



DEMON'S CAPTIVE

STEPHANIE SNOW

Loosely

DEMON'S CAPTIVE

Stephanie Snow

Loose Id.®

www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id® e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable.

Demon's Captive

Stephanie Snow

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © October 2007 by Stephanie Snow

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-556-2

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Jana J. Hanson
Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Loowis



The Loose Id

www.loose-id.com

Chapter One

In the dim light of midday, between the charred earth and the grim sky overhead, Charity hid. For the previous six months, running had been her primary occupation. Now there was finally no place left to run, no next hill to climb, or river to cross. Only burned wasteland for miles. As she lay motionless in the rubble, covered with ash and soot, she cried silent tears. It seemed a million years had passed since the end of her world. Fear of a terrible death had kept her on the move.

But what was she living for?

There was no escape from the invaders; hard lessons had taught her that. She had learned quickly after watching her people die at the hands of monsters with no mercy. Terror snatched the breath from her body as distant rumblings reached her ears.

With her cheek pressed to the ground, Charity felt the vibrations of approaching craft, and prayed again for salvation. If not to remain undiscovered, then to be quickly dispatched. Her elusiveness had probably increased the murderous rage that gripped the alien savages. The killing she'd witnessed them commit in the past made her certain of her own demise. It was what they might do to punish her that caused new tears to track down her soot-blackened face.

It was hard to remember before the invasion. That time seemed a distant memory Charity couldn't fully recall.

In a southern winter, there was no snow, and Charity reveled in the temperate weather. End of term was four weeks away, and the anticipation of seeing her family far outweighed the doldrums of final exams. Maneuvering her way off the public transport with her oversized book bag, she squinted into the bright sunshine to eyeball the math building a half a mile away. Suddenly, a chill wind blew across her bare arms. Charity looked to the sky as a strange light laid itself across the sun. For a moment, the world was cast in shades of red, and a terrible tension filled the air. Then it was gone. She shrugged, positive it was imagined. If only she had known...

Lying immobile in the ruins of her civilization, with the vibrations of the approaching enemy aircraft growing stronger each moment, Charity wished she had simply died in the beginning. If she had only stayed in the city, instead of rushing across the mountains for home, she would have met a quick death -- either from fire or the explosions that leveled every structure.

The apartment she shared with another student at the university was brimming with people. Fighting her way through the front door and into the living room, Charity looked for her roommate.

"Sarah?" Shouting to be heard over the conversations all around her, she spotted the familiar red head of her friend and pushed through the throng to reach her. "What's going on?"

Sarah looked worse than Charity had ever seen her. "Oh, Charity! I'm so glad you're back! Haven't you been listening to the news?"

She glanced at the screen where the 24-hour news stations played, then shrugged. "I've been in class. Why? Did someone die?"

"You really don't know?" Sarah seemed shocked, and quickly led Charity past some other students in deep discussion to watch the news.

On the screen, terrible images of a city turned to rubble flashed alongside pictures of thousands of bodies of slain civilians.

After a moment of watching and listening, Charity looked back to her friend with tear-filled eyes. This was a war.

At first, there had been no question an earthly enemy had brought such damage on them. Within the week, a volley of accusations had flown around the world and ended with a preemptive strike against another country. As open warfare broke out, no one imagined the real terror came from above, carefully hidden in the sky.

When the attacks began, Charity had become stranded in the tiny mountain town of Pinyon. In the weeks that followed, the world was laid to waste. Damage done by their infighting had crippled society; they were easy pickings for the aliens.

If the war between people had been terrible, what came next was hell. Humans were hunted like animals by the invaders, and slaughtered like beasts in the field. More than once, Charity had hidden in fear only to see men and women alike cut down trying to defend their lives.

Even now, she did not know what manner of beings they were. Devils, the holy men warned, or aliens from another planet; it mattered not. They killed and tortured and defiled with abandon.

The distant rumble became louder with every passing moment. They were almost upon her. God have mercy.

Chapter Two

Over the low hum of the air courier he piloted, a shrill beep sounded, alerting him to his quarry's location. With its sophisticated equipment, Melmanon actually heard her breathing. Unnaturally shallow and erratic, it gave away her fear as clearly as her scent trail had.

That she had eluded him for six hours, let alone six whole days, was unheard of. His legion had begun to question his prowess after several failed attempts to capture her, and he had been obliged to combat-challenge three of his mid-ranking officers to save face. A bloodlust like his was not easily satisfied, but he had deliberately held back, ensuring there would still be a killing rage upon him when he found her.

As commander, he wielded a great deal of power. He owed it entirely to his exceptionally cultivated cruelty. A soldier such as he was rarely matched in ability when it came to torture, killing, and strategy. In the thirty-eight years of his life, he had been at the forefront of nine planet wars. He hesitated to count this current conflict since it was hardly a war in his mind, considering the weakness of the defense.

Because the planet was divided into many smaller countries, it had been simple to feed off their fear of one another and instigate a war. Within weeks, they had launched their most

terrible weapons against one another. It had taken the worthless leaders that long to figure out the greatest danger came not from their neighbors, but the sky.

By the time the war tribe's ships had reached the surface, the battle was half-won, most of the major cities leveled by infighting. Those who had resisted died. A growl filled his chest as his rage came to the forefront. In the copilot chair next to him, a young warrior kept an eye on the console.

Melmanon was tempted to snap at him. Each new generation of warriors was less and less hardened. Training used to be brutal. In recent years, the politics of the tribe had changed, becoming soft in his opinion. The generals that governed the war tribe were guided in public policy by an elected representative host: two thousand men and women from all tribe-ruled planets. Will of the people or not, recent decisions shaped a future that involved less battle and more negotiating.

The knowledge this might be the last real battle he ever fought made his blood pound through his veins. The life he had known -- one that had given him pride and success among his peers -- was coming to a whimpering end.

Thinking about the end of warring always made him angry. He added that to his simmering rage as the sensors on the console chirped rapidly. They were fast approaching the place where she hid.

He lifted his hand to signal his copilot to slow, and finally, stop. Popping the seal, Melmanon stepped out onto the ledge that circled the craft, then dropped heavily to the earth some ten feet below. A shudder rippled through the ashes and debris.

This close, he heard her stuttering heartbeat. The power of bloodlust rushed through his body as he moved deliberately to the mound of earth concealing her shape. Her breathing had stopped entirely. Near her physical body, he heard a smattering of her thoughts.

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

An evil grimace twisted his face as he fed off her fear. Her desperate inner ramblings suggested she wished it would end quickly. He wanted to make it last.

As he punched his fist into the earth to grab her fragile neck and pull her from the concealing dirt, he sent her a message with his mind.

It will never end.

Chapter Three

Charity couldn't see. At first, it wasn't frightening, but as time passed and her memory returned, the inky blackness surrounding her became ominous and sinister. Her last recollection was of the demon ripping her from the ground. Of his massive...*paw* around her throat lifting her high, providing her an up close look at an invader. She shuddered at the image.

He *was* a demon. Built like a man with two arms and two legs, he was covered in skin the color of dried blood and possessed musculature far more developed and complex than any human man. Clad in what looked like black leather pants and vest, with boots laced up his calves, he seemed to be at least seven feet tall.

His face had all the right parts: two eyes, a nose, a mouth. The eyes were like burning coals, pure black with embers flaring to life inside their depths. His nose was a narrow blade that flared sharply. The shape of his dark lips was almost normal, but a mouthful of teeth to rival a shark flashed sharp and white. It was the mouth that had caught her attention because she heard him speak, and his lips did not move at all.

Deliberately she pushed the image of his face away. Exploring the darkness with her hands, Charity could feel she was on a bed. Naked, too, but clean. She rose to a sitting

position, and realized something was banded around her throat, preventing her from standing up.

Her fingertips found a seamless band of leather at her neck. From it, a leather thong trailed to a small ring. Whether it tethered her to the wall or to the bed, it mattered not. Tears of despair coursed down her cheeks as the severity of the situation hit her with force.

She was his captive.

* * * * *

“Yes, Commander Stave, we are completely secure. There are no further actions necessary, and my men will begin preparing the territory for occupation.”

“Good, Commander Melmanon. You are the first to achieve completion. You are to be commended.”

Seated at his communication screen, Melmanon drummed his fingers restlessly against the polished surface of the panel. “May I speak frankly, Stave?”

He watched as his old comrade removed the seal that recorded their official conversations. “What is it, Melmanon? Is there some problem?”

“I am...restless. I find no satisfaction in mastering these weak people. It seems all the truly great battles have been fought and won, and now, only the worthless are left.”

As he spoke, Stave brought his face closer to the screen and spoke in low tones. “I understand you well, brother. We have fought so long, and well, that we have conquered all valuable races. As we enter the prime of our lives, we begin to wonder what greater achievement can be had.”

Striking the console sharply, Melmanon growled. “There *is* no greater achievement left! This entire planet has proven to me there is no species who can stand against us, no world where a fair fight can take place. Do not misunderstand me. I have enjoyed this slaughter. I simply enjoy a real battle so much more! In wars of the past, we have conquered

honorable races, and melded their people with our own, making us stronger. What have we gained here? A planet? It seems a paltry reward.”

Stave looked thoughtful, but did not immediately speak. After several long moments, his carefully measured words came through. “We both know what comes. The tribe is changing. We have no battles left to fight. In the future, it is the man clever with his tongue, not his fists, who is the first to see new horizons.”

Angry at the words, but unable to dispute them, Melmanon growled low, pushing away from the screen.

“*Minth Hai*, Commander Stave.” The traditional farewell was more the roar of a beast than the words of a man.

“*Minth Hai*, Commander Melmanon. Go kill something. You’ll feel better.” Stave’s suddenly grinning face winked out on the console.

Melmanon stomped back to his quarters. His captive was still waiting. There was at least that to look forward to.

Chapter Four

The heavy door groaned. It was her only warning. Harsh and sudden, bright light flooded the room. Charity instinctively slapped her hands to her eyes, trying to keep the needles of illumination from her sensitive pupils. The illumination was immediately followed by the sound of the door being slammed shut. Unable to see, and acutely aware of her naked vulnerability, her ragged breaths froze at the sound of creaking leather. Heavy footfalls approached.

A shadow swept over her, providing relief from the fingers of light that probed the corners of her eyes. Unable to stand the suspense any longer, Charity lowered her hands.

He leaned over her, his imposing form blotting out the light like a solar eclipse. He spoke, and although the words were in her language, she didn't immediately understand. Charity realized he was *growling*, as if his voice was more suited to roars than words.

"I asked if you were frightened." One of his massive hands reached out and encircled her throat completely, drawing her upper body off the bed until the leash was tight. "Let's see what you fear."

Charity closed her eyes as sudden pressure built in her skull. Her hands wrapped around his wrist, barely able to circle it.

Her mind called forth images, memories, and thoughts. Dimly, she was aware he was pillaging her mind for her darkest fears. *Oh, God.*

* * * * *

Hardly feeling her weak clasp, it still drew Melmanon's eyes to her hands. The striking difference in the size and color of her flesh against his skin was conspicuous. Her small hands convulsed around his wrist as he probed deep into her mind. After a moment, he found her nightmares.

Images of the war against her people figured prominently and he took note of what seemed to disturb her most. All in all, rather boring. He had several bloody favorites she hadn't even thought of. With very little effort, he drew back from the mental connection, dispassionately observing the hard shudder that ran the length of her body.

He released her mind from his hold, watched as her eyes fluttered open, and the hands around his wrist fell back to her sides. For the first time, he saw her eyes were a deep green with small, pale flecks of gold.

With a glance to the rest of her, he noticed the body previously covered by layers of dirt. Luckily, a medic had been on hand to take care of the task. Without her covering of clothing and filth, she was very pale. Probably on the tall side for her people, she seemed pathetically frail to him.

Unlike the female warriors of the war tribe, she seemed soft, her skin totally smooth, with no scars or calluses. Her breasts were round and heavy, the nipples peaked in the cold air. His captive's form had the welcoming shape of a wife rather than a warrior.

He focused his gaze on her rounded abdomen, then lower, where he saw her luxuriant thighs were slightly parted. At their juncture, downy-looking hair barely shielded deep pink lips.

He recalled some of her nightmares and consciously tried to regain the mood that had been dispelled by her distracting beauty. Melmanon let a savage grin split his black lips, then reached between her thighs with his free hand, cupping her sex. He growled and leaned close to press his lips to her ear.

“This will probably hurt, *Charity*.” Her name was a sneer. “Feel free to scream.”

* * * * *

Charity’s heartbeat throbbed as the hand at her throat held her immobile, and the hand between her legs spread her thighs wide. Tears streaked her temples. She closed her eyes tightly, bracing herself.

One long digit pressed into her, probing slowly, then forcing deep, rubbing her sensitive inner walls. Charity was humiliated by the fact she became wet, her long-neglected body unknowingly reacting to the stimulation.

As his finger withdrew, she trembled, and was rewarded for her response when it thrust deep again. After a moment, she felt a second finger join the first, and a small gasp escaped her, hips bucking as he stretched her.

* * * * *

Melmanon watched his violation bring her to aching arousal. Touching her mind allowed him to see her embarrassment, but over it all was her mounting desire.

“You like this, don’t you, *Charity*?” His voice was a taunting growl.

“No, I don’t want...” Breathless gasps escaped her, the trembling in her doubling as he slowly withdrew his fingers.

“I think you do. I think you *want* me to hurt you.” There was dark speculation in his tone.

She refused to answer him, shaking her head wordlessly.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he used his two fingers to slowly fuck her. The hand at her throat shifted to cup her neck, holding her suspended. Wet heat coated his palm, giving away her mounting excitement at the steady thrusting. Twisting his angle slightly, he used the slickness to ease deeper until she moaned sweetly with each stroke.

Her chest rose and fell heavily, her full breasts surging. Her body stretched and shuddered as he brought her to the edge, then stopped, withdrawing his fingers to rest his damp hand across her hips, spanning her easily.

“Oh, no, I don’t want you to enjoy this.” Looking down at her spread out like a sacrifice over his bed, he realized his bloodlust was gone, replaced by an even more fundamental urge.

Rape was a part of war, but usually to dominate and humiliate a defiant enemy, not one already captured. To take one so frail and at his mercy was pointless, but his cock had decided otherwise. Releasing her, his hands went to his clothes, and he stripped quickly.

* * * * *

Charity opened her eyes as his hands released her, then widened in horror as he removed his clothes, revealing a dark body thick with muscles. Between his legs... It was the same thickness from base to tip. Unlike the dried blood color of his skin, it shone a bright red. With large testes drawn tightly at its base, it was not obscene or repulsive. It *was* unreasonably large, swaying out from his body like a terrible weapon.

Against her will, she spoke, pleading in hoarse tones. “Please, don’t. Don’t do this. You’ll kill me.” A whimper escaped her as his glowing eyes met her desperate ones.

The eerie black orbs flickered like flames burned within their depths, but he did not speak. His silence was both frightening and perversely arousing. In contrast to her earlier concern, now she feared, more than any pain, that she might enjoy it.

His utter lack of expression and continued erection caused her to squirm as the wetness between her legs flowed even more. As if he sensed her heightened arousal, a parody of a smile parted his lips, revealing the mouth full of wickedly sharp teeth.

“Maybe you will enjoy dying.” So saying, he reached for her neck again, and Charity’s eyes closed as his hand snapped the leash, freeing her, but leaving the collar in place.

Chapter Five

He pulled her lower body off the edge of the bed until her legs lay draped over his forearms, and his hands held her buttocks. Her first instinct was to fight, to try to hold him off. Reality intruded swiftly, and Charity opened her eyes to look at her tormentor with weary acceptance.

There was nowhere to run; no one to help her. It was either fight and suffer for it, or acquiesce to his wishes. One would certainly bring only pain, and the other may be more easily endured. Letting her hands fall back to frame her face, Charity turned away from the sight of her lower body poised against his own.

“You’re right, you know.” His words brought her gaze back to his face. “This is far less...damaging...than what I had intended.” He pressed his hips forward until the tip of his shaft pressed against her wet center.

His hands cupping her bottom, she felt his thumbs part her labia, feral growls rumbling in his throat as he pushed past the resistance of her body. Gasping moans came from her throat as he used shallow thrusts to burrow deeper. His size alone kept him from plunging forward; once he worked most of his length inside, he’d reached the end of her channel.

Pulling out, he repeated the process, and she blanched at the tightness of her body around his invading cock.

Charity had never felt so dominated, so helplessly aroused in her whole life. The sharp contrast of her captor's fearful appearance and tender treatment made her desire a sharp and ungovernable ache. Between her legs, the thick plunge of his sex balanced her on the knife-edge between pleasure and pain. As the rise to climax peaked, she focused on the savage visage of her warrior.

Shame at her reaction to his touch flooded her heart. Digging her short nails into the tender skin of her palms, Charity turned her face away and forced herself to remember the terrible crimes committed against her people by this beast and his armies. With the images of war so fresh in her memory, she held the pleasure at bay.

"Ah, you're so fucking tight." Marveling at the hot suction of her sheath gripping him, Melmanon wondered if he had become perverted. Certainly sexual domination was a large part of war tribe culture, but it was only used against one who fought. To subdue those who did not fight was not normal. He could not deny that he had never been so stimulated.

Without the necessity of holding her down, he leaned back, watching as her lips spread wide to receive him. Intoxicated by the vision of her pale body, he settled into a gentle rhythm, unconsciously careful not to cause her needless pain.

Unable to delay his pleasure a moment longer, Melmanon stroked deeper, building speed until he fucked her at a steady pace. A tingling at the base of his spine signaled his release, and he sank deep one last time as he came, spurting his burning hot seed into her body. Grunting in pure animalistic response, he gave several quick, shallow thrusts to prolong the pleasure.

Still gripping her hips, he raised his head to look at her, and found her face averted, her eyes closed and her hands clenched on either side of her head. One small fist was pressed tight to her mouth.

He touched inside her mind, felt her shame and the discomfort his size had caused, but also, unfulfilled desire. The knowledge that she had reacted against her will made him want to fuck her again. Still deep inside her, he felt himself becoming smaller. His member would never soften, but remained hard and unyielding, even in repose. He withdrew only slightly and felt her tight body clasp him like a glove. He began thrusting again, aware he still filled her well.

Less careful of his size, he fucked her in earnest, pounding as he hadn't been able to before. With each slap of their bodies, he sensed her climax edging closer. When she was close, he thrust his finger into her anus, probing briefly, and sending her into a blazing orgasm.

Melmanon watched as she clenched, then growled as the muscles of her cunt milked him. The sensation of her climax renewed his erection. He withdrew from her clinging pussy and used his grip on her hips to flip her onto her stomach. With her legs spread wide, he lifted her slightly and pressed his shaft deep, enjoying the even tighter resistance in this position. He used their combined wetness to lubricate his finger before pressing it into her ass.

Charity was torn between discomfort and unfamiliar pleasure, but as he continued to slowly fuck her pussy and ass, the pleasure warred for dominance. When she couldn't hold back her moans, she felt a second finger enter. He was merciless and tireless, rhythmically pounding until she felt an unwilling orgasm approaching. As the wave broke, and she writhed in ecstasy, the two fingers in her ass spread, bringing a wave of pain that only heightened her pleasure, causing more broken cries to issue from her throat.

He removed his fingers and quickly replaced them with his cock, and pushed until she felt her sphincter give. Her body tensed under him, and her hands gripped the sheets as she begged for mercy.

“No, no, you’re hurting me!” With only the tip of him inside, he paused at her words.

“Now you’re getting the idea.” The mean words were accompanied by a thrust, sinking deeper as she clenched futilely against the invasion. “Push out.” His harsh tone was belied by the stroke of his hand against her hip. “Relax.”

Fighting against her instinct to do the opposite, Charity took advantage of his momentary pause to force herself to relax, letting all of her weight rest on the bed. As soon as she felt the last bit of tension slide away, her captor began again. She did as he instructed. The stinging was still intense and sharp, but somewhat improved.

As he began to withdraw, the sensation changed. Over the pain a dark pleasure crept, drawing her nipples tight, and making her moan until he slid in again.

“Do you want me to stop?”

Torn between the breathless agony of his penetration and the ecstasy of withdrawal, Charity couldn’t respond. When he thrust again and held there, refusing to move, she bucked against the bed, sharp and unfamiliar lust riding her. Finally, he used his hands to hold her still as he fucked her with furiously pounding hips, all restraint gone.

Pinned under the force of his hands, Charity squirmed, her clit caught against the slick fabric with every thrust. His thickness was unbearable. Her body’s confusion between agony and arousal sent her into another blazing climax without warning. Above her, he buried himself up to his balls, and she felt his cock throb in release.

With her smooth cheeks pressed tight to his pelvis, Melmanon took deep, snarling breaths. She was so tight it felt as if she were still milking him.

Reluctantly, he pulled from her and noted that smears of blood marked his cock. He left her body bent over the bed, walked to the lavatory, and returned a few minutes later with a moist toweling cloth. Already clean, he watched her quivering pussy and the cum that slowly trailed from her in a thick stream. Her mind told him that she was both sore and aroused, and conflicted about her response to his body.

Her utter submissiveness was perversely alluring. The sexual act for warriors required the one you wanted to mate with be conquered by combat-challenge before you could fuck them. No one would ever let themselves be used without fighting, both before and during the act. To have the freedom to use her, take her without having to fight for it, was thrilling. Even now, his shaft pulsed to life, eager for more. He stepped once more between her legs and turned her until she lay face up.

Charity cringed in his grasp. Even now, after he had defiled her in the most degrading way, she inexplicably wanted more. Part of her mused she didn't resist because she had wanted it, *enjoyed* it as she never had before.

Although there was little expression in his basilisk-like gaze while he used a wet cloth to cleanse her lower body, she thought there was a sort of triumph in him, as if he gloried in mastering her. And why shouldn't he? She felt tears well anew as she realized he had mastered her very easily.

Dropping her gaze from his face and letting her eyes close, she missed seeing his grim visage lose its edge. But an echo of his thoughts whispered through her mind, making her shiver.

Yes, Charity, I am your master now.

Chapter Six

Charity felt Melmanon's hold move from her waist to her arms, lifting her easily until she stood before him, braced between his powerful hands. She swayed slightly, unbalanced. She looked up, her eyes level with his ribs, or rather, where ribs *should* be. It was impossible to tell, since strange muscles stretched here as well.

Her sex throbbed from his repeated taking, and her ass burned from his forced entry. Unable to stop trembling, she wondered why he had forced her to orgasm -- to humiliate or to confuse. She thought the climaxes had been to degrade her, a part of the torture he intended to inflict.

It mattered little, because despite her exhaustion, he seemed bent on using her more. She let her head droop and flinched when she saw his erection, proof of his renewed arousal. His hands burned like brands where they gripped her upper arms. They suddenly clenched tightly, causing her to squeak as he lifted her again.

He turned her to face the bed, standing between his legs, his knees on either side of her waist. The position brought her attention back to his erection, blood red and visibly throbbing.

"Suck it, Charity." She felt a measure of relief at his words, because he wasn't using her sore body again to satisfy his lust. Bending at the waist, she wrapped her hands around his hot flesh and lowered her head.

Growls erupted from him as Charity applied suction and her tongue to the most sensitive part of his cock. Her hands began a rhythm along his shaft, squeezing and stroking. She didn't question the beast's desire. Grateful, at least, that while demeaning, this was not painful. It didn't hurt, except where her mouth stretched tight around his girth. Although slightly different, he seemed sensitive in the same areas as a human man, though much hotter to the touch.

The groans and snarls he made frightened her, but she continued, working furiously to bring him to orgasm. When his shaft began to pulsate, his words pierced her mind.

Swallow it!

He swelled to even greater proportions, cum jettisoning from his cock, and she couldn't keep up. It ran down her chin and onto her chest. The hot flow was almost sweet on her tongue as she lapped and swallowed. To appease him, she continued to suck and stroke, milking him through his climax and beyond.

As before, he stayed hard, but reduced in size. Still sucking and stroking, Charity released him from her mouth with an audible pop when he used his hold on her shoulders to push her away.

With her lids drooping in exhaustion, she felt more than saw a towel brush her as he wiped his seed from her face and breasts. He pulled her against him, easing them both back onto the bed, then lowered her onto his upright shaft.

She cried out, bracing her hands against him in a futile attempt to lever off his invading length. After a moment, when he hadn't moved, Charity looked at his face. It seemed that whatever he saw in her expression was what he had been waiting for, because he spoke.

“Ride me.” His tone brooked no argument, and she swallowed heavily, fearing his anger more than her discomfort.

She sat up and found that her knees didn’t touch the bed; she was completely helpless atop his cock. As if he realized it too, his hands came under her hips, lifting her, then letting her fall, wringing a gasp from her as her clit struck his pelvis hard, unwanted sensations flaring to life. With no way to stop him, Charity didn’t fight as his hands continued to lift and release her in a hard ride of his flesh.

Several moments later, she choked back a scream when she came, shuddering as convulsions gripped her. Exhausted and spent, she slumped forward, her face resting against the fiery skin of his chest.

Part of her was horrified at her response, and longed to wrench away from him and his terrifying control over her. But weariness and weakness pulled at her. Unable to move or even think, Charity was unaware when sleep claimed her.

On his back, her slight weight atop him and her quivering sex still wrapping his own, Melmanon felt her mind fade out as she drifted off. It was not a peaceful sleep; her days of struggle and fear, the culmination of her capture, and his ruthless sexual assault had left her completely depleted.

Alone, he used the privacy to catalogue the sensations in his body. With her face resting on his chest, he felt her breath slide over his skin in soft puffs. Her hair cascaded around her head and down onto his sides, brushing his skin lightly. The clinging, wet corridor of her core gave an occasional pulse, tightening on his shaft, giving him pleasure. After a few minutes of enjoying the feel of her, he decided he wanted to look.

He used one hand to lift her off him and splayed the other across the back of her head and neck. Holding her like a baby, he turned her onto her back on the black bed coverings.

With his hand spread against the soft skin of her stomach and pelvis, he noted the burning darkness of his skin appeared like old blood against her milky pale hue. The breadth of his hand also forcibly reminded him of her diminutive stature. Considering his much greater size, it was a wonder she was so docile before him.

Never had another being been so helpless before him. She neither fought nor seemed to plan further attack. From his views of her mind, he saw her defeated acceptance and her fear of future pain. Even when he commanded her to suck his cock, there was only desperation to please, to submit to him, and to avoid his displeasure. Melmanon recalled the dark thrill that had coursed through him as he watched her obey.

Lustful thoughts of the things he could do to her and make her do to him flashed like an erotic vid through his mind. Charity was no warrior who must be conquered over and over, on whom one could never turn one's back.

She was a complete submissive.

Her kind never survived in his world. The only exceptions were brides, women recognized during testing for their singular potential as a mate and mother. Those women were raised and trained to be productive, fertile wives. Even then, they were usually assertive and confident, like women who took the warrior path. If some were occasionally more submissive, it was an added virtue to their mates.

Since her people would not be added to the war tribe, her suitability would never be considered. Without the distinction of being a wife, his people would never suffer her to live as a citizen. She could only be a slave.

Melmanon absentmindedly stroked the soft skin of her belly and considered how rare a find she was. In addition to her utter subservience, she had a lush body, and she sexually excited him as no other ever had. It was a pity he had to get rid of her so soon... He sat up slightly to sharpen his gaze on her slumbering face. An idea formed in his mind.

He was a hero of some renown. It was well known how much the war tribe owed to his military prowess, and the list of his successful campaigns stretched longer than any commander in their history. A toy such as this could very well be sanctioned, considering how difficult she had proven to capture, and the bloodlust he rightfully deserved to satisfy at her expense.

To request a special dispensation to keep her as a torture slave would not be unheard of. *How* he tortured her need not be anyone's business but his own.

Pleased he had found a way to keep her at his disposal as long as he liked, he relaxed. Proprietary interest flared, and he looked to the time then considered how long he had before needing to return to the deck.

His gaze once again on her pale flesh, he traced the contours of her body, starting at her small face with its frame of dark brown hair curling to her shoulders, across the leather collar she still wore, and down. Her breasts rose and fell, and he rubbed a calloused finger across a nipple, watching it bloom into a hard nub.

Suddenly curious without knowing why, he reached into her slumbering mind for memories. Images of her former lovers came into focus: small, pale hands like her own caressing her, small mouths drawing at her nipples, pressing into her sex with lapping tongues. When he mentally pulled away, he felt her body give a small shudder, as if even in sleep she felt his presence inside. *Good*, he mused. He planned to be her whole world. The sooner she became attuned to him, the better.

Between her legs, the small patch of hair glistened from their joining, and her thighs rested slightly open, revealing pink inner lips. He visually measured the differences in their bodies and felt himself grow hard again. Damn. Even the fiercest warrior met in challenge had never aroused him so often or so quickly. He rose from the bed and cleansed himself in the lavatory before donning his clothing.

Garbed in his usual attire, he returned to where Charity slept and pulled the thin black sheet over her exposed body. He watched as she sighed, curling onto her side, one small hand cupped to her face. The leather of the collar peeked out from the concealing cover of her hair, and he brushed his fingers against it briefly before striding purposefully from the room.

There was much to be done, but he didn't discount his need to further analyze his reaction to the captive. As he strode down the corridor to the main command deck, he considered what it meant that he had found such pleasure in dominating Charity. Grimly, he wondered how long it would last. He still longed to kill someone. Eventually, it would probably be her.

Chapter Seven

Charity woke slowly, coming to awareness in gradual stages. First, the feeling of her hair, soft and cool, brushed her cheek. Next, the tingle of numbness from the arm supporting her head in lieu of a pillow. Her eyes fluttered open, and she surveyed the dimly lit room around her. From the bed, she saw two walls that looked like black steel, reminiscent of a nautical ship, with rivets at the joints. The door that led out was the same, rounded at the edges and firmly closed.

Gingerly, Charity propped herself up and groaned aloud at her sore muscles, a reminder of the sexual demands of her captor. The ache between her legs was sharp. She slid off the bed and crossed the room. Her bare toes curled against the cold floor as she entered the sterile lavatory. Though alien, the basic fixtures were fairly self-explanatory. Within five minutes, she stood beneath a punishing spray of hot water.

Braced against the cold wall, Charity let the stinging force batter her body, and wished she could do the same with her mind. Memories of her behavior burned her eyes with unshed tears. It seemed the worst kind of betrayal to her people. Even now, she couldn't understand why she responded so readily to the demon's touch.

Perhaps it was because he had behaved so unexpectedly. In her heart, she thought she was facing death, only to be offered something entirely different. There had been no terrible brutality in what had happened between them. A thoughtful frown puckered her brow. In fact, if not for his incredible size and frightening appearance, the act might have even been tender at times.

She shook away the traitorous musings when a harsh inner voice reminded her of the crimes his kind had so easily committed against her world. To forget what he was capable of, what he would do when he tired of her, would be foolish. Her fists clenched in anger, she vowed she would not allow herself to find pleasure in his arms again.

Newly determined and much revived by the cleansing spray, Charity stepped from the stall. Wrapped in a large toweling cloth that swaddled her from neck to knees, she entered the room. Her breath drew in sharply at the sight of him reclining on the bed. Her gaze dropped to her feet, abruptly fearful and shy, terrified she had incurred his displeasure. She started at the sound of his voice, but did not look up.

"I hope you are comfortable." His tone was chillingly sarcastic. "Drop the cloth."

The room now seemed starkly cold, and she hesitated slightly before releasing her cover. It hit the floor, and he was on his feet. In two great strides he was upon her. His hands closed brutally around her waist and lifted her to his eye level. Unwillingly, her eyes met his as her fingertips reflexively braced against his chest.

She spoke before she could stop herself. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. *Please...*" The last was squeezed painfully past a growing constriction in her throat as tears threatened to fall. Shame at her own cowardice overwhelmed her, and her eyes closed while she waited for him to act.

In Charity's mind, Melmanon felt desperate obedience and a dozen new fears. Her skin was ice cold, and her body shivered lightly in his grasp. The feel of her suspended helplessly

between his hands helped him forget his anger. When he'd come back to find her gone, his instinctive reaction had been to assume she'd tried to escape.

He had gotten approval to take Charity as a torture slave. Although slaves typically died relatively quickly, lasting at most perhaps one or two years, there were those who had endured for much longer. He was confident that regardless of how long he entertained himself with her, there would be no issue.

To look at her now, his body was even more certain he had made the right choice. The temporary pleasure to be had by torturing and killing her was far outweighed by the ecstasy of using her for sex. Although he had frequently combat-challenged other warriors to relieve his lust, the use of her soft body was far more satisfying than any war cunt or warrior he'd ever had.

Her thoughts cut through his own as her fear increased.

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...Please, please, please...I'm so tired...please don't hurt me...I can't...I can't...

He growled deeply as he lowered his arms, bringing her against his chest with her face below his own. "Charity, look at me." He was gratified by how quickly her head snapped up, her eyes flinching slightly as they met his own. "Obey me. Always. Immediately. Do you understand?" He heard her thoughts even before her head nodded vigorously.

"Yes, yes, yes." Her voice was breathless and reed-thin.

"Good. Go to the bed." After lowering her to the floor, he was pleased to see how quickly she ran to the bed, clambering on top with no pretense of pride or modesty in her nakedness. With her feet tucked beneath her bottom, she clasped her hands in her lap and bent her head. He had never seen anything so arousing.

He shed his clothes on the way and used the flat of one hand to press Charity backward. There was no resistance in her body, but he heard her thoughts and worries loudly in his mind.

No pain. Please, no pain. Please, please, please. I'm such a coward.

Yes, she was a coward. But it was that timorousness that made having her so desirable and using her so thrilling. It was also what awakened repressed fantasies inside him, bringing out his curiosity.

He was reluctant to hurt her. Even more strangely, he wanted to replace every other lover in her memory. In her mind, he'd seen fond and happy recollections of tender lovers. As much as his domination aroused her, he was determined to conquer all of her, not only her submissive side.

Looming over her slight form, he saw a fine trembling in her legs and belly. He grew even harder at the small sign of her nervousness. Emboldened to do whatever he wanted, he moved to fulfill a forbidden fantasy.

He settled between her thighs, his face close enough to smell her arousal. Despite the soreness he knew she felt and the recriminations in her own mind, she was wet. Ever since he had seen her memories, he had wondered about tasting her.

Using his thumbs to spread her nether lips, he marveled at the deep pink color of her sex. Every detail was revealed in glistening dew, her tiny clit still protectively sheathed. He lowered his head to her, took a long, slow lick, then returned to explore.

Charity nearly yelped at the first touch of his tongue. Unnaturally smooth, it felt long and thick. After his first lap, he settled in and delved deeply, stirring her to near orgasm. Fearful of his wicked teeth should he decide to take a bite, she responded as his strokes pumped her to a fever pitch. She despaired at her inability to remain aloof, and bitterly thought any other advance would have been easier to withstand. Knowingly or not, he had found her point of weakest resistance.

Unable to stop, she raised her hands to the thick black hair that reached his shoulders, threading through it, then tightening to hold him close as she approached climax. Suddenly,

it was there. Her internal muscles clamped around his still invading tongue. Long moments passed, and her hands fell away from his head. He rose and pulled her hips against his own.

She felt a stinging pressure as his massive cock pressed deep. There was a moment when he touched her cervix, causing her to flinch in distress. It didn't last as he instantly pulled back, easing the discomfort. After setting a steady rhythm, he proceeded with measured thrusts that perfectly filled her.

"Touch your breasts, Charity." His growl was more effective than a shout, and had a purring edge she hadn't heard from him before.

She cupped her breasts in both hands, moaning slightly at the delicious tightening of her lower body. Another climax was building. She pinched and tugged at her nipples with abandon. Pleasure flared as she twisted them almost painfully, and she convulsed around his cock. As if her moment had triggered his own, he plunged deep, and she felt his scalding hot seed inside her.

For several moments, he held her immobile. Then he pulled away, her flesh releasing his with a reluctant quiver. As he rose from the bed, Charity stayed in the position he left her in, legs spread wide and her hands at her breasts, unsure if he would tell her what to do next.

Without the heat of his torso close to her own and his fiery hands holding her, she felt shivers spread through her. She was cold all over when he returned to the bed.

As before, he returned with a moist toweling cloth, cleaning her of his seed, then extinguishing the light and coming back to the bed. She felt him settle next to her on top of the sheet. Charity curled onto her side facing him, nervously awaiting his next move, but after long, silent minutes, decided he must be sleeping.

Her earlier bravado and determination to resist his sexual domination rang through her mind. Disgust at her disloyalty to her people broke her heart. She had never guessed the

depths of her own cowardice. While she thought her response to him was involuntary, a mocking corner of her soul suggested it was her own depravity.

How could she be so attracted to a monster, the worst killer she could ever imagine? A man who would no doubt kill her in time. It was a fierce ache in her breast that would not relent.

After nearly half an hour of fretting and shivering, naked and without cover, she moved fractionally closer to his heat. Careful not to touch, she fell into slumber uneasily.

As soon as she nodded off, her body followed its own instinct and pressed tight to his side, her leg rising to curl over his, her arm resting across his waist.

* * * * *

Utterly sated, Melmanon lay sprawled on his back, the slight weight of Charity's body against his side. With one arm circling her back, he traced the outline of her hip, marveling at her delicacy. Her slender arm at his waist, he placed his hand over hers, completely engulfing it. Her raised leg put the soft hair of her sex against his hip, and made him think of rolling towards her and taking her. She wouldn't protest. Strangely, he had come to believe the most fulfilling part of this arrangement was just *knowing* what he could do.

He'd thought at first it was his power over her and her unwilling response that brought him such satisfaction. After his earlier use of her, he realized the truth. He was most aroused by the simple fact she would do whatever he told her to. To be totally in control of her, without reservation, and able to do anything -- please or punish her -- was his ultimate fantasy revealed.

Even as his training protested, he knew he would never again be satisfied with the hurried sex of the war tribe. In their society, it was considered a perversion for a warrior to lust for anything but combat-challenge sex. Only when warriors retired and took bond mates did they have any other kind of intimacy.

In fact, it was a fairly accepted assumption there were dominance issues inherent to bonding that continued for the duration of life. He had previously thought Charity had the look of a wife, rounded and soft, made for having children. But those lush wives of retired warriors were not shy and timid. Some had even been warriors themselves, or in another service capacity.

Melmanon admitted wryly that if anyone knew his secret, they would truly think him perverted. He felt no shame, though. Thinking back, he understood why the combat-challenge system had never satisfied him, why he had a vague distaste for the method. As he lay in the dark with Charity breathing softly against his side, he remembered the first challenge he had participated in, and the lesson about sex he had learned that day.

He was only a first-class warrior then, barely fifteen years old in his first four year of duty. Her name was Perla...

It was a bloody battle, and he had already slain more than ten of his enemies when he saw his commander fall under the blows of five enemy warriors. Racing to his side, Melmanon struggled to fight them back, hacking and sawing until nothing was left. Sticking close to his commander for the remainder of the battle, he was startled when the Grinstat came for him later that night in his quarters aboard ship.

"Why am I summoned?" His words had no effect, and they pulled him bodily down the hall and into the hearing room. The Grinstat were the police for warriors. Being summoned by them usually ended badly.

When they entered the hearing room, it was not to the accused box that he was led, but to the witness box. Scanning the room, he saw Perla, a warrior several years older than himself, who stood trial.

After more than an hour of questioning, it was determined Perla had broken rank, leaving her commander open to attack and failing her duty. Melmanon understood the gravity of her failure, but wondered what punishment would be meted out. He did not have

long to wonder. After several minutes of conference, the judge announced that the commander himself had requested a specific punishment, for Perla's actions had caused him the most detriment.

And so it was ordered. Perla would be combat-challenged by the commander. Melmanon agreed it was fair; she had no chance against the commander. It would allow her to return to the ranks without further punishment. If anything, the sentence seemed light. Then the other shoe dropped. Melmanon would also fight. Long moments of silence gripped the hearing room. He had never heard of two warriors being allowed to combat-challenge one. It guaranteed her loss.

He had never challenged before, was actually a virgin, since combat was the only way warriors received sexual experience. In the normal course of things, he would not have chosen to challenge for many more years, until he was strong enough to win.

The next day it began. It took no time at all for the commander to capture Perla. Within minutes, he held her tightly from behind, urging Melmanon to take her. As he thrust deep, he felt her jolt as the commander pressed from behind, reaming her ass in punishing strokes. As they hammered her in a relentless fury, her body mashed between them, he felt uniquely powerful. He had never dreamed how it would feel to fuck a woman, and feel her helpless struggles. After a few thrusts, he shouted his satisfaction as the commander released her.

Perla slumped to the ground as they stepped away, but Melmanon was unprepared when the commander suddenly tackled him, brought him to the ground, and pinned him like a bug.

"Your turn, warrior."

Nearly twenty-three years later, he still remembered the terrible pain and humiliation of that day. Although he had lost his first challenge, by the time he was twenty, he had

grown another foot taller and gained seventy pounds. He was also undefeated. No one had ever used him again.

Every time he conquered another warrior, he felt the triumph, but there was never any real or lasting satiation after the act. There was always the knowledge they were not truly bested. They would throw off his victory over them and fight another day, conquering and being conquered in turn. Among the warriors, you were only defeated until the next battle.

Now, though, with his little torture slave, he had found someone whose resistance was crushed permanently.

As he stroked the cool skin of her back, images of Charity at his mercy flashed through his head. He lowered his hand to her succulent ass, slipping his fingers down her cleft and pressing one finger into her moist hole.

Against his side, her breath stuttered, but she did not wake. The wetness grew until he easily slipped two fingers in and out in a slow rhythm. The leg that rode high on his tightened imperceptibly, and he listened closely to her thoughts to ensure she still slept.

As soon as she was close to orgasm, he stimulated her clit, bringing her to a mild climax. As the pulses faded and she continued to sleep, he withdrew his fingers. When he woke the following morning with a steely erection, he would be able to take her quickly.

Cock already hard at the thought of tomorrow, he closed his eyes. In moments, he slept. It didn't occur to him to wonder why he had been so gentle.

Chapter Eight

Gasping and waking at the same time, she opened her eyes in the dark. Whether it was night still, or very early morning, was impossible to tell. All of her attention was on the body folded around hers. Lying on their sides, Melmanon was close behind her. His arms curled around her, one at her shoulders, the other at her waist. Harder and hotter than she remembered, his massive cock was already seated deeply inside her.

She felt the fluid strength of him in the easy movements that rocked her hips against him. Minutes passed while he kept up a gentle rhythm. Finally he groaned, holding her tightly while within she felt the pulse of his release.

When he pulled out of her, he didn't go far. He settled onto his back at her side and pulled her into the curve of his arm. Still drowsy and slightly bemused by the tenderness of her captor, she drifted into sleep again.

* * * * *

"Wake up, Charity." The rough sound of her name was almost a purr. "Wake up now."

Murmuring blearily, she rolled over, burrowing her head against the bed and mumbling indistinctly. "Nomph trrd."

Melmanon surveyed the picture she made in his bed, tousled hair and pale smooth skin against the absolute black of the sheets. Reaching for her with both hands, he drew her -- not harshly -- into a sitting position. Her head drooped a moment before her eyes snapped open and locked with his. Her thoughts were clear and sharp in his mind.

Oh, I forgot. How did I... Oh, no. No, no, no.

Without releasing his hold on her waist, he soothed.

“Now that you are awake, go the lavatory and prepare yourself. There are clothes for you there.” Her eyes grew impossibly wide as he spoke quietly. When he said the word *go*, the only thing that kept her from leaping off the bed to obey immediately were his restraining hands. As soon as he turned her loose, she bolted for the lavatory, disappearing inside.

Inside the lavatory, Charity quickly cleaned up before turning to the clothes on the back of the door. Like Melmanon’s own, they were unidentified leather. Instead of black, they were a dark red, almost wine-colored.

When she put on the pants, she discovered they were lined with a fur so soft, it felt like silk. The top was made like a corset without stays, hugging her tightly from bosom to hip and lacing up the front. Her arms and upper chest were totally bare, but otherwise, she felt warmer than she had in days. She hurried quickly from the lavatory, worried she had kept him waiting too long.

He stood next to the door. When he saw her emerge, he beckoned her to him. As she approached, he opened his hands to reveal more leather pieces of the same color as her clothes, and she stood in front of him while he fitted them to her neck and wrists, removing the old collar. Now she wore one piece around her neck, the soft fur lining tickling the underside of her jaw, and one on each wrist like a cuff.

She couldn't see the one at her throat, but the cuffs had intricate designs branded into the leather with several metal studs throughout the pattern. Curious about what they meant, but hesitant to ask, Charity followed as he stepped from the room into the hallway beyond.

Her earlier observation that they were on a ship of some kind seemed correct, since the metal and rivets theme continued here. Melmanon's hand wrapped around her upper arm, and he set a rapid pace as they moved down the hall. Struggling to keep up or be dragged, she gasped when more warriors came from the opposite direction. They didn't pay any attention to her, only striding purposefully by with a motion of acknowledgment toward her captor.

As they passed out of sight, she wondered why they hadn't resembled him. Oh, they were large beings, but vastly different in appearance. They hadn't looked at all like demons or devils. She slanted her eyes to him now, and wondered if he was a devil, even to them.

"Better the devil you know, Charity." He had not looked at her, but his words reminded her of his ability to read her mind. She tried desperately not to think of anything at all, but immediately recalled half a dozen unsuitable memories. As a particularly vivid image of his head between her thighs came to her, he pulled her abruptly through an open doorway into a room that looked to be a public lavatory.

His hand was at the opening of his pants, and within moments, his huge member was free.

"Suck." He kept one hand in her hair as she leaned down to take him into her mouth. Using both hands as before, she set a fast pace of sucking and stroking to bring him to climax. He grunted, then shuddered as he came, and she sucked and swallowed greedily. Unlike before, she was able to keep up and only some of his seed escaped her mouth.

Charity felt his shaft harden once again and tried to fight the answering clenching of her sex. The hot, sweet taste of him had only whetted her appetite for his thickness between her legs.

Then he reached for her, pulling her pants down to her knees and bending her over the sink. With her hands braced against the wall, she felt a moment's panic when her feet couldn't touch the floor. With her weight on his hands, she gasped when his fingers found her. She felt him spread her labia with his thumbs, and he quickly worked his length into her tight, wet core.

Giving several hard thrusts, Melmanon used the wetness of her cunt to lubricate two big fingers before sinking them deep in her rectum. Her mewling cries of pain and pleasure urged him on. When she came, the gripping of her sex rushed his own end, and he buried deep and erupted hotly into her body.

He reached for toweling and quickly cleaned himself, then Charity. She did not move until he lifted her. He quickly fastened her pants and brushed her hair back from her face with his calloused hand. She was absolutely quiet, in mind and body, and he realized she was fading fast. He cupped her face in one hand as he met her eyes and tried to read her thoughts. Frustrated when only disjointed words and fractured impressions came through, he shook her gently.

"Charity? What is wrong?" His words came out hard and angry, making her flinch and stammer her reply.

"I'm sorry, I'm...I'm hungry..." She trailed off into silence, and he released her face.

He felt foolish. Of course, she was hungry. He had captured her almost two days ago. And who knows how long since she had eaten before that.

He had been so happy to wake to her this morning, and so intent on satisfying the morning erection that woke him. The kindness and custom-made clothes he'd given her this morning were the first unspoken tokens of his pleasure with her, but her more basic needs had escaped his attention.

Gently pulling her into the hall, he proceeded to the kitchens, placing an order for both of them, then continued to the private dining room. Here, only his highest-ranking officers congregated, and as he led Charity to a table against the wall, one called out to him.

“*Rinkh laus*, commander! I heard you had taken a slave!” The sound of his second-in-command, Theron, caused him to pause long enough to answer.

“Yes. How quickly word travels.” Theron was the worst gossip on the ship. He stood nearly two hands taller than Melmanon, but had a wiry body that dipped and swayed as he walked. A descendant of the Drannons, he came from a birdlike people; even the hair on his head was fluff and feather. He looked down at Charity, saw her wide green eyes taking it in. For once, he didn’t have to read her mind.

Theron, unoffended by his dry observation, merely continued to talk with no expectation of a reply. “Well, it’s like I said. You deserve it more than most. It gets harder and harder to find a good battle, and the way this girl evaded capture makes her a perfect choice.” Theron peered down at her face, still wide-eyed and staring up at him. “Though perhaps she is not as intelligent as her elusiveness implies.”

Chapter Nine

The cook arrived with their food, and Charity's attention focused on her plate. Although the food was unfamiliar, it was good, and she ate with gusto, stopping only when completely satisfied. Once her fork was laid aside, she realized her captor had already finished. Blood rushed to her face as she dropped her gaze to the table, angry with herself for drawing his attention. She should have made sure she finished at the same time.

Across the table, he rose and came to her side. His hand took her upper arm and pulled her from her seat. They walked back down the hallway, then took a sort of elevator to another floor, though she had never actually felt it move. Lost in her own thoughts, she wondered why he had to hold her arm. It wasn't as if she would wander off.

"Would you prefer a leash for this collar?" His words made her jump. She swallowed a squeak as his other hand came to her throat, tugging at the band she had forgotten about. Just as she had forgotten how he could read her mind.

"No, thank you." Her hand rose tentatively to his, curling around the two fingers against her collar. "What's your name?" Her eyes widened as she realized what she had said. She started to drop her hand, but instead found herself gripping his fingers even tighter.

"Melmanon. But you will call me Master." His face was completely expressionless. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, Master." She couldn't seem to stop herself. "Am I a slave then?"

"*My* slave. You have been given the status of a torture slave. Do you want me to tell you what that means?"

Charity almost wished she had never spoken. Aside from her trembling fear, she felt desperate to know her own fate. "Yes, please." Then quickly, "Master."

The hand at her throat moved to cup her face. She felt her own fingers, still wrapped around his, against her cheek. It was a tender gesture, but his words and the hard hand at her arm dispelled the illusion.

"Because of the unique...challenge...you presented me, I asked and was granted permission to keep you. Instead of having a limited time in which to satisfy my bloodlust, I can keep you as long as I like." He stroked her face like a lover. "Until you die."

Charity shook. She couldn't help it. When he dropped his hand from her face, her own slipped back to her side. She stared at his vest until a sudden jerk on her arm alerted her to the fact they were moving out of the elevator and down a new hallway. More steel, rivets, and doors with unfamiliar characters on them.

When they reached the end of the hall, a large open portal led into a great room. From the amount of activity and the layout, she could tell this room held the ship's controls. She was not given much opportunity to look around. Melmanon walked directly to the center of the room where a large chair and console waited, pulling her along. As he sat, he tugged her to the floor at his feet.

She followed, leaning against his leg and the base of his chair for support. He released her and activated the console in front of him with motions of his hands and words in a language she didn't understand, but sounded the same as the one he had used in the dining room. After a few minutes of watching him, then looking around surreptitiously at the other

warriors and marveling again at how *different* they were, Charity drifted into her own thoughts.

In six months of running and hiding that had led to this moment, there had been no time to think of what had happened to her, no time to break down and sob over the loss of her family.

How strange that I feel so detached. Images of her life, her family, and friends haunted her. How ashamed they would be at how easily she had surrendered! Sadness gripped her as she thought of all she had lost, and a tight band of grief compressed her chest. She drew her knees up and rested her face against the soft leather of her pants, hiding the slow tears that trailed down her cheeks.

With her arms curled protectively around her body, Charity castigated herself for her cowardice. Although she had run desperately to escape, she had never fought back, never lashed out against her enemies. The bloody results of their conquering had dissuaded her from any rebellion. Her will to live burned too brightly for a meek acceptance of death, but not strong enough to burn in fury. She was certain anyone else would have fought to the death rather than allow, or find satisfaction in, the sexual demands she'd faced.

She might have been able to convince herself she submitted to her captor in order to prolong her life, but the fierce pleasure she felt belied those claims. A fool could see she was a coward and a traitor. Even now, when the demon named Melmanon confirmed her worst fears -- a torture slave! -- she couldn't find the courage to defy him.

Unable to lie, even to herself, Charity bitterly acknowledged she didn't fear death, or even captivity. It was the pain, the humiliation, and the helplessness that terrified her.

What he had already done to her was terrible in its own way, but the thought of real torture, real pain, made her stomach clench. As pitiful as it seemed, her best defense against future anguish would be to either infuriate him until he killed her in a rage, or try to appease him and satisfy his every whim.

Of the two choices, there was really only one that would do. She did not have the ability to rebel, to bring about her own destruction. Her head resting uneasily on her crossed arms, Charity gave in to her exhaustion.

Melmanon sensed his captive slip into an uneasy sleep. Her revelations didn't surprise him; while she possessed an agile mind to have eluded capture for so long, she did not have the core of fearlessness that marked a warrior. It was good she recognized her own weaknesses and didn't try any rebellious tactics.

Her decision to be a good slave fit in well with his own plans, and he made a silent vow to give her no needless pain. As long as she fulfilled his desires and obeyed him without question, there would be no torture. If he became bored with her, he would end it quickly, if only to honor the pleasure she had already given him.

Returning to work, Melmanon spent several more hours at his console, aware each time Charity woke. He also felt her restlessness and the soreness of her body. She shifted several times to relieve her discomfort. After what seemed to be the millionth time, he let out an aggravated growl that froze her in place. He reached down impatiently and grasped her beneath the arms, lifting her onto his lap.

Pinning her with his gaze and one hard hand at her throat, he grunted, "Do not make me take you back to the room." All the color leached from her face, and her hands involuntarily gripped his wrist.

"I'm sorry, Master."

Growling low, Melmanon felt himself harden when Charity's mind replayed the last time he'd held her that way, and the first time he'd taken her. He released her neck, stood with her in his arms, and crossed the deck to a narrow door that opened automatically.

Charity looked around cautiously, and thought they must be in his office. A large desk made of black glass dominated the far end, with a bulky padded leather chair behind it. There were all sorts of interesting items shelved on the walls, and she would have looked, but he strode rapidly to the desk and didn't pause until he dropped her lightly into the big chair.

Startled by how soft it was, she realized she could easily curl up and take a nap in it. Her gaze rose to the large form of her captor standing over her, and she resisted the urge to apologize again. In light of their exchange in the elevator, she was uncertain if he wanted her to speak at all.

He settled his hands on his hips. "Very good, Charity. Before you do anything, think of my desires first. You will be much better for it." He pointed to another door, a bit to the left of the one they had entered through.

"That is the lavatory. You may use it if you need to. You may sit in the chair, or walk around the room if you are restless." His face came close to hers. "Do not touch anything." With that, he left, the door closing automatically behind him.

For a while, Charity sat, grateful for the comfort of the chair and puzzled by her demon captor. Nervously, she wondered if he still heard her thoughts. After a moment, she decided probably not. He must be the only one who was able to read her mind; otherwise, she would never have been able to remain uncaptured for six months.

That he was the only one who violated her thoughts was a small comfort. *He* was the only one who would hurt her. To be fair, he had not punished her as she had expected. Even in the sex act, he used his body to give pleasure as well as take it. His size was the real reason she had felt any pain, and he didn't use it to inflict the damage he could have.

The title of torture slave still worried her, as did knowing she would die here. She would never be free, not so long as he lived. What would happen if he died? Would she be burned on his funeral pyre? Buried alive with him? The precarious nature of her existence

and the fragility of life drove her from the chair. For a while, she simply paced, then performed some stretches on the hard floor.

After a tour of the lavatory, she resumed her pacing, not knowing when she might have another chance for the meager exercise. Using her movements as an excuse, she looked at the unfamiliar objects on the walls. Some obviously served as decorations, rather like abstract paintings framed in black glass, but other oddly shaped devices on bowl-like shelves intrigued her. Not enough to touch, but enough to stare.

Charity sat in the big chair, staring into her reflection in the black glass desk when Melmanon returned. He showed no emotion at seeing her where he had left her hours earlier, and she wondered if he had known every move she had made in his absence. The realization she would never have the right of privacy again, for any reason, made her shudder a little.

As he reached her side, Charity stiffened, unsure whether she should stand or wait for him to decide for her. He pulled her to her feet and started to lead her from the room but came to an abrupt stop. With his free hand, he plucked something from its shelf on the wall and held it in his palm. Curious, but frightened, too, she waited for him to speak.

"Do you see how sharp the point is?" He turned his palm slightly so the tip of the thing was in profile. She thought it looked a bit like a carving of a musical trumpet, except that the tip, where a mouth might go, was wickedly pointed and sharp. Nodding her head, she didn't wait long for him to continue.

"This primitive piece was fired by our enemy. The sharp point pierced your skin at incredible speed, and the flared end drug through your flesh, inflicting mortal damage." This recital was utterly emotionless.

"How -- I mean, where did you get it?" She looked to his face, a little frightened of what his answer might be.

“From the body of a fallen soldier.” He said no more, replaced the thing on the wall, and pulled her from the room, Charity’s head spun with questions.

Why? What horrible purpose could be served by taking it and saving it, a token from a corpse? The feral nature of these people was clear to her. She had seen them in battle, knew their ruthless and mercenary natures. Unsettled, she wondered if it was something they were trained to do, or born to do. Either way, it did not bode well for her future.

She did not imagine a man who dug a weapon from a fallen comrade would balk at snapping her neck.

Chapter Ten

Charity spent every moment of the day under Melmanon's eye. Throughout the day, they would couple several times. He was insatiable. She sometimes felt as if he was experimenting with her. He would often spend a long time simply touching her, watching how she reacted. Other times, he would order her about, seemingly intent on ensuring her absolute cooperation. Regardless of the exercise, he pleased her more often than himself, driving her to shuddering ecstasy in his arms.

Day-to-day life was somewhat routine during their first two weeks. They took meals in the dining room. He worked every day; sometimes on the deck, sometimes in his office. They spent time going through the ship, which seemed huge and complicated to her. Everywhere there were people working, and he oversaw them all.

Almost a full month after her arrival, he took her off the ship to visit places where work had begun on her planet. The warriors had given way to a new wave, still alien, but with a far different purpose. She was astounded by their industrious natures. Instead of decimating her world, they were remodeling existing cities and towns to suit their purposes.

They visited a farming operation she had been to twice before. Harvesting the crops had taken no time at all. Now that the land was bare, tests were done, she assumed, to determine if their own crops could grow in the foreign soil.

Her gaze wandered to the fields, and she saw people! In obvious good health, planting seeds in the long rows of the earth. Charity stood rooted to the spot, staring at them.

Some talked amongst themselves; they did not appear abused. Most importantly, though, they were *her* people. She had believed all of them were dead, killed by the war tribe. This unexpected vision brought her first real joy in almost a year. She recalled forgotten dreams of a family, her own children, and a life of happiness. Those dreams were still possible if her people had survived!

Without thinking, she took several steps toward the ramp leading down to the earth. She never made it off the platform.

Brutal fingers caught the back of her neck, holding her immobile. *Melmanon!* Breathless from the pressure at her neck, with the others warriors gone, she and Melmanon were alone on the platform outside the transport they had arrived on.

Unable to see her master, she felt him step close behind her. His hands pressed down on her shoulders, causing her to stumble to her knees. Ahead, she still saw the people, but it was his words, spoken hotly into the delicate shell of her ear, that had her attention.

“You will never know them, slave.” His fingers bit deeply into her arms. She cried out in pain. “They did not fight our warriors, and so they have earned the right to live. But you...you ran from us. You put yourself above a warrior, slave. You will never have a friend. Never lie with a man. Never bear a child. Do you understand?”

Tears trailed fast in hot streams down her face. His words stung, and his hands hurt her flesh. She was so used to his controlled manner that this frightening brutality shocked her. Charity heard herself whimper, and when he pulled her into the transport and dropped her to the floor of the ship, she moaned in relief.

* * * * *

Back in Melmanon's room on the ship, Charity watched numbly as he furiously stripped her clothes, hurling them into a corner. When she was naked, her pale skin showed red streaks where his fingers had gripped her. He turned her to face the wall, lifted her hands above her head, and used the leather ties from her top to lash her wrists to a hook set high in the wall. When he finished, she was stretched tight, her bare breasts and belly pressed against the cold steel. Her nipples hardened painfully at the icy contact.

She heard him move about then leave the room. The draft of air from the door made her tremble. Awful thoughts of how he would punish her flashed through her mind. Paralyzing fear took over.

As her arms went numb, the thought of being left there forever made her tears flow faster, but it was perhaps only ten minutes before the door swung open, and she heard his low growl. Strange sounds made her shiver in fearful anticipation.

Charity cried out in surprise and pain at the first hot sting against her back. Her body twisted against the cold wall. The whip struck her back and buttocks, leaving a fiery map of pain behind. Blow after blow rained down, and she huddled to the wall, her wet face pressed into her upper arm. Above each slap, she heard his snarling grunts, an indication of his great rage and the force behind his swings. Her mind blanked, unable to deal with the burn of the welts he laid on her skin.

When each stroke only maintained the flame, rather than increasing it, the whip stopped. Her mind full of static, she was unaware of his movements behind her. She came to when his hands lifted hers from the hook above her head. Blood rushed back into her arms when they were lowered; pins and needles raced from shoulder to fingertip. That sensation was nearly lost to the stinging of her back. Hoarse sobs tore from her throat as he turned her around to see an unfamiliar shape.

The contraption was unfamiliar, but, within moments, Melmanon made it clear. As he strapped her into place, she thought *this* must be real torture. The device bent her forward at the waist, her hips against a bar, her legs held in place with a strap around each ankle. Her breasts hung free and her hands were strapped to a thin bar that extended from the base. Painfully aware her sex was completely exposed, cold air drafted over her and heightened her senses.

She felt the burning heat of him behind her, but it was something cold that pressed against her. Cold, hard, and slick, it moved along the tiny puckered hole of her anus, then delved between her labia. Without warning, he drove it into her pussy and made her cry out. Not as large as he was, it was nonetheless big and terribly cold. After several ruthless thrusts, it was withdrawn and rested on her anus again.

Charity knew what came next. Rather than tense, she relaxed. As soon as she felt him press, she pushed back against it. The pain was still sharp as the thing sank into her unprepared rectum. Crying again in great sobs, she felt him change sides so he stood in front of her.

His hands squeezed and tweaked her breasts until her hardened nipples throbbed. She screamed when pain bit down on the turgid buds, and she saw wicked-looking clamps pinching each one.

The pain in her ass and at her breasts consumed her, and she twisted and bucked against her restraints, sobbing and moaning. He moved behind her again. She was shocked when he thrust his cock into her pussy, pounding into her cervix over and over as he fucked her cruelly. The furious pumping caused her tortured breasts to sway wildly, eliciting unbearable pain. It was only a few minutes before she felt the scalding heat of his climax flooding her.

There was only the sound of his harsh growling breaths before Charity felt him withdraw. Still painfully full in her rectum and losing sensation in her nipples, she continued to sob softly, her tears a puddle on the floor beneath her. She heard him go into the lavatory

and return. He first unstrapped her ankles, then her wrists. Before she was able to pull herself up, he was gone, the door closing hard behind him.

Her hands went to her breasts. Charity whimpered as she released the clamps, and blood rushed back into her nipples. She then pulled the plug from her ass. On the bed, she saw several objects, including more terrible devices he hadn't used.

In the lavatory, she activated the lights and cried out at her reflection. Terrible marks around her nipples gave evidence to the teeth of the clamps. Over her shoulder, she saw the awful welts on her back. With hands braced against the sink, she reflected on the actions that had brought about this punishment.

Charity had never imagined he would be so cruel. She realized now she had started to care for him, to believe he was not the monster she had first thought. Now, in the face of his abuse, she knew her feelings for him had been a way to rationalize her sexual response. If she cared about him, and he cared about her, it wasn't such a terrible betrayal of her people to find paradise in his arms.

With this one act, he had stripped away her make-believe world.

Bitter tears coursed down her cheeks, and she gave a harsh laugh. In his defense, she'd never even asked him to stop. Her submission was so ingrained she'd accepted his right to discipline her. In this society, he owned her.

Reliving his words at the dock, she felt a kernel of defiance flare to life in her mind. *Why? Why can't I ever go back?* With the pain in her body worse than ever, sharp shudders racked her. At the sight of the pathetic creature she had become at the hands of an unfeeling monster, determination pulsed in her blood.

Resolutely facing the drawn face in the mirror, Charity made a grim promise to herself. She would either find freedom or death. Whichever fate allowed, it would be on *her* terms.

Chapter Eleven

Melmanon strode down the corridor, a man possessed. The last of her thoughts still echoed in his mind, and the pain in her body ghosted through his. *Hai!* He was such a fool! At the platform that morning, he had heard her thoughts clearly. He felt her yearning, her *hope*. She wanted a man like her, a child of her own. It was almost understandable, considering her civilization, but it was a slap in his face.

He had spared her from a terrible death. She repaid him by forgetting her place the moment she saw a puny member of her own race! She was a slave -- *his* slave -- and he knew she would not forget it again. That was his sole reason for the harsh punishment meted out.

Melmanon had released his fury, and the rational part of him wondered why he was so angry. Unable to answer, he snarled at the voice in his head until it stopped.

In the rec room where warriors trained, he snatched up a card for the imager and threw himself into a simulated battle. After more than an hour of intense physical exertion, he stalked out in disgust. Even the war games couldn't get his mind off his slave!

At the elevator, Melmanon paused when he remembered her slight form bent over the rack. The welted skin on her back had blazed a fierce red as he hammered away at her. Even now, thinking about how he had taken her simultaneously made him hard and caused him

regret. In the heat of his anger, he had thought only of imprinting his ownership onto her, and forgotten how fragile she was.

Suddenly worried, he reflected on how cold she had been, her lips white as she came away from the wall. What if she was still where he'd left her, unable to move? He rushed the last few steps to the door of his quarters, but hesitated a moment before opening it and stepping inside.

The rack remained where he had placed it, but she was not on it. All of the tools he had used were there, along with the ones he hadn't. Looking at the weapons of torture, he felt ashamed as he realized she would have seen them. He wondered if she thought he intended to use them again. Concerned, he crossed to the lavatory, and opened the door.

She was curled up on the floor of the shower. The water was off; Charity was soaking wet. He stepped closer and saw her face pressed to her knees. Hard shudders shook her, punctuated by muffled sobs. An unnamed emotion tightened his chest. Before he could analyze it, he took a clean cloth from the rack and stepped to the shower door, pulling it open.

Her strangled scream at his first touch stopped him cold, and he again saw her back, a mass of raw skin and deep bruises. He steeled himself against her pain and lifted her by gripping her upper arms then setting her on her feet.

She didn't meet his eyes, only stood frozen, hands clasped to her stomach. Her hair hung in wet ropes on either side of her head. With brisk motions, he towed her arms, legs, abdomen, and lastly, her breasts, where he mentally berated himself as he saw the purple bruises surrounding each nipple.

Careful not to hurt her further, he used feather-light touches to blot her back, and felt it each time she flinched. Finally, she was dry. He took her small hand to lead her from the lavatory. Back in the bedroom, he lifted her onto the bed and laid her on her stomach. Once she was down, she turned her face to the wall and fisted her hands at her sides.

He heard her thoughts returning, and felt how desperately she was trying to avoid thinking anything to incite his anger again. Her determination to avoid his anger both pleased and saddened him, though he didn't know why. Lost in his own musings, he focused on her again when she began to shiver.

Away from the bed, he opened the closet and brought out what he had gotten for her this morning, before their trip. It had been intended to show her how well she had pleased him these last few weeks, but it seemed to serve a different purpose now.

Charity felt the bed dip as he returned, and she prayed silently he hadn't risen to get one of the devices from his earlier tortures. When she felt his hands on her feet, she realized he was slipping on some kind of shoe. Like her clothes, she felt fur lining and the tightening of laces that ended at midcalf. Blissful warmth returned to her feet, and she hardly noticed when he rose again and left the room.

He returned about ten minutes later, and she was as he had left her. At the first touch of his fingers on her back, she started. Something warm and smooth was gently spread on the abused skin of her back. The throb and burn began to fade, and she let out a sigh of relief. Within a few minutes, she was aware only of a slight sensitivity.

He turned her onto her back, and she tried not to flinch as he brought his hand to her chest. He made a rough sound that was oddly soothing, and she forced herself to let him touch her.

Her breast cupped in one hand, she watched him use the other to dab a small spot of the cream onto her softened nipple. He was careful, and after a moment turned his attention the other globe. After giving it the same treatment, he lifted her like a child onto his lap, one arm curled around her shoulders, and settled her into the space between his legs.

He gently spread her thighs and dipped between them to press the cream right onto the rose of her ass. She instinctively tensed, and he hesitated only a second before pressing in to

spread it inside as well. When he was finished, he reached for something else, and her eyes widened at the beautiful garment.

It looked like a cloak, one that could easily wrap her whole body. At the throat, there was a beautiful clasp -- two pieces of hammered copper that fit together in the shape of a star. He easily maneuvered her until she was wrapped in it, the clasp fastened securely over the collar at her neck.

Wrapped in silky warm fur from head to foot, she wondered why he was treating her so well when he had been so angry before.

Chapter Twelve

The last of Melmanon's anger had faded after he found her in the shower. Struck again by her helplessness, he was shocked to find himself sorry for hurting her. No matter how many times he reminded himself she was his torture slave -- he was *supposed* to do it -- he still felt remorse he had wounded her, especially since she had never fought him. Every step of the way she had never resisted, not even to beg him to stop.

With her in his arms, close enough to listen to her unconscious thoughts, he admitted to himself he had been jealous. On the platform that morning, he had felt her joy for the first time. Like a cup filled to overflowing, her warmth had welled up from her soul to spill out like light into a dark room, expanding until it reached the farthest corner of her heart.

He had understood then, as he hadn't before, that her real self was not what he had. Her real self had been buried beneath the pain and tragedy of her experiences. When she realized she was not alone, that others like her lived and breathed in the world, she had opened a door in her mind he hadn't known existed.

It was his jealousy that felt the need to punish her for finding happiness in strangers. Looking down into her face, he saw she had drifted into sleep. She was beautiful. Not only the lush body that gave him so much pleasure, but the woman who thought herself a

coward. He didn't argue; she was no warrior. But he understood now it took a different kind of courage to accept what you could not change and try to make the best of it.

She was exactly what her name implied. Charity. In her language, the word for benevolence, for works of kindness with no need for payment. The way she gave herself to him, never holding back, or making him demand when he desired her touch.

His life had suddenly become very complicated.

* * * * *

Charity woke to the sound of the shutting door. She sat up when she realized she must have slept for some time, and also that she no longer hurt. She still wore the shoes and cloak he had given her. On the way to the lavatory, she saw all evidence of her punishment was gone, and upon entering, saw that her clothes were hanging on the peg behind the door.

After washing her face, and brushing her teeth and hair, she swept the cloak aside to look at her back in the mirror. Aside from two or three faint pink streaks, it showed no evidence of her whipping. As she eased into her clothes, she spared a grateful thought for the miracle cream that had eased her pain.

Back in the bedroom, she straightened the bed and noticed a large folded blanket on the bench. She lifted it and shook it out. It was black, with a large, silver star in the center. After stretching it out on the bed, her fingers rose to the clasp of her cloak. A star. She wondered what it meant.

His treatment still puzzled her, and she tried again to reconcile the two different faces he had shown her. After the first time he had taken her, there had been a change in his demeanor. Still forbidding and demanding, he had also been an attentive, creative lover who made her almost happy in his bed and her new life.

She had always experienced pleasure in his hands, so much so that she ceased trying to resist her body's arousal. When they slept, he drew her close, wrapping one arm about her and keeping her snug to the furnace of his body. Although she told herself it was to hold

away the cold, she now admitted she enjoyed being close to him, and perversely found comfort in his strength.

There had been so many nights on the run, fearing death at the hands of the many warriors who hunted for survivors. Melmanon was the enemy, but he had also spared her life. After considering how much worse her fate could have been, Charity thought that was why she was so conflicted.

With his complete physical and mental domination of her, she had sensed for the first time in her life she was truly safe. No one except her master would hurt or abuse her. Instead of many faceless dangers, there was only one person to worry about.

But it wouldn't last.

Even as her mind tried to think around it, she forced herself to admit he had said nothing to her, had made no indication she meant more than just a torture slave to him. Ultimately, he would kill her.

Only her own resourcefulness would see her out of this prison. Her heart hardened against its insistence of his regard, she reminded herself of her vow. Escape or die.

Curled in the warmth of fur, she hoped he would give her a chance to flee.

Chapter Thirteen

“Yes, you understood me correctly, General.” Seated at his private desk off the control deck, Melmanon spoke into the comm screen with firm tones. “I will not be accepting any future assignments.”

The yellow skin of General Was's face sagged in shock, then waggled as he spoke swiftly. “But, Commander Melmanon, this is so unexpected! This campaign has been so successful! You're a young man. Why would you retire now?”

The perplexed question almost made Melmanon smile. Indeed, most warriors had to be forced to resign a post as a commander, considering the incredible honor and privilege it entailed. “My reasons are simple, General. I am bored. There are no wars left worth fighting.”

Anxious wrinkles creased the General's forehead, “Well, of course, I see your point. However, your...ah...special circumstances are, shall we say, difficult to negotiate.”

Melmanon knew what he meant right away. Retiring commanders were afforded any concession available. Commanders and generals were the two highest ranks of the war tribe. When they retired of their own free will, it allowed those younger and stronger to take their place. As a custom, they were given a living, usually on any planet they chose. Retired

commanders oversaw the conquered planets, ruling small independent military forces that kept the planets in line.

That would be no problem; they had already discussed his taking the position of emissary to this planet, since it was his final battlefield. But more complicated was the matter of a bride.

Until they left active duty, which began at fifteen and ended in death, warriors were restrained from bonding or reproducing. As a retiring commander, it was his right to have a bride or career wife. But he was one of the last of his kind.

“General, I know that there are few of my kind left. Any woman tied to me through a bond would never bear a child, and would never be a credit to the tribe.” The General nodded cautiously at his words. “That is why I request no bride be procured. It would be unfair to deprive the war tribe of any offspring she may be able to produce.”

General Was appeared clearly pleased by his words. “Oh, Melmanon, you are truly the greatest commander of your time. How perfectly you understand my dilemma. Is there anything, anything at all, that will ease the disappointment of this loss?”

Melmanon repressed a growl of satisfaction. “Yes, actually, I have something in mind that will ease it quite a bit...”

* * * * *

Word of his resignation spread quickly. Melmanon called his officers together for a formal announcement. Theron, as usual, talked the most.

“Do you know who they have in mind to take your place?” The second-in-command quivered with excitement. The general consensus was he didn’t know how unlikely it was he would be promoted.

“No, Theron. I am not aware if they have selected anyone. They will have one month to decide, then you will know.” He acknowledged the communication officer. “Yes, Drand?”

"Where will you be going?"

"I will be taking my post on this planet. As my final battle, it is a fitting choice." Several murmurs of agreement rippled the room.

"When will your bride arrive?"

Melmanon let his eyes blaze as he met the gaze of Theron, the idiot. The hush that washed over the other officers told him they also knew how inappropriate the question had been. "Thank you, Theron, for bringing up an important point. The tribe will not send anyone because there are so few of my kind left. It would be unjust to ask that a fertile woman be wasted on my bond." Though shocked faces met his, he also saw several nodding heads, agreeing with the wisdom of his words.

"And so, I have asked and been granted permission to bond with Charity." Puzzled expressions raced across the faces of his officers as they turned to one another.

"Charity" -- he paused for effect -- "is my torture slave."

After a moment of total and complete silence, Theron broke the tension. "Melmanon, I'm speechless."

* * * * *

Satisfied all the questions had been answered, including several less than tactful inquiries about his rumored sexual perversions, Melmanon slipped into his room. The hour was late, and Charity lay asleep across the bed. It had been almost six hours since he'd left her. Though he knew he needed to talk to her, tell her about the change in his feelings, he couldn't resist doing something he had dreamed about.

Cupping her warm, flushed cheek in his palm, he said softly, "Kiss me, Charity," leaned in, and pressed his lips to hers for the first time, capturing the gasp that parted her lips. He took advantage of her open mouth to taste her, careful not to nip her with his sharp teeth.

She remained passive, accepting his caress, but after a moment, her small pink tongue touched his, tentatively and quickly.

Lust surged into his bloodstream as the proof of her passion. He had feared her desire would disappear in the face of his brutality. His other hand pulled her against him while he continued to lick and rub his lips against hers. A low growl built in his chest as she responded with gradually bolder parries of her tongue. When she sucked his lower lip and nipped it gently with her teeth, he groaned deep and pulled away slowly.

He drank in the sight of her face flushed softly with desire and her mouth gleaming wetly. He stripped his clothes away, pressed her back on the bed, and removed everything but her soft-soled shoes and cape. Settled between her thighs, he used the skills he had learned over the past weeks to bring her to the edge of orgasm with his tongue and lips.

When she gasped and shivered from the need for climax, he loomed over her and lowered his head to her breasts, lapping gently at her nipples. Both hardened to red berries. He sucked gently, bringing soft sighs and hums of pleasure from her throat.

While she enjoyed his attention to her breasts, he slid one finger deep into her pussy and began thrusting slowly. Beneath him, she writhed and arched, pushing her nipple harder into his mouth and grinding her hips against his palm. Mere minutes under the lash of his tongue and the rhythm of his hand had her climaxing, her head thrown back, her hands clenched in his hair.

Loath to leave her, he continued to stroke gently with both hand and mouth as she drifted down from her physical high. Finally, he relinquished his hold on her and lay on his back at her side. He pulled her into the curve of his arm then drew the cloak up to cover her nakedness. Determined to abstain from seeking his own pleasure, Melmanon sighed deeply.

While he tried to ignore the painfully hard erection that rose from his body in crimson glory, he was startled to feel her hand cup the head of his shaft. Speech became impossible as she took a place between his spread legs and lowered her mouth to his cock.

As the wet cavern of her lips met his tip, she looked up the length of his body and met his gaze. At the sight of her -- mouth spread wide over his shaft, her eyes clear and green -- Melmanon's orgasm began. The furious sucking on his cock only made it more intense as he roared his satisfaction.

When the last spasms shook his body, she continued to milk him with hand and mouth, drawing out the moment into minutes of extended pleasure. By the time he sat up and pushed her away, he was completely drained.

Without a word, he pulled her back to his side and tucked her close under his arm. The weight of her hand on his abdomen and her breath fanning his side soothed him. Within moments, he slept.

Curled close and tight to his side, Charity could not sleep. She waited for the deep, even breathing signaling his total descent into slumber. To make her mind carefully blank was an exercise of will, and as soon as she was certain he wasn't aware, she sank back into her own thoughts.

Her own behavior was a mystery. When he'd come back, she'd been resolute in her determination not to respond to anything he might do. Charity thought she'd been prepared, whether he hurt or pleased her. But he'd unwittingly disarmed her with his kiss. Never before had there been such a tender communion between them.

She'd heard about the power of a kiss, but this was the first time it had happened to her. It should have been the happiest moment of her life, to discover the one person in the world who touched her heart. In Melmanon's arms tonight, part of her had become his forever.

Where her face pressed to his chest, she felt the steady beat of his heart and realized something else. Despite his hold on her, both physically and emotionally, she wouldn't

change her course. Escape or die trying. This unexpected connection between them couldn't change anything.

In her mind's eye, she forced the memories of her life to surface. Her family, the camping trips and birthday parties, her sister and the niece who would never be born. Because *they* came. Melmanon and his army.

Images of the mutilated corpses of her people burned her mind like acid, but she willed them into focus. They were real; they had lived and died, and deserved better than betrayal from her.

With the heavy thought of her uncertain future crowding her, Charity drifted off to sleep in the arms of the man who held her body, owned her life, and to whom -- quite unexpectedly -- she'd given her heart.

Chapter Fourteen

Days passed quickly as Melmanon readied the ship for its next commander. Because he was to take a post on the same planet, arrangements had been made for all of his belongings to be transported here. Not much, really, considering the length of his life. Trinkets and tokens from long-ago battles, and a few from his childhood.

Now, only two days before the new commander arrived, he received the official document for the bond ceremony. It was to be performed the same night as the ceremony to transfer his title of commander. That night, they would also leave the ship for the home he had ordered prepared for them in the city. All was in order.

Except, despite the approaching deadline for his successor to arrive, Melmanon continued to put off talking to Charity. In fact, since he had beaten her, scarcely ten words had been spoken between them. He had been in such a rush to give her freedom from slavery, to make her his wife. When he tried to plan what to say, he realized this bonding, too, was no choice for her.

At the desk that would be his for only a few days more, he wondered when he had lost his hard edge. The routine exercises with his crew were as bloody and merciless as always. It

was only his relationship with Charity that was affected. He'd begun to accept he must be in love with her to worry so about her feelings and her reaction to his proposal.

They needed to talk. It wasn't what she would say that worried him. He knew her thoughts, feelings, and emotions. If he discovered she didn't care for him, that she didn't want him -- regardless of what she *said* -- he didn't know what he would do. He'd like to think his harsh treatment of her would never happen again, but he knew his own rage too well. There was a chance it could resurge if provoked.

Based on her behavior of late, he tried to analyze how she might feel. Outwardly, she'd shown little besides trying hard to please him. But privately, she was conflicted, and he knew she had unresolved feelings for him. Although she appreciated his kindness and marveled at how well he treated her, she didn't really believe it had much to do with her. If she only knew!

That was the crux of the matter. The things he *needed* to tell her every day went unsaid. He tried to show her, giving her pleasure and ensuring she never felt a moment of pain. Her thoughts, however, told him the message wasn't coming through.

* * * * *

Charity examined the new clothes Melmanon had brought for her that morning. After leaving them with no explanation save, "Put them on," she had been bewildered, but delighted. The dress was beautiful. Unlike the deep red leather of her pants and top, or the honey-brown color of her cape and boots, it was made of cloth. Silky and impossibly fine, it was green, like rolling grass. It fit tightly through the bodice, then flared at her hips and pooled in soft waves around her feet.

Instead of her boots, soft flats of green leather barely covered her toes. Over this, she had a new cloak of fur-lined leather in a deep, forest green color with fur so white, it nearly blinded her.

In the mirror of the lavatory, Charity brushed her hair carefully, styling the loose curls to twist about her shoulders. The collar and cuffs were not particularly attractive with the dress, but she pushed the thought away, determined to be happy with the gifts.

Her brows knit as she considered his recent behavior. Though still savagely dominating in bed, he had not hurt her since that day. They still coupled fiercely, but she felt only the minor discomfort of overused muscles when he was done with her.

Also, he kissed her. That in itself was perhaps not so strange, but it was done so carefully, so well, as if he truly cared for her.

Grimacing slightly at her foolish thoughts, Charity reminded herself that if he treated her well, it would not last. It would be stupid to become complacent. She must continue to look for opportunities to escape.

* * * * *

So many people! Charity's suspicions were correct. Melmanon had come for her earlier, pausing only to change his own clothes to ones as equally fine as her own. He brought her to a large hall she had never seen before, full of people in fancy clothes and uniforms. There was obviously to be some sort of ceremony. From what she could tell, it involved her master.

There was a lot of talking and milling around. He took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm, rather than dragging her by the arm. Several of the officers she had seen before many times. Ones she didn't know looked strangely at her. She wondered if something was wrong with her appearance.

It wasn't until after the ceremony where her master and another officer exchanged some kind of shield that she became worried. The officer gave an official-looking document to Melmanon, who signed it. The unknown officer pointed at her. She clutched Melmanon's arm and tried not to panic. He turned to her then took her hands in his.

It took a moment to realize he was taking the cuffs from her wrists, and the collar from her neck. He set them aside and reached for a set of copper bands. One was slipped over each

of her wrists. With a *snick*, they became one, until she couldn't see a seam at all. There was clapping and cheering, and they headed for the door.

Charity was still staring at the copper at her wrists when they got into a transport and took off. Melmanon was silent in the seat beside her. She gathered the courage to ask, "Master? What are these for?" Her arms raised only slightly to indicate the rings.

"You're not a torture slave anymore, Charity." His voice was both quiet and strangely subdued. He met her eyes. "I've bonded you. You are my wife."

Charity was stunned. Wife? But...

"Charity." Her name was a caress.

His massive hands wrapped around her own. "I...care about you. I want to be with you." She stared at him in amazement as he continued. "That day, when you saw your own people, I was so jealous. I wanted you to be happy to see me, to be filled with joy for *me*."

She gaped, her mouth slightly open as she listened.

"I know. How could you be happy to be a slave? I knew, after I beat you, it was because I wanted you to feel owned. As long as you were my slave, you would always wonder, worry about me hurting you." Even now, he appeared frightening, though his words belied his appearance. She thought maybe he knew it too, because he pulled her into his lap, bringing their gazes almost level.

"Charity, I know I didn't ask, but I didn't know how. If you hadn't agreed to bond with me, you would still have been my torture slave. Neither of us would have wanted that. You must believe me, I will treat you well, and you will be a citizen of the tribe, treated with respect and acceptance."

She was silent, her mind in turmoil. When she didn't speak, he went on. "I have already gotten the materials necessary to teach you our language, and you will learn it as quickly as I have mastered yours. I've even taken my post here, so you will not have to leave your planet."

At these words, unwilling images of her earlier plans to run and live with her people again sprang to mind. Although she tried to clear them, he saw. Cold silence filled the courier, and when he spoke, it was a menacing rumble.

"So that is what you hide from me. I had hoped it was something else." His hands tightened around her waist until she made a small sound of distress. "Escape or die? Not terribly original, Charity."

Looking directly into the fiery coals of his eyes, she summoned her nerve. "I would rather die than live in fear." Despite her bravado, her trembling fingers gave her away.

"So you'd rather I ended it? How about right now?" Melmanon's anger burned brightly in the face of her rejection, and he brought one hand to her throat, squeezing hard. "Well, Charity? Shall I help you with your plan?" When she remained silent, he applied steady pressure, until she involuntarily raised her hands to pull at his.

Beneath the wounded pride and frothing rage, he heard an internal voice telling him to stop. He remembered the last time he had allowed his hurt feelings to rule him and the pain she had suffered for it. Her body had healed, but he wondered why he thought he could heal her heart as well. When he suddenly released his grip, she gasped and coughed lightly, cupping her throat in her hands.

"I'm sorry, Charity." Her eyes flared wide and she stared at him. "I understand why you fear me, even why you want to run away." This time, his hands were gentle as he pulled her against his chest, sighing deeply when her head rested below his chin.

"All I ask of you is a chance. A chance to prove I can be trusted." He waited for her answer in silence. He heard her thoughts, but had no clear idea of what she would say. His behavior was hardly reassuring. When she spoke, her voice was raspy and low, and he winced at the proof of his brutality.

"I don't think I really have a choice. I'm beginning to see that even if I could get away from you, you would be able to find me. I would just be living in a different kind of fear each day." There was undeniable bitterness in her tone.

"I won't deny it, Charity. I cannot let you go." There was finality in his words.

"Then I will stay. I have no other choice." There was a poignant despair in her voice, and he tried to think of some way to make her happy.

"I will allow you to see your own people." Her head snapped back at him, her face a mixture of confusion and disbelief. He rushed to add, "I only ask you understand one thing. They may resent you. I will be the law here. Unlike you, they are workers, only a little better than slaves in their own land."

His warning went unheard. That happiness he so envied was back, her heart pounding in anticipation.

He took a ragged breath. "Can you tell me what you're feeling? In your own words."

"Mas -- I mean, Melmanon -- I don't pretend to understand why you've done this, but I know that you have given me much when any other would have given me nothing." Her hand circled one of the copper bands, and she looked earnestly into his burning eyes. "I won't lie. You still frighten me. I wonder when the day will come that I don't consider you to be a demon. But I believe you when you say you will try to prove yourself. And I can do no less than to try, too. I will never forget that whatever I have, whatever I do, it is only because you have let me live and given me more than..." Charity broke off, her face streaked with tears.

Melmanon said nothing at first, only thumbed away her tears. He paused there, with his hand framing her face. Not for the first time, the differences between them were striking. She was like a child, small and delicate, and so pale compared to him. When her gaze lifted

to his, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her softly, trying to tell her what he couldn't yet say with words.

As he pulled away, her lips clung for a moment, then her arms came up to his neck and she pulled him to her. With her face buried in his neck, her words were muffled but he heard the thought as well.

"I'm glad I'm not a slave anymore."

As the transport pulled to a stop outside their new home, he looked down into the face of the woman he loved, who had shown him what his life had been missing. For whom he would try to change everything about himself.

"I love you, Charity."

Chapter Fifteen

After entering the city, she had been astounded at the changes. Not that there was an undue amount of change; on the contrary, it looked much like it had before the invasion. Air couriers and the strange people who rode in them were the most unusual sight.

Whatever she had expected, it wasn't the mansion they arrived at a short time later. She thought it had probably been the home of a wealthy businessman, maybe even the mayor. It had two distinct wings, rose three stories tall, and was located on beautiful grounds. As they alighted at the front steps, she was surprised to see a small staff awaiting them.

They were her people. His admonition about their reaction to her came back as she noted the looks they gave them. Melmanon's fearful appearance prompted a sort of horrified disbelief, but as they approached, she saw how they looked at her. She knew there would be no welcome there. She felt bitter Melmanon had put her in a position that made her an enemy to her own people.

Quick introductions were given, and she nodded at the cook, housekeeper, and two maids. All four women had carefully schooled their features, but she would not forget the

condemnation. When they entered the grand doorway, Charity's mouth dropped open at the elegant interior.

Even in her former life, there had never been this kind of luxury. Her parents' home had been strictly middle class.

"Do you want a tour?" The question made her look at Melmanon. Just inside the door, he watched her with an expression she'd never seen before.

"No. I'd rather wait until tomorrow, if it's all right."

"Are you hungry?" His eyes cut to the left and presumably, the entrance to the kitchen.

"Not really. I *am* tired..." She trailed off, uncertain how he would interpret the comment. She *was* tired, but more than anything, she wanted the oblivion of sleep. With all that had been said tonight, she needed the forgetfulness found in slumber.

"Come here." With his back against the door, he held out both hands, and she stepped into his arms. When he lifted her high against his chest and carried her up the stairs, she closed her eyes. It wasn't until he set her back onto her feet that she opened them and looked around.

Their suite was easily three times the size of his quarters on the ship, but her attention was immediately drawn to the large bed that dominated the center of the room.

"The lavatory is through there." He pointed to a door across the room. "There are clothes for you in there." He indicated a large armoire to the right. "I have to give some instructions to the staff, then I'll be back." He brushed her lips in a fleeting kiss before closing the door behind him.

Charity was pleasantly surprised to find the armoire full of pretty clothes in every color and fabric *except* leather. Judging by the looks of it, the garments were not unlike ones she'd worn in her past. They would suit her fine. In a drawer, she found a white silky slip with lacy insets. Taking it to the lavatory, she gasped in pleasure once she was inside.

Marble and glass gleamed in the overhead lights, and she marveled at the large pool-like bathtub. Steam wafted upward in fragrant swirls, and flower petals floated on the surface of the water. She lowered the light to a dim glow and shed her clothes.

Two steps led up to the bath and as she descended into the heated water, her body relaxed. Settling on a contoured ledge, she rested her head on a small towel strategically placed on the rim. Time flew by as the heat seeped into her chilled flesh and a pleasant lassitude crept into her mind.

"You are so beautiful." The words came from nowhere. Opening her eyes, the nude figure of her husband stood at the base of the steps. The proof of his desire thrust aggressively, but his tone and posture were easy. "Mind if I join you?"

"Of course not." Charity watched as he settled across from her in the water. After a slight hesitation, she rose and settled herself astride his lap. With her hands lightly framing the demonic countenance of her lover, she pressed her lips to his, letting her softness give way to the unyielding firmness of him.

When the kiss ended, she saw the now-familiar glow in the black orbs of his eyes.

"What was that for?" His voice was deep and rumbling. His hands remained at his sides, neither caressing nor holding her.

"Can we..." Charity closed her eyes in embarrassment. It was difficult to ask when she was so accustomed to staying silent.

His hand came up and tenderly cupped her face, and she opened her eyes to watch him lower his mouth to hers in a tender kiss. When he lifted his head, she rushed ahead.

"Can it be gentle?" Her lips trembled on the plea.

"You mean, can *I* be gentle?" The truth of his words made the heated flush of her damp cheeks deepen. Her gaze fell to his chest in consternation.

"I didn't mean --" His finger at her lips silenced the protest.

"Yes. To both." Lifting the restraining digit, he laid his lips to hers. The soul-stirring kiss was soft and at direct odds with the urgency of his erection rising between them.

When her hands rose to cup his shoulders, his arms finally came around her, pulling her carefully against him. Under the round curve of her bottom, his hard thighs shifted restlessly. The ache inside her continued to build as the sweet delicacy of their embrace aroused both her body and emotions.

As if he sensed her rising desire, Melmanon shifted the tender ministrations of his mouth from her lips to her neck and shoulders. When he loosened his hold to dip her back, she instinctively tightened her grip on his shoulders, but the slickness of steam-damp flesh thwarted her hold.

It was forgotten when the wet heat of his tongue encountered her moist nipples. Teasing flicks brought them to aching hardness, and within moments, she arched her back and writhed in unfulfilled longing.

"What do you want, love?" His animalistic growl rumbled across the skin of her breast and she squirmed for the pleasure of it.

"I want you inside." She twisted her hips against his thrusting cock and panted a little in anticipation.

"Then take me." Between their bodies, she saw the insistent rise of his shaft. The buoyancy of the water aided her when she pressed down on his shoulders, lifting her body up and over him. Her damp opening aligned with the blunt tip of his cock, and she slowly lowered herself onto him.

"Oh, I can't. Help me." There was frustration in her voice as she squirmed, the weight of her body insufficient to drive her onto his shaft.

"Easy. Don't hurt yourself." Melmanon's hands cupped her ass and lifted her, until she was seated on his thighs again.

Confused, Charity wrapped one hand around his hardened flesh. "What's wrong?"

"You're not ready." He rose from the pool with her in his arms. As the water sluiced from their bodies in a glistening rush, Charity wrapped her hands around his neck and watched in wonderment as he carried her down the steps to the marble counter. He set her gently onto the cold surface, and took a towel to her rapidly cooling body.

Memories of the last time he had dried her came rushing back. She wondered bleakly why she needed him so much. He had done so many terrible things, yet she ached for his touch and the feel of his arms around her.

As he lifted her gently and gathered her close to him, she let her head fall to his shoulder and murmured a low protest when he placed her on the bed.

"Wait." She reached for him. He forestalled her with a kiss.

"I'll be right back."

She rose up on her elbows to watch him stroll nude to his armoire, where he took something black from the upper drawer. He turned to face her and the bottom dropped out of her stomach when she saw what he held. Eyes locked on the thin strip of black leather, she instinctively recoiled when he sat and reached for her.

"Don't be afraid." His voice was low and as soothing as he could make it.

"What are those for?" She never took her eyes off them.

"They're for you." Her fingers clenched against the bed. "To tie me up." At this, her gaze flew to his face.

"To tie *you* up?"

"I've asked you to trust me, and I want to show that I trust you, as well."

"What about this?" Aside from the four straight strips of leather, a complicated looping of material sat to one side.

"Ah, that's a little more complicated." He picked up the four strips. "Why don't we start with these?"

"How should we...?" Charity smiled in a mix of anticipation and embarrassment.

"I'll lie back against the headboard, and you tie me to it. Or I can lie flat, and you can tie me to all four posts." He was matter-of-fact, but the jut of his erection belied his tone.

Charity decided to have him sitting up. In a few minutes, she rested back on her heels to survey her handiwork. With his arms spread wide and bound, his chest appeared even broader and his arms more muscled.

The novelty of having him at her disposal made her almost giddy. She set about exploring him as if she'd never seen him before. She tested every inch of skin with touch and taste. When her silky wet tongue found one dark nipple, he gave a rumbling growl and twisted in his bonds.

Startled at first, a sly smile crossed her lips when Charity realized he was bound tight. Again she flicked and sucked at the nearly black nub and didn't stop until he groaned and shuddered. The other nipple received the same thorough exploration before she moved down to his abdomen. The hard contours of his body were a marvel to her, and she even trailed the shape of his legs, until she finally reached his cock.

His hard length gripped firmly in both hands, she applied her mouth to the weeping tip, lapping and sucking to bring him to orgasm. She wouldn't have said it, but she always liked him best after he'd come. He fit her so much better when he wasn't fully aroused.

"Charity." His words were low and growling. "I'll come if you don't stop."

She didn't lift her mouth from him, and with a roar, he came. When his tension subsided, she rose to straddle him.

"Wait." She froze, waiting for him to finish. "Get the other straps."

With a questioning tilt, she held up the other strips.

"No, the other." When she held up the loops, he nodded. "Now, put it on me."

At first, she wasn't sure what he meant, then suddenly she understood.

"You want me to put it..." She looked at his cock.

“Yes. It’ll keep me like this.” He gave her a knowing look, and she couldn’t prevent the blush. So he knew she liked him smaller.

“Okay.” After one false start, she successfully wrapped his penis up to his balls. The most puzzling part of the thing was the soft black bead laced on the strap that ran over the top of cock.

At her perplexed expression, he prompted, “Trust me, love. It’ll be fine.”

Her body ached with her need to be filled as Charity mounted him again. Sitting on his thighs, she angled his cock to her pussy. To bring them together proved a bit difficult. She struggled for a moment before Melmanon helped, bringing his knees up.

The change in the angle of his legs sent her sliding forward with a squeak, and he was halfway inside her when she stopped.

“Oh, yes, yes.” Her breathless whimpers continued as she gripped his shoulders and rode him in short bucks. He began to grunt in counterpoint to her lunges, and she could feel the tension in him, but the straps around his groin kept him from achieving an erection.

Charity felt the muscles in her legs protesting as she increased the speed of her lifts, but the pleasure was too intense to stop. She now knew what the black ball was for. With each thrust into her cunt, the straps on his cock held the small black ball against her clit, rubbing and bumping fantastically.

Climax was almost upon her when she realized once she came, she’d have to let him go. At first slowing, then stopping completely, she took deep breaths to bring her body back from the brink of orgasm.

“Why did you stop?” The words were harsh with unfulfilled desire. When Charity looked into Melmanon’s eyes, they burned red, the black nearly obliterated.

“I don’t want to come right away.” Another deep breath. “I want this to last.” Lifting off of him, she sat back on bed and considered him. “What do *you* want?”

"To tear that strap off my cock and fuck you into the wall." The tendons in his arms stood out in stark relief as he strained against his bonds.

"Oh, no. Nothing so easy, I think." She smiled sweetly. "Does the strap hurt?"

"It aches."

"Good." His face registered frustration as she stretched out next to him on the bed and laid her legs across his lap. When she spread them wide, his bobbing cock was only a few inches away from the glistening juncture of her thighs. With a front row seat, he could only watch as she used one small hand to reach between her legs and caress her slippery flesh.

Charity teased her quivering body until he finally cried out, "Enough! I need you now!"

She rose, but instead of releasing him, she lowered her mouth to his cock. At the first touch, his hips bucked, and he bellowed in lust.

"Oh, *Hai*, take off the straps. Please, Charity."

"How?" She pretended to regard the contraption quizzically.

"Pull, ah, yes, there. It'll just unravel."

Charity paused with the small tab between her fingers. Before she could change her mind, she moved, struggling to mount him again. Finally, she settled onto him with a satisfied sigh.

"You feel so good this way." She set a rocking motion of her hips that worked her clit ceaselessly on the black ball. She waited until the clenching of her body had him groaning and snarling in frustrated desire.

She reached between them, pulling the tab to release Melmanon's body from its constriction. Hot blood pumped into his cock, making him swell to life within Charity.

"Oh, oh!" Still impaled, she panted in distress as he grew, stretching her unbearably. As she struggled to adjust, she rocked forward to climb his chest and simultaneously worked herself on the little black ball. The unexpectedness of her orgasm only made it more intense,

and she shuddered and cried out as she came, burying her face in the taut muscles of his chest.

The effect of her climax on the flesh still buried deep within her was startling. With an inhuman roar, Melmanon ripped free of his restraints, lifted her off his shaft and high against his chest.

“Thank you.” The words were whispered as she pressed her lips to his cheek.

“Why did you do that?” There was anger in his voice, and she froze, suddenly afraid.

“What?”

“You could have hurt yourself.” With only the very tip of him still inside of her, he wrapped her more securely in his arms and placed his lips on hers in a tender kiss. “Be more careful with my wife. I don’t want her damaged.”

A small laugh escaped her, followed by a gasp as he lowered her a little, driving his thick length deeper into the wet and quivering recesses of her body. “Whatever you say.”

He set a gentle rhythm, lifting and lowering her on his cock, never letting her take more than the head of him. After a few minutes, he held her still. She felt him swell and pulse inside of her.

Chapter Sixteen

The next few months flew by for Charity. Her language lessons started right away, and she quickly discovered the role of a wife wasn't remotely similar to her role as a torture slave. As Melmanon's slave, the crew on board his ship had been distant. They had never spoken or tried to communicate with her, and had often acted as if she weren't there.

As his wife, however, *everyone* noticed her. The warriors she'd grown accustomed to on the ship were gone, though. Melmanon's new position put him in charge of civilian personnel. Like the warriors on the ship, they represented many races. Unlike the warriors, they were vastly different in size and shape. Melmanon explained they served the war tribe's military in non-warrior class positions. She privately labeled them bureaucrats, since she saw the similarities right away.

Among them, she quickly discovered she had quite a bit of power. Hope for the future burned brightly in her heart. Although she could not speak much of their language, many had learned hers in preparation to live and work among her people. She made a startling number of friends, and genuinely enjoyed the company of these foreign people.

One person in particular became a good friend -- a young woman named Desre, her language instructor. They formed a fast friendship. The other girl was similar in appearance

to her own people, though larger, and was the only person who spoke Charity's language as well as she did. In addition to teaching, Desre gave Charity insights into the workings of the war tribe and its people.

"Desre, why can't warriors be married?" Charity watched her teacher frown in concentration and lean one hip against the edge of her desk.

"Besides it being a law, I believe the reasoning lies in the brutal and lengthy nature of war. Many warriors spend their entire military career in space." One purple hued fingernail tapped thoughtfully against a full lower lip. "It would be impossible to spend time with your family."

Charity chewed her own lip in concentration as she methodically reproduced the alien characters on the page. "So, in order to marry, you must retire?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

"What about, well, dating, or having a sexual relationship?" It made her uncomfortable to ask, but Desre seemed to take it in stride.

"Warriors can combat-challenge each other for sex, and non-warrior service people can and do conduct affairs."

"What is combat-challenge?"

Desre appeared surprised by her question. Then a strange smile crossed her face. "You never attended one on board the air ship?"

"No, I don't think so. I never saw anyone fighting."

"Interesting. Well, they can be private, but most occur in a small arena. Any warrior can attend and watch."

"But what do they do?"

"In combat-challenge, one warrior challenges another to fight. There are no weapons, and they must fight in the nude." She gave Charity a vague wave of her hand.

"Why?"

"Well, the winner gets to..."

Understanding dawned, and Charity gave up all pretense of working on her books. "You mean they...? But that's terrible!"

Desre sniffed defensively. "It works for them. And it does have rules. You can't be challenged more than once per cycle, and you must be in the same year, so experienced warriors can't challenge young, inexperienced ones."

"Why can't they have affairs like everyone else?"

Desre sighed. "Charity, you have to understand how hard a warrior's training is. They are bred to be competitive and fierce. If they have feelings for each other, it will impair their ability to fight."

"So, that's why they're so mean."

Her teacher laughed, her dark hair rippling around her. "Some of them, yes. I'd say you probably got the worst of them, though."

"Melmanon, you mean?"

"Yes, he's well known for being the baddest of the bad." She frowned concernedly. "Is he...unkind to you?"

"No!" Charity was quick to deny. "He's...so hard, so tough."

"It isn't entirely being a warrior that does that to you." Pulling another chair up to the desk, she sat down and placed her hand over Charity's. "He's probably been on the outside his whole life. Being different is a big part of our society, but he's *different*. There are few of his race left, and all are males. I would bet, before he met you, he never intended to marry at all."

Charity bowed her head. "But why me?" The question was almost a whisper.

"Oh, how can you ask that?" Desre squeezed Charity's hand. "You are so sweet, so good. How could he *not* have chosen you?"

“I don’t understand him, Desre.” Charity looked around the beautiful room, and waved her hand. “He gives me all this, and I know what he wants in return, but I don’t know if I can give it to him.” Catching the look on her friend’s face, she gave a sudden laugh. “Not *that*, silly. *That* we do all the time.” She sobered. “He wants me to feel something I’m not sure I can.”

“Are you sure you don’t feel it already?”

“I” -- she blinked, startled by the insight -- “I’ve never been this physically close to anyone. It’s the emotions I can’t define.”

“Give yourself time, my little friend. You’ve only been his wife a few short months. You have the rest of your lives!”

Charity raised luminous eyes to her, wide with apprehension. “If I don’t give him the response he wants soon, that may not be too far away.”

* * * * *

That evening, after the house had emptied of the many bureaucrats who worked in her husband’s office, and her own personnel had left, Charity wandered aimlessly through the rooms. In keeping with war tribe tradition, the house was a leftover from her civilization, though the interior sported several modifications befitting the man who ruled the planet.

An entire section of the house contained offices where Melmanon worked during the day. Another section was her personal floor, including an office, a small receiving room, and several other undesignated rooms.

Downstairs, there was a lovely library full of books, mostly from her country. She knew it was strictly to please her. Since their marriage, he had provided many pieces of her old life. He had even gone so far as to give her projects that allowed her to make decisions about her people, how they lived, and what liberties they were granted.

Just inside the doorway of the kitchen, she stared at him. During the day, he wore the clothes of a ruler. The leather garb they had both worn on the air ship had been replaced with pretty dresses for her and somber attire for him. Now, though, at the kitchen counter eating leftovers from their formal dinner earlier, he wore only a towel wrapped around his hips. His hair was still wet from the shower. The small tracks of water that ran down his neck and onto his bare back quickly evaporated.

“Hungry?”

She stepped fully into the room, and walked around the counter. “No.” She smiled at the large plate of food in front of him. “But I don’t think many people could be as hungry as you.”

He stabbed a steamed vegetable and waved it menacingly at her. “It’s the food on this planet. Too many plants, not enough meat.”

She laughed. She knew how much he’d come to like the meals here. Since they relied on the agriculture of the planet to sustain them, most of the meal preparations had been under her supervision. She, of all people, knew how to prepare local dishes. It had been a small bone of contention that she preferred less meat be served, but after a few meals, he had displayed a marked enthusiasm for the fare.

Charity left him to devour the remainder of the vegetables while she poured a glass of fruit juice. She took a seat at the breakfast bar and gazed out into the darkness beyond the windows.

“Charity?” Pulled from her thoughts by the soft query, she looked up and saw he’d put his empty plate in the sink and stood at the counter, watching her.

“Yes?”

“Is everything all right?” It was a question he asked her more and more, despite his ability to read her mind.

Suddenly frustrated with the pretense, she asked, “Don’t you know? Can’t you read my mind?”

“If you want me to, yes. I’ve been giving you the privacy of your thoughts.”

Her surprised expression was quickly replaced by confusion. “You can turn it off?”

“No.” He gave her a small smile with no teeth. “It’s more like I’m not focusing on it. It’s on all the time, but I have to narrow it down to one person, and to sort through for the meaning.”

It was the first time they’d ever talked directly about his *differences*, and Charity hesitated, uncertain how far she could go.

“I remember, before...” She trailed off, unwilling to be specific about the dark time of her capture.

“Before we were married?” His voice was low, as if he were afraid of scaring her into silence.

“Yes, when we first met. You said something, and I heard it.” She touched her forehead and glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “You can talk that way?”

“I can send a thought to you, yes.” This time, sharp teeth flashed in the smile. “I could even send you my memories or fantasies.” His meaning was clear in the predatory flame that flared to life in the darkness of his eyes.

Charity wouldn’t be distracted though, and she persisted in her questioning. “And you can see mine, too?”

“Yes.” A memory of her experiences came back to him, and he recalled the fond images she carried of former lovers. The familiar jealousy quietly surged, reminding him of the tenuous hold he’d had lately on his self-control.

In his efforts to prove himself to Charity and adjust to his new status in the non-warrior class, he had suppressed all outward signs of his dominating nature. He had soon

discovered that presenting a mild-mannered façade was the only way to combat the impression his appearance made. Unfortunately, restraining his aggressive nature both in public and in private was wearing him down. The only thing that kept him in check was the difference he had seen in Charity.

She'd bloomed, making friends and taking an active role in her new life. In private, she was more open, more affectionate. Whenever the temptation to slip the leash on his brutal self reared its head, he brought to mind the growing trust between them.

"Melmanon?" Charity's voice broke him from his reverie, and he realized she had been speaking for some time.

"I'm sorry. I'm more tired than I realized." He extended his hand. "Are you ready for bed?"

She gave him a small nod and rose, taking his hand and letting him pull her close as they left the kitchen and headed up the stairs.

* * * * *

In their room, Melmanon tugged off the towel and draped it negligently on a chair. Charity removed her light robe and hung it carefully in the armoire on her side of their suite. The room was beautifully decorated with elegantly carved furniture. She knew it was authentic, since Desre told her that it had been procured from nearby cities. It was far lovelier than anything she had possessed in her former life.

Seated at the vanity that still delighted her with its whimsy, she selected a large silver-backed brush and began running it through her hair. In her reflection in the beveled mirror, she saw the healthy blush on her cheeks and the fit shape of her body under the lovely slip she wore. Her eyes told her that she had never looked better, but melancholy gripped her. At first, she had attributed it to the emotional upheaval in her life, but the changes had been nothing but good.

She had friends, a beautiful home, a purposeful life that involved her in the reshaping of her planet, and a bonded partner who treated her well. It had come to her today, though, that the reason for her malaise was Melmanon. He wasn't himself, not the being she'd gotten to know on the air ship. As frightening as that person had been, he was familiar. Since they'd come here, there had been no sign of that man, not even in bed.

Her conversation with Desre earlier had helped her understand the old Melmanon a little better, but brought her no closer to comprehending the new one. It was that uncertainty that caused her so much inner turmoil.

Suddenly aware she had stopped brushing her hair, Charity rose from the small stool and went to the bed where he waited. Sitting on her side of the bed, she felt his hand come to rest at her waist. With a strangled sob, she whirled, burrowing her face into the hot curve of his shoulder. Uncontrollable trembling shook her as tears coursed down her cheeks and soaked his skin.

Melmanon frowned in concern over her head. With her wrapped tightly in his arms, he laid back against the mountain of pillows she loved so much and held her while she cried. The temptation to look into her mind was strong, but he resisted. She wouldn't sense it; he was more concerned it would provoke his temper.

He rubbed her narrow back gently through the silky fabric of her slip and waited for the storm to pass. The suddenness of the outburst was no less startling than the fact that it had never happened before.

As the sobs began to subside, he turned her so she rested in the curve of his arm. Able to see her damp, flushed face, he used the edge of the sheet to wipe her tears away. At last, a final shuddering sigh escaped her, and her breathing evened out. In moments, she was asleep.

Lying awake in the semidarkness of their room, he tried to piece together her behavior. Since their arrival, the dynamic in their relationship had changed on every level. Emotionally, she was holding back, as if she were still concerned about incurring his displeasure. He had been prepared for that, especially after his actions on the night of their marriage. His loss of control in the air courier had definitely set him back in his efforts to win her love.

The increasing comfort between them had grown proportionately to his restraint. Deep inside, he acknowledged that if he behaved as he wanted to, he would lose any chance to convince her of his love. On the other hand, being someone else would never really allow her to love *him*. Torn in his thoughts, it was a long time before he drifted into sleep.

* * * * *

Fragmented images swirled in a dizzying kaleidoscope of colors. Impressions of warmth and comfort were overlaid with confusion and growing awareness. Melmanon fought his way out of sleep to sit upright in bed, breathing heavily as the remnants of the dream fell away. He looked to the shuttered windows and saw the advent of the dawn in the pinkish light that came through in slivers. He turned to Charity, and saw she was still pressed close to his side.

Caught by the beauty of her profile, he let his hand smooth the fabric of her slip, sliding down the curve of her waist and over her hip. A blast of mental energy caught him unprepared. He fought to block out the tangle of emotions.

Alert and wary, he slipped out of bed and prowled the room. The kind of signals he'd received couldn't be from Charity, and they were too powerful to be anyone on his staff. Opening the door to the hall, he scanned the corridor and reached out with his mind.

There was no sense of another. He growled low in frustration. Whoever or whatever it was, it was gone. He couldn't discount the possibility an intruder had been outside. But it

seemed unlikely the presence had been far away. If he hadn't known better, he'd have thought someone was right next to him to cause that kind of transfer.

Stillness came over him. He turned back to the bed in shock. An instant later, he was back by his wife's side, sliding his hand over the curve of her waist. Settling his broad palm over the swell of her small belly, he tried to tell if there was anything different about it.

After a moment, he opened his mind. Instantly, the images and feelings were back. Now, though, he knew they were the first conscious stirrings of his child.

Chapter Seventeen

Lulled from sleep by the delicious smell of the hot tea she was so fond of, Charity opened her eyes to bright sunlight filtering in through an open window. Blinking in consternation, she sat up and saw Melmanon sitting at the small table where they took their breakfast each morning.

“What time is it?”

“Almost nine.” He smiled at her with an expression she hadn’t seen before.

“Why did you let me sleep so late? I’ve missed my meeting with Desre!” She was genuinely upset; her language classes were a favorite part of the day.

“I decided we needed some time alone.” There was a wealth of meaning in his words. Before she had a chance to worry about it, he came, lifted her from the bed and carried her to sit the table.

“Eat.” His order was tempered by the soft brush of his lips against the crown of her head.

Charity didn’t argue. Her body, more accustomed to eating around seven in the morning, loudly informed her that breakfast was late. After making a considerable dent in

the fruit salad and pastries, she sat back with a small groan. "I ate entirely too much. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I wouldn't worry about it." He set aside the papers he had been reading. "Let's get dressed. We have an appointment this morning."

"With who?" She tried to remember what the calendar on her desk said about today.

"I'm taking you to see the surgeon." His face was somber, and she realized he was serious.

"Why?" Her voice rose a little in panic. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing yet, but I'm concerned. Last night, you were feverish, and I don't want to take a chance that you've been exposed to something." His voice was soothing. It only put her more on guard.

"There's nothing wrong. I would know if I were sick."

"What if it's something from my people? You don't have the same immunities we do." The logical point was undeniable, and she rose to dress reluctantly. Something about his deliberate nonchalance set off alarm bells in her head.

Freshening up in the large bathroom, she studied her reflection while she brushed her teeth. There was hectic color on the crests of her cheeks and her eyes were brilliant, almost glowing. Concern replaced suspicion, and she wondered if he could be right about seeing the surgeon.

After dressing in a light summer frock, she followed Melmanon down the curved staircase and outside to their air courier. Entering the vehicle, she didn't protest when he pulled her tightly to his side and held her during the short trip across the city.

* * * * *

In the exam room of the hospital, Charity tried not to be scared. Although the building itself was a product of her society, the interior had been completely redone. Strange

equipment and mysterious machines filled entire rooms, and when the surgeon began to examine her, her gaze wandered to the strange surroundings.

“Well, we’ve got a little blood and taken a scan. Give the tech and me a few minutes, and we’ll be back with the results, okay?” His voice was kind and genial, so Charity ignored his odd appearance to smile and nod her affirmative.

After fifteen minutes of waiting in tense anticipation, the surgeon returned. She felt dread like a brick in her stomach. Coming in behind the surgeon was her bonded. That he’d brought Melmanon out of the waiting room for this news couldn’t be good.

“What it is? What’s wrong?” Hysteria rose in her voice, but she was powerless to stop it.

“Charity.” Melmanon’s deep voice was soothing, and she gratefully accepted the comfort of his arm around her as he perched on the edge of the table. “Surgeon Dawes has something important to tell you. I need you to be calm and listen. All right?”

“Yes, okay.” Wrapped tightly in her lover’s arms, she regarded the odd little man across the room.

“Charity, I have some rather startling news. While not impossible, it was an unlikely event we could not have predicted.” He pulled a thin sheet from the papers he held and slid it onto a mounted square on the wall. When illuminated, the sheet showed a scan of her body. At first, nothing seemed obviously out of place. But...

“No, I can’t...” Charity felt her pulse pound. The arms holding her were all that kept her upright as the world swam.

“You’re pregnant. I know how unexpected this must be, but I will stress again that, while unlikely, cross-species reproduction is entirely possible. For some races, it is much easier than others. Because Emissary Melmanon’s race had proven so unproductive in the past, he didn’t take precautions. In the future, we’ll be more careful.” The surgeon smiled a little, and came forward to pat her hand. “I don’t want you to worry, Charity. I know you’ve

been experiencing high body temperature and erratic emotional outbursts, but that won't last long." He crossed back to the scan. "Do you see here? Although you are only about seven weeks along, the baby has developed sufficiently to be transferred."

"Wait, what does that mean, transferred?" Charity looked uncertainly at her silent warrior. "Pregnancy lasts almost a year, not two months."

"Well." Surgeon Dawes looked back to the papers he still held. "For your people, that is usually true."

"Usually?"

"You wouldn't survive a pregnancy of that length." He glanced uneasily at Melmanon. "Your child is predominantly of its father's race. An elevated body temperature is part of that, as well as its large size. If you carried it much longer, the constant spike in your body temperature would have the same effect as an extended fever. It could cause permanent damage to your organs. Also, she is already much larger than a seven week old human fetus would be. Her development is closer to three months, actually."

"She?" The slip had not gone unnoticed. Melmanon leaned forward in sudden interest.

"Yes, she. I wasn't going to tell you unless you wanted to know." He gave her an encouraging smile. "I know how confused you must be, but I want you to know, there is no danger to either one of you. The procedure is simple. A single incision into the uterus will allow us to take her out, and we'll place her in an artificial womb. The machine will simulate the sounds of your body around her, and provide her with the nutrients necessary to grow until she can be 'born.'"

"When would you do it?" The shock made the question unnaturally calm.

"We can do it today. You'll be healed before you leave."

Looking up into Melmanon's face, some of her panic and confusion must have come through because he immediately took control.

"She's ready, Surgeon Dawes. Thank you for explaining it to us both."

As the surgeon left to make preparations for the procedure, Charity struggled with her thoughts and fears. Pressing her hands to her abdomen, she tried to feel the life inside.

"She's there." Melmanon's hand came to rest over her own and she looked up at him in disbelief. "I felt her this morning. She has telepathic abilities like me. I *felt* her." There was a stunned wonder in his voice now, and his other hand slipped behind her back so that the two huge palms sandwiched her waist. "My daughter."

"Are you happy I'm pregnant?" Charity didn't know how to feel, but it was suddenly important to know how he felt about it.

"Happy?" He seemed to think about the question for a moment. "Yes, I am. I never gave children a thought. I never imagined I'd have one." His demonic visage showed that unfamiliar expression again, but this time she recognized it for what it was. Delight. Pride.

It suddenly occurred to her she was having a child, too. They would be a family: mother, father, and child. Apprehension filtered into her mind. "Are you sure about the surgery? What if something goes wrong?"

His face changed. A familiar hardness edged past the other emotions. "Nothing will go wrong. I wouldn't risk either of you." The heat of his hands around her waist was intense. "You're too important to me."

"You said you felt her. What does she think about?"

He smiled. "She feels warm and safe. Last night, when you were upset, she was upset, too." At her expression, he soothed, "No, not like that. She was empathizing with you. I can feel how much she loves you already."

Her heart swelled with wonder and joy. Cupping the gentle curve of her belly, Charity leaned close when Melmanon covered her hands with his own and held her quietly until the surgeon returned.

Chapter Eighteen

After an indecently short period of time, Melmanon stood alone in the waiting area. They had hustled Charity away and flatly denied his presence in the operating theater. When he'd tried to use his power to override their policy, the surgeon had drawn him aside.

"We are well aware of your position here, Emissary Melmanon, but I will be frank." Surgeon Dawes leveled a stern glare on him. "Do you want my medical technicians to be nervous while they operate on your wife and child?"

"Of course not!"

"Then you will keep your intimidating presence here. In the waiting room." Giving him a long, steady look, the surgeon shuffled back to the operating doors, leaving a frustrated Melmanon in the waiting area.

Spinning to pace the length of the hall that traversed the third floor, he stormed a path up and down while the realization he would be able to see his child soon washed over him.

A child! *His* child, a daughter. He still reeled from the shock of it. He'd seen the scan, and her size; he knew she was already developing mental powers like his own. The enormity of the whole thing changed his world. Suddenly, he was sure of the future. Charity would

never want to leave once they had a daughter. It could only strengthen the bond between them to have a complete family.

He was certain this would alter her perception of their marriage. Before, sex had been the defining characteristic of their relationship. Now, the focus had changed. They would be a family, what he'd sensed she'd secretly longed for that day in the fields.

At the sounds of footsteps, he turned to see Surgeon Dawes striding merrily down the hall.

"All done! Come and see, come and see!" Following the ebullient man back towards the operating theater, Melmanon tried to calm his thundering heartbeat.

Inside, Charity lay on a pristine bed of white sheets, her eyes open and watching him approach. As he neared the side of her bed, her hand rose to grip his.

"Have you seen her yet?" There was anxiety and excitement in her voice, and he smiled as gently as he could.

"We'll see her together." He bent to gather her in his arms, sheet and all, then turned to the surgeon, who smiled and waved them into the next room.

Turned to ease through the narrow door, Melmanon heard Charity catch her breath. He was hard pressed to draw air himself as they beheld their daughter.

Inside of a large plastic dome, a filmy sac that seemed to float in the air glowed transparently. Within, liquid swirled and eddied around the tiny, curled shape of their daughter. The perfection of her form was apparent.

After a long moment, Melmanon looked down at his wife and saw her gazing back at him.

"Can you hear her now?" Her smile was tremulous, and he could read her lingering anxiety in the unshed tears in her eyes.

"Let me try." Opening his mind, he carefully pushed away everyone but her, the miniature life before him. Instantly, he felt that stirring awareness, the fragmented images

and impressions she'd gathered in her mother's womb. Still, there was a sense of warmth and security, and he sighed in relief she had not been damaged by the procedure.

"Well?" Charity's demand had him turning back to her.

"She's fine. She doesn't seem upset or unhappy." He smiled. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

They both looked back to the dome.

"She's lovely." Charity's voice cracked, and he saw one tear slide down her cheek.

* * * * *

Back at home, preparations for their daughter's "birth" swept the mansion. Charity quickly discovered even the most dedicated service person melted into goo at the thought of a baby in the governing house. Her personal staff were giddily making plans for decorations and remodeling. In contrast, Melmanon's staff were unabashedly jealous and took any opportunity to prod her with suggestions for names and decorating themes.

Lately, her thoughts were in constant upheaval. The complicated nature of her relationship with her husband had taken a back seat to their baby, but she found herself trying to analyze her new and developing feelings.

The facts hadn't changed; he was still an invader, a warrior of the army that killed her people and destroyed their way of life. Her interaction with the war tribe had made her understand something, though. They were only living as they could, within the society they had created many hundreds of years before Melmanon was ever born. His own people had once been the victim, as hers were now.

She could not blame him for that, especially since he had forsaken his people's ways in his mercy to her. His lapses in control were terrible and frightening, yes, but the changes he'd made to himself and his life were more than enough to convince her of the depth and sincerity of his love.

Everything she needed, everything she wanted, was already hers.

* * * * *

Seated at his large desk, liberally littered with agricultural reports, Melmanon absently hefted a large, glass paperweight. His mood was pensive at best. The changes in his household were striking, and he knew Charity was blooming. Her happiness was contagious, but he discovered something ugly inside of him. He was resentful of his own child. It was a forcible reminder of the day he'd been driven to a jealous rage by Charity's joy at seeing her people. With the rising anticipation for their daughter's arrival, his malcontent grew, and he started to fear what he would do. The familiar rage he had suppressed so well for almost a year began to build inside of him.

His only solace was he literally couldn't imagine ever physically hurting her again. She had recovered from the surgery before they ever left the hospital. He'd inspected her carefully to make sure no mark marred the pale perfection of her skin. His concern for her health was real, and no amount of anger could incite him to break her trust.

He also knew she was confused by his aversion to sex lately. There was no reason they couldn't be intimate. The issue of preventing pregnancy in the future had been a simple affair, and Surgeon Dawes had encouraged them to wait at least a year before attempting another conception. He'd told Melmanon that Charity would fare better if she had time to prepare her body for the next child. Melmanon vowed not to put her health in danger. The real reason for his reticence was much more complicated.

He wanted her to tell him she loved him.

When a sharp knock sounded at the door, he slid the paperweight back into place on the desk and barked out, "Enter."

The dark head of his wife poked around the heavy door, and her mischievous smile beamed at him.

"Busy, O great emissary?" Her irreverent sense of humor had flourished in recent weeks, and he managed a tight smile of welcome.

“Not really, O humble emissary wife.” His answering grin was somewhat subdued.

“I came up to bring you to dinner. Everyone left a few minutes ago.” She’d crossed to the desk and leaned over to tap her fingers against the rich wood. “Base to Melmanon. Melmanon, do you copy?”

“Sorry, a little distracted.”

Charity smiled uncertainly, but she knew something was wrong. For several weeks now, she’d felt the rising tension in him, and in private, he’d started to withdraw from her. Most nights, he stayed up late and gave the excuse he was overwhelmed with work. When he did come to bed, he made an effort not to touch her. If she tried to initiate intimacy, he pushed her away, or rushed through it.

After a few tears and a lot of thought, she was pretty sure she’d come to the root of the problem. Tonight, she vowed to do something about it. Their daughter was due soon, and she didn’t want to start their family off on the wrong foot.

Coming around the desk, she ignored his stiff posture and climbed nimbly onto his lap. She curled her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his. When he remained stiff and unyielding, she drew back and looked into his eyes. If he had really been disinterested, the black of his eyes would be unrelieved. She knew he felt something intense because red flared to life in their depths.

“Kiss me.” She accompanied the demand with a hard pull on his neck.

“Why?” He didn’t give an inch, and she frowned at his surly query.

“Because.”

No change.

“Because I’m your wife?”

Still nothing.

“Because you love me.”

He didn't budge.

"Because I love you." She saw his eyes flare, then his hands gripped her waist tightly.

"What did you say?" There was a rough vulnerability in his words.

"Because I love you. Isn't that a good enough reason for a kiss?" Her tone was teasing, but she was serious.

"You love me because we have a baby now." There was a sharp bitterness there, but she also heard the unhappiness.

"No. I love *you*, baby or no baby." Her hands moved around to cup his hard face. "Look inside me. Feel what I feel." She pressed her mouth to his.

His lips were hard at first, then she felt the hard probe of his mind, the pounding sensation in her temples as he delved deep. His arms closed fiercely around her. His lips softened. After long moments of soul-stirring communion, they both drew away, and she rested her flushed face against his shoulder.

"*Hai*, I do love you, Charity." There was a ragged, raw sound in his voice. "I've been so torn up. At first, I was so glad about the baby, since I knew you'd never leave me if we had a child. But then, I was so jealous."

"Shh, it doesn't matter. I understand." She hugged him tightly. "You'll never need to worry about that again. You have my permission to read my mind whenever you need to." She pulled back and looked up at him. "Okay?"

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." She gave him a teasing grin. "Can we eat dinner now?"

"Fine. I've been wanting to dine on you for weeks." He gave a mock growl and hefted her high as he rose from his chair.

Epilogue

The daughter they named Hope came home three days later. Standing in the hospital waiting room, Charity felt the steely tension in Melmanon and knew he was as nervous as she. As a blue-capped nurse came forward with a tightly wrapped bundle, she fought to keep herself from squealing in delight when she took her daughter into her arms. At first, with her face covered by the swaddling cloth, Charity only had an impression of size and weight. She ruefully acknowledged their daughter definitely took after her father. Already she was twice the size of a human baby.

Her husband's arms came around her and tugged back the fold that shielded Hope's face. She was asleep, one small fist pressed to her downy cheek. Dark black hair swirled thickly over her head and her skin was a soft blush color, with rose red lips. As if she sensed their unwavering regard, her heavily lashed eyes fluttered open. Like her father's, they had no white. Unlike her father's they were deep, dark green, and in their depths, a silver flame burned.

"She's so beautiful." Melmanon's reverent whisper drew Hope's eyes and the silver flame flared anew.

"She recognizes you!" Charity's heart swelled at the proof of the bond between father and daughter.

Melmanon's voice was thick, and she heard the rasp of deep emotion when he spoke. "I love you."

"I love you." Charity's own voice was thick with tears.

In their daughter's face she saw the incredible miracle of life, every struggle leading to this moment of perfect clarity.

"Let's go home."

 THE END 

Stephanie Snow

Stephanie lives in Southern California where the days are sunny and the nights are...well, not. She works (when she must), she writes (when there's nothing on TV), and she collects her government check every weekend (party!). She has a very nice family (who tells her she's adopted), a very nice boyfriend (that we're scared of), and a cute cat (that she clearly doesn't deserve). Her greatest aspiration is to someday be immortalized on YouTube. Preferably engaging in "lewd and lascivious acts" (per the police report). Sadly, the last time that happened the only people who got it on video were the crew from "COPS." You can email Stephanie if you're like Dr. Dolittle and you can talk to the animals. If not, just visit her MySpace page, www.myspace.com/stephanie_snow.