing the depth and the current."

"I do wish you'd come out," she said nervously. "You don't know what's in there."

He grimaced. "I been tryin' real hard not to think about that, Darlin'."

Her lips tightened, but she resisted the urge to point out that not thinking about something didn't actually constitute protection from it. If something was there, it wasn't going to vanish just because one didn't look at it.

She'd certainly been trying her very best to ignore the doubts and anxieties clouding her emotions, but it hadn't made them go away. They will still there, just waiting for a weak moment to surge to the forefront of her mind.

She was relieved when William waded out at last.

"I think this is the spot we want."

She looked at him questioningly.

Dropping the pole he'd been using, he sauntered toward her and draped an arm around her shoulders. "You're wet."

He wagged his black brows at her. "How about you?"

Alexis stared at him blankly a moment before that registered. She didn't know whether to be amused or irritated. She couldn't help the faint smile that curled her lips, though.

"Don't you ever think about anything else?"

"Occasionally, but only when you're not around." He twisted his head to look behind them. "I'm gonna take a break."

"Joel with you?" he asked when he returned his attention to her.

She shook her head. "He sent me to bring some people over and to find out how everything was progressing. He's trying to organize everything to get ready for the bear clan."

William nodded, squinting his eyes toward the compound as they approached it. "We've encountered a couple of pretty nasty beasties. I was wonderin' if that grav-shield could be expanded."

Alexis felt a quiver of nervousness go through her at the mention of the beasts—Sloan and Pitts had mentioned some encounters with some really scary ones—but when he mentioned the grav-shield she turned her attention to it. “How big an area?” He waved an arm to encompass what had been cleared. “At least this much. More would be better.”

“It would take a good bit more power, but it could be done. The posts would have to be set very precisely.” She stopped, looking back at the river. “What are you doing there?”

“We figured we’d build a water wheel to supply us with water.”

Alexis frowned, searching her memory for a reference. When it came to her, she looked at William with surprise. “You know how to build one?”

“It’ll be my first, but I think I can figure it out. My great grandpa was an engineer, after all.”

He said it teasingly, but she thought he had a very good idea of how to do it or he wouldn’t have come up with the idea to start with.

“You’d want it inside the grav-shield?” she asked doubtfully.

“It’d be nice if we could.”

She chewed her lip, thinking. “The beams don’t bend. That’s why the posts have to be absolutely precisely placed. We could put posts on the other side but that wouldn’t stop anything from swimming under.”

He made a wry face. “That might be a problem. We’ve seen a few pretty nasty looking beasties there, too.”

“And you were in the water!” Alexis exclaimed.

He looked irritated. “I needed to know the depth before I could figure the size of the wheel, and I needed to know how fast the current was.”

Alexis looked away. Knowing he was right didn’t make her like it any better.

He settled his arm across her shoulders again and urged her to continue their walk back to the compound. “I’ll give it some thought. I’m thinkin’ we want the water supply safely inside with us. Maybe we can figure out a way to keep the critters out and still have it inside the compound.”

Alexis glanced at him as the comment made an unrelated thought click into place.

She’d been fighting despair ever since she’d learned of Joel’s plans and realized that he was right. She really didn’t have a choice of whether to go or stay. If everyone else was moving to colonize New Earth, she would have to go with them.

It was her determination not to think about what that meant, she realized, that had prevented her from considering that she needn’t necessarily accept that she could never go back and never see Torin again.

She didn’t have to close the portals forever to protect the clan. In fact, everyone would be far better off if they still had the option of returning.

All she had to do was see if she could scavenge what she needed from the Plymouth and, if she could, she could set up both portals so that they could be remotely accessed from either direction!

\* \* \* \*

If Mirak hadn’t nearly fallen off his perch in his sleep, he might not have woken until morning. He did slip, however, and the sudden shift woke him wide awake.

Rubbing the blariness of sleep from his eyes, he glanced toward the compound of the human clan without any real expectation of seeing anything of any interest. It was the

dead of night and the humans always slept at night.

What he did see, though, set his heart to thundering in his chest in dismay—dismay because he'd been asleep instead of watching as he should've been and whatever the humans were up to they were well in progress.

Beyond the walls of the compound, he saw a trail of flickering torches snaking off into the wastelands—hundreds of torches.

\* \* \* \*

Torin signaled sharply for silence as a sentry appeared on the wall above them. The men working on the tunnel froze. After a moment, when the man disappeared again, Torin relaxed, signaling that they could continue.

He'd begun to think they'd chosen the only spot near Castle Doom that wouldn't take them into the caverns. He'd also begun to regret talking Joel into turning over the rescue of Alexis' friends to him. She was going to be very disappointed in him if he didn't find a way and not only had they not, yet, broken through into the caverns, but he hadn't been able to determine where Doom was holding them. All he had to go on was his slight acquaintance with the man—which was far more than he'd wanted.

What little he did know had indicated he was a sadistic bastard. To his mind that pointed strongly to the probability that Doom was holding them in the dungeon, regardless of how valuable he considered them, maybe *even because* he considered them so useful. He wouldn't want to give them the run of the castle and Torin didn't think Doom was the sort to consider trying to persuade them to cooperate with him. He would enjoy forcing them to do what he wanted, so it seemed unlikely that he'd set them up in comfortable accommodations.

That still didn't mean he hadn't decided to lock them in one of the tower rooms. He hoped to hell that wasn't the case, though, because if they were being held in one of the towers, short of an all out assault on the castle—which would probably only result in getting them killed—there was no way he'd get them out.

A rumbling noise beneath him brought his thoughts abruptly back to the task. The man he could see scrambled backwards abruptly out of the hole they'd dug, which was barely big enough to accommodate one man. Dread seized him, but in a moment, he saw the second man scrambling out of the tunnel.

"We broke through, my lord," the man announced in a low voice that quaked slightly with nerves.

Torin patted his shoulder. "Good job, Jay. You and Brodie take a break and send me Lind and Saul so we can get to work on the dungeon wall."

Jay and Brodie saluted, crouched low to the ground and headed quickly toward the knoll some distance away where the rest of Torin's men waited. He watched them until they disappeared, then got down and crawled through the tunnel.

The smell of decaying flesh stung at his nostrils almost as soon as he'd crawled through the tunnel and into the cavern. He paused, sniffing, struggling against the dread that began to worm its way into him. Moving again after that slight hesitation, he followed the cavern until he reached the point where he knew the dungeon wall should've been. A pile of rubble met him instead and his heart sank.

## Chapter Thirty Two

Either Doom had ordered the cave collapsed after his escape, Torin decided, or Alexis' friends had attempted what he had and were now buried under the rubble. He couldn't leave until he knew.

Bending he began to dig at the dirt and rocks without any consideration to the noise. The dungeon wall was thick enough he knew the bear men wouldn't hear him through that. He'd cleared away enough of the debris to find the edge of the dungeon wall by the time his men joined him. Moving back to rest for a moment, he watched as they focused on clearing the area nearest the wall. A few minutes later, one of the men uncovered a foot. He bent down to examine it. "One of the bear men," he announced. "He must have been caught in the cave in. That's enough. Let's get started on the wall."

The tools they'd brought with them were far more effective in removing the grout between the stones than the spoon he'd had to dig with. They'd already loosened the stones in a section of the wall almost two foot square when one of his lookouts came scrambling through cavern behind them.

Torin had his sword in his hand when the man skidded to a stop.

"My Lord! Something's happening!"

Torin stiffened. "Be more specific," he growled, wondering if he'd misjudged the bear men's hearing.

"A messenger arrived shortly after you came down, riding hell bent for leather. A few minutes later the enter garrison was in turmoil. We can't find a position to see what's going on, but there's torches everywhere and we can hear men and togs—sounds like Doom's entire army is gathering in the bailey."

Torin frowned. Glancing at the men who'd been working at the wall, he discovered they'd stopped to listen. "Keep at it—hurry. Whatever it is, it's got nothing to do with us. They don't know we're here."

He looked at the soldier again. "Get back out there and see if you can find out what the hell's going on. We'll try to use the diversion to get to the captives."

The man nodded jerkily and headed out again.

"Step it up!" he growled when the man had left, crouching beside them to dig at the rocks.

Relief flooded him when, a few minutes later, one of the stones tumbled out. Behind it a half dozen of the others they'd loosened collapsed. Grabbing at the stones, they pitched them behind their shoulders and Torin shoved his head and shoulders through to look around the cell on the other side.

Three humans were clustered together at the far side, staring toward him wide eyed, white faced. Thank the fates he hadn't been wrong about Doom, he thought, feeling relief swamp him.

He doubted they could see him well in the dimness, but he could smell their terror.

"Mel!" he called out in a low voice. "It is I, Torin. Alexis sent me to get you out."

Mel merely gaped at him. He was on the point of wiggling the rest of the way inside to

grab them and haul them out when Mel pulled away from the others. "You're the ... Liger-man that was with us before."

Irritation flickered through him. "Yes—the Halfling. Come on. We don't have time to talk. We need to get the hell out of here."

Mel glanced at the other two. "It's alright. It's Torin. Alexis sent him."

"How do we know that?" the man asked.

"If you'd rather stay with Doom," Torin growled. "Suit yourself. I don't have time to coax you out of here. Linda, are you coming?"

Linda looked startled when he called her by name. She didn't question him further, though. Shoving to her feet she rushed across the cell, dropping to her hands and knees and scrambling toward him as he backed out. Torin helped her through and handed her off to Saul. "Help her. They're blind in here."

Saul grasped her arm and hurried her away as Mel climbed through. "Go with Lind," he told her, bending down to see if Dr. Long had changed his mind. He met the man almost face to face when he did and grim amusement flickered through him briefly. He supposed they'd figured this wasn't one of those times when 'better the devil you know' would apply.

Grasping the man's arm to help him through the hole, he guided him as quickly as he could toward the tunnel.

Berl met them as they emerged on the other side and Torin's belly tightened. Shaking his head to silence him before Berl could speak, he hurried the scientists and his men across the exposed ground between them and the knoll. As soon as they were safely beyond view of any sentries, he turned to Berl. "News?" he demanded harshly.

"They're moving," Berl said grimly. "Something's happened—I couldn't find out what. But Lucky informed me that a tiger messenger had arrived at Broden Fortress a little while ago and went straight to your brother. I was on my way to his apartments to see what I could discover when Shae came barreling out of his quarters and ordered his men to mount up."

Torin ground his teeth, his mind shifting rapidly through the little information he had.

"Lucky's certain it was a tiger man?"

"He was the one that escorted him up to Shae. I ordered the men on alert, but I didn't know what to make of Shae dashing off like that. If the attack was to be launched against us, he wouldn't have ridden out with his men. It would've been more effective to turn on us and attack."

"Exactly," Torin said grimly. "Which means whatever's happening is the first phase of the deal he made with Doom. Take the humans to Joel—Don't forget the signal we worked out—or they're liable to shoot first and ask questions later—and send someone ahead to warn Joel. You won't be able to make very good time with them. Make sure he knows the signal."

Saluting, Berl motioned to the men who were to accompany him and hurried to the togs. Torin wrestled briefly with the urge to rush to Alexis immediately. He wouldn't do her much good, however, if he arrived alone, not if he was right and the tiger clan had joined Shae and Doom. The armies were going to crush Joel's little ragtag band of humans between them.

\* \* \* \*

Joel's heart sank when he met the party at the gate and discovered Alexis was

among them. Fury instantly rose to take the place of his angst. Grinding his teeth, he strode quickly toward the group as they brought the togs they were riding to a milling halt in the bailey.

“Damn it, William! What the hell were you thinking to bring her with you?”

William looked at him grimly. “What’s goin’ on?” he asked sharply.

Before Joel could respond, an excited cry diverted both men. Alexis slid off the tog she was riding in her usual graceless manner, half jumping half falling from the beast. She collided with the tall woman Berl had brought with him only a short time before.

Joel watched as the other two crewmembers joined them for a happy reunion, embracing and talking all at once, reluctant to intrude on Alexis’ joy when she’d been so worried they wouldn’t be rescued.

He jerked his head at the group. “According to news Alexis’ friends brought us, Doom and Shae have joined with the tiger clan. One of the scouts reached us not more than thirty minutes ago with the news that the tiger clan had discovered we’d emptied out the southern compound and were headed this way. By now they will have discovered the others are empty, too, and they’ll be heading straight for us.

“Berl arrived just before that with Alexis’ people and the announcement that Doom was on the move. We’ve got to get the rest of these people out of here.”

William’s gaze lifted to Alexis. He looked a little sick. “God! We didn’t have a clue. We’d come to tell you we had the others secured and to get the rest.”

“You’re going to have to make a run for it,” Joel said grimly.

Nodding, William looked at Alexis again. “Make it short, Darlin’ an’ get back on your tog. We’ve got to get them the hell out of here.”

Alexis jerked away from her friends and sent him a startled look, but he’d already nudged his tog into motion and was headed toward the people gathered in the center of the compound. “You’re gonna have to leave this stuff. We’ve got to move fast. Get movin’! Quickly now!”

Most of the people simply gaped at him. Dawning anger showed on many of the faces, though. “It’s all we’ve got!” Someone from the crowd shouted. “You can’t expect us just to leave it!”

“I can and do!” he bellowed. “We’ve got two armies bearing down on us. Get your asses in gear and get movin’, god damn it!”

That galvanized them. Some of the people clung determinedly to their belongings. Others didn’t question William but threw them down. All of them began to rush toward the gate, however.

Joel grabbed Alexis by one arm and dragged her over to William, lifting her up to him. “But ... what about everyone else?” she demanded as William snagged her around the waist and tucked her against his chest.

“Your friends will ride with the other men.”

Alexis stared down at him. “I meant the others.”

He shook his head. “There aren’t enough togs to carry them. They’re going to have to make it on foot.”

Alexis stared at him in disbelief. “Even taking the most direct route, it took almost a half a day to get here on the togs, Joel. On foot ...”

Joel shook his head. “They’ve got maybe an hour head start. We’ll hold the army off here as long as we can and then fight a retreat. You and William are going to have to

keep them moving as fast as you can. It's the only chance they've got. If anybody falters, they'll have to be left behind."

A terrible dread filled Alexis as her focus shifted from concern about the others to Joel. "Isn't there another way?" she gasped, begging him to tell her there was, struggling to deny what he was telling her. "Come with us, Joel. Please!"

His expression hardened. "I have to stay here, Baby. They don't have any chance if we can't hold the armies off a while. We'll be right behind you."

Alexis' chin quivered. She knew he was lying. She could see in his eyes. Shrugging free of William's grip, she launched herself at him. He caught her tightly against his chest, staggering back a step at the impact. "Joel! Don't do this! Please don't. Come with us."

He shushed her, squeezing her tightly. "I'll see you at the portal."

"Promise?" she asked, begging him to reassure her, begging him to make her believe he thought he was going to be alright.

"If there's any way in hell, Baby, I'll be right behind you."

She pulled away enough to study his face. "Promise?" she begged weakly, knowing he couldn't promise her anything.

He kissed her, deeply. She clung to him, trying to hold on to the moment, trying to memorize every tiniest detail of his touch, terrified that she was never going to know what it was to be held by him again. And she'd never had the chance to show him how much he meant to her. She'd never had the chance to soothe his hurts from his past, to give him all the things he'd lost—love, acceptance—to help him learn to forgive himself.

"I love you, Baby," he whispered huskily when he broke the kiss.

Her chin was wobbling so badly she could barely get the words out. "I love you, too." She swallowed her tears with an effort. "I'll never forgive you if you don't keep your promise and come back to me," she said forlornly.

He smiled, stroking her cheek and then resolutely lifted her up to the saddle again, handing her to William. "Take care of her," he told William grimly.

William nodded, his face set in grim lines.

As soon as the last of them had cleared the gate, Joel ordered it shut and barricaded. Trying not to think about the look on Alexis' face as she twisted around to look at him one last time, he focused on preparing his men for battle.

He hoped she hadn't meant what she'd said because he was fairly certain he wasn't going to be able to redeem his promise.

At least he'd seen the new world, he reminded himself. At least he knew most of his people had made it over, knew William would do everything he could to get Alexis safely across.

He would've liked to have had the chance to have a son by her, he thought.

It was less than an hour later when his lookout shouted. "They're comin'!"

Joel felt his chest tighten. Alexis hadn't even been gone a full hour. They couldn't have made much progress even though everyone had been unnerved enough by William's announcement that they'd left at a near run. They would've tired, and slowed down. With William and Alexis prodding them, they might be a quarter of the way there—maybe.

Regret filled him—that he'd seen so little of Alexis in the past weeks, spent more time arguing with her than making love to her—thrown away chances he might have had

because he'd resented the affection he saw between her and William. The only thing his possessiveness had gotten him was regrets over missed chances, he thought angrily.

Thrusting the thoughts away, he began to stride swiftly along the line of men crouched near the walls. "Hold your fire! Remember—be careful with your ammunition. Don't fucking waste it. You've got maybe enough to put two bullets in each one of those sons-of-bitches, so don't be trying to shoot before they get within range. Wait for my signal."

He'd just reached the men he'd set to man the bombs when one of his men came rushing up to him. "They're signaling."

Joel's head whipped around. "You're sure?"

The man nodded and Joel ran to the gates, climbing the rickety structure to one side to stare into the distance.

The signal flashed again, and he quickly flashed the counter signal.

A few moments later, a mounted army began to pour out of the trees at the edge of the field. He held his breath, straining to pierce the predawn darkness to identify the men, dread filling him as he realized it could be a trick. His enemies might have found out about the signal.

He looked down at the man below him. "Tell the bombers to get ready—but wait for my signal."

The man nodded and rushed off to relay the order and Joel turned to study the men crossing the field. One, notably larger than the others around him, surged to the fore, distancing himself quickly, urging his tog into a gallop as he closed the distance between his army and the gate of the compound.

"Friends!" Joel shouted to his men. "Hold your fire!"

A few minutes later, Torin rode through the gate, taking in the emptiness of the compound and the men stationed by the walls in one glance. Some of the tension seemed to leave him. He settled back on his tog, studying Joel. "I thought you might welcome some help."

Joel grinned suddenly. "I never thought I'd be glad to see that ugly mug of yours, Torin."

Torin snorted, an amused sound. "You might want to hold off on that till you see what we've got behind us."

"How close?"

"Not far enough." He glanced around the compound again, this time with the assessing eyes of a general. "We won't be able to hold them off long."

Joel's amusement died. "We'll have to dig in and hold them as long as we can. William and Alexis led the last of the women and children off not much more than an hour ago."

Torin cursed long and fluently and Joel eyed him with a good deal of respect. "Why the fuck isn't she on New Earth?" he growled.

Joel tamped his anger at the accusing note with an effort. "Because she *is* Alexis, god damn it. They didn't know anything," he added grudgingly. "They came back to get the others. Most of them are on foot. We've got to give them at least a couple of hours to give them any chance of making it to the portal. And you know as well as I do that William will have his hands full with Alexis if they have to leave the others and make a run for it."

Torin nodded grimly. "We're going to be trapped in here," he said coolly. "I'm thinking we'll do them more good if we abandon the fort and take up a position between Doom's army and them."

Joel chewed his lip, thinking. "I'd planned to hold them here as long as I could and then fight a retreat to hold them back as much as I could."

Torin shrugged. "A good plan—except that Doom will be bringing his army from the North. Shae's gathered his men just west of him and the tiger clan are headed this way from the west. If we're trapped here, there won't be anything between Alexis and their armies. I've brought about as many men as you have here. My suggestion is that we form a line, hold it as long as we can, drop back and form another."

Joel considered it and finally nodded. Summoning his captain, he ordered him to form the men up and take them out the 'new' gate. "Tell the bombers to hold. I want them to wait until they charge, lob everything they've got at them, and then fall back to the line." He turned to Torin again when the man had rushed off. "Hopefully, they won't figure out right away that the compound's been abandoned. That'll give us time to get everyone in position. They know you joined us?"

"Doubtful," Torin responded grimly. "Unless one of Shae's spies managed to inform him after we'd left. Shae had already taken his men and ridden out by the time I made it back from Doom Castle to Broden Fortress."

Joel nodded. "Well, if they don't know, maybe we can come up with a little surprise for them—they won't be expecting archers."

When they'd reached the high ground Torin had chosen, they ordered the men to form a crescent line to face all three armies, archers to the fore.

Joel surveyed the line of men as he saw the fore riders of the tiger clan. "How sure of your men are you?" he asked Torin grimly.

Torin studied him a long moment, his lips set in a hard line. "We're about to find out."

"That's fucking comforting," Joel snarled.

Torin smiled grimly. "Berl, I trust with my life. He's made certain any of the men he has doubts about are surrounded by men he knows are loyal."

Joel nodded. "I just hope I can trust my life to him," he muttered.

"As long as you're standing next to me . . ." Torin broke off as a fireball shot from the compound. He watched the ball arc through the air. It landed approximately twenty feet shy of the advancing army. It exploded on impact, throwing the men and togs into momentary confusion.

Heartened by the fact that it had fallen so far short of their line, they recovered quickly. Leaning over the heads of the togs, they kicked them into a gallop and charged.

"They've got the range now," Joel said in satisfaction, just as a dozen more fireballs flew out from the compound. He cursed in the next moment as several of the bombs exploded before they hit the ground.

"Doom's arrived," Torin announced grimly.

They waited tensely, watching as the fireballs and explosions lit up the night sky.

"How the hell are they doing that?" Torin asked after a watching a while. "They can't throw them that far?"

"Slings," Joel said absently. "Damn it!" he growled in the next moment as they saw the flare of laser pulses. From within the compound, they heard the screams of the

men either hit by the pulses, or by the flying chunks of tree trunk blasted away from the stockade walls.

“Archers!” Torin called. “Get ready to cover their retreat.”

A few minutes later the men left to handle the bombardment came tearing out of the hole cut in the rear of the compound, whipping their togs into a lather to try to outrun the armies converging on them. The line opened to allow them through and closed again behind them. They were spotted as they emerged from the compound, however, and the army battering at the front gate, swarmed around the compound.

The first volley of arrows created havoc in the charging hoard. Togs and beast men went down, tripping the men beside them. The men behind managed to gather their beasts and clear the downed men and togs. Barely breaking stride, they whipped their togs faster, trying to close the distance to reduce the effectiveness of the archers.

It would've been the right tactic if they hadn't been facing Joel and his men, if they were charging down on men armed with nothing but swords. As it was, they raced full tilt at the line and caught the first volley of Joel's army—bullets and the laser pulses from a dozen pulse rifles. Another row of men and beasts plowed the dirt.

“Get ready to fall back!” Joel bellowed.

“Hold the line for the retreat!” Torin yelled at his own men.

Neither Torin nor Joel recognized the sudden commotion in their own ranks. At first thinking it was Joel's men leaping up to retreat. It wasn't until some of the lion men broke from the line and headed straight for the oncoming army that they realized what was happening.

“Shoot those treacherous bastards!” Joel roared.

His men, already on their feet to retreat, turned and fired at the lion men that had abruptly changed sides, cutting down almost a quarter of them before they could reach the enemy side. Another quarter, at least, were mown down by their own side before the army realized they were friend not foe.

Joel glanced at Torin's grim face.

Torin didn't look at him. “Take your men and fall back. We'll cover your retreat,” he ground out.

“And then?”

Torin looked at him. “And then we'll fall back.”

Nodding, Joel turned his tog and ordered his men back to the first defensible position. They'd barely formed up and aligned their weapons to lay down cover fire when Torin ordered his own men to disengage from the enemy and fall back.

When dawn finally broke they saw the armies of the bear, the tiger, and the lion forming up again. Between their position and their enemies, men and togs from both armies lay sprawled lifelessly, or wounded and struggling to rise, and Joel had lost count of the number of times they'd already clashed and fallen back.

The combined army still outnumbered them roughly three to one by Joel's guestimate. He exchanged a grim look with Torin and twisted around to stare into the distance behind them. He could just make out a trail of dots struggling over the dunes. His gut clenched.

He looked at Torin again. “You think we can hold them another hour?”

Torin glanced behind them, stared for a long, long moment and finally turned to survey the men stretched out on either side of them. Joel's men were counting their

bullets. His archers were counting their arrows and the others had pulled their swords.

“It’s a good thing the bear men aren’t nearly as good with the pulse rifles as your men,” he said.

Joel nodded.

“William will take care of her,” Torin said after a moment.

Joel dragged in a ragged breath and nodded. “You should’ve taken your men and left while you could.”

Torin glanced at him and shrugged. “I’m where I want to be—so are they. I wouldn’t have led them here if they weren’t willing to throw in their lot with your clan.”

Nodding, Joel narrowed his eyes at the other army. “Steady men!” he bellowed. “Let’s take out as many of those bastards as we can!”

Torin stiffened abruptly, rising up in his stirrups to look over the opposing army at the screaming mass swarming up their rear, waving clubs and hoes. “What the hell?”

## Chapter Thirty Three

Alexis leapt from the tog and ran to a youngster that had fallen, helping him to his feet. The togs were already loaded down with the smallest children, but he was obviously too exhausted to go on.

"Give him to me," William snapped. "I'll carry him."

"He can take my place," Alexis said.

"Get on the damned tog, Alexis!" William snarled.

"No," she said, helping the child up.

William glanced behind them and then toward the building they were nearing, trying to decide if they had time to reach it.

What they didn't have time for was arguing.

Grimly, he tugged the tog he was leading forward as the boy Alexis had helped settled on the tog and she tugged at the reins. "Hold on tight. It's just a little further," Alexis told the children, sparing a moment to gaze toward the battle raging behind them.

She couldn't make out anything from the distance, couldn't see anything but a dark, heaving mass as the two armies collided. Wondering if Joel was still among them, she looked away again, hoping against hope, trying to convince herself that he was invincible.

The women were limping, but moving quickly all things considered, encouraged, no doubt, by their terror. Relief filled her as she saw the women in the lead reach the command center. Tugging harder on the reins of the tog, she struggled to increase her pace. She paused when she reached the rubble at the entrance, staring into the distance worriedly while she stood directing the stragglers.

"What is that?" she asked William worriedly after staring at the mass racing toward them, between them and what was left of Joel's army.

William frowned as he strained to make out the group headed toward them at a loping run. The frown cleared and doubt creased his features for a moment. "Damned it don't look like wonda-petz."

Alexis glanced at him sharply, feeling her heart clench painfully. "The fieldworkers?"

William glanced at her and turned his attention to the oncoming horde. "My guess is it's Torin's people," he said finally. "If they was hostile, Joel would be in behind them. He's holding the other army off for their retreat."

Alexis wasn't convinced. She stood watching until William looked at her again. "Get movin', Darlin'. You need to get those people across."

"We," she said, her heart clogging in sudden fear at the look on his face.

He looked at her, his expression hard. "Get goin', woman! I ain't got time to whip your ass, but I'll make time if you don't move it!"

"Why?" Alexis demanded.

William's lips tightened. She could see his reluctance to tell her. "They're not firing any more. They're out of bullets and the army's right behind 'em. We're gonna

wait here and hold the others off of 'em."

Tears filled her eyes and began to run down her cheeks. "William don't!"

He grabbed her, planted a quick, hard kiss on her lips and then turned her around and popped her on the ass, hard. "Go! Get the women and children through the portal. We're gonna be right behind you."

Alexis dashed at the tears blinding her, sniffed, and finally began to clamber over the rubble. The women and children were huddled in a tight knot when she reached the control room. "Go! They're right behind us. Just step through and keep moving. Hurry!"

The group surged toward the portal and froze again, torn between their fear of it and their fear of the army breathing down their necks. Alexis worked her way through the crowd and gave the first two a shove. Panic rippled through the group as they disappeared.

"Move, damn you!" she screamed at them. "Those men are dying out there to give you a chance to get through!"

They moved, reluctantly, but as the sound of gunfire reached them, the fear of the men chasing them outweighed their fear of the portal. They began to shove at each other mindlessly. Within moments complete panic overtook them and they stampeded forward, knocking each other down, stepping on anyone that fell. The screams of the women and children nearly deafened Alexis. She was carried along with them, fighting just to stay on her feet.

When she emerged on the other side, she saw that the panic of the women pouring through had communicated to the people on the other side. People were running in every direction, women and children screaming and knocking into each other in their haste to get as far from the portal as they could.

Breaking free of the moving mass with an effort, Alexis ran to the controls. Staring anxiously as the last of the women and children came through, she held her breath, waiting. The men on her side gathered in a line, their guns ready.

She glanced them. "Don't shoot! Our men are coming!"

She prayed they were coming.

The cat/dog creatures William had called wonda-petz poured through the portal in an unruly tide, falling over each other. After looking wildly around, they began to race around the compound with the screaming women and children who screamed louder and ran faster, certain the poor, obviously confused and equally terrified creatures were chasing them.

Abruptly a man mounted on a tog burst through the portal. At almost the same instant two lion men, also mounted, leapt from the portal. "Don't shoot!" she screamed again when one of the men fired. "They're with us!"

She didn't flatter herself that they'd paid her the least attention. Rather, it was the riders bearing down on them that scattered the men in every direction as men and lion men, all mounted on togs, began to pour through the portal in a steady stream.

Her heart in her throat, Alexis peered at the faces of the men as they appeared, searching desperately for a beloved face among them. Relief flooded her as William and the men who'd stayed with him jumped through.

William scanned the area and raced toward her. "Hold off! We've got more men coming!"

Alexis nodded jerkily, holding her finger poised over the shut down button. Several dozen more mounted men appeared, and then behind them a half dozen rider-less togs. Alexis glanced at William.

“Close it!” Joel bellowed as he barreled through the portal.

Alexis’ heart jerked in her chest at the sound of his voice. Even as she whipped her head around to look for him, she saw Torin and for several moments she couldn’t breathe for the joy that swelled in her chest.

“Hit it!” Torin roared. “They’re right behind us.”

Inhuman screams ripped the air as she slammed her finger down on the shut off. The sound froze everyone, sent shivers clawing up their backs.

William grabbed Alexis, dragging her against his chest and covering her face, but not before she saw the horrible mess of body parts that flew through the portal.

\* \* \* \*

Alexis bit her lip to keep from laughing at the face Torin was making at Paxton. Pax stared back at him in wide-eyed fascination, not a sign of a smile on his face despite Torin’s best efforts in that direction.

Staring at the long stream of drool that emerged from the corner of the baby’s mouth and dripped down on the hands he had wrapped securely around the baby’s chest, Torin frowned. “Is he supposed to be doing that?” he asked doubtfully.

Alexis chuckled. “Maude says he’s teething.”

Apparently satisfied with the explanation, Torin went back to grinning at the infant.

“Dopey and dopier,” William drawled, earning a glare from both Alexis and Torin.

“Pax happens to be very intelligent!” Alexis informed William indignantly.

Torin sent her an irritated look, but at that moment Pax diverted him by chuckling. Grinning, Torin turned to look at the baby again, only discover that Pax was staring at Joel.

Glaring irritably at Joel, Torin got up and moved to the window, settling on the window seat where he could command Pax’s full attention.

Shrugging, Joel sauntered across the room, took Alexis’ hand, and drew her to her feet. “As long as Torin’s watching the rug rat ....”

Alexis frowned at him, but she didn’t resist when he draped an arm over her shoulder and began to herd her in the direction of their newly finished bed chamber.

William met them in the door, blocking it. “I sorta had in mind to christen the new room myself,” he drawled, folding his arms over his chest and meeting Joel’s challenging gaze with one of his own.

Alexis glanced uneasily from one man to the other.

Cohabiting had seemed like a good idea at the time, despite the fact that none of the men had been that thrilled with the idea. The fact was, though, that very few permanent structures had been completed yet and everyone that could packed in together to escape the misery of months of living in the huts that had been erected as ‘temporary’ shelter. Their ranks had swelled beyond anything that had been anticipated and there hadn’t even been enough temporary shelters at first because of the number of men Torin had brought with him. Added to that, once Alexis had finally confessed that she’d rigged the portals for remote access, Berl had led a raid to retrieve the women of their clan that

they'd had to leave behind. Alexis had only had to point out that she'd have to share the house with someone else and they'd decided to capitulate.

That didn't mean they had to actually get along, apparently. "What I was thinking," she said before they could shove her out of the way and come to blows, "was that there's a sexual position I've always wanted to try that I read about in my sex class—it was called a *ménage a trios*—meaning three."

William and Joel looked down at her doubtfully. She could see, though, that in spite of the anger simmering beneath the surface, they were also intrigued.

"Three?" they both asked, almost in unison.

She shrugged. "I can handle both of you. Of course, if you'd rather just fight with each other, I understand," she murmured, slipping between them and heading into the bedroom.

William caught up to her first, dragging her into his embrace and kissing her until she was weak kneed. "Sure you're up to this, Darlin'?" he murmured when he broke the kiss to explore her throat.

Surprise flickered through Alexis and then a shiver of excitement. She hadn't actually thought they'd take her up on it. "Mmmhmm," she murmured when she felt Joel move up behind her and stroke a hand over her buttocks.

Both men moved away after a moment and began undressing, watching Alexis as she pulled her own clothing off. It didn't her nearly as long to remove her jumpsuit, though, as it did them to remove weapons, boots, trousers, and tunics. She climbed onto the bed and lay on her side, watching them, a half smile on her lips.

They were two of the handsomest, strongest, bravest, smartest men in the whole world—next to Torin.

Guilt pricked at her for leaving him tending Pax, but he was so good at getting the baby to sleep.

Her mind drifted momentarily to the day Pax was born. She'd been afraid Torin would be disappointed that he didn't have the same distinctive markings as his father. There'd been a touch of both doubt and relief in his eyes when he'd looked up at her, though. "I'd hoped he'd look like you instead of me," he said tentatively.

Love had filled her heart. "I wanted him to look like his father," she said, looking down the baby with the same love she felt for his father. "He's such a handsome darling. You were made with love, weren't you, sweetie?"

She heard Torin swallow and glanced up to find his eyes on her face rather than the baby's. "He was."

Joel settled on the bed in front of her, commanding her full attention as he pushed her to her back and covered the peak of one breast with his mouth. Delicious jolts of heat traveled through her—guilty pleasure. She was glad she'd weaned Pax. It had been so long since her breasts had been fondled she'd almost forgotten how much pleasure it gave her.

Joel reminded her thoroughly before he moved lower, nipping at her belly.

William settled on the bed beside her and covered her mouth in a deep kiss just as Joel reached his goal and dragged a slow, wet kiss along her cleft with his tongue. She gasped into William's mouth, sucking on his tongue as Joel covered her clit with his mouth and began tugging and sucking at it.

It was hard to decide which delighted her more, William's mouth or Joel's as

William took up where Joel had left off and teased her breasts. Drunk with pleasure she simply focused on the feel of the hot pull of their mouths as they carried her swiftly to bliss. She was still gasping at the climax they'd given her when Joel dragged her on her side to face him.

He kissed her. "You're sure about this, Baby?" he murmured huskily.

She nodded dizzily as they positioned themselves, sucking in her breath and holding it as William pushed his cock slowly and carefully into her rectum until he was root deep. He sawed slowly in and out of her when he'd given her a few moments to adjust to the fullness.

Joel gathered the moisture of her pleasure on the head of his cock and began a slow claiming of her passage that had her panting for breath. Awkwardly at first, they began a rhythmic thrust and retreat that was beyond anything she'd ever imagined. Delicious heat swirled inside of her at the press of their bodies against her and inside of her. She groaned, frustrated that she couldn't move, had to lie still and allow them to control the depth and pace. As they grew more confident, or less in control, they began to move faster, pumping into her within a few moments so deep and hard she felt her body leap toward culmination. She moaned, squeezing her eyes tightly as she felt herself hovering on the brink and then pitching over the edge. She cried out at the force of it, gasping and shuddering.

Her cries, or the convulsions of her body around their cocks, sent both of them into paroxysms of pleasure, and they came on the heels of her climax, driving deeply and holding themselves still as they emptied their seed into her.

The three of them lay locked together for many moments afterwards, panting for breath. After a little while, almost reluctantly, William withdrew, rolled away from her and got out of the bed. Joel grunted, shuddering as she pulled away from him and rolled onto her back.

Torin dropped onto the bed in the spot William had vacated, planted a hand on Joel's shoulder and gave him a shove. Joel, caught off guard and too weak in the aftermath to put up a fight, rolled off the bed and hit the floor so hard it jarred the bed.

"Pax?" Alexis asked weakly.

"Asleep—Lucky's watching over him," he returned, settling an arm across her waist and dragging her close.

William, coming out of the bathroom, caught the exchange. "Bored him to sleep already?" he drawled.

Torin lifted his head and glowered at him.

"It's that noise he makes," Joel put in as he got to his feet. "Scares the tike so bad he faints."

Alexis struggled not to giggle. "I think Torin has a beautiful singing voice," she defended him.

Joel glared at Alexis and Torin a moment and finally turned and stalked from the room. "I'm taking the couch."

William shrugged, eyed Torin for a moment, and settled in Joel's spot.

Torin decided to ignore him, focusing on resurrecting Alexis' spent passion. Alexis resisted the urge to groan wearily, but found within a few moments that she was fighting the urge to groan with pleasure.

Remembering abruptly that the third climax was usually the very best, Alexis

began to focus more fully on his caresses, urging him to hurry and claim her. She groaned when he moved over her, entered her in a swift thrust that took her breath. Lifting her legs, she wrapped them tightly around his waist to open herself more fully to deep penetration. When the third eruption hit her it was everything she'd hoped, dragging keen cries from her as rode it all the way to oblivion.

She roused slightly to the stroke of a hand and discovered William had gathered her into his arms the moment Torin had rolled off to collapsed weakly on the bed.

Uttering a sigh of absolute contentment, she snuggled more fully against him.

"There's somethin' I always wanted to ask you," he murmured after a little, dredging her up from the verge of sleep.

"What?" she asked drowsily.

"That funny little, half scared look in your eyes in the lasergraph ...."

Alexis opened her eyes and peered toward the object in question, which had claimed a place of honor on the crooked mantel Torin had made for her with his own two hands.

"What were you thinking about?"

Alexis cudged her half conscious mind for the answer and finally sighed when she managed to dredge up the answer. "The frog DNA."

William stiffened and then began to chuckle. "I love you woman! I always have. I always will."

Alexis smiled.

The End