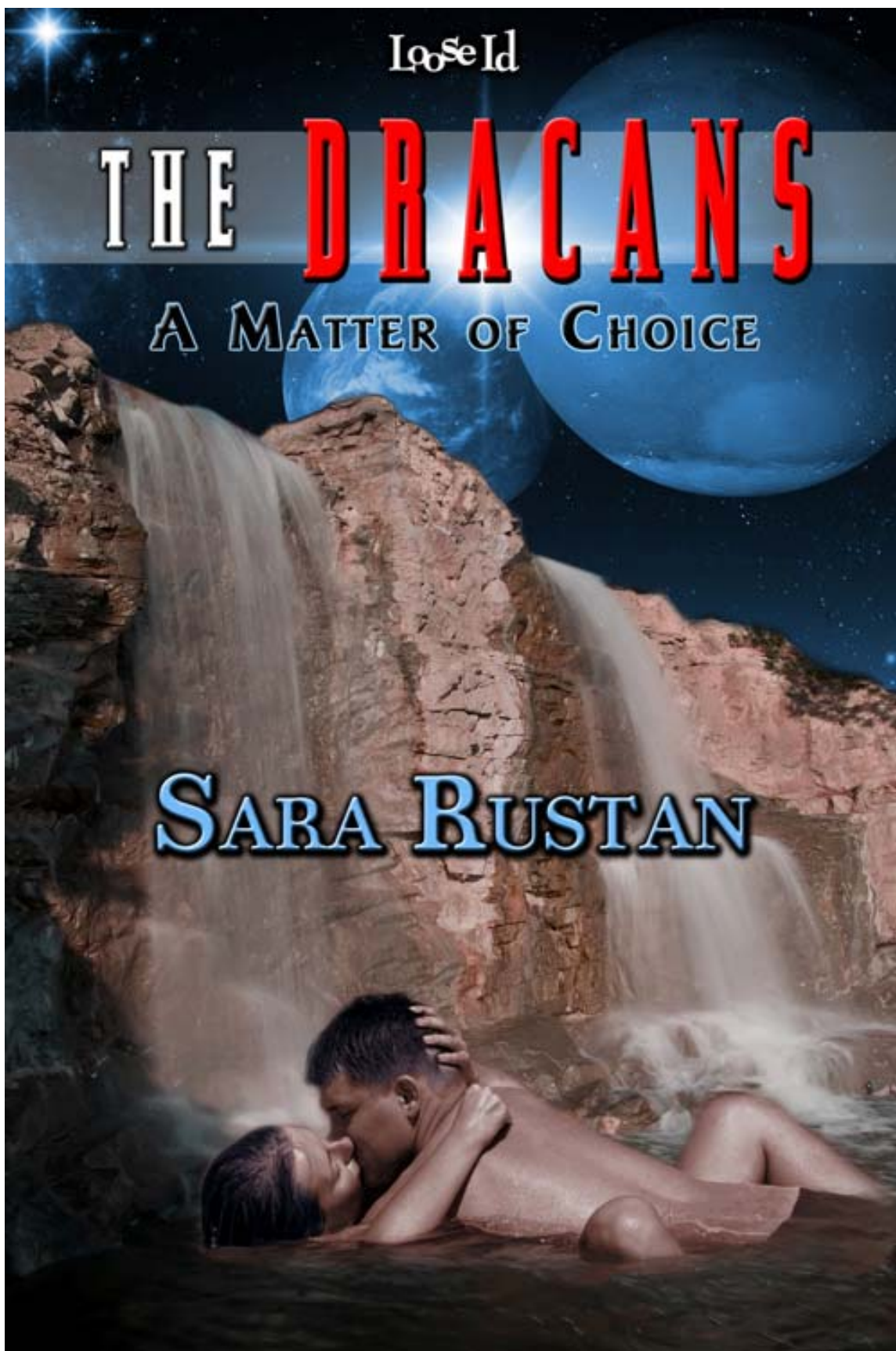


Loose Id

THE DRACANS

A MATTER OF CHOICE

SARA RUSTAN



THE DRACANS: A MATTER OF CHOICE

Sara Rustan

LooseId®

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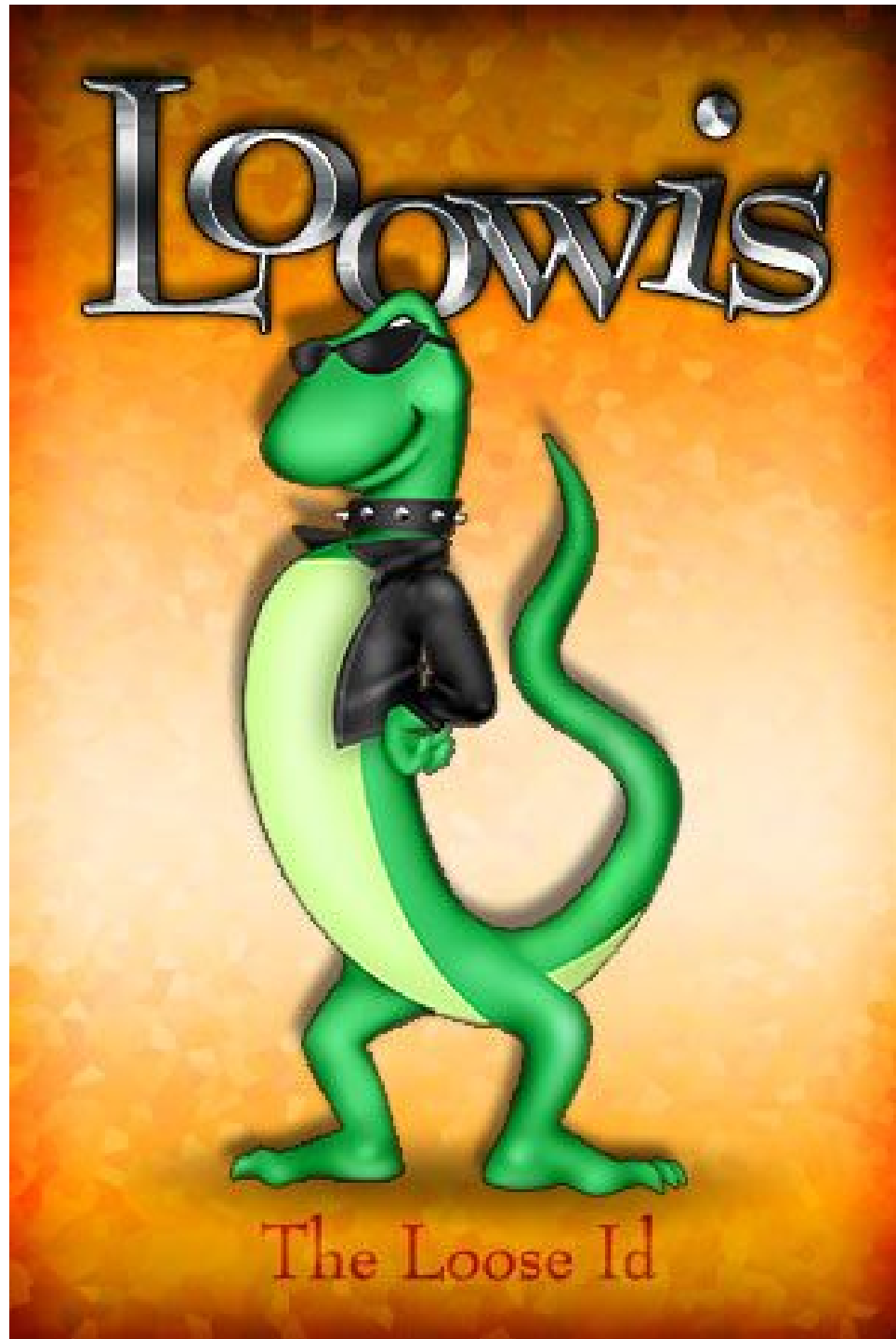
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Chapter One

It just figured. As soon as she decided to take a vow of celibacy, the hottest guy in this sector of the galaxy finally called. Ruliann jumped down from the surface transporter at the entrance to the wilding terminal, frustration lending her energy as she automatically weaved through the surging crowds.

When she had seen the note from Jonnath on her personal comp asking her to meet him here, her stomach dropped with a queasy mixture of fear and anticipation.

Their attraction six years ago had been instantaneous and overpowering, even though nothing had come of it. He had been fun to talk to, smart, and thoughtful of other people -- in addition to having a gorgeous body, sultry green eyes, and a just about perfect face. Then he had left.

Why did he have to come back to Draco Tertia now? And why did he want to see her, anyway? She couldn't believe that he wanted to pick up on their brief acquaintance of so long ago. Wouldn't he have kept in touch with her if he cared that much?

It wasn't as though they had been that close. They had never even had sex. Remembering *that* fact made her scowl even after such a long time. Six years ago she would have done about anything for the chance to --

No. She was *not* going to go there. That was all water under the dam.

She had almost skipped the rendezvous, reluctant to revive her old feelings, but sheer curiosity made her change her mind. She hadn't seen him in six years and wanted to know if he was still as attractive as ever. That was all.

She would just say hello, chat for a few minutes, and they would go their separate ways. More than likely he was just checking in with people to get back in the swing of things. As soon as he found out that she was joining the Plexanian order, he'd be gone faster than a fircat.

She made her way through the crowds of teenagers and their families preparing for the wilderyear. The departure terminal reeked of excitement and fear, mixed with the scents of leather and cerastic survival gear, and even the occasional whiff of arousal. Like healthy young animals, even when setting off on such a watershed trip the teenage Dracans were still thinking about sex. Judging from her own memories of being a teenage Dracan, it might be more accurate to say that they never *stopped* thinking about sex -- but she was older and staidier now. She wasn't even going to think about how long it had been since she'd had a boyfriend.

Ruliann had loved her wilderyear. She loved the challenge of living in the primitive wilderback without adult supervision, accompanied only by her peers. And she enjoyed the sexual experimentation typical of that year. After Dracans pairbonded, they could only have sex with their pairbonded mates. That tended to motivate young Dracans to explore as much as possible before settling down.

Like most young Dracan girls, she had expected to grow up and find a highly compatible man, someone to be *kiadrin* to her, someone with whom she would pairbond. She was Dracan, after all, and pairbonding and a highly developed sense of smell were designed into her genes.

But the years passed and the right person never showed up.

A young couple entwined in each other's arms near one of the exit gates gave off an intense scent of arousal. Passersby smiled on them, probably remembering their own early stages of pairbonding.

Ruliann just looked away. Something hard and lonely ached in her chest. None of her relationships had ever developed beyond the pleasant stage. When she met Jonnath the chemistry between them had been so strong. She couldn't help hoping that he would be the one.

She knew that he was attracted to her -- strongly attracted. That wasn't something that one Dracan could hide from another, since the hormones, pheromones and the smell of sexual arousal were obvious. But when he went off-planet to study, she abandoned her hopes for a relationship.

She had shrugged and tried to move on. Jonnath wasn't the only man out there. Surely one of the others would be her special match. But it didn't happen. Machika, her college roommate, provided support and encouragement -- and Ruliann adapted.

Her involvement in the Plexanian Sanctuary helped a lot. She found helping women in trouble rewarding.

Now Jonnath was back on Draco Tertia and wanted to see her. She had no claim on him, no right to expect anything. But it was going to be hard to see the man who had come closest to being her *kiadrin*. She wanted to stop hoping, stop wondering if this year she would meet someone -- so the idea of taking her vows drew her. It was a way to close out this chapter of her life and take control.

Dammit, why did he have to come back *now*?

The crowd in the terminal thinned out as she approached the cafe in a quiet corner of the central rotunda. At a table near the entrance she saw the outline of a familiar masculine figure, saw the shape of his shoulders, the powerful muscles in his thighs, and the wave of his thick chestnut hair. Her body clenched at the visceral impact of that recognition. She assumed she would have grown out of that immediate reaction.

Wrong again.

Taking a deep breath to relax herself, she inhaled a wisp of his distinctive scent. Damn. He still smelled incredibly good to her, too. Forget deep breathing; shallow breathing was required here. She needed to control herself. Letting Jonnath know how much he affected her was unthinkable. He had left her before, and she was committed to a life choice that didn't have room for him. She would *not* let him disrupt her life again.

With what she hoped was the pleasant social expression of a mere acquaintance, she moved toward his seat at the cafe table.

* * * * *

Jonnath detected Ruliann's unique combination of aromas and pheromones when she was halfway down the terminal, but he deliberately didn't look in her direction. His body was humming in anticipation, on high alert and eager for her presence. He knew his fantasies of the past six years weren't about to come true, but it was an intellectual knowledge. The rest of him could hardly wait.

He *had* to be in control of his emotions in order to convince her to give him a chance. If the trip from Epindrath to Draco Prime hadn't been enough time to prepare, he doubted that the next couple of seconds would do much good. But he couldn't help taking every nanosecond he could get.

When he had met her six years ago, he had been head over heels with wanting. But the attraction was too strong to indulge casually -- the risk of bonding was too high.

He had been committed to studying with the Epindrathi, and they wouldn't allow him to bring a mate. If Ruliann and he had pairbonded, he wouldn't have been able to leave her because pairbonding was a form of addiction, with severe withdrawal effects. It would have put an end to his ambitious plans to find a cure for his sister Sabriel's disability.

He had left with only a casual goodbye, while his heart wanted so much more.

There were good things about being a Dracan. Jonnath could hardly imagine being anything else. But some of the consequences of the pairbonding genes could really complicate life. At moments like this he almost wished he were standard human. Almost -- but not quite.

If things went perfectly, he would be able to pick up right where they had left off years ago. Their mutual attraction would be as strong as ever, and they would fall deeply in love. On the other hand, if things didn't go well ... Well, Ruliann might not even be speaking to him when this was over.

He had tried to plan for every eventuality. It was one thing he was good at -- planning. Before he met Ruliann he had made the perfect plan to help Sabriel. He had arranged everything, got all the complicated permissions, and committed himself to several years of study. But he hadn't expected Ruliann.

When he met her he hadn't known whether to rejoice or despair. His schedule had been too tight, left too little room for error. He couldn't fit her into it. So he had made a new plan, including coming back, finding her again, and being with her for the rest of his life.

He still wanted that, but his chance of succeeding didn't seem high right now, after what he had heard about her life and her decision to join the Plexanian order. He shook his head at his foolishness. With twenty-twenty hindsight, if he could do it over would he still leave? It was hard to say. Because he *had* come back with a solution, a cure for Sabriel. And that was worth a lot. He just hoped that he didn't have to give up Ruliann for it.

He could tell that she was close now -- her enticing aroma of gilly flowers and musk was stronger. Her fragrance flooded his senses. His body tensed as he prepared to resist the magnetism that he remembered.

He turned toward the entrance of the cafe and, when he saw Ruliann, breathed in hard. She was even more beautiful than his memory, her hair a shimmering blend of Dracan mahogany with scattered blonde and brown, her skin soft and touchable. And in addition to

being beautiful, she was warm and smart -- everything he had ever wanted in a woman. His body leaped in anticipation.

He had to succeed. He just had to.

Unfortunately for him her expression, though not unfriendly, was guarded. Somehow he would have to get through her defenses.

Holding out his hand, he smiled warmly. "Ruliann. It's been way too long."

"Jonnath, how good to see you. Have you finally finished your studies on Epindrath? Or are you just visiting?"

"I'm finished except for the final details of publishing my report. I came home unexpectedly to deal with a family emergency."

She settled herself on the chair opposite him and raised her eyebrows. "Your family? Is something wrong with Trellnor?"

He shook his head. "No, my immediate family is fine. This was a cousin you probably don't know." He waved his hand in dismissal of the cousin. The nonexistent cousin. Ruliann herself was the family emergency. "So tell me what's up with you. What have you been doing for the last few years?"

This was not the way he had envisioned meeting her at this point in his life. He had fantasized about this meeting over the last six years, and none of the fantasies included this kind of cool conversation between almost-strangers.

As they discussed what they had both been doing during the intervening years, Jonnath felt colder and colder as the old spark failed to leap between them. Sure, there had been that initial surge of attraction. But after that everything went flat.

His senses told him that she was not responding to him, her body and hormones were not tuning themselves to him, and he struggled to contain his disappointment. When they had first met, their arousal had been equal and immediate, each of them inspiring the other

in a perfectly choreographed dance of attraction. Something had changed and not for the better.

If they were no longer attracted to each other enough to bond, he would have to give her up in the end. But not without giving it his best effort.

They had reached the present in their recap of past history. She shrugged, clearly wanting to gloss over the details, and said, "So then I decided to join the Plexanian Order. I'm committed to their mission, and I can participate more fully in their community life if I live in the Order's enclave." There was a defensive note in her voice, as though she were girding herself against his objections. No doubt she had gotten plenty of that from her parents. Dracans were very family oriented. Her parents would not have been happy about this decision.

Jonnath leaned back. He was trying to be careful, even though it didn't come naturally to him. His normal tendency was to fasten on a goal, put his head down, and head straight toward it. But if he said the wrong thing ... He wanted to tell her she would be wasting her life, that she deserved so much more, but instead he merely asked, "What about a mate? A family?"

She shrugged. "It wasn't happening. It's not like it's a life sentence. The order doesn't lock up its members, you know."

"So, couldn't you have continued to work with their mission without actually taking vows?"

She scowled. "I didn't think you would be sympathetic. You are a man, after all."

The corner of his mouth crooked up in a half smile. "Well, yes. I am a man. I can't argue with that." It was time. He had to tell her now. "A man who had hoped ..." His mind worked furiously to figure out the best way to put this. He took a deep breath. All that he had was the truth. It would have to do. "A man who had hoped that there was something between us that we could explore, when the time was ripe."

Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed.

It wasn't looking good, but he kept going, making his voice as seductive and enticing as he could. "I had hoped that when I came back to Draco, if things were the same between us, that maybe ... that maybe we could think about getting together." Damn. He had blown it. He knew it. The expression on her face told him that.

"And you thought I would be just waiting around for you whenever it was convenient?" Her voice was rough with emotion. "How nice it must be to know that the world revolves around you." She straightened her shoulders and sat up straight. "But it can't have escaped your notice that things *aren't* the same between us. The old spark just isn't there anymore, is it?"

Her face was a bit white, and grim, and his Dracan senses told him that she was upset, probably angry. That acrid smell could cover a lot of emotional ground.

But it was so like Ruliann to face the issue head on. He'd always admired the way she charged right at something, without regard to the consequences. But just this once, he wished she could have joined with him in pretending things were the same. Maybe it was temporary; maybe it was due to ... to lack of contact. Hell, maybe there was some physical imbalance in one of them, something that could be fixed. He wouldn't give up his dream so easily. He had spent too many years imagining and fantasizing being with Ruliann.

His face felt like it was set in stone as he said, "I would like to give it a chance. Give *us* a chance." He saw the rejection in her face. "Put off joining the order. Please, Ruliann. Please," he said, his voice low. He didn't normally beg for anything, but for this he would make an exception. He'd do anything to have back the possibilities he'd walked away from six years ago.

"I'm sorry, Jonnath." She pushed her chair back from the table as though she were going to leave. "I've made my decision. I'm not going to change my mind for a mere whim, a nonexistent chance of something between us. It wouldn't work." Her lips pressed together in a hard line, and she said more softly, "And the failure would be devastating."

Jonnath held his breath briefly, then exhaled. He caught her gaze, holding it with firm intent. "I'm invoking *kiadra shinneth*, a formal challenge."

She slumped back in her seat, a look of incredulity on her face. "You're *what*?" She ran her hand through her hair. "In order to do that you have to ..." Her voice trailed off, and she shook her head as though to clear it. "You declared me *kiadra suth*? And left for six years?"

He shook his head slowly. "It wasn't supposed to be six years. I was so close, so many times, to having the complete solution, but there was always some missing piece. Ruliann, give me a chance; give me the challenge weeks. Let's see if there is still something between us."

"But, Jonnath, you have no competition." There was a hard, sarcastic note in her voice. "*Kiadra shinneth* doesn't apply."

He squared his shoulders, and kept his voice low and firm. "I'm afraid that it does. Taking vows with the Plexanian order is legally equivalent to marriage, so I have the right to object."

She narrowed her eyes. "So you think I'm going to go off and spend two weeks just hanging out with you, waiting for some lightning blast of attraction, just to see if we end up in a pre-bonding state? Not in this universe."

He looked at her, letting all his yearning show in his eyes. "We had something special six years ago. We could have something special again." He reached toward her. "I'm not asking you for anything but your time."

Ruliann stood up, pulled a few credits from her pocket, and tossed them on the table. "Tough. I'm not doing it."

Jonnath almost decided to let her go. It wasn't going to be easy to deal with her anger - or the prospect of hurting her with failure. But he was committed. He had to give this one last chance. "Wait, please." He stood and held out his hand to her. "Don't leave on this negative note. We were good friends once. Please. For old times' sake."

He could see the indecision on her face. She wanted to hold on to her anger, to use it to give her energy. But she was basically a warm, caring woman. Slowly, she held out her hand. “For the sake of our former friendship.”

His hand grasped her softer, smaller hand. He smiled at her apologetically and said, “I can’t let you go yet, you know.”

Her eyes drifted shut and she slumped to the ground.

Chapter Two

Ruliann gradually awoke, pulling herself out of the depths of sticky, sour-tasting sleep. Her eyes opened with a sluggish flutter, and she looked out into a bright, simply furnished room. A hand-sewn blanket covered her, and sunlight streamed in through a roughly hewn window, falling on a small braided floor covering.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, but when she opened them and looked again she was still in a bedroom just like the room she had lived in during her wilder year eight years ago. The last thing she remembered was Jonnath's smile, as everything went black around her.

Dammit. He had invoked *kiadra shinneth*. He must have drugged her and brought her here. How could he have done this to her? He could tell there was no spark between them as much as she could. And she wasn't going to change her mind. She didn't *want* to change her mind.

She was going to join the Plexanian Order and dedicate her life to helping troubled women, women whose relationships had turned bad -- and dangerous. It was irrelevant that she would probably have never made such a decision if things had worked out with Jonnath. That was then, this was now. She was different; he was different.

This cabin looked pretty much the same, though.

Her head pounding, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. She could see the yellow ochre of the wilderback hills through the window. She really was in the same cabin. She breathed in deeply and absorbed the familiar scent of clean, wild air free of the taint of civilization, with a touch of burning *bulong* chips, and ... yes, a hint of Jonnath. He had been here not long ago, but wasn't here now.

She ran a shaky hand through her hair. He must have transported her here in a flitter while she was unconscious. That explained his choice of meeting places. The wilding terminal was a convenient place to kidnap someone you were taking into the wilderness. He must have had this in mind all along. The sneaky, low-down rat.

When he left so suddenly, she assumed his attraction was much weaker than hers. She had been wrong about that, too. A tinge of warmth grew inside. Could she finally indulge her frustrated desire? Would it be worth the risk? In her imagination she felt the despair of finding nothing there, and she had her answer. No. She couldn't take the chance.

She had questions for him when he came back. Meanwhile, she needed water and a trip outside.

Tentatively, she stood on her feet, stretched, and tottered to the central room of the cabin. The room looked a lot like it had eight years ago, but many of the details were different. The curtains fluttering at the window were blue instead of red; the dishes were heavy brown ceramic instead of white cerastic. But it was the same room.

She had the peculiar feeling that instead of being transported here she had been in a time machine, and that the friends that she had lived with that year would walk in the door at any minute. Feeling a little silly, she glanced down at the chronocomp on her wrist just to make sure. When she saw that it was still the same day, she wasn't sure whether she was relieved or a bit sorry. If she could relive the last eight years ... No, she was pretty sure she didn't *want* to do that -- she'd probably make the same mistakes again, or even bigger ones.

She took a cup from the counter and went outside to the pump for fresh water. A breeze was blowing and the air was clear, the temperature just right. A month or two later in

the year it would be oppressively hot and muggy, but this was the best time of the year in central Tarang. She dashed some water on her face to clear the remaining cobwebs and settled on the wooden bench in front of the cabin.

The peace and quiet, the smells of the wilderness were soothing and restful after the plastic, high-tech life that she led in the city. But she had to think about Jonnath and what she would say to him about this arrogant interference in her life. She sighed and rubbed her temples with her hands. She so did not want to be here. Not here, not now.

It might have been different if she had felt the same explosive reaction to him that she had six years ago. Maybe there *was* something wrong with her. None of the men that she had met since Jonnath had sparked anything like the conflagration between them. Now nothing much was happening with him either.

She belonged in the Order. There, her blunted reactions would be a benefit, a positive feature, not a cause of distress and feelings of inadequacy.

The bench was comfortable, with stuffed cushions and a slanted back. As her headache gradually cleared away, she must have drifted asleep, because she jerked awake with the knowledge that Jonnath was close by. She could smell his unique, tasty fragrance, spicy with a touch of bitterness.

She turned toward the path that led to the river a short walk away and saw Jonnath striding toward her. Like the cabin, his figure was oh-so-familiar, yet different. He had filled out since the last time she had known him. Then, he had been strong but slender. Now, he was more solid, more substantial. He exuded an aura of authority and self-confidence. Though that wary expression on his face wasn't exactly full of confidence. It was true, he couldn't possibly know how she would react to this abduction. It's not like he knew her that well, after all. But any moron would know that she wouldn't be happy.

She lifted her chin and met his eyes as he approached. Anger at his interference in her life rose inside her. Anger at his arrogance -- and old anger that he had left her, left her alone for so long.

But, God, he looked good.

He stopped a few feet away and inspected her solemnly. “How are you feeling?”

She pursed her lips. “Fine, considering. What did you do to me, anyway?”

“A contact absorption drug.” He looked serious. “I’m sorry. I wish I hadn’t had to do that.”

Ruliann raised her eyebrows and snorted. “*Had to?* Yeah. Someone was twisting your arm to drug an old friend.”

“You were more than an old friend. You were ...” He paused, then caught her eyes. “You were *kiadra suth* to me.” His voice was soft but firm.

That’s right. He had declared her *kiadra suth*. He had been strongly enough attracted to her that he felt pairbonding was a real risk. So he had used an old Dracan custom and declared her *kiadra suth*, giving him the right to reports on her status from her family.

Emotions welled up in her, but damned if she could untangle them. He had declared her *kiadra suth* and then just left her for six years.

A tendril of joy that the attraction had been mutual mixed with indignant anger and despair at their nonexistent chances for bonding, since things were so different between them now. She closed her eyes for a minute, but could find no peace in her whirling thoughts. Leaning her head back against the cushions, she opened her eyes and looked at him. He met her gaze and just waited. The moment stretched out, but she still didn’t know how she felt.

Finally she asked, “Why? Why did you leave for so long?”

He sighed, an explosive gust of tightly-held breath, pulled up a *krellik* stump, and sat down. “You know about my sister Sabriel’s disability?”

“Sure. Her sense of smell is ... weak.”

“It’s more than weak. It’s bad enough that it’s difficult for her to participate in normal Dracan society. People make allowances; she gets by. But although she lacks the Dracan

sense of smell, she is Dracan in all other ways.” He paused, resting his chin on one hand. “But without the ability to lock in on the pheromonal messages, it’s impossible for her to pairbond.”

Ruliann frowned. “I thought the whole gene complex was inherited together, that it wasn’t divisible.”

“It’s not. Some of the enhanced sense of smell is a separate gene bundle, but since the pheromonal features are a requirement for the base, it all comes together. Sabriel was just the unlucky victim of a random genetic mutation.”

The poor girl. Sounded like her life ... was eerily similar to Ruliann’s own, at least in the lack of pairbonding. Except she knew that she didn’t have the same problem because of her original reaction to Jonnath. The living proof was sitting right in front of her. The self-centered, thoughtless, living proof. “So how is Sabriel’s problem connected to your absence?”

“I was determined to find some way to help her. She can have gene therapy to provide the missing genes, but without a real connection to her brain it does no good. The sense of smell in standard humans isn’t directly connected to the conscious brain; it goes through the unconscious. So there’s been very little research into creating the connections that Dracans need to the brain.”

Ruliann almost smiled at Jonnath’s technical lecture. He had always gotten excited by technology and engineering problems. It looked like that hadn’t changed.

He took a deep breath and continued, “Shortly before I met you, the Epindrathi accepted me as a student, the only non-Epindrathi allowed on Epindrath in the last fifty years. They aren’t very similar to standard humans, but they are a species that relies heavily on the sense of smell. And they had exactly the knowledge and technology that I needed to learn how to fix Sabriel’s problem.”

Ruliann thought back to that time, a few years after her wilderyear, when she and Jonnath had gone out. If only things could have taken a different path. “But why bother to declare me *kiadra suth* if you were going to be gone for six years?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be six years,” he said flatly. “The initial plan was for two years, maybe three. Then I would come back -- to you.” He took a deep breath, raising his shoulders and dropping them with a sharp exhalation. “But things kept coming up. There was one last detail that I had to nail, a twist on technology that I could have if only I could work with some new source.”

He shook his head. “Now, looking back, it seems ... foolish. Once I had the basics, I probably could have finished the work here. But I was getting the reports on you from your family, and you seemed to be doing fine, so I kept pushing off my departure. Ru, I’m so sorry.” His voice was soft and rough.

A rush of emotion flooded Ruliann’s eyes and the back of her throat with unshed tears. If only things could have taken their normal course. They might have been together for all of the last six years. She looked off over the hills of waving, golden grasses and nodded, blinking hard to keep the tears from falling. It was all she felt capable of doing.

“Ru, am I too late?”

Ruliann could hardly think; her emotions were swirling like waters receding from a heavy storm. She licked her lips and shook her head slightly, not in denial but in acknowledgement of her total confusion. Clearing her throat, she said quietly, “I don’t know, Jon, I just don’t know. I don’t even know if we’re *capable* of bonding.”

He heaved himself to his feet and moved to the door of the cabin, where he said, “Your family and work know where you are, and expect you to be gone for two weeks. But if you want to leave early, I can put up the flag anytime.”

He went inside and closed the door, leaving Ruliann to sort out her feelings alone in the quiet spring wilderness.

Chapter Three

After sitting by herself for a while, Ruliann finally gave up trying to figure out how she felt. She needed time -- and activity. Wandering around outside the cabin, she came across the vegetable garden, weedy and overgrown. She found a hoe inside the rough shed on the side of the cabin and started cleaning up the rows of plants. Some of the lettuces were already too old, but there was still more than enough for many days of salad. She even found perennial herbs that she had planted herself, eight years ago.

She had been right -- the activity did make her feel much better. She had always liked working in the garden. While she hoed and pulled weeds, her thoughts went around and around about Jonnath, about the Order, about what to do with her life. She had just gone through this same thought process when she had decided to join the Order, and it hadn't been much fun the first time. She viciously hacked away at a particularly large and woody weed.

Now Jonnath was making her go through the whole thing all over again. Even if there was some guarantee that they would bond -- which there *wasn't* -- would she want to? She hardly knew him. All she really knew was that six years ago they had been overpoweringly attracted, and that she had really liked him, enjoyed being with him, enjoyed talking to him.

But did they want the same things out of life? She had no idea. She didn't even know if he wanted children or if he was going to stay on Draco Tertia now that his project was done. She tossed the weeds onto a pile to compost and moved onto the hayberry bed.

After spending more than hour in the garden, she was hot and sweaty. Jonnath was still inside, so she took the path down to the stream, stripped off her clothes and sat in the shallow but sparkling water and let it run over her hot, itchy skin. Enough of the agonizing. Enough of thinking through the same things over and over again.

She would try to take things as they came, to relax and think of this as a vacation. She took a deep breath and concentrated on being present in her body, paying attention to the physical sensations and letting go of her tedious thoughts.

Water flowed over her skin, little fish tickled, a breeze blew over her damp face. Insects buzzed, birds called, small animals rustled in the brush. And the fresh, clean smells of the wilderness filled her -- green plants, moist organic earth, dried leaves, rotting wood. What she noticed most of all, though, were the missing smells of civilization. There was no oil, plastic, metal; no concentrated smells of masses of human bodies.

Finally cooler both physically and emotionally, she returned to the cabin and quietly entered. Jonnath, working in the kitchen area, greeted her briefly and continued preparing dinner. They didn't talk much as they set the table and ate. While they were eating, the sun went down. They sat at the table talking like strangers of things they had done during their wilderyears, and listening to the chirping of the insects and calls of the birds. Neither of them brought up their relationship or mentioned any plans.

When Jonnath started a fire in the fireplace, Ruliann went through the bag that he had brought for her. There were clothes and toiletries, but she didn't find a supply of the tonic that she normally took every day. Well, it wouldn't hurt to go without vitamins for a few days -- or weeks. She got out a vial of the compound that she kept in her handbag and emptied it into a glass of water. She was stirring it with a spoon, when Jonnath stood up abruptly and said, "Stop." His voice was oddly tense, and she looked at him curiously.

In a few strides he was next to her. “What *is* that?”

“It’s just a tonic that my friend Machika prepares for me,” she said impatiently. What in the world was he getting so weird about?

He took the glass from her and waved it underneath his nose. His eyes narrowed and he said flatly, “Your *friend* has been drugging you. This contains a libido and bonding suppressant.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “That’s impossible. You must be wrong. She wouldn’t do that.”

He growled, “She *is* doing that.” He touched the tip of his finger to the liquid in the glass, and flicked the wet finger with his tongue. “There’s absolutely no doubt. When did she start making potions for you?”

Ruliann thought back. It was the month after Jonnath had left. She had been unhappy and depressed, dissatisfied with her latest date -- who hadn’t measured up to Jonnath. Had she wished she didn’t have to go through the upheaval? Because she remembered Machika saying she would make her a potion that would make her feel better. No. Could she have thought ...

There was grim satisfaction on Jonnath’s face. He had seen in her face that she had remembered *something*. But how could she take his word against that of her best friend? It’s not as if he didn’t have motives of his own. Though what he would get out of accusing Machika ... Ah. It would put her decision to join the order in question. She didn’t want to believe that he would do such a thing -- but she didn’t want to believe this ... this *wrong* of Machika, either.

She took the glass and sniffed it herself. “I don’t smell anything but vitamins.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why do you think there’s something else in it?”

He breathed out noisily in impatience. “You know the last six years that I’ve spent on Epindrath? Well, a big part of that time I’ve spent learning how to improve someone’s sense of smell. In doing that, my own sense of smell has been so highly trained that my ability

exceeds the normal Dracan ability as much as the normal Dracan ability exceeds the standard human.” He crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter, emphasizing the muscular breadth of his chest. “Believe me, I *know* what’s in that potion.”

She raised her eyebrows. “But *I* don’t.”

Frustration crossed his face. “We’re in the middle of the wilderback. What proof would you accept?”

She shrugged. “What proof do you have?”

He took a deep breath and drummed his fingers on the counter, looking around the room as though the answer would jump out at him. His gaze fell on the duffle near the second bedroom, and he smiled. “That’s it.”

“What? You packed a substance analyzer to bring along?”

“No, but it’s almost as good. I have the feedback training device that I constructed for Sabriel.” He rummaged through the bag, pulled out a small electronic device with smell and taste outputs, and turned it over in his hands. “It will help you detect the drug yourself.”

Now that was interesting. She sat down next to him on the floor and peered closely at the small object. “How could it do that?”

“It’s a training device. It helps the conscious mind label and recognize subtle differences in hormones and pheromones, particularly those that Sabriel needs to help her deal with Dracan mating -- including the ones that are in that potion. You don’t have a disability, so it should be able to help you recognize them more quickly.”

She frowned and reached out to touch it gingerly with her finger. “You made this?”

“Yes. With Epindrathi technology.” He held it, looking at it reflectively. “This is the culmination of my six years with them.” He looked up at her. “You do remember that I graduated early with a degree in virtual reality engineering, right?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, of course I remember that. We met at your graduation party.”

“Well, this uses my engineering knowledge and the Epindrathi smell training techniques.” He smiled. “I’m quite proud of it, actually. It will enable people like my sister to live a normal -- Dracan normal -- life.”

“What will it do to me?”

The side of his mouth quirked. “It doesn’t change you in any way, unless you consider learning something new a change.”

“But how does it work?”

“One of the reasons -- though not the only one -- that it’s so hard to learn subtleties of fragrance as an adult is that we don’t have a vocabulary to label the perceptions. Sure, Dracans have more words than standard humans. But I found that it’s not enough. I had to create a whole new vocabulary.

“This device, connected to a comp, will teach you the vocabulary for the substances that you recognize, then break it down into adjectives and adverbs of smell. It should only take an hour for a Dracan of normal ability to learn to recognize the substances in your tonic.”

“How can I trust what it teaches me?”

“Well, if you don’t trust your own senses, I don’t know how I could convince you of anything.” His voice was mildly exasperated.

She sighed. “You have a point.”

“So?”

“OK. I’ll do it.”

Jonnath set it down next to the comp and tapped away. “I need to tell it what learning sequences to go through. You’ll need the Dracan hormonal/pheromonal base, plus a few categories of ...” He frowned. “You know, it really is hard to talk about this with a limited vocabulary. Just call it *more*, and we’ll leave it at that.”

The nose device was like the VR devices that gave you stim-surround sensory impressions. The computer started droning away. An hour later, Ruliann removed the devices and turned off the comp. She had passed the final test on hormone/pheromone recognition. And learned an interesting new vocabulary.

Jonnath entered the room. How strange. He smelled ... *sheltie*, *ramly sheltie*. She tried to think instead of the words that she would have used before -- anxious, but not overwhelmingly so? But the old words lacked something. They didn't seem right, or accurate. Aack. These new words were going to be useful -- or maybe just distracting. Having words that nobody else -- except Jonnath -- knew, wouldn't exactly help communicate with other people.

His eyes met hers, his eyebrows raised. "So?"

She breathed in deep and exhaled with a heavy sigh. "I went through it. I think it worked. Now what?"

"Do you have any more of the concentrated potion?"

"Yes." She reached into her bag and pulled out a small case. She snapped it open and pulled out a small blister vial. "But this is the last one."

"Break it onto that plate, and bring it to your nose."

When she breathed next to the small puddle, a flood of impressions swept over her. There were vitamins and minerals and antioxidants and -- a substance that was an analogue for several of the hormones involved in arousal. Except that the substance was *jellian* and *shlack*. It would lock into the receptors and prevent normal activity.

Jonnath was right. God. She had been so involved in the process of smelling and identifying the substance that she had almost forgotten what it would mean.

Her friend Machika, her closest friend, had been drugging her for almost six years. And her lack of reaction to Jonnath wasn't her *fault*.

She dropped the plate on the counter, where it clattered and spun a bit, like a top. Then she raised her eyes to Jonnath's grave face.

"You were right."

"I'm sorry."

She ran her hand through her hair, shaking her head. "I'm going outside. Come with me?"

Jonnath reached out, checking her face for her reaction, then wrapped his arms around her. She rested her head on his shoulder. She started to shake. "How could she have done this to me? How? No wonder nothing ever worked out with any of the men that I went out with."

His arms were warm and comforting, his body solid and substantial. But she didn't want to give him reason to expect ... But Machika ... Was her whole decision to join the Plexanian order based on a *lie*?

She pulled away from him and turned back to the counter. She picked up the glass with the tonic and the plate and dropped them both into the pan of soapy water just as Jonnath cried, "Wait!"

She looked at him and raised her brows in question. "What?"

He leaned back against the counter, shaking his head. "Too late now." He looked up at her. "Do you know what's going to happen when that wears off?"

"Uh, no."

"How long have you been taking it?"

"Probably six years."

"It was never intended for long-term use. It's designed to get people with broken pairbonds through the worst of it, and then it's tapered off."

"So what will happen to me?"

He took a deep breath. "You are going to be so ... aroused that you're going to *need* to have sex. A lot."

Ruliann closed her eyes in disbelief, then opened them again. "You're kidding?"

He shook his head.

"You're not kidding."

"There was an incident -- oh, about twenty years ago -- where young people in a certain wild circle took the drug for a month, then stopped cold turkey -- and staged an orgy."

She cleared her throat. "An orgy?"

"Yes." His voice was grim. "Unfortunately a couple of charges of rape also came out of it, so the whole idea got a very bad rap."

"So you're saying that I might *rape* you?"

Jonnath snorted. "I don't think that would be possible. I'd have to be unwilling in order to call it rape." He looked at her from the corner of his eye, his head tilted to the side. "It explains why things weren't the same between us, you know."

He was right -- and it was the best news she'd had in a long time, but it was too much to deal with right now. She just shook her head and headed for the door leading to the outside.

It was dark outside. The stars sprinkled the sky with myriad points of cold light, and a sharp breeze reminded her that winter wasn't long over. She flopped on her back on the cushy moss that grew in the open expanse in front of the cabin, and Jonnath sat down next to her. Just knowing that soon -- maybe even tomorrow -- they might be having sex, made her intensely aware of his body next to hers. The hormones might not exactly be in working order yet, but even without that she could admire his firm muscles and other body parts, and imagine doing things she hadn't done in way too long.

She stared up at the stars. "There's the Jaguar constellation. It was up in the sky when I was out here last."

"You never came back after your wilderyear?"

"No. I kept intending to. But there was always something that needed to be done, something important to take care of." She paused. "Like the way you stayed on Epindrath instead of coming home." She sighed. "I guess both of us were shortsighted. Thanks for bringing me back here. At least I get a vacation out of this."

Jonnath picked up her hand and rubbed her fingers against his lips, then moved her hand to his lap, where he held it warmly in both hands. Was that the beginning of a tingle between her thighs? Was her skin sparkling? How foolish -- it was way too soon to feel the withdrawal effect. What was going to happen would happen. She just had to go with the flow. And it felt good to have him hold her hand.

"You need to decide whether you want to raise the medical flag. In the circumstances, I can't ask you to give me my two weeks." His voice sounded like he was trying hard to be the perfect, considerate gentlemen.

Her gaze slid to the side. "Well, a couple of weeks of hot sex with you wouldn't exactly be torture."

He smiled down at her. "No, it wouldn't be torture at all. But the chances of bonding would be high. Very high." He brushed her hair back from her forehead. "Do you want to take that chance?" Though his voice had a surface calmness, there was an underlying note of tension that told her that this was important to him.

What *did* she think about that? Bonding. She had hoped one day ... But what about the order? She had made a commitment. Well, not the final commitment. But did she want to bond from an accident of ... of chemistry? What about choice? Of course it wasn't as though Machika had respected her ability to choose.

She didn't know. She couldn't decide. Not now. Jonnath was waiting very patiently for her response. She breathed in deeply. "I don't know. Please, let's just stay here for now. Tonight. Maybe tomorrow. When I see how I feel ..." Her voice trailed off.

Jonnath sighed. "Okay. We'll play it by ear." He pressed his lips against her hand, dropped it, and stood up. "The water in the solar shower should be pretty warm. As the *guest* --" She could hear the ironic smile in his voice. "-- you have first dibs."

Ruliann took one last look at the velvety dark sky sprinkled with stars. Tomorrow she would walk up the hill behind them and just sit, looking out over the plain. Tonight she would get some rest. It sounded as if she might be needing it.

She looked at the dark outline of Jonnath's figure between her and the flickering light from the cabin's fireplace, and she remembered how much she had wanted him. Surely she could have a taste. Just a taste.

Chapter Four

The next morning Ruliann was rummaging through the contents of the cupboard, checking out the provisions. It had the usual supplemental rations guaranteed to never go bad -- and never taste good, either. It looked like Jonnath had also brought along some tastier food, fruits and containers of preserved meat and spices. She selected one of her favorite pastries, flaky with bits of nuts and creamy paste inside, crisp crust on the outside. Had he remembered that it was a favorite of hers? A smile spread over her face. It would be nice to have someone who cared about her preferences, to whom she was special, cherished and unique.

She heard Jonnath's steps outside on the stone path. He entered the room and it felt smaller and darker, just from his vitality and presence. He was holding a bucket, the kind used to carry fish from the pond, and the scents of the stream and the flowering jimsa came in with him. His dark eyes were smiling cautiously at her. He must still be unsure of his welcome. Ruliann opened her mouth to give him a friendly greeting, when the breeze from the open door blew more of his unique scent to her.

He smelled like all of her favorite foods rolled into one: chocolate and cream and laren fruit. She wanted it, wanted him, wanted to roll herself in that enticing smell. Her eyes met

his, and things in her lower body clenched as tendrils of his arousal reached her. Moisture grew between her legs, and her skin felt too tight.

His eyes heated, and his smile grew slowly. He took a step toward her, setting the bucket onto the table with careful precision. Another step and she was trapped against the counter, as much by the melting heat inside her as by his body.

His face was poised inches from hers, the ridge of his cock against her belly, and she could hardly decide which source of tasty fragrance to explore first -- his mouth or the damp, tender skin of his neck. Her brain was barely functioning and her body was almost paralyzed with the overwhelming sensations, so it was good that he took the decision out of her hands by bending the slight distance closer and delicately stroking her lips with his tongue. The taste of him astonished her, so rich and deep, so addictive and arousing.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and bonelessly sagged against his body, all of her attention fastened on his mouth and the throbbing where she pressed against his erection. His tongue slipped into her mouth, and she moaned. She sucked and swallowed, pursuing him with her tongue, trying to get more of his succulent taste.

Jonnath pulled back a few inches, and looked down into her half-closed, heavy-lidded eyes. He murmured, "I see the drug has worn off." He ran a finger down the side of her face and across her sensitive, swollen upper lip.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she forced them open again. "Yeah. You could say that." Was her brain running on only one neuron? Because it sure felt like almost all of it had defected to the part that was going *sex, sex, sex*.

He breathed in deeply as though the air was a precious wine vintage, his appreciation for the rich stew of hormones, pheromones and fragrances written all over his face. "The bedroom. Shall we move to the bedroom?" His hand tugged her in that direction.

A wave of unexpected panic roared over her, like cold water on an ocean beach. She wanted to have hot sex with Jonnath. She did, she really did. But even though she had more

or less known what was going to happen since last night, that wasn't long enough to rearrange the habits and feelings of six years. It had been so long ...

Pulling away from him, she edged toward the door. "I ... I need a little while to ... get used to ... I'm going to hike up the hill. I'll see you later." She smiled weakly, apologetically.

He grinned back, his face looser and freer and somehow younger. He was clearly happy at her new response. "Sure. Take your time." His voice dropped a bit, became more husky. "I'll be waiting when you get back."

Ruliann turned and rushed out the door. Part of her wanted to jump on him, to get as close as possible and explore these feelings, but another part of her just wasn't ready. That part needed a few minutes, a few hours -- hell, maybe a few *months* -- to get used to the idea.

She had spent a long time worrying about her sexuality, wondering whether there was something wrong with her, wondering if she would ever have a real relationship. Now she could put all of that behind her. Enormous relief soaked through her, mixed with anticipation -- both physical and emotional. Soon, really soon -- in the next few hours -- she would be having sex with Jonnath. Hot, carnal, juicy sex. Her mind and emotions could hardly comprehend it.

Last year's leaves crunched under her feet as she worked her way up the steep hill behind the cabin. The thickets of sharling fronds were bright green now, but would turn yellow and scarlet later in the year, when she wouldn't be here to see them.

The sheer physical labor of walking uphill made her conscious of her body, including the moist throbbing between her legs and the tight buds of her nipples, so ready for attention, for a wet tongue and tormenting fingers. Jonnath had told her she would be horny, but it had been so long she had almost forgotten the reality -- and she couldn't remember ever feeling so aroused.

Her breathing was heavy by the time she reached the summit, and it wasn't all due to sexual arousal. She must remember to exercise more back in the city. She was supposed to

think about going back to the city later. But in her current state, it was hard to even consider the idea. If she went back now, who would be there to help her through this? Sure, there were plenty of younger men in that stage of promiscuous exploration common to young Dracans, but most of her friends were pairbonded or settling into a relationship -- or else she couldn't conceive of sharing casual sex with them.

The idea of hot sex with Jonnath was much more attractive. Her body was throbbing and aching at the mere thought.

She looked restlessly around her. Her plan to just sit there and enjoy the beautiful, serene view seemed like a bad idea now. She didn't *want* to sit and think. She wanted to undress Jonnath slowly, running her tongue over every gorgeous inch of his solid muscles, touching him, having him touch her.

No, sitting still was not an option. She wasn't going to head right back to the cabin and beg Jonnath for sex right now, because she wasn't *quite* ready, so she needed vigorous exercise to take her mind off other parts of her body, off Jonnath's body.

She headed down the hill away from the cabin. This was the path to a waterfall and the small, deep swimming hole at the bottom of it. The proverbial cold shower -- that's what she needed. And the brisk hike wouldn't be bad either.

Halfway there, her rusty wilderness skills started coming back to her. She concentrated on walking silently along the overgrown path, making as little noise as possible. One of the reasons for the wilderyear was for Dracans to keep in touch with their animal nature, the ability to survive without reliance on the infrastructure of civilization.

There was a wild streak running through the Dracan people. The progenitor of their race had designed it in, believing that exercising the part of human nature that was close to other animals led to greater satisfaction. Ruliann had no idea whether she was right or not, but she had missed being alone in the vast expanses of the continent that were preserved for that purpose.

The waving of the thick grasses down the hill warned her that an animal was passing by, and she stopped in the shade of the tree to watch. It was a fircat, a solitary cat rarely seen in company. But it *was* spring.

She looked around, careful not to move suddenly or catch the cat's attention. There, over by the stump on the other side of the small valley. There was a female cat, with the brown speckled coat of the fircat female. They both settled down to groom their coats in an elaborate display of inattention. She rolled her eyes. So typical of fircats, so independent that it was hard for them to give it up, even for mating.

Well, she didn't have all day. Somebody was waiting for *her*, back at the cabin -- even if she was currently delaying the encounter. She moved out from under the tree. The cats startled and disappeared into the undergrowth so quickly it was hard to believe they had ever been there.

It seemed to be the day for big cats. She was almost to the waterfall, when she stepped around a rocky ridge and saw two Dracan jaguars rolling and playing in a grassy clearing. Their glossy black fur glistened in the sunlight as they pounced and swatted and nuzzled each other. They were one of the experiments the geneticists had done while developing the Dracan pairbonding complex, uncommon but protected by Dracan law.

They looked happy. A pang of envy for their togetherness and the simplicity of their lives went through her. Why did everything have to be so complicated? She wanted Jonnath, he wanted her.

How could she go through with the vows to the Order, now that she knew that the decision was based on a lie? She couldn't. Now that she knew why her relationships had never worked out, she had new hope for the future. Everything was different. But rejecting the order didn't *necessarily* mean accepting a pairbond with Jonnath. She didn't even know him very well. How could she make such an irrevocable decision? A pairbond would tie them together physically, a much tighter bond than a simple marriage ceremony.

The secluded pool glittered ahead, an oasis of cool blue in the increasingly hot mid-day sun. Her nipples were rigid buds, moisture was pooling between her thighs. It was going to be a long, *hot* day. She pulled off her shirt and stepped out of her pants, eager to plunge into the refreshing water.

* * * * *

Jonnath took one last swing at the log he was cutting into wood for the fire. He grabbed the rag he had hooked into his waistband and wiped the sweat away from his eyes. When would Ruliann come back?

Her reaction to him this morning was everything he had hoped, the best news he'd had since returning to Draco Tertia. He could hardly wait to touch her, plunge into her softness. His cock swelled at the thought. He buried the axe in the log and headed into the cabin.

The wisps of her scent hanging in the static air of the cabin took him unaware. Damn. You'd think it was him that was coming off six years of suppression drugs, he was so aroused. The simple rubbing of his loose pants on his half-erect cock was excruciatingly irritating.

He would have liked to strip to his bare skin. It was pretty common in the wilderness for people to wear minimal or no clothing. But he didn't want to make Ruliann more wary. Greeting her at the door naked and erect might well be interpreted as just a tad aggressive. It would certainly look like he was taking sex with her for granted. And god knows women never liked being taken for granted.

But she did intend to have sex, didn't she? He frowned in sudden, irrational fear. When she said "play it by ear," wasn't sex implied? Would she think that he was taking advantage of her drug withdrawal? Then he remembered her words from last night. She had seemed to think that sex with him was a good thing. He had to stop being so jumpy -- but the anticipation was getting to him.

He had filled the tank on the roof with fresh water, pumped up with sheer manpower. He had cleaned the cabin -- what little there was to clean. He had laid out bread and meat

for sandwiches and made a salad, sitting covered in the root cellar in the side of the hill in back of the cabin. If she didn't show up soon ...

He was acting like a youngling on his first date. This was foolish. Where had she gone to, anyway? Was she avoiding him? She had left hours ago. He couldn't just hang around here waiting.

He made the sandwiches and wrapped them in a napkin, put them in a backpack, flung a tightly woven wool blanket over his shoulder and set off up the hill. It was probably difficult for her to show up, looking for sex. It would only be kind to take the pressure off her. How convenient that kindness would take him exactly where he wanted to be.

When he got to the top he looked around, paying little attention to the undulating hills turning purple in the distance. Examining the ground closely, he saw some broken twigs going toward the waterfall. He sniffed, trying to detect her scent. There was a fresh breeze blowing, but he could swear the impression of Ruliann was heavier in the direction of the waterfall, too.

Well, if she wasn't there, he could just have a cool dip himself and go home. No harm done.

Hiking up the final hill, he couldn't yet see the waterfall, but he knew she was there. Her enticing female scent inundated his senses. His cock was suddenly rigid and ready, and he adjusted his pants, allowing it to spring up, making a tent of the loose cloth. If she was swimming, he was going to be out of his clothes so fast, she'd miss it if she blinked.

Then he turned the final corner of the path and the waterfall and pool were right there -- and Ruliann's naked body, framed by the roaring water pouring over the cliff. Her face was turned up into the spray, her eyes closed. He forgot all about his clothes as his hungry gaze soaked up the curve of her ass, the rounded weight of her breasts, the expanse of soft, wet skin.

His heart pounded in anticipation, and blood poured into his loins. This was paradise. After six long lonely years, here he was with the woman of his dreams and fantasies, about to get extremely, magnificently lucky.

He dropped the backpack and the blanket where he stood, pulled off his shirt, and untied and dropped his pants. The breeze was cool on his overheated skin. Ruliann couldn't have heard him because of the pounding of the waterfall, but she turned around and looked straight at him.

He strode toward the water, his gaze glued to her face. She smiled, a seductive yet hesitant smile, then her eyes dropped to his fully erect cock. Her face flushed with pink and she licked her lips. His erection grew even harder -- so hard it throbbed. He waded into the pool and bent forward to glide through the water. Even the sudden shock of the cold water wasn't enough to soften him. He was pretty sure that nothing except burying himself inside her, over and over again, was going to make this erection go away.

Something told Ruliann that Jonnath was close, probably some scent too light to reach conscious awareness, and she turned to see him undressing on the edge of the pool. The steady background ache between her legs that she'd been resisting all morning turned into overpowering need. The water falling onto her hot skin from the waterfall was just more stimulation. Even the *breeze* was making her nipples into hard little buttons.

Part of her was nervous, but it was outvoted -- strongly outvoted -- by the rest of her. Thank the Goddess he had followed her up here, because she did *not* want to walk all the way back to the cabin without release. Was it possible for the human body to spontaneously combust? Because she felt hot enough to burst into flames. Her skin was hot; her nipples were hot; her pussy was hot -- hot and wet and aching.

She half closed her eyes and breathed in deep, savoring the complex bouquet of maleness moving toward her. Nobody had ever smelled so good to her; nobody had ever looked so good.

She opened her eyes wide as he stepped up the rocks out of the water, his muscles flexing as he casually shook the water off his face. His abs were firm, his waist smooth. His ass made her hands twitch to cup and caress those tight buns.

His cock was pointing right at her, dark and rock-hard against his paler skin, and his eyes were dark with desire. His gaze drifted over her body, and her skin prickled in awareness.

She could feel the heat roll off his body; they were surrounded by the scent of arousal. The clouds of hormones and pheromones were euphoric, aphrodisiac drugs, winding both of them to a high pitch of need. Her pussy throbbed, her nipples ached, and moisture was pooling between her legs. Even her lips felt swollen and hot.

Finally. After six years of boring, unsatisfying sex, she was going to have the real thing -- and with Jonnath, fulfilling all her old fantasies.

His hands reached toward her but stopped a short distance from her skin, as though stroking her aura. Electricity shimmered across her skin. He licked his lips and rumbled softly, "So, my *kiadra* ..."

The possessiveness and seduction in the way he said that word made her heart beat harder in her chest, made the last splinters of the cold inside her melt. She tilted her head slightly, and raised her eyebrows in question. Why was he talking instead of touching her?

His green eyes were steady on hers. "So, my *kiadra*, do you accept this? Do you want this, want me?" He moved his hands down her form -- but an inch away, the closeness, the almost-touching tantalizing her senses.

She took a deep breath. "Yes." The word came out soft and rough. She cleared her throat. "Yes," she said clearly, firmly. "I want you -- as you know perfectly well." There was a grumbly note in her voice.

His lips twitched. "Well, yes, I *do* know that." His voice deepened. "But you still have a choice. I want to make sure you know that, make sure there are no regrets later."

“Enough of being a gentleman,” she said impatiently. “Would you fuck me, *please?*” She raised her eyebrows. “Is that clear enough for you?”

He nodded, pretending to consider the question. “Yes, I think that’s clear enough.”

His hands touched her hot skin, and her arms slid around his neck, drawing his lips down to her. A bolus of scent and taste overwhelmed her senses. More, closer, harder.

His hands grasped the curves of her ass and pulled her against the hard heat of his cock. Their tongues tangled together; she sucked down his heady taste, all male, all Jonnath, all hers. Her wet body was pressed against his, and where they touched the heat grew, as though they were melting together.

She slid one hand down his hot, slick skin, over the taut muscles of his ass, then around to grasp the velvety steel of his erection. His tongue was thrusting into her mouth, flooding her senses with his unique, rich taste, while her hand was circling the broad head and stroking up and down on his shaft. Her hand couldn’t even fit around the width as she rubbed him against her wet skin, swallowing his moans and uneven breaths into her mouth.

Her nipples rubbed against his chest, and her hips rotated against his, searching for more -- more stimulation, more arousal, more of him.

Jonnath pulled a little away from her and looked around. She took advantage of the space to slide down and flutter a nipple with her tongue. He groaned and pressed against her hand on his cock. She squatted lower and circled the broad purple head with her tongue, lapping up the salty liquid oozing from it. Concentrated sex, that’s what he tasted like. In the middle of one of his own moans, he gave her a little tug, and she looked up at him while running her tongue up and down.

His eyes were heavy-lidded, his face thick with passion. “Sweetheart, do you want to have sex here or move across the pool to someplace less rocky and wet?”

Break contact with all of this tasty male flesh just to move somewhere more comfortable? Not on her life. “No.”

With a brief shake of her head at his foolishness, she slid up his body and dived back into his intoxicating mouth. She had never tasted anything so good. She probably would never taste anything so good ever again, because that had to be impossible. So the plan was to get it while the getting was good.

His fingers gently pulled and twisted and tormented her nipples, sending bolts of electricity to that place between her legs, melting what wasn't melted already, heating her like you heat candy until you get it to the point where sugary liquid turns into sweet confection. She wasn't just a sweet confection, she was a sweet confection that was going to explode unless someone touched her *right there*, there where she needed to be touched, that little bundle of concentrated nerves.

She reluctantly released his cock, but only to pull herself up with both arms so that she could rub herself against the hard ridge of his erection. That friction felt so good, but it also drove the ache in her pussy. She needed more, she needed him in her *now*.

One of his hands slid down her waterfall-damp skin, to that place that was wet with her own waterfall, where her juices were flowing. His fingers slid over and around and about and over and around her clit, the spot that was the center of her attention and yearning. Her breathing deepened, her juices coated his hand, and he thrust two fingers into her sheath. She shuddered and her concentration narrowed to her pussy.

And his taste and smell and the touch of his skin and his fingers on her clit and inside her were enough to kick her over the top. The candy crystallized suddenly and sweetly; muscles she'd forgotten she had spasmed, contracting against his fingers in grateful release. Heat and pleasure surged through her body.

It wasn't the highest peak, she knew. They weren't done -- he hadn't been inside her. But it allowed her to gather her energies for continuing. Her breathing slowed, and she slid down his body to stand leaning against him.

In the temporary lull, he tugged her a little backward, settling down on the cold, wet shelf of stone. At least it had been worn smooth by the pounding of the waterfall. He grasped

her arms and pulled her down to him, positioning the head of his cock at her entrance with his fingers.

Though wonderfully tasty, that last bit had lacked something, something to fill her and stretch her and hit all those intimate places inside. With a sense of immense satisfaction she settled herself down on his massive erection, slowly, surely, letting herself stretch and adjust to the unaccustomed fullness. If that last orgasm was sweet, succulent candy, this must be the ambrosia of the gods.

She bent her head down and twinkled her tongue against his nipples, contracting her internal muscles against the jerking of the cock buried so deeply inside her.

He leaned his head back, resting his weight on his arms, and groaned. "Goddess, Ruliann, I've never felt anything so good."

She paused in her licking and sucking to say, "That's good," and returned to her task of stimulating as much of him as she could reach, while still keeping him locked inside her. She moved up to his neck and the tender, sensitive places under his jaw and around his ear, then took a break and returned to his mouth, one of her favorite places on his body. His lips were soft, his tongue a center of taste and moistness and passion.

They were both breathing now in synchronized pants, swimming in the most intense cloud of sex and arousal she had ever experienced.

He tried to pump up into her, but the rocks were too hard and the angle was wrong, so Ruliann crouched over him, lifting herself up, pausing, then plunging down.

He moved his hand between them, flicking his finger around her clit over and over again as Ruliann moved. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the building pressure. The glittering wave of orgasm swelled inside her, brighter, stronger, more powerful. She was so close; she was almost there.

She opened her eyes and saw Jonnath, his head bent back, his eyes closed, and the reality that this was him, this was really him filled her. She closed her eyes again and paused, letting the anticipation build, surfing on the approaching wave, then plunged down again. A

hot explosion of ecstasy steamed through her, and her sex spasmed around him in contractions that went on and on, kicking off Jonnath's own release. Hot spurts of come filled her, as he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly against him.

It felt like her thoughts turned off entirely, as all her consciousness was focused on her body and the total relaxation of tension.

She heard the roar of the waterfall again with a vague feeling of surprise. Had it stopped? She hadn't even heard it for a while. She moved a little in his arms, finding a more comfortable position for herself, with her face tucked underneath his chin, her lips moving against his skin.

He kissed the top of her head and brushed the hair away from her face. "Kitten, I think that was the best sex of my life." He buried his nose in her hair and breathed deeply. "But can we move to the blanket now?"

She sighed, as real life acquired solidity -- including little rocks right underneath her bare feet and knees. "Oh, all right. I suppose we can." She pulled herself off him, her movements uncoordinated and jerky.

Jonnath slid into the water and reached his arms toward Ruliann. His hair was wet and tangled, his eyes sleepy and satisfied. She sat down and slid into the water herself, and he swirled her up in his arms and started walking across the pool to the other side.

"Hey, what are you doing? Put me down!"

He pursed his lips as though considering the demand, then shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

"I can get there by myself." She struggled half-heartedly in his arms.

He smiled, a big self-confident grin. "Well, I know that, silly. But I *want* to carry you."

She rolled her eyes and huffed in exasperation.

Jonnath set her down on her feet, picked up a blanket lying in a heap on the ground, then shook it out and laid it down on the softest, flattest piece of ground near the pool. With

his arm around her waist he pulled her over and down, until they collapsed in a heap of skin and arms and legs. She cuddled up to his side, resting her head on his broad, muscular chest as though it were her personal pillow.

They dozed in the warm sun, letting the rays heat their skin and the breeze evaporate the water. The smells were all fresh and wild, trees and dirt and small animals and the sweet smell of flowers in bloom.

There was a dull ache between her legs; she could tell that she'd just had vigorous sex. But already the ache was transmuting into a more interested, yearning throbbing. Her mouth wanted to taste his again; her nipples wanted to be suckled and nibbled. No sense in being greedy, though. If she was going to be like this all day -- or all week -- she was going to have to pace herself. Didn't want to wear out the only male around. She giggled.

Jonnath peered down at her, and turned her face toward his with a finger. "What's so funny?"

She chortled. "Oh, just the thought of myself as a ... a sex kitten, some kind of insatiable succubus. It's *so* not the way I've been used to thinking of myself."

His face sobered. "I know. That must have been hard on you, thinking that ..." He frowned. "What *did* you think, anyway?"

Any desire to giggle drained away. "I thought that I was frigid, unable to respond normally to men. Except that I *knew* that my response to you had been normal -- and to the men I met before you. I feel stupid, now that I know what was going on."

He shook his head slightly. "Don't feel stupid. Why would you suspect that someone was slipping you anti-libido drugs?"

"I still can't believe that she was doing it on purpose." She sighed. "Though Machika doesn't seem to like men all that well." She wiggled a little bit, so that his thigh was pressed right *there*. Ah, that felt good. "Do you think the sex was so phenomenal because of the withdrawal effect, or because it was you?"

He snorted. “Well, I’m absolutely, totally sure that it was just due to me and my talents as a lover.” He shook his head. “What do you think I’m going to say? Was that a trick question?”

She wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue.

“But I’m not suffering from withdrawal, and it was phenomenal for me, too. So I really do think that we’re special together.” He leaned over and gave her a passionate, wet kiss. “What do you think?”

“Oh, I’ve always known we’d be special together. If I’m not mistaken, that was why you fled six years ago, right?” She raised her eyebrows.

He sighed. “Yes, that’s right.”

She gave him a gentle kiss on the chest. And there was a flat male nipple sitting just an inch from her mouth. Another wiggle and her tongue was lazily swirling around it. Flaccid flesh underneath her thigh swelled and stiffened.

So much for pacing herself.

Chapter Five

Ruliann shifted her leg over so that she was straddling Jonnath, the thick ridge of his erection pressing against the needy, yearning flesh between her thighs. Her eyes closed in concentration. She rolled her hips, stimulating herself with his hardness, and then slid up, pressing her hot, wet skin against his in a full-body caress.

She was surrounded with a cloud of hormones and pheromones and tasty, tasty Jonnath smell. Breathing in deep, she absorbed as much as she could, nuzzling his skin to keep her nose close to the source, working her way up his body.

Her mouth ended poised above his. She slowly licked his lips. Oh, he tasted so good. She needed more of that; she wanted to crawl inside him, get so close they couldn't tell where his body ended and hers began. Fastening her lips to his, she thrust her tongue inside his mouth. Their tongues dueled in an intimate, passionate battle. They both seemed to want the same thing -- more of each other, all of each other.

Her body was pressing against his. Her hands were stroking his hot, firm skin; his hands were all over her back and her ass. Stimulation poured in from all her senses, and she could feel the wetness flowing from her. Her body ached to have that thick, rock-hard shaft pounding in her again. But before that ...

She slid down again, knees to the side, lifting her head up and positioning his cock with her hands. She licked her lips, anticipating his taste as though it were the most luxurious and expensive chocolate. No, this was going to be even better than chocolate.

He moaned and pumped his hips as though trying to reach her mouth.

She glanced up at his face from beneath her half open eyelids. "Impatient?" she murmured.

"Gods, yes. Suck me, please." His hips thrust again, and he added, "Now."

"Well, since you ask so nicely ..." She swiped his cockhead with her tongue, slurping up the drop of glistening liquid. His rich, musky taste exploded on her tongue; his scent flooded her nose, overloading her conscious mind. Intense, distilled sex -- that's what he tasted like. Her pussy throbbed, and moisture flowed down her thighs

She opened her mouth wider, sinking down on his velvety flesh, her hands grasping the lower part of the shaft. She had thought he had been as big and hard as he could get. She was wrong. The shaft that she had to stretch her mouth around grew in her mouth to a massive size, straining with eagerness.

She pumped up and down with her mouth, swirling the head with her tongue, following below her mouth with her hands.

Jonnath groaned. "I think I'm going to come."

She pulled off his cock. "Then you don't mind if I switch?"

"God, no. Just keep doing *something*."

She would like to have him come in her mouth, but later. Right now she wanted him buried in her; she *needed* him inside her. She didn't want to wait for him to recover. So she crouched over him, grasping his cock with one hand, running the head through her hot, wet labia, circling her clit.

"Enough," he growled. And flipped her over onto her back. He positioned himself and thrust, hard and fast and deep. His massive shaft filled her completely. She had never been so

full before. He pulled back, and she felt as if she would die if she couldn't have him back again. Then he stroked forward, until she could taste him at the back of her throat.

After a few strokes he paused, buried inside her, and said, "Don't move." Then he bent forward and circled one nipple with his tongue, while his fingers rubbed and tugged the other nipple. Her pussy swelled around his cock, and she had to move, she just had to. She lifted her hips slightly, reaching for that perfect spot, but he held her down with his legs. "No moving."

"But I have to," she wailed.

"No, you don't. Stay still, or else."

She was tempted to find out what the "or else" meant, but was afraid it would involve something really cruel, like not having sex right now, so she did her best to lie still. He worked her nipples over, flicking his tongue, pulling and twisting with his fingers, and the tension between her legs grew and grew. Not being able to move only made her more aware of the fullness inside her, and she flexed her intimate muscles, caressing his erection in a wave of exquisite pressure.

He leaned up, thrusting further into her, and moaned. "Sneaky, sneaky."

She panted. "Is that a complaint?"

"God, no." And he picked up the thrusting rhythm again.

Forward, back, forward, back. Arousal surged through her, intoxicating, blazing arousal. She was almost there -- then he reached between them, rubbed her clit, and she fell over the other side, spiraling down in spasms of ecstasy, as he pumped his seed into her.

He collapsed on top of her. One part of her loved the feeling of his weight -- but not her back, pressed hard into the ground. She wiggled and shoved, and he sluggishly moved to the side, so that they were cuddled up against each other.

She closed her eyes, in pure bliss. She hadn't felt so good in ... well, about six years. Sure, she knew some of this intense sex was due to removal of the suppressing drugs. But that

didn't mean she couldn't enjoy it. She sighed and pressed her lips against the skin of Jonnath's neck, where her face was cradled.

The goal of the traditional two weeks of challenge was to get to know each other. They were making a good start on the sexual knowledge -- and she was looking forward to a great deal more. This was like spreading a banquet in front of a woman who had been on a semi-starvation diet for six years. She could feel a wide grin grow across her face at the thought of two weeks of spine-tingling, explosive sex.

But they couldn't spend every single minute having sex. Unfortunately.

She rolled over on her stomach and rested her chin on her hands. She gazed at Jonnath's chiseled features, the sweet curve of his lips, the swell of muscles in his arms. They'd been together only a short period of time, but already he felt more familiar to her than friends she had known for ten years. It seemed *right* that they were together. Would it feel wrong to be apart?

Jonnath's eyes flicked open. When he saw her looking at him so seriously, he squinched his eyes together. "Hey! What's with the inspection? Trying to decide whether to keep me or throw me back?"

Ruliann wrinkled her nose. "Hmmp. You should be so lucky." Pulling her legs up underneath her to sit up, she adopted an air of mock haughtiness. "You kidnapped me and brought me here against my will. I was planning my revenge."

"So long as your revenge involves tormenting my body sexually," he raised an eyebrow, "I can live with it."

She stuck up her nose. "I'm picking the revenge, not you."

He sighed. "Oh, well. It was worth a try."

"It does sound like fun, though." She ran her finger down his chest, circling his nipples, gliding through the hair and down the softened, sticky shaft. "Maybe later." She sat back and crossed her legs. "So tell me about Epindrath. Was it lonely being the only human around?"

He turned on his side and rested his head on his hand. "Very much, at the beginning." He smiled at her. "I spent a lot of time fantasizing about you, and wondering if leaving had been a mistake."

A warm feeling swelled inside, melting some of the ice that had accumulated over the years. "I thought about you, too." Then she remembered how miserable she had been back then and frowned. "But I thought you didn't like me enough, so it wasn't much fun."

"I'm sorry about that, kitten. I probably should have done something different. I just couldn't figure out anything that would have been fair to you." He shook his head as though to shake off the past, and continued, "Anyway, after I learned how to communicate with the Epindrathi, I was less lonely. There were lots of intellectual challenges, and I kept in touch with my family and friends here. There was an occasional human visitor, and I could visit the Federation outpost that circled Epindrath. So it wasn't all bad."

She nodded. "You'll have to tell me all about it." She wiped the sweat from her face, and stood up. "But right now, let's go for a dip in the pool." She tugged on Jonnath's hand. "Last one in is a rotten *marfan*."

He leaped to his feet and with shrieks of laughter they raced to the cold, clear water.

Both of them claimed the victory.

Chapter Six

It was the middle of the morning two days later, the sun from the window dappling their skin as they lay on a blanket in front of the cabin. Ruliann was trying to turn a few blades of grass into a whistle -- and failing. Jonnath was lying on his back with his arms underneath his head, their legs intertwined.

She felt him take a deep breath, and then his body grew tense. She pulled back to see his face. He looked very serious. "Jonnath? What's wrong?"

He licked his lips. "Ruliann ..." His voice trailed off.

"What?"

He breathed deeply again, half-closing his eyes. Then he exhaled roughly, letting it all out. His gaze was fastened on her. "Ruliann, would you marry me, bond with me?"

A wave of shock went through her. Her whole body tightened, and she pulled away from him. "Bond?" Her voice seemed high to her own ears. This was too soon. She really liked Jonnath, and the sex had been mind-bending. But bonding was *forever*. Just a few days ago she had decided to join the Order; she couldn't make such a decision so easily. She breathed deep and said, "We don't really know each other very well. A little more time --"

He sighed and smiled crookedly, a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "That's what I thought." He rolled away from her and stood up.

"Jonnath, just because --"

"Breathe, Ruliann. Smell what's happening to us."

She raised herself into a sitting position and breathed in. The training that she had done two days ago to identify the libido suppressant took effect. They smelled *stamly*, *rolline* and *gralt*. They were on the verge of pairbonding.

She stood up and grabbed Jonnath's hand. "But ... What can we do?"

"If you were willing to pairbond, we could stay here and let nature take its course. Believe me, there's nothing that I would like better." He squeezed her hand tightly and looked into her eyes. "Are you sure that you're not ready? The last few days have been paradise for you, too, haven't they?"

"Yes, yes. Of course it's been heavenly. But I don't know how much of what I feel is due to the drug withdrawal, and how much is real." She needed him to understand. "If I trusted what I feel, there would be no question. I'd happily stay here with you for the rest of my life. But after six years of wondering why my relationships didn't work, and discovering I'd been drugged, and the last few days ..." Her voice trailed off. "I don't want to lose you. But I need a reality check; I need to be *sure*. You understand, don't you?"

He nodded. "Yes, I do understand." Then he gently pulled away, and stepped back. "In that case, there's only one thing that we *can* do. I'll put up the medical flag and get someone to pick you up." He smiled crookedly. "My challenge succeeded, all too well. We ended up in a pre-bonding state, and the challenge is now over."

She felt like someone had kicked her in the stomach. She reached for him again, but he stepped further away.

Shaking his head, he said, "Meanwhile, we're going to have to avoid each other. No touching, no contact. We probably shouldn't even be in the same room together." He

grabbed his clothes and the blanket from the ground, dropped them on the bench, and backed toward the path away from the cabin. "I'll put up the flag and go for a walk so you can pack your things." He touched his fingers to his lips and blew her a kiss, then turned around and walked away.

Ruliann sank to the ground as she watched him disappear into the trees toward the stream. He didn't turn around and look back at her. It was probably just as well. If he had she might have begged or promised him anything, even told him that she would bond with him. And he was right. She wasn't ready for that. Yet.

From the heights of happiness to the pits of ... well, not despair exactly. Intense disappointment? Sexual frustration? Damn, she was going to miss him even more than when he left six years ago. At least then she had the doubtful consolation of not knowing what she was missing.

She curled forward until her head was resting on her crossed arms and concentrated on breathing. There was pain and frustration to live through now, but bonding to somebody she didn't want to spend the rest of her life with would be even worse. Maybe if she told herself that often enough she would even believe it.

* * * * *

Ruliann waited in the clearing in front of the cabin. A distant hum told her that her ride would be here soon.

She felt ... unfinished. Her two weeks with Jonnath, the two weeks that she had started to look forward to as a highly desirable vacation -- complete with the passionate sex that had been missing in her life for so long -- had come to a sudden end. No vacation, no sex -- and no Jonnath.

There was a reason that they were so attracted to each other, that they were pairbonding candidates -- *kiadra* and *kiadrin* -- to each other. And part of that reason was that they *liked* each other. Dracan pairbonding could not happen without the relaxed and

comfortable feelings that came from being with someone you actually liked. Lust and sexual compatibility alone would not do it. Although there were people who complained that it hadn't worked that way for them, she suspected it was because they actually preferred having somebody to squabble with and bitch at, they just couldn't admit it.

But in her case there was no doubt. She liked Jonnath, liked everything about him. She enjoyed his sharp, intelligent mind, his sweet thoughtfulness, his moments of dominant maleness. Even when he had invoked *kiadra shinneth* and kidnapped her, he had been nothing but considerate. He had brought her to this familiar cabin, to a place where she had been young and carefree and happy.

And he had let her go.

She missed him already.

It was up to her now. If she were to ever see him again, she knew that she would have to take the next step.

With the muffled roar of its engines and anti-grav boosters, the flitter landed a short distance away. Ruliann picked up her bag and headed toward the open door. Whatever her final decision, she had work to do, life to handle. She hoped that everything would fall into place in the process.

* * * * *

"I would never have drugged you, Ruliann," Machika said, her voice pleading. "You're my best friend. I wouldn't do that to you."

Ruliann leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, studying her friend. Machika's short, reddish blonde curls were tousled, her normally pale skin even paler in her distress. "But, Machika, you *did* drug me. That potion you gave me contained a libido and bonding suppressant. Where did you get it?"

Machika covered her face with her hand, looking down. "My mother." Her voice was hardly audible.

Ruliann sat up straight, “Your *mother*? You let that evil bitch give you drugs?”

“She’s a good medical substance technician. It was one of the only things she’s ever done for me in my life.”

Ruliann shook her head, rolling her eyes.

“She made an adjusting potion for me ten years ago, when I was going through puberty. I thought ...” Machika’s voice broke. “I thought she did it because ... because she had some tiny scrap of feeling for me.”

“I’m sorry, Machika, but I’d guess that she did it because it was inconvenient having a teenage daughter around, getting attention from men.”

Machika just nodded, her lips quivering.

“Did you just ask her for more for me?”

Machika nodded again.

“She didn’t say anything *then*?”

She sobbed and said, “She just laughed and said ‘the more the merrier.’”

Ruliann scowled. “I’ll bet. That sounds just like her.” She raised an eyebrow. “So, are you going to turn her in for fraudulent prescribing?”

Machika looked shocked. “I couldn’t. Even if she is an evil bitch, she’s still my only mother.”

Ruliann sighed. “I didn’t think you’d stand up to her. One of these days you’re going to have to get a backbone, you know.”

“You won’t turn her in?”

“I don’t know, Machika. She really shouldn’t be able to get away with this.” She frowned. “Let me sit on it for a couple of weeks. I’ll file a report so that if I decide to do something later I won’t look like an idiot, but I won’t mention her name. Yet.”

Machika scrubbed a hand over her damp, blotchy face. “Thanks. You’ve always been a friend to me.”

“You’re going to go through withdrawal, too.” Ruliann looked doubtfully at Machika. “I know you aren’t technically a virgin, but have you ever had *real* sex? You started on that stuff awfully young.”

Machika bit her lip. “We’ve been friends for almost eight years. You *know* I’ve never been ... aroused by men.”

“Well, I guess we know why now, don’t we? Still, you’d better be careful. This may hit you even harder than it hit me.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. But what can I do to help you?”

“Well, there is something you can do. I want you to call every man I’ve ever even thought of going out with that’s still not pairbonded and invite them all to a party. A big party. A huge party.”

Machika’s eyes widened, and she looked around the small apartment. “Here?”

“No, get the party room downstairs, the first evening it’s available. Call every woman you know and get them to bring every unattached man *they* know.”

“What are you going to do? What about Jonnath?”

Ruliann smiled almost grimly. “I’m going to find out exactly how special we are for each other.”

* * * * *

Ruliann strode along the cerastic walkway, heading back to her apartment. She had told her boss at the Sanctuary that she wouldn’t be taking vows, under the circumstances. Virgillia had been very understanding. Ruliann intended to keep working there, at least for now. The work had been fulfilling, and there was no reason she couldn’t continue.

She’d been a whirlwind of activity since returning from the wilderback, with more energy than she’d had in years. Of course it might partly be to avoid thinking about the ache between her thighs, and her hopeful nipples. It seemed as though her panties were always a bit damp. But the arousal was unfocused, like a cloud surrounding her. She could admire a

nice ass, strong shoulders or an interesting package, but her responses were only a bit more than her constant background twitchiness. But let her thoughts drift to Jonnath, to the feel of his cock inside her, and a flood of moisture drenched her.

Down, girl! No thinking of Jonnath. Particularly sex with Jonnath. She'd tried masturbating and using sex toys. It took the edge off -- for about fifteen minutes. She'd finally given it up, because it only made her think about sex more. Her doctor had offered her a tapered dose of the suppressant. She had the prescription, but she did *not* want to take more of those damn drugs. Particularly since the whole point of the big party Machika was planning was to find out how she responded to other men now that the drugs were out of her system.

Her communicator beeped in her pocket, and she took it out and flipped it open. Jonnath was requesting holographic communication. Her heart pounded like a drum, and it felt like sheer joy was running through her veins. She hit the code for *wait a minute* and ran the remaining few blocks to her apartment.

Gods, she was acting like a teenage girl with a crush.

They were avoiding each other -- weren't they?

She thought of running up the stairs, but that would take a few seconds longer than the people lift. As the lift slowly rose to her floor, she tapped her toes on the floor impatiently. At least the stairs would have had the advantage of not making her feeling like she was waiting.

She rushed through the apartment, flung herself onto her bed, and slapped her palm on the comp control on the bedside table. Her short list of personal messages showed up on the wall, and she selected Jonnath's. After a short pause -- he had probably started doing something else while waiting for her -- a three-dimensional image of him sitting in a chair flickered into existence in front of her.

Jonnath-the-image smiled at her, and said, "Hello, sweetheart."

"Well, hello yourself. I'm glad you called -- but what happened to 'no contact'?"

He shrugged. “After I was thinking straight I realized that it’s only in-person contact that’s dangerous. And we really don’t know each other that well, do we? The least we can do is get to know each other a bit better. So my new plan is for us to get to know each other -- safely.” He looked at her, licked his lips, and ran his gaze over her body. “Even if we can’t actually do anything ... fun.”

Ruliann settled back against the pile of pillows. “Well, I don’t know about that.” She pursed her lips and looked up through her eyelashes, flirtatiously. “They do some pretty nice things with simulators these days.”

He stretched, rolling his muscles and shaking out his shoulders, drawing her attention to his tantalizing shape. Then he stretched out his legs, his hands on his hips, and her attention was drawn to the swelling of his cock under his light, stretchy pants. She licked her lips, and imagined his taste flooding her mouth.

Then Jonnath looked at her knowingly and drawled, “It’s frustrating to not be able to smell or taste anything, isn’t it?”

She raised her eyes to his face and sighed. “Yes. It’s not the same at all, is it?”

“Hmm. I wonder if anybody has ever pairbonded over a virtual reality link?” He looked thoughtful. “You would think that if the pheromones were created on both sides of the link, that it would be possible.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, let’s not be the first for *that* breakthrough. I don’t think my equipment is capable of it anyway.”

He laughed.

She scowled at him. “I meant my VR equipment, not *me*.”

“I know what you meant, kitten. It just sounded funny.” He rubbed his chin. “You know, there might be a market for something like that. Pairbonded mates that have to be separated for too long use drugs to suppress the withdrawal reaction, but a virtual reality

experience that could supply the real pheromones and hormones ...” His voice trailed off and his eyes grew distant.

“Jonnath!” There was a bit of a bite in her voice. “Could you design the next greatest virtual reality gadget a little later, please?”

He looked sheepish. “Sorry.” His holographic figure stood up and reached for a drinking glass sitting on the table, walking right through her feet in the process. “How *is* the withdrawal going?”

“I’m surviving.” She blew out in an exaggerated sigh. “It’s getting better, anyway. But I’m glad that I was up there with you for the first two days.”

“I’m glad you were there, too.” He blew her a kiss with half-closed, bedroom eyes. “I only wish it had been longer. If --” He interrupted himself, shaking his head. “Sorry. I know it’s too soon to ask again.” His tone turned brisk. “So tell me about your life. I want to know everything.”

“Okay, but there’s not much to tell.”

But she found that there was more than she expected, because it was more than an hour before they finally said goodbye. She would have preferred to have the conversation combined with hot sex, but just talking had been surprisingly satisfying. So maybe there *was* an up side to the dilemma she found herself in.

Chapter Seven

Ruliann wove her way through the crowds of people, heading for the refreshment table to make sure that nothing had run out. There were always the drink dispensers, of course, but it was considered a sign of a poorly run event if the guests actually had to resort to them, except for those with specific restrictions on their diets.

She felt bubbly and high, just from being there, from being at the party and feeling free of her old worry about being normal in her responses to men. Machika had done a good job of gathering together every unattached male in their extended social circle -- and some of the attached ones, too, of course. It's not like you could put a sign at the door: *Pairbonded Men Keep Out*.

The only problem with this party was that Jonnath wasn't here. Unfortunately she was absolutely, positively sure that his presence would make it impossible for her to gauge the degree of attraction between her and any of these other men. So that short term enjoyment had been sacrificed to the longer term decision making process.

She looked over the canisters of wine and brew and the plates of hors d'oeuvres. They were well supplied for now, but she should probably have another cask of brew brought out. It was a hot day, and brew was always popular when it was hot.

Clusters of people were chatting and talking and laughing, creating a frothy, cheerful background noise. But she couldn't see Machika anywhere. This was her party, too. Where could she have gone?

Ruliann was worried about her. She had looked stressed and unhappy this last week. And she had an irritating tendency to cater to Ruliann's smallest wish. Sure, she ought to feel a little bit guilty. But not *that* guilty. Hell, if she'd had that witch for a mother, she might have done the same thing.

And Ruliann was starting to think she might have done her a favor in putting her on hold until Jonnath came back. Although she was enjoying flirting with the men and the subtle pheromonal conversation that happened between an interested man and an interested woman, so far her responses to these men were only pale, washed-out versions of her response to Jonnath.

Ah, there was Olven. This would be the true acid test. Although Ruliann had never gone out with him, he was a buddy of Machika's -- one of the only men Machika actually liked -- and hung out at their apartment fairly often. Not only was he drop-dead handsome, he was nice. And funny, and fun to be with. So if anybody had a chance to compete with Jonnath, it would be him.

She headed across the room toward him, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, Olven. What's up?"

He turned around and looked down at her, a lock of his blond hair falling across his forehead. He was one of the few men here who was actually taller than Jonnath.

"Hey, Ruliann. Long time no see." His admiring gaze swept her from head to foot, and a slightly puzzled look passed over his face. "You look good. Is something different? There's something different about you today. Did you cut your hair?"

Ruliann laughed. "No, dimwit. I didn't cut my hair. Something is different, but I'm not going to tell you what."

Olven groaned. "No, don't do that to me. I'm horrible at guessing games."

Ruliann giggled. She couldn't help it. It was just too much fun to have him look at her like a sexy, desirable female. They'd been friends before, but she'd felt like one of the boys, because there had been no spark there, no spark at all. She grabbed his hand. "Come sit with me and we'll catch up."

Olven said, "Sure." Then he looked around the room. "Have you seen Machika? I swear I saw her when I came in, but by the time I got over here she was gone."

"I've been looking for her, too. Maybe she's outside in the garden. Come on. We'll look there first."

Machika wasn't in the garden, but they did find somebody who told them she had left with one of the guests. Olven looked surprised at that news, so Ruliann figured that Machika hadn't told him about the libido suppressant withdrawal. She glossed over it quickly, muttering something about a friend from out of town.

She dived back into flirting with Olven, and basically fluttering around like a party butterfly. She was young, she was sexy, she was female, and she was determined to enjoy this. For all she knew, it would be her last chance to seriously flirt with anybody besides Jon. But she wasn't going to think about that now.

Several hours later Ruliann was relieved to shoo the last guest out of the party room. Machika hadn't come back, so she was cleaning up alone. It was probably just as well. The fizzy effervescence she had felt earlier in the evening had eventually gone flat, and she appreciated the time to herself to just think.

She wrinkled her nose at the scent of stale brew and the lingering odor of sweaty partygoers, and activated the industrial strength but noisy air cleaners. She picked up the crumpled napkins and plates and utensils, turned on the cleaning robots, and palmed the door to the party room to lock it.

She leaned against the wall of the people lift and closed her eyes.

It had been fun to flirt and socialize and dance and drink and get silly. But she knew now that none of *these* men were any competition. Some of them she liked but wasn't that

attracted to. Some of them she was attracted to but didn't like. Most of them she was pretty darn lukewarm about on either plane. Olven was one of the only ones she both liked and was attracted to, but even though his body had noticed hers, he kept looking around for Machika. So he was out.

Nobody had come close to matching the way that she and Jonnath set each other off, feeding off each other's responses, winding arousal spring-tight within minutes. It was a good thing that the libido suppressant withdrawal had tapered off. She was frustrated enough as it was. All this flirting had been like eating that foamy candy that melted in your mouth, when what you really wanted was chocolate.

She was going to have to make a choice, and the shape of that choice was becoming clear. There was always the possibility that some even more perfect man for her was out there somewhere. But she hadn't met him in the last six years, and he hadn't been here tonight. In fact, she was having a hard time even imagining *how* somebody could be more perfect for her than Jonnath.

Some of the earlier effervescence returned at that thought. And her body cheered at the idea of sex. But tonight she needed to go to sleep and get some much needed rest. There would be plenty of time tomorrow for thinking.

Her eyes were drooping as she palmed open the door to her apartment and shuffled inside. It had been a long day.

She hoped that Machika was doing all right. In all the years they had lived together Machika had never had any kind of sexual relationship. She didn't have the experience to deal with the overpowering sexual need she must be experiencing. Ruliann glanced at the clock and frowned, hoping that Machika wasn't getting herself in trouble.

Then she went to bed, visions of Jonnath dancing in her head.

* * * * *

At noon the next day, Ruliann sat at the dining table drinking kaff and looking dreamily out the window. Her intention had been to spend the day thinking about the pros and cons, considering her feelings for Jonnath and coming to a decision about whether to get together with him and let nature take its course, or to do something else.

But when she woke up this morning and thought of Jonnath, a wave of joy had rushed over her, and it had been obvious that all of that was unnecessary. Of course she was going to pairbond with Jonnath. Any other choice was inconceivable.

So now she was fantasizing about how she would tell him, what they would do when they got together next -- mixed in with worrying about Machika.

Then she heard Machika's door open, followed by the closing of the bathroom door. And judging from what she could smell, Machika had definitely had sex last night. Quite a bit of it, from the strength of the odor.

A half an hour later, Machika sat down on the other chair at the table, her hair wet, her face scrubbed clean, wearing her usual fuzzy robe. Her eyes were tired, and there was an unhappy tightness to her mouth.

Ruliann reached over and hugged her, and Machika rested her face on Ruliann's shoulder. Then, after a few minutes, she drew in a deep, shuddery breath and pulled back.

Ruliann asked, "Are you okay?" Her eyes searched Machika's face.

Machika nodded. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"It was just sex." Machika shrugged. "No big deal."

"It might not be a big deal to someone else. You're not someone else." Ruliann hesitated. "Maybe you should fill that prescription to taper off the drugs."

Machika's eyes flashed. "No. I'm not going to take more drugs."

"Hey, it's your call. But I'm going to be gone for a few weeks --"

Machika smiled widely. "I knew it. You're going for Jonnath, aren't you?"

Ruliann smiled back. “Yes, I am. But I’m worried about you being here all alone. You could stay with Jadda.”

Machika waved her hand in refusal. “Don’t be silly. I’ll be fine. I’m just a little tired and cranky this morning.” She smiled. “I’m a big girl; I can handle living on my own, don’t you think?” She rolled her eyes, then frowned. “And if you come back all pairbonded and everything, I’m going to have to get a new roommate, aren’t I?”

They chattered away, talking about Jonnath and all the changes that were coming, and plans for the bonding celebration, and Ruliann’s worries about Machika gradually dissipated. Machika was smart and strong. She would find her feet in the end.

* * * * *

Jonnath sat at the same table in the terminal cafe where he had sat two short weeks ago. This time it had been Ruliann who had asked to meet him here. That had to mean that she had decided to pairbond with him -- didn’t it? She knew the risk.

But he was afraid to let himself rejoice until he knew -- absolutely, definitely *knew* -- that she had decided to accept their pairbond. So half of him wanted to rejoice, while the other half kept recommending patience. It was only a few minutes until he would know for sure, but they were sure the longest damn minutes he had ever lived through.

Until the message from her yesterday he hadn’t heard from her since that Gods-bedamned party of hers. *She* hadn’t told him about the party. But at least three women of his acquaintance had invited him, so he couldn’t help but know about it. The thought of showing up himself had crossed his mind, but had quickly been rejected. Then when she hadn’t answered his messages for the next couple of days, he had started to worry. What if she had met someone else? What if she was even now having wild sex with some other man? He scowled, and started tapping his finger on the table.

He glared down the terminal toward the entrance, breathing in and sifting through the complicated, almost overpowering scents. It was even more crowded than last time, since the

summer vacations were beginning. Would he even be able to detect her among all those other distinctive smells? Then he caught a whiff of gilly flowers and musk, Ruliann's unique scent, and he was instantly rock hard.

He groaned. He edged his chair forward a little and draped the tablecloth over his lap. Anybody who cared to sniff would recognize his arousal, but there was no point in sharing visuals with them, too.

Then he caught a glimpse of her head, a bit of her shoulder, the line of her jaw as she worked her way through the crowd. For a second he lost sight of her behind a particularly dense family group, then they moved on and she was right there in front of him.

She was smiling, happy. Something tense inside of him relaxed, and he allowed himself to start feeling the joy. Then she sat down across from him and his senses were flooded with her arousal, her reaction to him.

He could feel the wide grin pasted across his face.

She raised her eyebrow in question.

He cleared his throat. "So, I guess you're happy to see me."

She pursed her lips and glanced downward as though to peer under the tablecloth. "I'd say I'm about as happy to see you as you are to see me."

"So, what's with the public meeting place? Don't you think somewhere a little more private would have been more ... uh ... convenient?"

"Maybe." She shrugged. "But I thought that we might as well finish off those two weeks of hot sex that I *didn't* get. So I've reserved a flitter to drop us off at the cabin in --" she looked at her watch "-- about fifteen minutes." She waved a hand in invitation to the neighboring departure gate. "So, if you're ready ...?"

"Almost." He stood up, stepped around the table, and pulled her up into his arms. "There's just one little thing I'd like to take care of first." His mouth descended on hers, flooding him with her taste and smell. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her against his

aching cock. Her body fit so well with his, as though two complicated pieces of one whole puzzle had snapped together.

Chapter Eight

The flitter landed in the clearing in front of the cabin. Ruliann glanced at Jonnath, but his face looked tight, almost grim. They had started out chatting on the short flight but had gradually drifted into silence. The enclosed area where they sat had an inadequate ventilation system, in her opinion. The scent of arousal and the level of pheromones and hormones was enough to make the dead come back to life. So Ruliann knew his grimness was nothing personal. She snickered. Or rather, was *intensely* personal.

She grabbed her bag from the holding cage, directed Jonnath to the other one, and climbed out of the small air transporter. A minute later she had dropped her bag in the living area of the cabin, when she looked up to see Jonnath at the door.

He narrowed his eyes at her, arms akimbo. "Take off your clothes. Now."

She tilted up her chin and looked at him for a second, then decided that now was not the time to tease the short-tempered, *really* horny predator. But she couldn't resist the urge to twit him a bit -- just a little bit -- by turning the clothes removal process into something slightly -- *very* slightly -- resembling a striptease.

By the time she oh-so-slowly pulled her last foot out of her pants, he was naked and gloriously, magnificently, rampantly erect. She licked her lip, her gaze glued to all that tasty male flesh.

Jonnath moved a few feet away from the door, but -- oddly enough -- not toward her. His movements were slow and graceful, and reminded her of a Dracan jaguar stalking its prey. He growled, "Put on your sandals."

Huh? Her eyes dropped to his feet. He had his sandals on too. Hot damn. A Dracan mate chase. She had thought she was already as aroused as was physically possible. She was wrong. A flood of delicious heat steamed through her, centering on that needy place between her thighs. She toed on her sandals, and grinned at him, a combination of sultry taunt and wild invitation.

His eyes widened in feral challenge, and he took one step toward her. "Run," he said, his voice gravelly and low, the words a drawn-out command.

Ruliann fled.

She ran through the clearing and down the path toward the stream, the warm, moist air flowing over her over-heated body. Sweat was dripping down her face, and moisture dripping from between her legs. The jiggling of her breasts only increased her torment. She could see why most Dracan women weren't over-endowed in the bust department, tending more to sleekness.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Jonnath about ten strides behind her, licking his lips, his eyes intent on her ass. Part of her didn't really understand why this was so arousing. She knew that he could catch her any time he wanted to. Maybe it was just the sheer physicality of it, the reminder of their animal nature. Whatever. She shrugged mentally, and concentrated on enjoying the effort of her muscles, being naked in the wilderness, absorbing the scents and sights of all the burgeoning life around her.

And anticipating what Jonnath was going to do to her when he caught her.

She figured he knew where she was heading -- a shaded clearing near the stream, covered with moss and soft ground. It had been popular for assignations the year that she was here, and certainly when he was here, too.

Her heart was beating hard in her chest, a combination of the exertion of running and blazing lust. When she reached the clearing, Jonnath's body slammed into hers from behind, carrying her forward to the soft ground.

He pulled her hips back with his hands and his cock thrust into her wet, swollen sheath, tunneling into her endlessly, filling her completely. Unable to stay on her knees, she collapsed to the ground, his body covering hers. His hands reached underneath her, his palms roughly circling her nipples. His teeth gripped her neck firmly but not breaking the skin. Then his mouth pulled back a bit and he rumbled, "Mine."

Her body was hot and sweaty, her muscles tired from the exertion. The weight of Jonnath's body was pressing her into the ground. She was surrounded in a cloud of hormones, pheromones and the scent of sex, an extraordinarily tasty cloud that was inciting her to even higher levels of arousal. Nothing had ever smelled this good to her before, and living with this for the rest of her life seemed like a good idea. Quite a fine idea, in fact.

She was barely thinking at all; she was only feeling, emotions *and* senses. His hands on her nipples were sending electricity directly to her pussy, which throbbed and expanded, fluttering around the cerastic pole of his cock.

She bucked a little, needing, wanting to have him move, but unable to do more than squirm. "Jonnath, please."

His voice rumbled in her ear. "Please what? Do you want me to fuck you?" He moved a tantalizing inch back and forth. "Do you want me to make you come?"

"Yes, yes, all that. Please!"

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?"

"Yes, Jonnath. Yes!" She lowered her voice, turning it into a growl. "Now, *move*. Before I have to hurt you."

He pulled back, leaving her sheath weeping for the loss of his cock, and then slammed forward, holding her hips against him. Her sex clenched around him as glittering tension mounted higher and higher.

He withdrew and drove forward once again, twisting her nipples with his fingers. She moaned, wanting to get high enough to come, but not quite there. He pulled back, and a whimper of passion and frustration escaped her at the reduction of that delicious pressure.

Her breathing was fast and hard, coming in pants now. She ground herself against him as he surged forward.

He adjusted the angle of her hips and thighs and moved his fingers to her swollen clit, circling it as he pumped in a furious rhythm. Fiery spirals of arousal mounted in her until, with a scream, release poured through her -- and her senses told her that this better-than-chocolate Jonnath smell, this unique combination of everything that went together to make *him*, was locked inside her forever, that she would always need it, need him, and that this was a good thing.

His scent flooded her, soaking into every cell of her body, and she floated in a sea of Jonnath-joy. She spasmed around him as he flooded her core with hot come.

They collapsed together on the soft moss, Jonnath still buried inside her, her body spooned against his. A wave of sensation rolled over her, an odd, synesthetic combination of chocolate and sunlight and shimmering skin and Jonnath's scent, a scent that smelled and tasted better than anything she had ever smelled or eaten before.

Something had clicked into place; her focus had changed. Jonnath was the center of her world now, and it felt right.

She pulled off his still rigid erection with a slurp and turned to face him. She had to have more of that incredible smell. She had to. Nothing was more important, had ever been as important. She found herself growling as she buried her face in the crook of his neck, right where she could feel and taste his heart beating in his veins. She licked his damp skin and growled even louder at the explosion of that delicious taste in her mouth.

Jonnath groaned and rotated his still stone-hard shaft against her mound. “Ruliann.” There was a note of triumph in his voice.

She kept licking, swiping his skin with her tongue, anxious to not let a drop of that elixir escape.

“Ruliann!” He shook her slightly.

She pulled away and looked up at his face through half-opened eyelids.

“We’ve bonded.” A joyous grin split his face.

“Well, yeah. That was the point, wasn’t it?” She grinned back at him. “I figured that out when you started smelling about five times better than chocolate to me.”

She licked her lips. “I’ve heard that a man’s stamina is the highest the day he bonds.” She raised her eyebrows in playful question. “Shall we test that bit of common knowledge?”

Jonnath nodded thoughtfully. “And I’ve heard that a woman will never come so often and so hard as the day of bonding. We should probably make sure that’s not just a foolish rumor, too.”

Ruliann shook her head. “It’s a tough job ... but somebody’s got to do it.”

He laughed. “We’d better get busy. There’s only ten hours left in the day.”

She nodded in mock seriousness. “You’re right. That’s hardly going to be enough time.” She shrugged. “Oh, well. There’s always tomorrow, and the next day.”

“And the rest of our lives.”

A wave of joy mixed in with her unslaked passion. She would have Jonnath for the rest of her life. That was *much* better than five times as good as chocolate.

 THE END 

Sara Rustan

Sara has always read voraciously, vastly preferring the world in books to reality. There have been times she and reality have barely been on speaking terms. After working as a programmer for several large corporations, she decided to follow her dream instead, and started to write. She is particularly interested in speculating about how human nature will be tweaked in the far future, but finds any kind of fantasy absorbing. Clean up after her three sons and husband, or create fascinating worlds of fantasy...? It's a tough decision, but those dust bunnies deserve a life, too.