

As Pretty Girls Do



Art by Christopher Filippone

by Jolie Howard

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Part One: The Yeter

Chapter One

As pretty girls often do, Beth knew someone was watching her. The breeze-soft tickle on her neck and arms alerted her to the occult admiration. In clubs, at the gym, or on campus the feeling would bring a smile to her wide lips. She would scan her surroundings until she found the eyes watching her. She would pass her judgment and then with a coy look invite, or with a moue of distaste discourage.

Now, however, the slithery touch quickened her pace. She tugged the single earplug from her ear and focused all of her hearing on the quiet of the park. Only the rhythmic patting of her running shoes broke the silence. Still she knew someone followed.

Maybe running in the park hadn't been the best idea, but the treadmills had been full when she finished her circuit. The green and fragrant park with the miles of ribbon-like paths seemed to call out, tempting her to brave the early twilight for the finishing touch to an otherwise wonderful workout.

She turned left on the next cross-trail, and glanced back the way she'd come. Not a sign or a flicker of movement betrayed another presence. Pushing a little harder, Beth sprinted toward the park entrance. By the light of a street lamp, she saw a patrol car pause in its travels. A floodlight cut the darkness and further lighted her path. A deep feeling of relief filled her clenched soul as a broad-shouldered figure climbed out of the car and placed a distinctively shaped cap on his head.

No more than a hundred yards separated them, too far to see the cop's face, but something in his sudden movement reflected her fears. Behind her, he saw whoever pursued and he ran towards her.

A hand—with fingers long enough to encircle her throat—jerked her to a stop. Beth gripped one fist with the other, stooped, and drove her elbow back into the attacker's groin. She was prepared for anything but the low amused chuckle. The fingers tightened, and lifted her—not just from her crouch, but also from her feet. A shout from the policeman produced another rumble of laughter. Beth kicked and connected with her heels, feeling the solid impact through the soles of her well cushioned shoes into her calves and ankles.

A bass grumble whispered, "Playtime later, little one. I look forward to your squirming." He shook her, and she grabbed the fingers, digging her nails into the sleek skin as hard as she could. Her knuckles popped with the effort, but the grip tightened enough to change her struggle from gaining release to merely dislodging the noose of fingers long enough to draw a complete breath.

The cop drew his gun and shouted, "Police! Release her ... I'm armed and will shoot." Though her vision had become spotted and gray, Beth saw the cop drop to one knee and steady his weapon for a shot.

"We don't need him, sweetness. I'll be everything for you." The soft gentle tone made the statement somehow more frightening.

Beth would never be able to describe the next moment, though she would witness the same horror many times again.

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A white-toned noise engulfed them, and a beam of purple-black light lanced out. The cop writhed in the unnatural ray, and turned inside out as neatly as a cloth bag—one filled with raw meat and bones.

The hand twisted her rag-doll body to face her attacker. Yellow eyes registered in the moment before she fainted. Yeah, running in the park had been a bad idea.

Chapter Two

The stale air clung to her like damp felt. Beth tried to clear the stickiness from her throat but stopped when the cough hurt like blazes. Her throat! Long fingers. Yellow eyes—she remembered. The thought stoked her heart into an ear-thumping pounding and she struggled to sit upright. Some sort of harness across her chest and hips held her against a firm padded surface. Not really wanting to see but needing to, she opened her eyes. A dim blue green light made the air look like water. The chamber walls looked pebbly or rough but felt dimpled and smooth. Some areas had variations in color like waves and handprints or other arcane shapes. No sign of her captor.

Beth twisted her head to examine the bindings, straps of some webbing material with pale colored spots. She ran her hands along the length of the material and, when she inadvertently touched the palest spot in the center of each, they dropped away, retracting into the couch padding with a low whirr. Her exercise suit had dried and smelled of stale sweat and fear. She caught a whiff of another odor, not unpleasant—just different. Unable to place the scent, she forgot it and tried to make sense of where she'd awakened.

Swinging her feet to the floor, Beth sat up. A distinct rectangle drew her eyes and, moving quietly, she went closer. A touch opened the panel like a stereo cabinet door, and Beth carefully examined the next compartment for signs of her captor. Various monitors were inset in the top of an island-like console that stood a few feet from the door. The rest of

the area was an open space with swirling designs on the floor. Beth took a couple of cautious steps into the room before the window caught her attention. Not the opening itself, but the view beyond froze her and she felt a wiggling cold fear bloom in her guts. Born in a decade where digital pictures—similar to what lay before her—were as common as landscapes, she immediately and correctly identified the vista.

Damn, she thought. How unfair that she had trained and practiced her defense against every possible violation except this one. How was one supposed to prepare for this? The pictures didn't adequately capture the reality, and how horrible that she saw this marvel under such circumstances. She gazed in wonderment and terror at the gleaming blue, green, and white sphere hanging like an exotic fruit before her.

Earth.

Chapter Three

Time passed without any kind of reckoning, as Beth stood mesmerized by the sight of her home so far from her reach. Any notions of escape died in that immeasurable moment. She would die here, her captor beyond the reach of authorities. Her parents and friends would never know what happened—no one would—until some dim unimaginable future when her body was found floating in orbit.

A soft tap behind alerted her. Turning, she saw the creature that was the master of this ship. The yellow eyes—those she remembered quite well—but the rest registered for the first time. The humanoid formed an almost perfect parody of a weight lifter's physique. Broad shouldered, thick necked, square chinned and boasting a defined six-pack of muscles on his stomach. Two of everything a human had two of, but there the similarities muddled. His skin was mottled, like a giraffe, with light and dark patches. As Beth watched the patches lost the blue, gray, and green cast and became shades of tan and beige. The mottling made identifying facial characteristics difficult, but she noticed he had no hair on his head—or anywhere else, for that matter. He stood naked, one hand playing with the inset monitors, the other holding a weapon upon her. He glanced from her to the controls and back.

Beth averted her eyes, but not before noticing the differences in his anatomy that had prevented her elbow shot to his groin from any response save a laugh. A ridge of bone had blocked her blow but what it protected appeared

human—all too human in shape and surmised function. It twitched as if he could feel her regard.

Her captor grunted and gestured. He spoke a rapid sentence in another language.

She looked up at his face. A very human one, beyond the odd variegated coloring, looked back at her.

He repeated the same words.

"I don't understand."

He stopped fiddling with the controls and reached out, faster than Beth could believe, to slap her, knocking her from her feet. He said a single word and gestured.

This time she understood. Stand. She clambered to her feet and stood where he pointed. He repeated the first sentence. For the life of her, there was no clue as to what he expected and she shrugged, trying to appear compliant but confused. He delivered another ringing slap, which sent her to her knees. He repeated the stand order, but as she drew her feet beneath her, Beth jumped to a decision.

Tucking herself tightly, she uncoiled to drive her head into the creature's stomach. The sound of his oomph at the impact encouraged her. She snatched the weapon from his loose fingers and turned it toward him. The grip was the same as a pistol, but she had to stretch her finger to reach what she hoped was the trigger.

The creature grabbed the console for support. Too late Beth saw his smile, and the floor fell away from her feet. She flailed, trying to find down, and kicked the wall. She tumbled toward the window in a leisurely somersault. One part of her mind understood that he had nullified gravity and she was

weightless. The same part noticed that her captor was still standing, apparently unaffected by whatever he had changed. The rest of her mind fixated on the looming window, suddenly realizing there was no glass or other solid substance between the bay and space. She didn't know whether the technology that kept the air in would keep her in as well. The creature plucked the weapon from her nerveless hand. The tiny tug halted the headlong tumble and she drifted.

Every involuntary muscle twitch changed her illusion of balance and she concentrated on being still. A glittering droplet floated before her face, reflecting back a miniature of her white face in its surface. A tear had broken free from her cheek. She hadn't noticed that she'd been crying.

Long hard fingers encircled her calf.

"No!" she whispered, but he completed the motion and sent her wheeling across the hanger. She warded off the wall, but the rebound sent her back toward the gaping port. Dimly, she heard harsh cries from her lips. Her hand entered the barrier; a slippery gel-like substance engulfed and chilled it. A grip on the back of her jacket stopped forward motion and she arched, drawing back from the too close vacuum of space. The creature gave her a little spin, stopped her turn as she faced him and then pushed until she could feel the barrier on her neck like greasy whipped cream. Her captor lifted a tear from her cheek and examined it. He tasted the drop and made a sound of pleased surprise. Beth closed her eyes as he licked the rest of the salty wetness from her face. He tapped her forehead with one finger and she looked at him.

He gazed into her eyes and whispered the same sequence of words as before, and fingered the zipper on her jacket. Inching it down, he repeated the words one more time.

‘Oh that!’ she thought with relief at her understanding and horror for the same. More tears spilled as her trembling hands found the zipper and finished the job.

He laughed at her efforts to strip while weightless and, finally, restored gravity when Beth had succeeded. She huddled on the floor, grateful to have down, once taken-for-granted but never again, returned. At the word, she stood where he pointed.

“Yeter,” he said, patting his chest. “Solterran.” Pointing to her. She nodded, hoping that it was the right thing to do. The Yeter touched a spot on her leg. A dark purple bruise marred the honey gold of her skin. She winced. He poked again with a chuckle for her discomfort. When she would have closed her eyes, he chuckled under her chin.

The Yeter ran his hands down her arms, examining how the tiny hairs stood up when her skin goose-bumped, and back up her sides. He cupped her breasts and whispered something as the nipples hardened. He used her long hair as a handle to draw back her head. He smelled her neck and ears before licking them. Another difference. His tongue was long and smooth in a mouth with narrow lips and a solid bridge of teeth. Bright white and even, except for two small fang-like incisors upper and lower, which broke the skin on her shoulder when he bit down. Four little pin-points of blood welled up and he licked those away too. He caressed roughly from her breast to her rump, pulling her tightly against his

groin. She cringed but his grip in her hair and on her ass held firm.

Beth felt the hard bulge as he rubbed against her. She heard herself whimpering, a little no-no-no. The Yeter growled and lifted her to the tabletop. She kicked at his face but his hand, long fingered and strong, locked her ankles together in one grip. He prodded her feminine folds with the other. Pain, fresh and galvanizing, shot through her as his fingers parted her roughly. Fisting her hand, she twisted and punched at his jaw, connecting with a crunch. The creature howled and released her legs. Beth rolled from the console and stumbled toward the other cabin.

She felt the air movement as his hand missed grabbing her. She lashed out with her bare foot and struck his stomach with her heel. He doubled over, but grabbed her ankle and dragged her back. One more kick—at his crotch, and then his knuckles hit the side of her face. Stars whirled in her vision ... How comic book—she thought—as the floor rushed up to meet her. Dazed, she found no will to continue the fight. He left her face down, kicked her legs apart, and knelt between her knees.

He lifted her by the hips and forced his way in. Another difference, she thought, wishing to be more unconscious. His penis didn't feel the right shape. The groin plate pummeled her inner thighs. He apparently found nothing amiss, judging by his rapid breathing and ecstatic groans. He lifted her upright, and the fit felt better. His hands covered her belly and breast, his teeth broke her skin, and the hunter claimed his trophy.

"Seba," he whispered after his spasms stopped. "You smell like sex."

English. He did speak it, but he covered her mouth when she tried to talk back.

"Sussa. I will talk. You will listen." His fingers stroked her cheek, but the palm stayed over her lips. "You wish to live through this?"

She nodded.

"Good. Obedience and silence, unless I order otherwise."

She nodded. The Yeter withdrew and pushed her onto her back on the floor. He uttered one word and pointed. She stayed.

* * * *

Beth had heard of living in fear, but no one had ever told her that fear isn't the same as being afraid. The constant terror dulled into a cramp-like ache, flaring into knife-sharp fear whenever the hunter desired. And he desired it frequently. Her breathless panic amused him endlessly. He would halt the ship's gyro and send her in a weightless pinwheel across the open-space hanger bay. Each time she vowed not to scream. Each time she steeled herself against the begging words. Each time she failed.

"Stop ... Please." Her voice trembled as she sought some anchor with her reaching hands to halt her tumble toward the hard vacuum a few meters away.

"Do you beg?" he asked with a laugh for her whimpering.

"I beg." She fought the words but they slipped out so easily.

"For what do you beg?" The actual lines sometimes varied but their meaning—and outcome—stayed the same.

There were tortures worse than rape. Begging for it topped Beth's list. Sometimes he wanted her to beg, sometimes to fight, sometimes to submit, and sometimes a combination of all three.

"Fight me," he might say.

Beth would use the martial arts training she had once considered her silver bullet against the dangers a modern woman faces. Her captor laughed as she faltered in her resistance. A casual slap, which set her ears ringing, would send her rolling across the floor where, if she failed to regain her feet fast enough, he kicked at her with his magnetic soled ship-shoes.

The bruises on her body ran the gamut from blue-black to orange-green. None ever faded completely before his pinches would freshen them. Pain buttons, he called them. He used them to cause her to flinch and cry. He would lick away her tears like some rare exotic delicacy.

The bruises on her inner thighs were renewed continuously. She fought his advances until he, another species but entirely male, buried himself completely, holding her arms captive with his long sleek fingers. Only then was it permissible to submit and allow her mind to escape.

He would usually finish quickly, and then return to his maps and hunting plans. This time, he halted in his thrusting and whispered in her ear. Always a bad sign, the altering of his routine warned her of his imaginative mind working to devise another way to shame her.

"Seba." He'd renamed her, never asking her real name, never giving his own. "Open your eyes."

She obeyed ... She always obeyed; the part of her that rebelled had burrowed deeply, waiting for an opportunity to escape.

"Move under me."

"What?" she asked, confused by the new game. He filled her mouth with his tongue—not a kiss—to forcibly silence her. The only words he wanted were the begging ones, or her unintelligible syllables of fear.

"Like Uman females move in the videos."

He'd murdered a porn shop proprietor, prior to abducting her, and stolen some movies. He'd watched them as if studying the behaviors of some lower species—the Jane Goodall of the Yeter.

She shook her head, decisively. He wrapped his fingers around her neck, chuckling, as he always did, at her little fit of insurgence. The gray starry haze of oxygen deprivation set in rapidly.

A fate worse than death, better off dead, death before dishonor—she could list all the empty platitudes but knew she would always chose life over death. Living in any form had to be better than dying. Alive, things could improve. Dead, there could be no change.

Beth moved.

Chapter Four

Her grandmother had always said that wearing a smile, when sad, usually made one feel happier. Beth discovered a horrible parallel. By faking an orgasmic response to him, her body eventually rewarded her with an actual one. The first time came as a surprise, and the subsequent ones revolted her. Her body betrayed her each time, becoming wet and ready whenever he touched her. She now had two enemies to resist. As before, she considered this development the worst that could happen. As before, her captor proved her mistaken.

He set up his snare carefully. A deserted alley would be the staging point. The quarry was a gang of toughs on their home turf. The bait was Beth.

The hunter explained it slowly and waited for her to nod.

Before setting her aground from the tiny lander, which was carried in a compartment under the windowed bay, he drew her near and nuzzled her ear.

"Forget whatever little plans you've hatched, sweetness. I tracked you down once and can find you again." He patted her rump and pinched her nipples; teasing them to hard peaks under the shirt he'd given her. The Yeter warned, "If you change my plans, you will suffer for it."

Clothes. How welcome and strange they felt against her skin. The short skirt and crop top fit snugly. The sandals were too loose. Where had he acquired these? Beth wondered how long it had been since she'd been taken. Had anyone looked

for her? What explanation had been given to her friends and family?

The air, redolent with hydrocarbons, assailed her nostrils. A humid heat brought a sheen of sweat to her skin. The sun glimmered on the horizon, and set as she watched the sky, red and gilt, until the night swallowed the day. She had no idea to what southern city these buildings and streets belonged.

It didn't matter. In cities, there were police, and police had guns and weapons. Her paltry plan went no further than seeking sanctuary in such a place—forever if needs be. Beth strolled easily down the litter-strewn street. Her eyes, belying the casual walk, frantically searched for a patrol car, or sub-station.

At the corner, she'd been told to continue on, and then turn at the parking lot and turn again at the next street, which would lead her back to the side road where the hunter awaited. Halfway down the block, lights and music flowed from one of the run-down buildings. Even a tavern or restaurant would serve her purpose. In a crowd, she'd be safe to call for help. He'd never expose himself to a large number of witnesses.

Her steps quickened with the hope pulling her. The music and light emanated from a brownstone, once a home now a derelict shell. A young boy sat on the stone banister and watched her hesitate.

"Whassup, girl?" he called.

Beth glanced up the street. The street ahead became an open area, filled with ragged macadam and burnt cars. All that laid behind was the hunter, waiting for his game.

"Do you have a phone? I'm in trouble and need to call my parents. They'll give you money when they come for me." Beth prayed her globetrotting father was at home for once, or her club and cause mother had charged her cell phone.

The boy eyed her up and down, and then shrugged. "Sure. C'mon."

The stoop had large chunks of concrete missing and the door opened with a groan. "Up there."

The interior was a mishmash of bare brick and smashed drywall. Graffiti adorned walls where paintings had once hung. The stairs shuddered slightly as they climbed, but the boy seemed unconcerned so Beth followed.

"Here go." The boy smiled and pushed open a stained and warped door. Beth paused in the doorway but a hard hand to her back flung her forward.

"Live meat," the boy's voice said. Beth clambered to her knees. Immediately a foot to her ribs threw her over. A half-dozen angry hard faces looked back, mostly men but two were girls. Darkly malevolent eyes in rigid faces whipped her with their hatred. The extensive bruises lighted no candles of mercy for the green-eyed blonde lying dazed on the curling linoleum. Beth felt alien under the intense scrutiny.

"She wants the phone."

One of the women straddled her and laced strong fingers in the sleek hair. "Who you gonna call, bitch? Cops?" The girl bounced as she spoke, forcing little gasps from Beth's lungs.

"Listen, please. There's ... There's a man hunting for me. He's dangerous. I'm only trying to escape him, not hurt you." The desperation in her voice did little to convince them.

The other girl strutted around and draped her latte-colored arms around one of the older boys. She kneaded the long firm arm muscles beneath his tawny skin as he pretended indifference. "We're bad, girlfriend. We're dangerous, too. Nobody can do us better."

One young man, standing back, sauntered closer. "Hunted? She don't look that special to me."

The first girl laughed. "You ain't had white ass, Rik. Whyn't you just check that out."

'Rik' dragged Beth by her arm toward a tattered sofa, throwing her face down into the musty cushions. The face had changed but the conditioning held. Beth struggled, and then submitted before finally writhing beneath her newest captor. They all took a turn with this strange girl who didn't scream but accepted rape with a reluctant enjoyment. The girls teased the youngest boy about his virginity until he, too, bared his manhood and used her quickly.

The gang-girls pinched and prodded and encouraged. Beth realized their arousal was as great as their male counterparts. She could smell the hot girl-smell through the tight black pants, could hear it in their breathy jibes.

One man, which one she never knew, had a taste for something new. Using the semen of those who preceded him, he oiled the head of his cock and pressed against her anus.

Beth kicked and wrenched, and resisted the fresh violation. Strong hands recaptured her arms and legs, draping her across the back of the sofa.

Hands parted her thighs and the thickheaded cock returned to jut against her sensitive nub. The man let her wriggle onto his erection and pumped hard a few times. Beth moaned as he retreated enough to prod her anus with the now-slippery tool. With a violent heave, his cock penetrated and withdrew, and again. The next stroke forced a soft groan from her throat. The next thrust she arched to meet.

The girls chanted, "She likes it. Give her more."

In horror, she heard herself repeat their words, begging for more. Ignoring their giggles, Beth reveled in the more of it, grinding to take his stroke deeper.

Her inner self blushed as the man described the tightness of her ass in graphic detail for his comrades. The hidden part cringed at each wave of ecstasy her rebellious body experienced. Her occult mind listened and recorded each murmur of pleasure or gasp of satisfaction her traitorous lips uttered.

She forgot the owner and the place. She forgot the situation and her fear. The cock became her temple and she worshipped the tremendous length and power in each thrust. The Yeter made her feel the same way, every nerve ending alive and vital. He overloaded her senses until she lost awareness of any rational thought.

She climaxed and loathed that she had learned to enjoy even this. The man's hands gripped her hips to gain better leverage to pummel harder. The spasms of his body reaching

orgasm set off another for her. He rocked against her, dwindling rapidly in his satisfaction. He withdrew and wiped his spent member on her rump. The hands released her, and she slid from the broken-legged sofa to the floor.

Beth curled in on herself. She felt the juices ebbing from between her thighs. She hated that she missed the familiar feel of the hunter's body covering hers. Hated that the wet tongues invading her mouth had tasted of cheap beer and harsh tobacco and not of the pungent wine the Yeter drank. Hated that his warm sleek oddly scented skin was not the skin on the hands fondling her breasts, restraining her wrists, pinching her thighs.

With no thought for her survival, Beth hovered at the edge of a half-sleep—exhausted as much by her disillusionment in her fellow humans as in her exertions at their hands.

The gang argued over her fate. One trio wanted to keep her for more games, another proposed selling her to a pimp named Lotto. The girls—perhaps unhappy with the compliant competition—pouted, and suggested butchering the bitch. The boy said something about a ransom and the others laughed their disbelief at the possibility that someone cared enough to ante up for her return.

The cool nip of a metal edge against her neck registered only as a sensation, not as anything to fear. She smelled a familiar odor and chuckled deep in her throat. A hand in her hair lifted her face.

“What you laughing at, girl?” the boy—though enough of a man to have taken her—asked.

"He's here. I told you he'd come," Beth murmured dreamily. Her punishment was over and the Yeter's game had begun.

The hiss of a plasma single-shot was expected, as was the splash of bright blood. A thud reverberated as the bigger girl, thrown by camouflaged hands, struck the wall and fell heavily to the floor. Beth could see startled confusion in the dying eyes.

One by one the gang-bangers were dispatched, though they fought hard against the cloaked invader. Those with guns perished in the unholy purple-black glow, the others with bone crushing blows. Hiding beneath the table, looking for the source of danger, holding a gun too big for her dainty trembling hands, the second girl whispered, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray...." before the ungodly ray inverted her into a shuddering pile of bloody meat.

The Yeter smiled down at Beth. "Having fun, little one?" The mottling of his chameleon skin had settled back into the brown and beige. "You should have done as I ordered."

Warm blood pooled and spread beneath her. What remained of her clothing absorbed the liquid. The hunter grabbed the sticky mass that the gore had made of her hair, and twisted. She followed unresisting. He flung her across one of the blown open carcasses, and took her with no preamble, roaring in his exultance, laughing as he rubbed the congealing gobs of blood into her breasts and across her belly. Dead eyes watched from every angle.

The tiny seed of herself, buried and hidden, tightened further.

Chapter Five

Beth listened and learned. She watched and waited. The hunter would hurt her—but not harm her—in his playing was the first useful thing she determined. He mostly spoke English, teaching her only basic commands in the other language. Stay and stand. Come here and go away.

Her duties consisted of entertaining him. The few small chores required to maintain a tidy ship he performed without her help. Beth spent hours in idle boredom. Far too much time, she decided, as the futility of her situation numbed her mind.

Beth began practicing her katas and performing dance steps from the lessons she had as a child. Invariably, her self-inflicted training sessions would incite the Yeter and his passion. To herself, shameful and angry, she admitted her intentions had been fulfilled. She almost looked forward to his attentions for a change from running on the endless and pointless hamster wheel of her worry.

When he left the ship, he locked her in the smaller cabin. Upon returning, he boasted of his prowess. She was expected to listen and nod on cue and admire the souvenir he'd chosen. A shirt, a piece of jewelry, or some meaningless trinket from his victim's pocket thrilled him. Sometimes he'd return empty-handed and surly. He'd slap at her, and make her cry. Her moans diverted him from his disappointments. Beth despised her effortless tears.

Once he brought back Chinese food. She sat cross-legged and devoured the bounty. He'd fed her regularly, but his food

tasted like variations of unsweetened oatmeal and boiled chicken and was more easily ignored than digested. The Yeter sampled each item but didn't like the taste of any except the egg-drop soup, which suited Beth. She hated snout soup. The hunter laughed when she burped.

"God, I love Chinese." The thought slipped out before she could stop the words. The perfunctory slap came as no surprise.

"I know," the hunter murmured, pulling her into his lap to sniff her. He never tired of her smell, though what the attraction was he wouldn't explain. He'd say she smelled like sex, which was to be expected considering his appetite for rape.

"I saw you. You squirmed to noises," he said, shaking his head, obviously not a fan of club music. "When you left, though you were not my targeted quarry, I followed." His fingers slipped inside her momentarily, and she felt the wetness his touch inspired. He sniffed her scent from his hand. "You and a male. You said you loved Chinese food."

Beth remembered that date. The man had been the friend of a friend and had been amusing enough to take home after stopping for a late dinner. They'd made love, and finished off the leftovers. She had exclaimed then how good the food was. The Yeter had been there, in her apartment, watching. Learning about her. Beth shivered. Why her?

"Seba, I decided then that I would have you." The run in the park was irrelevant, at some point he would have taken her. His hand held her chin, twisting to open her nape to his

nostrils. She could feel his teeth against the soft skin behind her ear.

She imagined a whole network of tiny pinprick scars scattered like freckles on her neck and shoulders, each testifying to another victory over his captive. The Yeter's other palm cupped and kneaded her breast. Her nipples peaked involuntarily and he rumbled his satisfaction of her arching response.

He licked the remnants of soy sauce from her cheek. "So, as my trophy this time, I brought you my quarry's supper."

Beth started. The hard arms held her, demonstrating that her release was at his discretion, before granting her liberty. The Yeter might pass as human in the dark of a club, but not in a restaurant. Someone else, innocent of anything except stopping in the wrong eatery, had purchased the meal and had been murdered for a couple of take-out cartons of her favorite food.

The hunter watched as she vomited and took his pleasure as she cried.

Chapter Six

She knew something had changed when she awoke but couldn't define the difference until she wandered into the hanger. The Yeter was exercising, as he often did in the ship's arbitrary morning. He moved in graceful steps and fluid gestures that reminded Beth of Taijiquan, alternating with rapid series of punches like a shadow boxer.

She watched and sipped the cylinder of water. Her eyes wandered to the open portal and the changing pattern of stars, lost in aimless thoughts. She gradually realized the Yeter had stopped in his routine to watch her and Beth prepared for his newest abuse. He didn't move toward her, standing silently but wearing that hateful smirk. A novel and creative trick would follow when he looked at her that way. Well, she couldn't avoid whatever he'd planned, and her eyes glided back to the unfamiliar configurations outside.

The cylinder sounded like a bell as it struck the floor. The hunter warded her blows, grunting when she passed his guard, time after time. The hot tears in her eyes caused her eventual defeat, blinding her, allowing him to grasp both wrists and twist, using her arms as a straightjacket. She wrenched violently and screamed but, once caught, the fight was over. Her frenzied strength ebbed with each frustrated sob.

Beth ignored the prohibition and cried out, "You promised, you promised!" She crumpled in the vise-like embrace.

His panted breaths betrayed his effort to subdue her. Later, that would be a scant solace but for the moment she filed away the information without further reflection.

"I promised you'd live. Not that I'd return you." He licked the mixture of sweat and tears from her neck. His erection burned like a brand on her thigh.

He turned slightly so she could watch the gas giant race by. Not Jupiter, not Saturn. Maybe Neptune, she thought. Maybe not even her Solar System. The stars turned from blue to red as they shifted from one side of the opening to the other. She watched as the celestial stream flowed unbroken, ignoring the Yeter as his insatiable appetite drove him deep into her. She let her mind slip away, not caring if he punished her for her inattention and non-response.

For the first time, Beth considered suicide as a viable solution.

Chapter Seven

The passage of time had been difficult to measure. Beth thought she remembered four menses, light enough to be ignored by her, if not by the hunter. Whatever he found so entrancing about her scent doubled then. There may have been another cycle during the black depression after leaving Earth's orbit. This then, was the sixth. Six months, more or less. A half of a year of her life had been stolen.

She had never been a cheerful person, but friends had always said she was like a force of nature in her vitality and enthusiasm. That part of her had gone on a long hiatus but, from day to day and against her will, her animated energy returned to normal. The innate will to survive proved stronger than her wish for an end.

Another day had begun much as most of them did with her captor waking her with his hardness ready to sample her again. Beth heard a muffled klaxon above the ragged impassioned breathing of the Yeter. His ears pricked and he pulled away with a startled grunt.

She followed to the hanger and watched as he checked monitors and consulted a guide. Beth laughed silently as his hands began to tremble, moving slowly and uncertainly across the various screens. Finally he crouched, his face a study in animated thought. She realized, with something like pleasure, he was afraid.

"The silking is torn," he said, gesturing to the portal and the glinting sleek gel-like covering that protected the ship. "I must go outside to repair it."

He reached out and drew her toward the monitors. "Watch here. When this number turns white," the hunter pointed out a figure on the screen, "Touch this." He touched a square on a nearby touch pad.

He was momentarily distracted by her scent, burying his face in the curve of her neck. Beth could feel the prodding of his penis in the curve of her rump as the hunter spread his hands on her abdomen and tugged her tightly against him. She half expected him to ignore the technical problem for however long it would take for him to solve his physical one.

Beth, knowing she had no choice in the matter either way, examined the console and the touch pads more carefully.

The 'number'—a strange slatted series of dots—was flashing in a cool blue green. The touch pad was labeled with pictographs. The one he indicted had a spot with radiating half-circles—meaning a sound or speaker, she thought.

"Do you understand?" he asked, finally remembering his purpose, pulling away with a groan.

She nodded. He looked into her face a long minute. "We cannot go on unless this is repaired."

She nodded again.

The square jaw tightened. "Say aloud what I have instructed."

Beth repeated his instructions.

The Yeter stared a minute longer, and then made his decision. He turned to a textured panel and tapped a few of the swirling shapes. The panel opened and he removed a belt of supplies and a small cylinder. Protrusions from one side of the canister were slipped inside his nostrils. He pushed a

lever on the other side and strode to the gap. He looked back at her again.

"You cannot pilot this ship."

So that is what had the Yeter worried, Beth realized. He would be vulnerable and feared her. She mimicked his smirk but the angry heat in his eyes erased it.

The gel yielded to his push, but a bubble remained around him, tethered to the silking by a gossamer cable. Beth felt her jaw drop in indignation. At no point could she have actually fallen through the opening but he had used the misconception to torture her. He caught her eye and shrugged.

By lifting up on the cable the hunter moved the sheath in the direction he wished to go. Beth watched until he was out of sight.

Gradually the number faded from blue-green to blue to a gray-blue. When it turned white, she pressed the communication button and waited.

Beth felt a shuddering tremor through the soles of her feet. Movement beyond the portal caught her attention. A shower of tiny pebbles bounced off the gel coating and flashed like jet-propelled fireflies. She had seen the phenomenon several times and wondered if the flashes were the stones or fragments of silking adhering to them.

Another shape floated into view. The Yeter drifted, still in the bubble of silking, a couple yards away, carried by inertia. The meteorites had ruptured the cable and set him in motion. The knowledge of his fate was plain in his solemn expression. He showed no outward signs of panic, which impressed Beth in spite of her hatred.

She looked once more at the controls. Though the ship, by and large, seemed to run automatically, she had no idea how to engage the drive or how to return to Earth—or anyplace else, for that matter. How long the ship's stores would support life was another unknown. Beth weighed her options and found them to be the same as they always had been. Her life was still in the Yeter's ungentle hands.

Pressing the sequence, she opened the locker and lifted out an air cylinder. Beth activated the feed and stepped up to the barrier. Her hands shook as she pushed through the gel, forming her own silking-sac and cable. The material surrounded her, slick and snug, covering without invading her mouth, nostrils, or other orifices. She wondered how long the silking could keep the absolute cold at bay then noticed the hunter shivering. Not long without the cable, it seemed.

Pushing off like a cliff diver, she jumped toward the Yeter, who watched with a curious look on his face. When she glided close, he reached out, awkward and clumsy with the cold, and the two sacs merged. He cuddled her tightly, drawing warmth from inside her bubble and from her skin. Beth wrapped her arms around his neck and exhaled into the enclosed space made between their bodies. His hands would linger then move on, searching for another warm patch of her.

Beth glanced at the spacecraft and stiffened. They had drifted farther than she thought possible in the short amount of time. She pointed and he nodded. The grimness in his eyes worried her further.

The hunter worked his fingers, gripping and relaxing, until limber enough to grasp the single cable of silking. The cord

thinned with the combined weight and the Yeter paused in his task. Beth trembled, fearing breakage, and held on. She had tried to save him for her own reasons but had no wish to die with him. The umbilical slowly regained its shape and he repeated the process. The ship swam a little nearer.

Little by little, he reeled them back. He pushed Beth through the silking and stumbled in beside her. Inside the hanger, the hunter took the cartridges back to the recessed niche and attached tubing to each. Recharging the air, Beth thought, sitting where she had fallen coming through the portal.

The Yeter tapped a couple keys quickly and a vibration announced the continuance of the voyage. The stars regained the blue to red shift.

He stared at her, looking as if he had something to say or wanted her to say something. She averted her eyes and rested her chin on her knees to watch the stars. For the rest of the day, he avoided her—a difficult task in the tiny confines of the two-roomed vessel—and huddled alone, wrapped in blankets.

Most of the next day, he merely watched her. Finally, he voiced one of the commands she knew. 'Come'. She went.

He crouched with her between his knees, one of his usual positions. Strangely gentle, he gathered her in. The four needle-sharp teeth broke her skin and he lapped the droplets away. He nuzzled her ear and Beth worried. What was his game this time?

"Seba. You saved my life."

Beth nodded, and tilted her head to show she listened.

"Why? Speak truthfully."

She shook her head and whispered, "What choice did I have?"

"Ahh." His arms encircled her but didn't restrain her as he usually did. "What would you do, if you were given a choice?"

She said the first thing that came to mind, trying to shake him from this new torment. "I'd slice open your fucking belly and strangle you with your own guts."

He chuckled. His arms tightened. "Struggle, and speak no more." So she struggled, for all the good it did, to amuse him.

"Would you accompany me voluntarily?" he asked, pinning her ass tightly between his knees.

She shook her head and bucked against him as he entered her as roughly and carelessly as ever. Whatever passed as his gratitude apparently didn't stand in the way of his pleasure or her rape.

"Too bad. I would have liked to keep you forever."

Which was the first time she been given any clue that he hadn't intended to do so all along.

Chapter Eight

The Yeter treated her differently after the conversation about his rescue. He would still—suddenly, frequently, and for no apparent cause—be overcome with desire and demand her to ‘Come’ but the beatings and rough play ceased. Between sexual bouts he would ignore her, no longer engaging in the restrictive cuddling or tormenting of his captured treasure.

In the night, Beth would open her eyes to catch a glimpse of his eyes closing. He watched her obsessively but tried not to be caught at it.

“Why do you hate me so?” he asked as she dozed. He shook her and asked again.

Beth looked at him incredulously. “Why? You need to ask? Why wouldn't I?”

He rolled and leapt to his feet. “You have no needs that go unfulfilled.”

“But I did not choose to be here!”

He paused in his restless pacing to glance at her.

“This is about choice?” the Yeter said. “What choices did you have before me?”

“All of them,” she whispered, sitting cross-legged and wary—ready to fall silent and submissive at a word or harsh look from him. His only expression was puzzlement.

“I chose where I went and with whom. I chose what I would do and when,” Beth explained. Her captor stepped closer and she braced for the expected slap—which he didn't deliver.

Instead, he crouched before her and gazed into her face thoughtfully. He placed his hand behind her head and tilted her face to the dimmed lights. His fingers followed the line of her jaw.

"You were content with that?" The yellow eyes appeared sincere.

She nodded—a bare trace of one with her chin propped on his fingers.

He shook his head. "You had all the wrong things to chose between." He put his palm over her mouth to stop her retort. "And did a poor job of it, besides."

The Yeter buried his face in the tangle of her hair. In a sudden fluid motion, he cupped her rear cheeks in his strong hands and lifted Beth from the pillows, pulling her legs wide around him. His erection split her further and for the first time in a long while she wasn't wetly ready. The pain drove a cry from her. He finished more quickly than he ever had and, with everything but his eyes, left her alone for days.

* * * *

Beth watched the other ship approach, curious but wary of changes in the routine. Her captor had continuously, but never pleasantly, surprised her with his ingenuity. Anything different would be bad. The visitor's vessel, upside-down to Beth's orientation, stopped with its portal facing the Yeter's. A pair of figures slipped through the silking and propelled toward them.

'Stand,' he commanded in the foreign tongue, pointing to a spot behind him near the wall. She complied. "They are Jibarae."

From her new position she couldn't see how the visitors transversed the barrier, but the process took no longer than her space walk had so the silking was common to both ships, she assumed.

The visitors were as alien as the Yeter, but familiarity had made her comfortable with his physique and these creatures appeared strange in comparison. Slender and gray-skinned with a soft down that covered every inch of exposed skin. Unlike the Yeter—who usually went naked but had donned a sort of cottony breechclout for the guests and had twisted another as a sarong for Beth—the newcomers wore layers of fuzzy garments in soft silver and gray tones. The host welcomed his guests with a nod, and spoke a few words, one of which she recognized as 'come'. The Jibarae replied and one produced a cylinder she knew contained the odd-tasting intoxicant the Yeter drank occasionally.

After a few more exchanges, the hunter gestured to Beth, and said, 'Come' in the same language. One of the gray guys asked a question to which her captor listed the few words she had been taught. The Yeter motioned to the living quarters and told her to 'Go'. He and the guests chatted a bit longer and, once, Beth caught the word 'Seba'. The chuckles that followed the speech erased any doubt about the topic of conversation.

Beth hunched down in one of the niches in the smaller room, and prepared herself. She knew now why the Yeter had invited these creatures to his ship.

The males—she didn't know how she knew the gray ones were male, but know she did—had opened the cylinder and

relaxed into the deep padded pillows to enjoy it. They passed the tube-like bottle, drinking from the spout shaped opening. The conversation rolled on in the unknown language. Occasionally the hunter would jerk his chin in her direction indicating at least one of their topics of discussion. He would smile at her each time as if he knew how badly she wished to understand what was being said.

"Seba." The Yeter gestured to Beth and she joined him in his pillow. Tears had formed and one trickled down her cheek to poise on her jaw. Her captor licked it away, and the others watched. They watched as she removed her dress when he commanded it. The sound of that order was indelibly written on her memory. They watched as he caressed her until she moaned and writhed. One blurted out a few words.

"He wants you to look at him while we play," the Yeter whispered. So Beth's leaf-green ones gazed into the steel-gray ones while the hunter explored the well-known hollows and curves of her skin with his tongue and fingers. The other growled something and the Yeter shrugged.

'Come,' the taller and lighter colored one (older—Beth wondered) said. The Yeter gave her a little push in the right direction. She half crawled and half rolled to lie across the other's lap. The soft plush fabric of his pants felt like lying on stuffed animals. He asked a question of the host. The answer seemed to satisfy him, and the downy fingers tickled traces across her breasts.

The younger one laughed as her nipples tightened. He tapped her forehead and pointed at his eyes, reminding her. He tipped a bit of the wine into her mouth and rubbed her lips

with his finger. Beth felt a quicksilver effect, the warmth traveling to her bones in an instant. She liked the sudden lack of worry or fear and, laughing, opened her mouth for another sip. He gave her more with a smile.

The feather light touches of these creatures made her tremble as they investigated every square inch of her skin. She strained toward the wispy brushings but the sensation became no more substantial by her effort.

The one, who held her, tugged at her arms and legs until she straddled his lap. He fumbled momentarily at the closure of his remaining clothing. Beth laid her head against the furry shoulder and continued to hold eyes with the younger one, as he had commanded. The press of an erection against her wet core closed her eyes for a time. Her nipples rubbed against the fuzzy vest covering the taller one's slender chest as she posted on his equally slender hardness.

The young one groaned audibly. Beth opened her eyes to find him kneeling beside her. His hand slid up her rump, and then up her back to her neck. His penis stood out from his body, smooth and hairless, slim but with a bulbous knob at the tip. She tightened her feminine muscles and felt the same hard protuberance on the member inside her. The one she rode groaned, and pulled her down hard.

Beth clasped her fingers around the other's erection and moved her hand. His eyes, half closed, flew open in surprise. Twisting, she took the end in her mouth. The older one barked a laugh, and commented something aloud.

"He says you are versatile," the Yeter translated. His voice was closer than she expected. His hands on her waist lifted

her from her perch. Beth wriggled against him and he chuckled, pushing her away. The older Jibar groused, and the hunter repositioned her on her hands and knees, and waved his guest on. Again, the willowy penis slipped slickly inside her, and her lips closed around the younger one's erection. Yes, better.

A hand she knew well brushed her belly, and she sensed the Yeter's intense scrutiny. Beth wondered briefly if her excitement pleased him but forgot his presence as she concentrated on her task and enjoyment.

The young one lifted her hair and ran velvet fingers along her spine as her lips and tongue engulfed him. The taller male cupped her breasts, and then, as if with desperation, scrambled for purchase and clasped her waist with his delicate fingers, pumping rapidly. She felt him stiffen and the bulb deflated like a punctured balloon, though the shaft itself remained firm. He withdrew with a gasp.

The young one murmured a few words and thrust in hasty little strokes. Beth understood and pumped faster, sliding her tongue around the lollipop shaped penis in quicker tempo. She felt familiar hands on her hips as the Yeter set his larger cock tightly in place, pushing without pause to fill her completely as the Jibar hadn't. Beth writhed with the onslaught, and quivered. The tremors reached even to her lips.

The young one pulsed and a miniscule dollop of fluid burst forth. Not human in any way, the thought came and went as his flavor did.

The Yeter boosted her upright and settled into his crouch, thrusting up and deeply into her. He slid his hands onto her breasts to capture her nipples between his fingers, holding her smooth back against his chest.

Beth felt the treacherous response building inside her as he stroked and grinded toward his own climax. She heard cries, her light ah-ah-ahs and his growls. The wave of sensation crashed through her, his spasms increasing her own. His teeth in her shoulder proclaimed his satisfaction. She collapsed between his legs as his hard subsided. Beth rested her forehead on the mottled skin and hated him all the more for sharing her so easily.

The younger Jibar whispered a hoarse question. The hunter caressed Beth's ass and laughed as she shuddered and whimpered. He spoke a few quiet words then, taking a perverse pleasure in translating for her, said, "The Jibar asked about your stamina." His fingers slipped in and out causing her to move with the stimulus. "Again and again, I told him."

Again and again. As often as he wished. Beth moaned and writhed and imagined him dead.

Chapter Nine

Beth awoke slowly. Her head ached. She covered her face with her arm but the stale sweat and spent sex smell of her skin made her nauseous. She settled for burying further into the downy pillow.

God. What a hangover! She struggled to trace the activities—which bar, which after-hours club, and which man—that had left her so sick.

Movement beside her announced her bed-partner— whoever he was—hadn't left and would expect breakfast. She'd send him downstairs to the bakery for croissants to go with hot chocolate. Her stomach roiled then calmed with her planning.

Her head! She wouldn't feel better until she showered and ate and took a couple of painkillers, but lethargy kept her fastened to the bed. Cozy, velvety warmth enveloped her. She felt a pressure on her rump and squirmed slightly as a hand caressed her flank and side, coming to rest cupping her breast. The unmistakable prod of a morning-after hard-on poked sought access to her inner thighs.

"No. My head hurts." She pushed the relentless hand away. "I need some aspirin..." She rolled to face her lover, squinting.

Her words trickled off as the where and when and what and who came crashing back. The alien intoxicant had been powerful and the males ravenous for her—a shared appetite. Beth cringed at the memory of how accommodating she had

been, and tried to regain her dreams of home by shutting her eyes and rediscovering her fantasies.

The Yeter lifted her from the snug nest of sleeping Jibarae. The younger one, who had obligingly served as her pillow, stretched and rolled to a more comfortable position.

The hunter sniffed at her neck and propelled her into the confines of the shower enclosure. He angled the spray to drench her; nearly drowning her as the water filled her mouth, rinsing away more aftertastes than bore thinking about. Cleanser in the lukewarm water was mild and silky on her skin. Her captor scrubbed lightly everywhere. His hand parted her thighs and his thumb slipped into her. The touch, though gentle for him, caused the abused folds to burn. She winced and tried to pull away but he persisted until she settled down.

"There, Seba. You smell better." He lapped the water from her neck. She rested her head against the cool bulkhead as his penis parted her sore flesh. The water trickling between their bodies cooled the worst of it and she sighed her relief.

At some point the soreness and headache dissolved into passion. Her ragged syllables of pleasure echoed back from the walls, mocking her, as the Yeter found the perfect rhythm and she surrendered again to his mastery of her responses.

When his spasms had stopped, he held her snugly for a moment before releasing her. "I will miss this," he said.

His tone startled her, almost wistful. She looked a question. He laughed.

"This is the last time, my pretty one. The Jibarae will employ your talents now."

Whirling, Beth slammed her fist into his nose, followed by a downward blow to his groin. The yelp of his pain told her attack had the desired effect. He caught her by the neck and jerked upwards, pinning her to the shower wall.

She kicked and connected but, other than a grunt, the Yeter didn't react more than an increase in the ferocity of his scowl.

The panel opened and the younger Jibar shook the hunter's shoulder and whispered an urgent-sounding message. Beth felt the subtle relaxing of the fingers on her neck and, suddenly released, she fell to the floor.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" she gasped. "I saved your fucking life and you repay me by passing me along, like I'm some kind of toy you've grown bored of."

"Bored? No, but I can't take you with me. I will honor my obligation by not killing you." He turned away.

"Our deal was that I'd obey and you wouldn't kill me."

The two Jibarae gestured at each other and the younger one tried to shush Beth, tapping her lips gently. How much they understood was questionable, but the fury of the exchange was obvious to anyone with ears.

"I fulfilled my end. But now you are reneging on your debt."

The Yeter whirled, eyes narrowed and angry. In two steps he had crossed the chamber and pulled her standing by her hair. He snarled into her face. Defiantly, she glared back.

"Kill me, you bastard. Or take me home. Otherwise, you still owe me your life."

Why, when he had complete power over her existence, had she attempted to bargain for more? Why hadn't he merely walked away, letting her accusation fall on deaf ears? If she was just a commodity to be bought and sold or gifted away, why did her words matter? Later, she would consider these questions and try to find answers. But, at the moment, she was simply as angry as she had ever been.

Beth would never know if it was her unrepentant bravado or his strange sense of honor that decided the moment.

The Yeter looked away first. Beth's hopes soared. She was right and he had acknowledged by default.

The hunter sniffed the hair in his hand and his face, eyes glazed with distant musings, became thoughtful. His other hand stroked the skin on her belly in a mindless rhythm.

Finally, he met her eyes. "I believe I've repaid my debt by not taking you back." He shook his head as she began to argue. "But you may never understand my kindness in this. So, I will honor you in another way."

Kindness? She snorted but he ignored her contempt.

He released her hair, and licked the damp from his hand. "You wish revenge on me?"

She nodded, wondering what he had thought up. He chuckled at his own cleverness.

"Then I will make it far easier for you to find me when the time comes. My name is A'tan Dystat." He turned away and waited silently while his guests gathered their belongings, old and new, and slipped through the silking.

She accompanied the Jibarae to their ship without a fight. A'tan hadn't looked at her again.

As Pretty Girls Do
by Jolie Howard

Part Two: The Jibarae

Chapter Ten

As soon as Beth boarded the Jibarae ship, the precariousness of her situation struck her. The Yeter had understood her language, though he prohibited her speech. Now she had no shared words except the few her captor had taught her. He had known of her origins. Did the Jibarae? She had become confident, if not relaxed, in her role with the Yeter. What would be her place here? Silence and obedience were the lessons her captor had taught. Maybe these creatures expected the same. How would she know?

The aliens pointed and jabbered a command she only barely recognized. "Stay." They turned to a console similar to the one on the Yeter ship. Programming a course, Beth guessed.

The air temperature was uncomfortably cold. The shivering began as a tremble but soon had her shaking all over. The younger one asked her something and mimicked her shivering.

"I'm freezing." Beth rubbed her arms and hands. He touched her goose bumped arms, and brushed soft knuckles across her hard-with-cold nipples. Instead of laughing, he spoke to the older Jibar who shrugged and continued his activities at the controls.

The younger one pulled the outer tunic over his head and slipped it over hers. The shirt was too tight around her chest and fell only to her thighs. The long sleeves covered her hands and the Jibar pulled the wide cowl neck up over her head like a hood, nuzzling her cheeks with his chin and

tucking her thick tresses beneath the folds. He murmured comforting noises. The fuzzy fabric felt softer than cashmere.

Almost immediately, Beth's shivering abated in the gloriously warm folds. She smiled her thanks at her benefactor. He copped a quick feel of her partially covered rump before a gruff cough and the scowl on the older one's face brought his attention back to more important matters.

The stars misted through the silking and the shift began. The Yeter ship shrank and disappeared in a matter of moments. A suffocating pressure, like the embrace of her captor's arms, crept up from her stomach into her throat and lungs. Beth didn't expect the wave of terror—of homesickness—that rocketed through her. Through her rapidly narrowing field of vision, she saw both Jibarae turn and stare at her in surprise. The look that passed between them would have amused her if hitting the ice-cold floor hadn't hurt so much.

Sorry, guys—she thought, blearily—defective merchandise is not returnable. Her consciousness faded and with it any further opinions.

Chapter Eleven

She struggled. Soft hands soothed her. Warm liquids trickled into her mouth and toasty furry blankets swaddled her. Beth fought against awakening but, eventually, she let her eyes open.

A light tan face with dark gray eyes looked back. "You am 'tay?"

'Are you okay?' her mind clarified before she consciously recognized the language as Pidgin English.

Beth rubbed her head against the pillow, wincing at the tender lump. "Better. Yes, I'm okay." The moment stretched as she examined the new Jibar and he examined her. His fur was beige-tinged, not gray or silver. His eyes were darker and larger. He appeared smaller than either of the others, and confirmed it as he stood and reached for a cup on a small shelf. Even thinner and more delicate appearing, she decided. Was he a younger Jibar?

Snaking her hand out of the warm wrappings, Beth held the hot ceramic mug tightly. The liquid was syrupy sweet and tasted nutty. She glanced surreptitiously around the tiny chamber. A cot—comfortable and well-stocked with the fuzzy blankets—filled over half, leaving space for a set of tiny shelves and a series of hooks—the closest one holding the hooded tunic she'd been given earlier. The entrance panel stood open and a wedge of a room was visible. A low table, pillows, and a console were all she could see without sitting up. The other room was darkened and not in use, as far as Beth could tell.

"Gud?" the youth asked.

She nodded and sipped.

"I talk 'kay?"

Another nod and a smile for his obvious wish for her approval and understanding. She noticed that he had already exchanged 'tay' for 'kay'.

"I am Orix, Orix za Forday," he said tapping his chest. "You am?"

"Elsabeth Collins." She felt a little silly with a formal introduction but he had given his whole name and it seemed like the polite thing to do.

"Elsa, well to come on 'Fordachau'." He gestured to encompass the ship. "Be restful." He turned to leave and took the empty cup from her hands. "No am time for duties. Am night. Tomorrow, 'kay?"

"Okay," she agreed, betting the Jibar would say the word correctly the next time.

Orix touched a swirl on the wall and the lights dimmed. He closed the door with a click, but she heard no additional whirring indicating a lock being engaged. Beth cuddled down and wondered about the 'duties' the Jibar mentioned.

'Duties?' she thought, wondering what had been in the drink to make her so sleepy. She giggled silently, feeling like Scarlett O'Hara as she told herself to worry about things—like duties and survival—tomorrow.

* * * *

A gentle shake awoke her and she opened her eyes to peer into the pale gray ones of the middle-sized Jibar. He tugged

at her blankets and she raised the edge. With a low grunt, he slipped in beside her.

She pointed at herself. "Elsa."

He ignored her introduction until he found her hand under the tangle of covers. He directed her attention to his immediate concern. Apparently, her duties wouldn't wait for morning.

"Ipok," he whispered and, holding her hand around his penis, moved his hips.

She rubbed her thumb over the head of the thicker part and Ipok groaned. With velvet hands he traced the curve of her breasts and down her sternum and abdomen to tease at the folds between her thighs. With tiny brushes side to side, he parted her nether lips and rubbed at the nubbin concealed there.

Beth lurched, not expecting such direct contact, but Ipok forced his knee between hers and pinned her in the angle between the wall and cot. He continued the exquisite torture until Beth's breaths came in gasping sobs. Her thighs clasped his knee and she hitched forward and backward until her climax came in a forceful, bucking spasm.

Ipok rolled to his back, dragging Beth with him. His erection found the crevice between her legs and, with quick strokes, he amused himself until she caught her breath.

Beth reared up and sat on her heels. She poised above his long slender penis, teasing the bulbous head until the Jibar grasped her waist and arched, driving himself deeply into her warm wetness.

She remained motionless, letting him exhaust himself in his attempts to be inside her, until he lay still beneath her hips. Then, slowly, she slid down the willowy shaft and paused at the nadir point. Even more slowly, she raised herself, tightly clenching her feminine muscles, to pause again at the apex.

She took the same leisurely journey several more times. Each time he moved she would freeze until he subsided. His hands kneaded her thighs in an unspoken request to speed-up her tempo. The Jibar gave up, finally, and watched her, his face contorted with his effort to lie quietly under her ministrations.

He moaned. "Elsa!" The word voiced a plea she understood. Beth relented and posted rapidly up and down, without pause or tease. With a sharp gasp, Ipok shuddered and she could feel the rapidly deflating bulb of his cock.

He clasped her tightly and drew her down beside him. With his shaft still resting between her thighs, Beth cuddled into the downy warmth and fell asleep within a few breaths.

Chapter Twelve

Beth wriggled and struggled, not to escape the hands, but to be captured more fully by them. He wanted nothing more than to possess her body with his, she knew. He would have what he wanted, as she would when he did. The scent of his skin stirred a reaction inside her; she tightened and rubbed to enjoy the moist, lush feeling. Mostly asleep, she moved with more urgency, seeking the release but not quite finding it. The scent of his skin ... The feel of his hands ... 'What was it?' she wondered. Why think of him at all? Her dream dwindled obligingly.

The pervasive smell of food invaded Beth's dream and enticed her to wake up. She slipped out of the cozy cocoon. The air was still chillier than bare skin comfortable, so she pulled the tunic off the hook and smoothed it over her upper body. The door opened to her touch and the three Jibarae looked up as she stepped into the common room. They wore short loose pants and sleeveless tunics.

Ipok's eyes sparkled with welcome, and Orix said, "You am sleep okay?"

The oldest Jibar had a book-sized object in his hand and, with no acknowledgment of her, returned to his attention to the characters on the screen part.

"I slept fine. Thank-you." Talking aloud felt unnatural. Some hint of mischief rose in her soul and she said, "Except for an interesting dream."

Ipok smothered a laugh as the older Jibar glanced up. With a word from him, both Ipok and Orix carried a few items to

the table—a carafe of beverage, a bowl of lumpy-looking brown mush, and a pale-colored platter. Ipok had a handful of what appeared to be oversized spoon rests. He placed one in each corner of the square table.

He and Orix sat, cross-legged, at two corners, the other Jibar hadn't moved from the third. All three looked up at her expectantly. Orix crooked a finger at her with a meaningful expression. Four spoon-rests!

Beth positioned herself at the remaining corner. The unnamed Jibar put aside his reading and, with a few mumbled words, ladled out a helping of mush. Then Ipok, repeating the same words, helped himself. Beth waited until Orix indicated she should go next. As she reached out, the oldest one grasped her hand and repeated the phrase, and then motioned her on. Orix, sprinting through the required protocol, scraped the serving bowl to fill his spoon rest-shaped bowl.

The platter was some kind of bread, and the progression was identical. First the older one broke off a piece, and then Ipok, Beth, and Orix got the last. Beth was careful to leave the larger portion for the considerate youth.

Ipok and Orix waited for the patriarch to take a finger scoop and a sip from the carafe, and then, chatting quietly, dug in.

Beth noticed that Ipok drank from the opposite side of the opening. She chose a third side, hoping, and choked back surprise. The beverage was coffee, heavily sweetened. Orix showed approval by nodding slightly. He took his drinks from

the side opposite hers. The carafe had distinctive patterns and she found it easy to keep track of 'her' spot.

The Yeter had fed her from his plate. Then, she thought, he'd been asserting his dominance. Now, she had to reconsider. At two for two, a common plate must be the norm off Earth. She hated eating with her fingers but if the fuzzy-fingered Jibarae didn't use utensils, who out here would?

The mush tasted like bacon-flavored undercooked mashed potatoes, edible but just barely. The bread had a crumbly biscuit texture and a wonderful aroma. Beth thought she could eat the entire loaf, especially if buttered. She enjoyed the final bites with her eyes closed.

The oldest Jibar rapped the table. Startled, Beth jumped and jostled her corner hard. The carafe tumbled and, though he grabbed for the wildly spinning bottle, the contents were deposited mostly in his lap. Beth yanked the sweater off and attempted to soak up the hot liquid. In the process, she knocked the serving bowl and two spoon-rest things, which went flying with unerring accuracy at his stomach and, as he doubled over, against his head.

When the barrage ended, he stared at the mess of coffee and odds and ends of food covering his clothing, either stunned or furious. Beth waited, feeling the blush rush to her cheeks, for his censure.

Abruptly, Ipok laughed. Orix smothered a smile but soon was rocking with his merriment. Finally, the older one chuckled and beckoned to her.

"Elsa?" he said as she regained her seat next to him.

She nodded, wondering what else he knew besides her name.

"You were more graceful on the Yeter ship." His command of her language was perfect.

Hot tears filled her eyes, and she hung her head. He tapped her chin firmly and, after wiping her face with the back of her hands, she looked up.

"I am Erit za Forday, Fordachau shipmaster and merchant-apprentice." He pointed at Ipok. "He is shipmaster apprentice and trade-master." With a careless gesture toward the youngest Jibar, "And that worthless one is the trade-apprentice and ship-keeper."

Beth snuck a peek at Orix, but Erit's dismissive attitude hadn't erased the smile remnant one iota.

"He will teach you our routine and some etiquette." Erit continued in his language and Orix nodded.

He stood and strode from the room. Ipok followed, but spared an encouraging smile for her.

The young Jibar collected the spilled items and the few remaining on the table and carried them to the sink. Beth wiped the crumbs from the table, retrieved the spoon-rest under it and took both to Orix, who stepped aside for her. As she put her hands in the basin, he groped her breasts. She stiffened, but Erit's words about her place and Orix's duties came back.

He was slightly shorter than she and his chin rested on her shoulder. "Show me."

"Show you what?" she asked. His tentative fingers teased her nipples.

"Erit say bring you for him ready."

Oh! Beth blushed. Her hesitancy showed.

"Ipok say how. I not understand." Orix looked glum but brightened as an inspired thought struck him. "I ask him for show."

Beth grabbed his hands. Like hell she was going to have Ipok demonstrate her features—like Tupperware—to Orix. Teenage boys had never proven to be a mystery for her when she was younger, why would this be any different? Her hands guided his and, with few words but many moans as he did the right things, she taught and the Jibar learned.

Chapter Thirteen

The youth gave Beth a sleeveless tunic. As they negotiated the narrow corridors, she was glad. The common room had been almost warm enough, but most of the ship was frigid. Stopping before one of the many panels, Orix smiled and rubbed his fingers across the little peaks on her chest.

"Sometimes that happens when I'm cold, too," Beth said, laughing. He'd been amazed when her nipples had performed the same trick under his hands.

"Cold?" the boy asked. "I make more warm for you." She didn't get a chance to ask him why the ship was so cold, because he pushed the panel release and stepped in.

Beth followed. Erit and Ipok were standing at a table with a tilted surface. Like an architect's, she thought. Both looked up as the panel opened, but Erit continued his sentence as if nothing had occurred. Ipok dropped his eyes back to the table where Erit was pointing.

Ipok spoke briefly, glancing up at her once. Erit looked at her a long minute, then sighed. He shooed Ipok away. Orix, with a firm hand on her fanny, push her forward far enough to close the panel, leaving her alone with the oldest Jibar.

She noticed that Erit hadn't changed his tunic or pants, and then her surroundings diverted her attention from that detail.

The room was nearly as large as the common room, with the air of being the place of where a person lived and worked. There were tools hung on the walls, looking as if stored rather than displayed. Bits and pieces of metal of various colors,

shaped like flattened marbles, were strewn on every level surface. Jars, containing jewel-like stones, lined the upper shelves of the room's periphery. A wide platform bed, covered in the same soft blankets as her cot, served the additional purpose as some kind of sorting system for spools of wire.

A light tapping noise reminded her of the room's other occupant. Beth pulled her attention back to Erit. He stood next to his worktable, watching her. He had been watching her for some time, she realized, waiting for her to ... To what?

'Come,' he said, after a long pause.

Erit fingered her earlobes and then said a short sentence. Beth blushed and removed the tunic. He ran his downy soft palms up her belly and along the underside of her breasts. He said something else.

Beth recognized some of the words. She wasn't wearing anything else to remove. Her panic must have shown in her eyes, because Erit chuckled and shook his head. He repeated the order, more slowly, emphasizing one word and pointing at himself.

Now she understood why the Jibar hadn't changed his tunic. She was going to do the honors.

His silver-gray eyes followed her hands but he didn't offer any encouragement or words of advice. The tunic untied at the neck and was loose enough on his slender frame to slide easily. She yanked it down past his knees, and he obligingly stepped out. The fastening on the long shorts frustrated her. Not a button, or a zipper, or even Velcro, but some kind of combination. A flap loosened, and then she caught on to the

trick. A tug, a pull in one direction then a flick of her thumb undid the closures, one by one.

By the time she finished fumbling, Erit had cleared his throat twice and groaned once. Beth hid her smile as his erection popped free of the fly. His fault, she thought, he could have made this easier for her and gotten to the heart of the matter sooner. She teased the tip of his penis with her breath and pulled her lips away as he lurched toward them. Again, she blew lightly and pulled away as he pushed toward her.

"Elsa," he said sternly. "Stop that."

Giggling, she tried the same trick again. Erit grabbed her wrist in one hand and swept the bed free of spools and debris with his other. Beth was surprised at the strength of his grasp and had only a moment to rethink her strategy. Overbalancing, she tumbled him onto the platform as he flung her toward it. In the tangle of arms and legs, her hand found and held his maleness firmly. She squirmed and let her fingers stroke him.

Erit remained motionless, and then slowly rolled toward her, adjusting her arms, his legs as he maneuvered but never moving fast enough to dislodge her fingers from his penis. Finally, side-by-side, he began to touch her in that brushing careful way he had used on the Yeter ship.

The Jibar tugged gently at her arm and she complied, releasing her grip on him. He positioned her hands above her head and stroked the sensitive undersides of her arms. His hands, soft as cashmere, never stopped the feathery caresses. Her face, her collarbone, circular motions around

her nipples, along the curves and lightly through the valleys of her belly, hips, and thighs passed his fingertips, thumbs, and the rougher stroke of knuckles. Beth closed her eyes. The Jibar continued, running his palms down her outer thighs to the backs of her knees. He stroked each calf and ankle, and then started the return trip by following the path of her instep, and the inner sides of each of the parts he'd explored on his outward journey.

As the fabulously soft tracings reached her inner thighs, she parted them willingly for his mercies. She arched to meet his fingers but the hardness that opened her was a welcome substitute. His gruff moan was an echo of her feelings. Wrapping her legs around the slender hips, she drew him in harder, feeling the hard bulge of the swollen head sliding by, through, and in.

The Jibarae were built for sprinting not for marathons, and he climaxed quickly. Beth clenched her legs to hold him deep and worked her hips to slide the shaft within. Erit matched the tempo she set, gripping her hips and plunging to meet her as she arched.

With a cry, almost of pain, the noise catching in her throat and breaking free, the climax came over her. In the breathless moment that followed, a horrible truth burst in a similar fashion into her consciousness.

The adjustment from one owner to the next had been too easy, she thought, shamefully. She acknowledged the change in her attitude. The Yeter may have raped her, initially, but at some point had she become a willing participant—if not in her

captivity at least in this? She may have had no choice in the beginning but hadn't she adopted the identity readily?

Tears burned under her eyelids and welled until she had to blink and spill them. Erit noticed and asked, "You are injured?"

Beth shook her head and tried to swallow the lump in her throat but that only made it clear that she was going to have to cry it out. She sobbed and let all her anger and fear pour out in her weeping.

"What is it?" Erit asked, puzzled.

"I'm a whore," Beth groaned.

She could see Erit's shadow nod. "Yes," he said, with admiration in his voice. "A very good one."

She burrowed under the blankets, still crying—though a small part of her laughed with the immensity of his misunderstanding. Erit lay quietly, stroking her skin, until Ipok called for him.

Chapter Fourteen

The Jibarae treated her well. Orix taught her the basics of the bathroom and kitchen. True to his word, though still cool for bare skin, Orix had increased the air temperature in some areas of the ship, and told her if the air felt cold in a particular chamber she should stay out. No one seemed to object when she wore clothes, so she did.

Ipok visited her at night, creeping into her bed like a dream, and disappearing before morning.

Mornings, after a little foreplay (but never intercourse) with Orix, were spent with Erit. She would play with the ingots of metal, and spools of wire until he and Ipok finished their habitual confab. In sex, as with everything, Erit was methodical and precise. Sometimes she felt like an item on his to-do list; Get up, exercise, breakfast, planning session with assistant, use the ship's whore, work up new designs, etc.

She really had no complaints about his prowess. He had determined what pleased her, and then followed the formula to its usual result. Erit rarely rushed through anything, and never in his time with her.

Beth dreaded afternoons. The three Jibarae disappeared to their various tasks and she was on her own. She wandered through the permitted areas. Though the Jibarae ship was far larger than the Yeter's, there wasn't much to explore. She often gravitated to the landing bay to watch the stars.

Later, she'd help Orix make dinner and clean up. He often gave her an extra piece of the marvelous bread afterwards.

The evenings reminded Beth of after dinner activities at a retirement home. Erit would study his little computer thing, which Orix informed her was a newspaper. Ipok would draw and measure on a large tablet of clear plastic sheets and, occasionally, ask for the elder Jibar's opinion. Orix would study filled versions of the same type tablet, and ask Ipok questions about the intricately layered designs.

Sometimes, Erit and Ipok, or Ipok and Orix would play a game. The game reminded Beth of a Chinese checkers/Connect Four hybrid. One of the goals was, as close as she could figure, to move all your pieces from various places to a home, while other pieces prevented your opponent from achieving the same goal. Some pieces were brightly colored stones and some were metal toothpicks.

Curious about the rules, Beth asked questions of Orix, while the elder Jibarae played. Erit grumbled deep in his throat, demanding her silence.

The youngest alien crooked a finger and she joined him on his cushion. He had one of the large tablets on his knees.

Orix cuddled against her chest, grinning at the involuntary hardening response of the nipples under her tunic. He tapped the tablet and let her look at the drawing.

A pair of lines shaped like a crescent moon was centered on the sheet. Orix indicated a symbol in the corner of the tablet.

"Titanium," he whispered in her ear. Beth glanced toward Erit. He either hadn't heard or Orix's whisper didn't bother him.

Orix flipped the next page. A web pattern overlaid the twin pieces of titanium. "Forday metal." One by one, the pages were flipped, each layer adding a single type of stone or gem or metal to the overall design. When all the pages were layered, the materials were listed down one margin. Small slashed numerals followed each symbol, relative weights the Jibar youth explained.

"But what is it?" Beth asked. The intricate spiraling, swirling device was too beautiful for any pedestrian use.

"Ornamentation," Erit answered. She looked up to see both Ipok and Erit looking at her.

"Jewelry?" she asked.

Erit gestured and grunted something at Ipok, who jumped up and left the common room.

"Ornamentation," Erit repeated, motioning and commanding for her to 'come'. She obeyed—the habit deeply ingrained by the Yeter. The Jibarae had never been abusive but neither had she given them cause.

Ipok returned with an unmistakably shaped box. He lifted out a piece similar to the one on the tablet. Drawing her to her feet, Erit indicated the odd and, until now, inexplicable loops on the tunic she wore and Ipok fastened on the 'ornament'. The swag-like design hung badly on her, having been designed for a flatter-chested individual, so Erit adjusted the attachments higher on her shoulders.

The lid of the case held a mirror—the first she'd seen since leaving Earth. Beth startled at the sight of herself. Too many changes to list easily—oh, her hair! Without a brush or comb, she'd resorted to raking the thick mass with her fingers.

Longer than she'd ever worn it, the twisting strands laid in wavy locks passing her shoulder blades. The color had darkened without the light of the sun as bleach and contrasted sharply with the translucent hue of her skin. Not a blemish marred her chin or forehead.

She thought her eyes looked different, deeper and clearer. The sparkle of the 'ornament' drew her gaze. The layers of design pulled her in to follow one delicate strand to a tiny stone to another thread to a bead. With effort she withdrew from the web and admired the whole, and her breathe caught in her throat. Too much at once, she thought, and averted her attention from the reflection.

In the bottom of the case were several matched sets of hoop-like ornaments. Beth noticed tiny tabs in the shoulders and bottom hem of Ipok's tunic and surmised their intended purpose.

She lifted a pair out and pushed the U-shaped wire through the hole in her left earlobe and then another through the right.

Beth shook her head and laughed at the flash in the mirror. She tossed her head again and arched her shoulders. Her reflection sparkled and glittered as each facet threw back the light with prismatic affect.

Engrossed in her display, she didn't notice Erit's expression. He buried his fingers in her hair and tilted her chin, staring at the bejeweled wires in her earlobes.

"I wondered," he whispered. He gave her chin a gentle shake to make the stones jiggle again. She could feel the rise of his excitement against her flank.

Beth glanced at Ipok and Orix but saw the same mesmerized look on their faces. She giggled.

"You should see some of the parts we humans will pierce!" she said, lightly shaking her head for their enjoyment. "Belly buttons, nipples, noses, tongues—anyplace." The familiar spreading warmth coursed through her, responding to the erotic effect jewelry had on the Jibarae.

Ipok bobbed the case, and carefully set it aside. With one fingertip he tapped her earpiece, and then traced a line to the necklace. The lower edge of the filigreed ornament rested just above the firm peaks of her nipples, evident through her tunic. His touch made them tighten more and a little moan escaped her.

Erit had his hands under her shirt, on her hips. His erection, freed from his clothing, throbbed against her rump and she responded with a squirm, encouraging him. She found the fastenings of Ipok's fly, releasing his shaft into her hand.

Erit tongued the jewel in her earlobe and caught it between his teeth. From behind, his willowy member slipped into her. His teeth on her ear and his penis inside her held her captive to his whim. She writhed, wanting him to thrust harder, finding the tiny movements he allowed maddeningly frustrating. Her hot, damp, scent, which had enthralled the Yeter but had no effect on the Jibarae, wafted to her nostrils and excited her further. Beth gripped Erit's flanks and pulled him deeper. He chuckled as she hissed in her exasperation.

She groaned her disappointment when he withdrew, but sighed contentedly as Ipok replaced him. Beth rested her

forehead against his shoulder until Erit drew her chin up and set the earrings to dancing again.

Ipok nuzzled her jaw and neck, his breathing becoming ragged as his passion overtook him. His fingers sought and caressed tender places and, as he found them, she moaned her appreciation. Erit stood solidly behind her, his heat like a hot iron pulsing between her cheeks. She could hear the low rumbling growl of desire, feeling it through his chest on her back like a vibration—the echo answered a cry within her.

She was warm between them, Ipok moving within her, Erit holding her upright from behind. Beth drew up her knees as someone's hands cupped her rump, and wrapped her legs around Ipok's waist.

Beth felt a shaft prodding her anus and stiffened. Erit nuzzled the earring and murmured encouragement but, inexorably, succeeded in his purpose despite her half-hearted objections. Suddenly full, she felt the distinct shape of each as they thrust rhythmically. Ipok's hands held her ass, she decided, as one of Erit's slid up under the tunic to cup and knead her breast. He encircled her waist to add his wiry strength to his junior's.

Ipok climaxed with a groan, burying his face under her chin. He held steady as Erit continued to pump, seeking his release. Ipok rocked her against him, stimulating her most sensitive spot. She could feel her wetness, lubricating Erit as he increased his tempo. She lifted and relaxed as he drew out and slammed in.

His arm around her waist clasped her hard against him and his tremor sent the ultimate sensation to spur her own. Her

calves tightened around Ipok for one massive simultaneous thrust from each male within her.

Ipok's knees gave out first, and all three tumbled to the cushions, now strewn from their proper places. They gasped, and Erit grumbled an order to Orix who, Beth realized with a blush, had been observing events openly and curiously. The youth fetched a carafe of water for his elders.

Orix reached out and jiggled one of Beth's earrings. "You am pretty that way, Elsa."

Ipok and Erit laughed, choking on the mouthfuls of water.

"Yes," the oldest one said. "Pretty." His eyes shouted his admiration for her, and she readied herself for a busy night.

Chapter Fifteen

The structure of the Jibarae hierarchy was gradually forming in Beth's imagination. Orix took care of the day-to-day running of the ship. He was Ipok's apprentice for making ornaments. He served as gopher for both of the elder Jibarae. Beth liked the boy and his sunny disposition.

Ipok assembled the ornaments and managed the ship's inventory of raw materials. He would eventually design most of the pieces as Erit did. Ipok rarely spoke to her and, though never cruel or thoughtless, would be casually indifferent and ignore her except during meals or when having sex. His middle of the night visits and caresses would engender an erotic dream during which she would come awake and find the taciturn male riding her energetically.

Erit had called himself shipmaster. Beth supposed that meant he decided where and when the ship went. At first she believed he owned the vessel, but Orix and Ipok didn't defer to him on other ship matters, so some piece of the puzzle was missing.

The answer came to her one morning. He had been preoccupied and irritable with everyone during breakfast and had ignored her when she slipped into his quarters.

Beth wanted to ask what was annoying him but instead let him pace and think. She played with a length of strange bronze-colored wire. The strand was supple and, though not stretchy, seemed more like stiff elastic than metal.

She wound a piece around her finger, and then spiraled more up her arm. She slipped a bead and a bright blue jewel

on the end. The thin filament held the form, winding like a snake perched on a charmer's arm.

When she glanced up, Erit was watching her—as she knew he would be.

"I like that. May I use your design?" he asked, kneeling beside her on the sleeping platform.

Beth shrugged. "I didn't invent it," she said, happy to have distracted him from his problem.

Erit affixed a pair of 'ornaments' through her piercings. He often devised new designs for her, quickly realizing the weight and size limits of her comfort. This typically unmatched pair consisted of a simple stud and a second piece that wound up over the top of her other ear. The cuff had dozens of tiny diamond-like chips that caught and reflected every tiny glimmer of light.

"What's wrong? You seem angry," she said. The Jibar reached out, touching the ear clip and then following the metal down her arm.

"No, not angry."

"Worried?" Beth caressed him with her metal-coiled finger. She didn't expect an answer at that point, correctly guessing he would want her body before wanting her conversation. Whatever his difficulty, Erit was able to set it aside for other activities and the anesthesia of vigorous, inventive sex.

He enjoyed her responses. He watched her during her arousal and found ways to increase it. Beth wasn't certain if he had become a better lover with practice, but Erit had learned the ins and outs of her appetites—as she had his. Ins

and outs, she thought laughingly for her choice of words. She had definitely caught on to the ins and outs.

He didn't question her laughter, nor assume it a negative commentary of his technique. She liked that about the Jibarae—and the Yeter, though she loathed admitting it. They had a healthy respect for sex. No hidden meanings shrouded the pastime. No hang-ups or apologies about what they liked, and no qualms or regrets in their satisfaction. If they wanted—fine. If she wanted—equally fine. No questions about whether an act was moral or tidy only if it was possible. Simple. On Earth, she felt more used than useful, though sex was a smaller part of her role. Oddly, her usefulness to the ship was only sex but she felt more a part of the whole.

Sometimes, she remembered who she had been and then her present circumstances would appall her. Plaything for non-humans, sponge for affection and approval, glutton for sexual excesses, puppet for the whims of others—her grandfather would have disowned her. She wondered if her parents missed her, and would laugh or cry depending on what else the moment held.

But, when either of the Jibarae had her helplessly quivering in excitement, she couldn't recall any life before this one.

The older Jibar loved to ornament his toy. Clips, with fabric padding and bearing bright gems, hung from each nipple. A brushing caress would stimulate them anew, keeping her desire at a fever level. Erit was a master at his craft, she thought. He had added another piece to the ensemble. She blushed when he fitted the delicate clip, brilliant and

beautiful, to the tiny bit of tissue between her thighs. The weight, so insignificant in reality, gained mass by its position.

It tugged when she arched. It rubbed and caught on his tunic and fur. It jiggled with each twist of her hips. She hated it and asked him to remove it.

Erit tapped the clip with his finger and smiled as she lost control during the first of several climaxes. She loved it and objected when he took it away.

"Next time," he promised, finishing with her in a flurry of quick pumps.

Later, while he rested, Beth unwound the metal from her arm and, with a wicked smile, wrapped the length around Erit's ankle. He crossed his foot over his raised knee and stared at the bright addition.

"Still worried?" she asked.

Finally, he spoke but didn't look at her. "This is Fordachaile—Forday metal. Only we know the secret to its processing."

"Oh?" Beth prompted, "And?"

"The Forday merchant-master has need of more."

The missing puzzle piece fell into place. Orix, Ipok, Erit, and then an unknown other comprised the line of masters and apprentices. Erit, as merchant-apprentice, would be learning that skill—maybe via those 'newsletters' he read with such meticulous care.

"Is that a problem?" is all she said, as the new information rearranged her notions into logical pictures.

"Not for me, but..."

"But what?"

Erit sighed and removed the metal, rewinding and setting it aside. "I hesitate to initiate a procedure you will find distressing."

"Me?"

Erit nodded. "The Yeter explained you were terrified of weightlessness."

Beth remembered the endless days of torment the Yeter had given her. The yawning empty portal and a fear of falling out of the ship, not weightlessness, had terrified her. Why had A'tan told the Jibarae otherwise?

She fell back with a suddenly dizzy feeling. Maybe he hadn't realized? She hadn't hesitated or shown her reluctance when she had jumped out to rescue him—but by that time Beth had discovered that falling was unlikely, and nearly impossible.

"No Erit. I'm not afraid of weightlessness. I was afraid of the Yeter."

Erit laughed but stopped when she didn't laugh too. He waited for her to say more but she had too many conflicting ideas to speak further of the Yeter's deception.

"Good. I would hate to cause any member of this crew unnecessary discomfort." Erit jumped up, obviously relieved, and shouted for Ipok. "We will begin then."

Chapter Sixteen

Beth discovered that, while she didn't fear weightless, enduring it was uncomfortable. The ship cycled from normal gravity—less than Earth's but adequate—to low level for short intervals. The prolonged periods of no-gravity trailed each normal/low cycle. The cycle corresponded to the requirements of creating Fordachaile. The process was a closely guarded secret that Orix hadn't yet learned. Beth was barred from the large landing hold as the older Jibarae worked.

Orix showed Beth the way to swaddle the blankets around her body to create the illusion of sleeping on a surface. He painted the bottoms of her feet with a clear solution that had a minor magnetic quality. She caught on to the trick of gliding through the corridors brushing her toes along the deck.

None of the Jibarae ate heavily and Beth soon followed their example. The attempt to swallow food often resulted in choking, burping resulted in a mouthful of stomach backwash, and sipped fluids trickled into the wrong pipes.

A few bites of bread and a mouthful of strong coffee at the beginning of each normal gravity portion of the cycle sustained them until the next one.

The other thing Beth disliked about the days of making the valuable metal alloy was being ignored. Masturbating had never been as satisfying as shared sex and, since the Yeter had taught her submission, she had rarely had more than a day pass without. She missed it. It was as if a fire had been sparked and, instead of carefully tended as it had been, left to blaze unheeded. Both adult Jibarae were inaccessible. Though

she often cuddled with Orix, his participation was limited by his physical immaturity. He couldn't and the others wouldn't and Beth hoped every day the metallurgical episode was over but it went on.

Erit stayed in the hanger for complete cycles, having quick meals brought by Ipok. The middle Jibar dashed from storage rooms to Erit's chambers and back to the process, grumbling and mumbling lists and tasks. Orix was occupied in one of the rooms containing bins of ingots separating some from the others. Ipok checked the apprentice's work and approved the choices before returning to the workroom with the fresh supply of metals. Aside from baking the bread that no one could eat due to the low gravity, Beth had no spontaneous calls to duty, no morning trysts with Erit, and no ghostly midnight visitations to her bed.

* * * *

The storage rooms for metal were chilly. She had followed Orix to one of the sorting rooms and watched as he examined each piece. Beth's nipples tightened in the cold and a shiver of craving crept up her bones and flesh. Cuddling close to the young Jibar, she expected him to laugh or comment or, hopefully, caress the outline visible through her tunic. He turned to another bin and began sorting. Gradually but with obvious intent, he moved further away. Beth supposed he was too tired and too busy to be frisky with her.

"What are you looking for?" she asked. The shape of the ingots reminded Beth of over-sized half-melted Hershey Kisses, but what niggling differences, which caused Orix to choose one and not another, she hadn't determined.

Orix glanced over his shoulder. She had mimicked him, anchoring her feet beneath one of the railings and tucking her rump between her knees and the wall.

By straightening his legs, he could reach several of the bins. He pulled a handful from one of the iris-like openings and, after a cursory look, held them out.

"Which am most bright?" he asked. She touched one. He removed it.

"Which am most dark?" She pointed at another. Orix pushed it aside. He took another look at the five or six remaining pellets. In his eyes, she could see his struggle to find adequate words. He started once or twice, and finally shrugged. He picked one out and handed it to her. "That am a most good one for Forday metal." The youth went back to his sorting.

Beth examined the metal. The piece lacked the glint of the 'most bright' one and was lighter in color than the 'most dark' example. She reached into another bin and tried to find another. Of the five new nuggets, one looked similar and she held it out toward the Jibar. He shook his head.

"No. Not good. Like this." He gave her another sample. Beth compared the two ingots to find the common element. Each had a glazed appearance, not shiny, not dull. Almost a glow. She watched the Jibar as he found another. He bounced the metal inside his fist. Beth copied his movements. The two felt as if they massed the same, and had the same texture.

She pulled out a few more and carefully chose another. "How about this one?" Orix sighed, impatiently. Beth knew that he, like the other Jibarae, had been without sleep for

some time. He took the nugget and shook it in his hand, and then grinned.

"You am good at sort." He tossed her discards in another bin but placed the good ones with the others. "Solterrans do this?"

She laughed. "No. I'm so bored that sorting rocks is fun." Orix laughed with her but she could tell he didn't get the joke. Between them they filled the bin before Ipok returned. Beth offered to take the filled container to the hanger bay door, and save the middle Jibar the trip. Orix nodded and continued to sort.

With a slight tug to free the bottom from the weakly magnetic shelf, Beth maneuvered toward the door. Inertia carried the bin into the wall with a resounding bang. The youth laughed as she struggled.

"Maybe more good if wait for Ipok!" he called as she managed to grab the jamb with one hand and the handle of the bin with the other. It bounced at the end of her reach and she thought her shoulder would come apart at the joint.

"It more heavy than you am, Elsa," Orix said, no longer laughing. The concern in his face reached her. She pulled the handle gently.

"I'll be more careful. Don't worry." She used smaller gestures to direct the burden. Orix watched a moment longer before resuming his chore.

Once in motion, the bin moved easily. Beth could anchor her toes, give a pull and glide ahead to anchor again.

At one tight corner, the bin lodged. Try as she might, no amount of pulling would free it. Beth scooted under and gave

a push. The box erupted from the bottleneck and catapulted toward the far end of the long central passageway. She pursued it, finding handholds to increase her speed.

The container struck the far wall and bounced, ricocheting back along its original path. Her hands groping wildly, Beth tried to slow down. As the heavy load bore down upon her, velvet covered steely strong fingers grasped her upper arm and pulled her aside. Beth plowed into the slender chest of one of the Jibarae. She could feel the box bang into her—even the glancing blow was sufficient to spin her. A wiry arm held her close.

The wayward bin, knocked sideways by the collision with Beth's shoulder, tumbled drunkenly and careened from wall to wall, bonging and clattering, until a long leg steadied and stilled it.

Beth clung to the Jibarae, afraid of being hit again, finally looking up as the bin came to rest. Ipok leaned his head back and sighed.

"Thank-you," Beth whispered. The dark-eyed alien examined her face. His soft palms caressed her in quick worried little gestures. "It was too heavy."

The Jibar muttered something and growled under his breath when she winced as his fingers happened upon the already bruised shoulder. Pain button, maybe, but where did the sudden dampness inside fit in? Beth turned a little so Ipok's knee rubbed more deliciously. How had she ever thought they looked alike? All three Jibarae had such splendidly intelligent and lively features. The Jibar, not quite

ready to grin at her boldness and obvious intent, gave her a question with his expressive face.

"Orix told me it was too heavy. Don't blame him." Beth was pretty sure Ipok's grumbles promised dire consequences for the boy's negligence.

She nestled into the downy folds of his tunic. His hands, which had been comforting, began a more urgent mission of discovery, gently twisting and probing. Beth arched a little and felt the thickening of his penis against her belly. She squirmed tighter against the knee between her thighs, feeling the sensation of warmth and wetness spread, and fumbled at the fastenings of his pants. Her breaths came in noisy little gasps. Her own whimpers of desire, sounding frantic and primal, quickened a deeper heat and she no longer fumbled, adept in obtaining that which she wanted.

Ipok shook his head. He said something then added, "Not am time." But he didn't release her, and groaned his urgency as she succeeded. She stroked the willowy member and traced her fingers over the opening at the tip. He smelled of metal, of hard work, and of denied but building passion. She thought maybe his desperation matched hers and the days of feeling resentment about ignored by him were forgotten. The moments ahead were too tantalizing to worry about bygones.

"Yes, it is." She slid down his body, kissing and nipping. Ipok's long fingers, the down darkened by days of handling tools, tangled in her hair and urged her silently. Beth teased the rounded head with her lips, slowly engulfing him. Bit by bit, she pushed away, using her tongue and lips along the shaft to torment and please. She slipped back, wanting him

inside her where the worst ache remained. His grip prevented her from pulling away, and Ipok pumped hard. A harshly grunted alien word, 'Stay', and she obeyed. If he wanted this, it would be enough for then. There would be a later, Beth was certain. She would give him this pleasure and wait for hers.

A door opened nearby, but she didn't care. Let Erit be displeased. Let him be angry. Let him beat her if he chose. But, please God—Beth prayed as she took Ipok's cock deep into her throat—let him touch her.

A gruff statement reached her ears, but Beth ignored the words and the reply. She concentrated on the stiff penis between her lips, lapping and drawing and swallowing as Ipok's stroking allowed.

Erit repeated the command and Ipok reluctantly, or so it seemed, released her hair from his fingers. Firm, strong hands gripped her shoulder and yanked her away.

Instantly, Beth wrapped her legs and arms around Erit, rubbing and stroking his cock with her pelvis. She could feel the plump tip swell against her belly.

Ipok laughed, a thin unhappy sound of anger and umbrage, but also of a cynical camaraderie in their mutual frustrated desire.

The oldest Jibar carried her—easy in the low gravity, which had returned unheralded and unnoticed—toward the common room. Beth rejoiced in the knowledge that her pent passion would be soon freed. She moaned and writhed against him, loving every tiny movement of his fingertips on her skin. With his experienced and able hands he would quench the now painful longing. Erit crossed the room, not stopping at the pile

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of cushions where Beth had known many pleasurable moments.

With a slap to dislodge her and a push, Erit put Beth in her room and, for the first time since coming to the Fordachau, she heard the whirl of the locking mechanism.

Chapter Seventeen

Her dreams were wildly disjointed and erotic. Helplessly, she coupled with one rough male then another. Some were human, former lovers from home. Others were strangers with faces from movies and magazines. The Jibarae faded in and out, slipping brutally into her, filling her from front and behind. Their furred fingers pinched her bare skin while human men nipped at her acutely sensitive nipples or used their tongues to tease and torment her wetly swollen crux.

Beth's tender places were bruised and raw but still she wanted more. Every abused nerve fiber burned as she strove for release and was denied.

The heat of the Yeter's cock against her thigh inflamed her and she arched and writhed and begged him to mount. When he did, she climaxed and the dream faded into a hazy grayness, in which she felt only lethargy and malaise.

The sound of movement, the whisper of cloth against cloth, awoke her. Her eyes watered in the subdued light but cleared as Beth blinked.

Orix stood above her, intently stirring the contents of a small bowl.

Beth tried to speak, the words blocked by the desert of her dry throat. She moved her hand, which she realized was a mistake. The tiny effort sent her stomach into spasms. Whatever small moue of pain was enough to attract the boy's attention. He set aside the bowl and, in a deft and practiced motion, rolled her side-on and retrieved a basin from under her cot.

Vomiting left her dizzy and disoriented. With her eyes closed, Beth felt gentle hands part her legs. Part of her leapt toward the touch, but when it came she nearly cried. Some cooling antiseptic solution was spread and the instantaneous numbness was welcome. More was applied to her nipples, which were equally sore and battered.

"Thank-you," she whispered through cracked lips. The young Jibar set aside the medicine and held a cup of water. She gulped until he pulled it away.

"No more am now. Some later."

"Erit was angry with me. He won't be annoyed that you helped me, will he?"

Orix looked puzzled. "He not angry, Elsa. He worried. We am going to Verouport to make you more better."

"Verouport?"

"Medic am there who know Solterran sickening."

"I'm sick?"

The beige-gray head bobbed. "Why else you am in bed?"

Beth felt a flash of fever return, and with it a wave of lust. It was similar, if weaker, than the sensation she'd experienced before Erit had locked her away.

"I thought Erit punished me. He beat me," she whispered. Dimly, Beth knew how unlikely her charges were but rational thinking took a back seat to the fever memories.

"Never," Orix said with absolute conviction.

"Then how did I get these bruises? Why am I so sore and used?" she demanded. Orix laid the blanket over her body, covering the livid coloring on her thighs, hips, and breasts. A fold rubbed against her swollen flesh, which dampened with

longing. She caught at the Jibar's hand and pressed it to her nipples.

"You did to you," he whispered, pulling his hand away and leaving only her touch on the suddenly warmer skin. The click and whirring of the door announced his departure.

To herself? A sudden doubt assailed her before disappearing beneath vivid pictures. She recalled most clearly the way Erit and Ipok had mistreated her after the bin mishap in the corridor. How they had taken her time and again and helped the others to rape her too. How Orix had celebrated his new maturity, claiming his place in the hierarchy of owning her. She remembered the agonizing violations and the vicious groping. With bated gasps of excitement and thighs wetly welcoming, Beth embraced the legion of forceful lovers as they reappeared in her delirious imagination.

The antiseptic no longer cooled and her heat exploded again.

When next she awoke to Orix and his now silent ministrations, Beth found tethers around her wrists and ankles. In a fleeting moment of sanity, she knew that the restraints were a Jibaraen attempt to prevent any further damage at her own hands. But, as before, when the fever reasserted its hold on her mind the ties became additional proof of abuse and begat dreams of tantalizing bondage and erotic degradation.

* * * *

Her body was arched over a pedestal, with her arms and legs spread to four compass points, giving her tormentors unhindered access to her sex. Her unsupported head dropped

back as a thick pulsating maleness ravished her. As if waiting the invitation, a darkly attractive gang-banger prodded her lips with his erection, threatening to cut off her nipples if she failed to please. The hot scent of him filled her throat and nostrils. Both partners pumped and she could find no rhythm to satisfy them. As promised, they hurt her and laughed as she screamed.

"Go to hell!" Beth hissed. So they did, dragging her along for fun.

Demons with snake-like penises, prehensile tails, and fingers tipped with daggers joined the cast of her inferno. The spit on their slick cocks, which writhed like serpents to invade the deepest wells of her, burned like acid inside her. Their ejaculate, spilled gleefully on her belly, breasts and face, gelled into quivering globules. Each blob inched across her skin seeking some orifice to fill, leaving slug-like paths that itched as they dried. When they found a home, the slimy shells ruptured to free thousands of tiny spiders. The arachnids scurried away to nestle beneath her, their bodies becoming a squirming mattress on which the torment was continued.

* * * *

The fever abated. Beth discovered icy packs tucked around her. Her tethers had been replaced by a series of looped bandages, which held her arms tightly against her waist and her knees bent up against them. Her wrist and ankles stung of flesh rubbed raw, but in no way matched the pain of her nipples, anus and labia. Orix watched her. The fearful concern in his eyes hurt her as much as her injuries. Her attempt to

apologize was shushed and a cool liquid trickled through her cracked, bruised lips.

"You am sick, pretty Elsa. You am strong enough to be more better soon."

Beth recognized in the boy's words a wishful self-deluding denial of the seriousness of her condition. She wondered why the other Jibar stayed away but remembered her effect on Ipok. Maybe she was contagious?

"Is Ipok sick, too?" she murmured, but missed the answer as another dream captor claimed his right, sending her into fantastic if painful bliss. Angels—with marble penises as grand as their feathered wingspans—mounted up, enjoying her warmth on their wintry flesh. Her fever melted the stone of their erections and they became molten and consumed her with their furious passion.

In a fleeting lucid moment, a final fever only a breath away, Beth knew the truth. Death had come, however belatedly; to answer the plea she had prayed so long before. How unfair! She hadn't wished for death in such a long time.

She felt cool in his presence, relieved of her fever. Pain lost importance, becoming a minor background distraction. She didn't want him but the frost-covered ebony of his maleness rose like a drawbridge. The touch of it, pressing against her thighs before driving into her inner core, banished the thought of breathing and froze her heart as the massive tool pierced deeper. He did not thrust but simply impaled his victim with a single motion, pinning her to his stony pallet, like a butterfly on a card.

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He lay his heavy hard body down on hers. He posed immobile above her, not moving, not allowing her to move. Nothing would please him, and he would permit no pleasure to his captive. There was nothing to negotiate and a pretty face couldn't seduce him to mercy. This was his way and this would now be her way for eternity to come. After some immeasurable time, he climaxed silently to fill her everywhere with a loathsome dark essence in which there could be no satisfaction for his whore.

Not a whore, she argued into the judgmental silence of her soul. A sexual being, happy in being admired and accepted, but not a whore. A woman, content to find power in being submissive and pleasing, living each breath to a fullness she had never before known was possible. A person, in discovery of new aspects of the universe, finding previously unimagined doors opening on exciting vistas. What right had Death to end her journey so incomplete? The seed of her pride—long buried—burst into sunflower brightness and flooded her with a brilliantly righteous and determined anger.

Death, though a mighty master, was a lousy lover. Beth fought.

Chapter Eighteen

The light, though filtered through her eyelids, had a familiar quality. The air, though tainted with alien scents, had an equally recognizable pallet of odors. The sounds, tinny and sharp but with muted voices and solemn tones, finished the picture.

A deep breath, Beth chugged in the air as if bursting from beneath the surface of a deep pool. Faint wisps of her dreams returned but it was the memory of fucking Death that broke the last mucous layers of her sleep.

She struggled—even she knew her efforts were laughable—against the blankets that, tightly tucked, held her in place.

A smooth hand brushed her cheek and then long fingers rested lightly across her forehead. Her eyes wouldn't open until a cool damp cloth freed her lashes from the sandy paste sticking them shut.

'Stay,' came a whispered command.

Beth tried her voice but the gravelly gasp was nothing remotely close to what she'd attempted to say.

"Sussa, sussa." A finger on her lips stopped them from further attempts.

Gently, and with additional swipes to moisten the grit, the caretaker coaxed open Beth's eyes.

Blinking cleared the last slimy residues and Beth could see. Large lavender-colored eyes in a vaguely familiar mottled-skin face looked back. A broad smile of the thin-lipped mouth revealed paired needle-fine fangs jutting from a solid bridge

of stark white molars. The skin on her neck tingled in a sympathetic response to her memories of the touch of those teeth.

She now could distinguish that peculiar spicy scent in the myriad odors of this place. Before opening her eyes, Beth had thought she was in a hospital, now she knew the truth. Dreams—she must still be the Yeter's playmate and all her subsequent memories were just dreams.

She rolled her head on the flat pillow, baring her shoulder to offer her neck for his bite, as he'd preferred. She reached out to the rock-hard abdomen to stroke the erection that would, invariably, be waiting and arched toward the hand lying lightly on her stomach. The displeased hiss surprised her and, as she turned to look, an injection made an unmistakable sting beneath her ear. The irresistible drowsiness washed over her and Beth plummeted towards sleep. As her consciousness slipped, something occurred to her.

Weren't A'tan's eyes yellow?

* * * *

The pressure in her bladder and a grumbling stomach were the next visitors to awaken her. She rolled her head and stretched, enjoying the release in her cramped muscles if not the chilly air outside the cocoon of her bed. The austere room with the low lighting and muted colors was easy on her eyes, no longer full of sand but still itchy and burning. The high bed, a few cushions, a low table were, along with a counter and doorless cupboards, the only furniture she could see. The

outlines of two doors, parallel lines in the subdued swirling patterns of blue and teal, were evident on separate walls.

Another wall held a series of windows with filmy drapes. The outer room appeared to be brightly lit and, diffused by the curtains, supplied her room with comfortable illumination.

Slipping out of the warm bed into the chilly air, her toes curled protesting the dual abuse of supporting her weight and the icy temperature of the nubble-textured yet sleek floor tiles.

With unsteady knees and uncertain balance, clutching the walls for support, Beth shuffled to the second door and was relieved to find the expected equipment behind the familiar patterns. The lukewarm water in the sink, tossed one-handed on her face after the more pressing matter was resolved, refreshed her dry eyes but washed away none of the dizziness. Leaning heavily on the basin, she glanced regretfully at the shower, pictured her difficulty with navigating a dry surface, and knew the pleasure of being clean would come at too high a price—for the time being, anyway. Soon, she promised and turned toward the door panel, wishing to be in her suddenly and completely too-far-away bed.

The room telescoped strangely, as if each tiny step carried her further away instead of closer to her goal. She felt oddly prickled by pinpricks showering her cheeks with a numb sensation that spread internally to her inner ears. A moment of vertigo, the sweep of cool air in her hair and Beth braced for impact. The floor tiles were quiet tones of lilac and peach, she decided, not off-white or beige. Her arms crumpled under

her weight, without slowing her velocity. Lilac and peach spangled mist covered her tunnel of sight and darkened to purple-black drapes drawn tightly. A new bruise, she thought, ruefully—though the old ones had faded and vanished since her last period of conscious memory. Pain no longer frightened her. Sometimes it only reminded one to avoid stupidity, though the warning was commonly ignored. Like this time, she admitted.

Uncomfortable and cold, her hands trapped beneath her and her tangled legs uncooperative and unresponsive to her will, Beth considered her options. There was only one logical course open and a single action she had enough energy to accomplish. Lay still until she regained some strength or until someone found her. So, she went to sleep, waiting for one or the other.

* * * *

The warmth of a smooth skinned hand on the back of her neck interrupted her uneasy nap. In her dream, she and A'tan had lost the battle to regain his ship. The umbilicus of her silking had ruptured under their combined inertia. The cold of space crept in slowly, settling into her joints and muscles.

Gentle hands turned her over. Fingers probed the knot on her forehead and Beth cringed, murmured her objection, and tried to curl into a ball.

"Sussa, Elsa," whispered a deep-pitched voice—not any of her Jibarae masters. With firm insistence, he drew her toward him until her body left the cold tiles. Muscular arms cradled her beneath her shoulders and behind her knees, bringing her head to rest against a broad chest. The spicy scent was so

like the one she remembered from her dream. A Yeter, but not A'tan. Twice now this one had been her caretaker and she wondered if he were responsible for her recovery.

Pins and needles struck her hands and feet as he rubbed circulation back into the bloodless flesh. Beth protested, pushing away his arms and struggling against the unpleasant sensation. Even had she been completely healthy her attempt would not have slowed the treatment. The massage continued but his attentions were no longer limited to her extremities. The caresses lost the clinical professionalism and were gestures of arousal seeking to excite. As if electrical, his brushing touch on her nexus caused spasms to jolt through her. Beth arched involuntarily—not certain if she sought to escape or help his efforts—and whispered, 'Stop,' in the foreign language, which, to her surprise, he did. The strong arms simply held her, and he rocked forward and back, a universal motion of comforting.

Without opening her eyes, Beth curled her arms around the wide neck and nuzzled the silky skin under his chin. It wasn't the fevered-sick craving of her illness and not for gratitude. Nor was she feeling overtly passionate. She simply missed the contact of another body and sharing sensation and warmth. Beth cuddled closer until his cock, clearly delineated beneath some textured fabric, twitched against her hip. She froze, not wishing to further encourage the Yeter. The rumble of pleasure in his diaphragm was a wordless compliment to her desirability but also warned of how much he wanted her.

He cupped her ass-cheek with long sleek fingers and slid through the valley of her waist to stop at her breast. Beth felt

his shoulder muscles tighten as he tilted his nose into her hair. The tip of his tongue caught at her earlobe, and another growl escaped him.

Her elbows jammed into his collarbones as she pushed his head away. The Yeter pulled her hands from his neck and grasped both her wrists in one palm. She yanked free but he recaptured her easily and again the purr of satisfaction rumbled. Beth felt the vibration echo within her, bringing a flicker of bright to heat her body from the inside outward. Her nipples tightened and, this time, the groan came from her lips.

He buried his face in her upper shoulder. She fought the bite of his paired fangs. He held her more securely, planting his hand on her thigh and pinning her rump to his knee until her struggling ceased. As if she were a kitten, the Yeter lifted her by the neck with his teeth and forced her legs apart. Astraddle his lap, Beth drew up her knees, meaning to guard against his obvious intent. He wrapped an arm around her hips and tilted her backwards to the floor. He held her hands above her head, tangling them in her hair, trapping her wrists to the cold hard tiles.

A'tan had been more gentle with his teeth; this one used his as another way to immobilize his conquest. She had been well conditioned and his penetration hurt less than the ongoing bite. Beth gasped as he thrust; holding her tightly so each plunge filled her more deeply. Finally, he released her hands and took his teeth from her neck. He raised her body vertically, letting gravity—and her own passion—draw her down as he arched upward into her.

His tongue caressed her collarbone. Lapped away the blood trickling down from her neck. Soothed away the hot pain of the punctures. Four of them and she could feel each one as a separate wound. Warmth radiated, matched evenly by the heat rising from the pairing.

Beth wrapped his waist with her legs, using the leverage to raise and plummet along the axis of his erection. The ridge of his groin plate nestled smoothly under the crook of each knee and provided a sturdy platform for the large muscles of her thighs.

The Yeter trembled as his climax overtook him. Beth clung to him, with her legs, with her arms, and with her tight inner muscles.

As usual, her objections had lasted only long enough to be forcibly overcome. Did she play at being reluctant, she wondered. If so, why? Did her initial unwillingness absolve her guilt for the enjoyment she found in excessively vigorous sex? And, as much as she'd liked the friendly copulation with the Jibarae, the rough-edged pseudo-violence with the Yeter fulfilled some deeply ingrained need.

Was it the sensation of power that she could entice another into being driven to possess her? Or was it the incredible release of having no choice?

How had this interlude—starting, as it had, as a nurturing gesture to a helpless convalescent—become a rape? Was it her scent or her availability? Was it her uniqueness or her attitude? Was it her struggle or her acquiescence?

She had no answers but the obvious one—the one that now drove the breath from her lungs and thoughts from her

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mind, tearing away rationality and leaving only basic instinct. However this had come about, it had happened, and Beth was content.

No longer would she make excuses for the passions she felt. The familiar sensation flooded within her. In addition to the bliss of orgasm, Beth rejoiced in a wonderful freedom. She was glad to be alive.

Chapter Nineteen

In her dreams, she walked in a twilight-soft park. The tree limbs drooped like gauzy canopies and vines draped the trunks with flowers that scented the air with a strange and wonderful perfume. The paths twisted around the wooded areas and she walked faster to see what lay beyond the next curve. Footsteps echoed back. He would have it. In his hands, she would find the object for which she hadn't known she was searching.

Breathless, she rounded another corner in the labyrinth. The path branched into two. A choice had to be made. No sound heard; no movement spied. No clue betrayed the direction she should take. This was a good place to wait, she decided, sinking deeper into a dreamless state.

* * * *

A soft voice welcomed her back. Fuzzy fingers brushed her cheek and neck. She cuddled into the warm palm.

"Elsa!" Orix exclaimed as she opened her eyes. "You am better."

Beth nodded. "Yes." Her glance caught his happy open grin, and she sent one back to the Jibarae youth. Ipok pushed himself away from his post next to the outer door and approached quickly.

He nuzzled her chin and his fingers caressed her tender nipples, which peaked beneath the light blanket and rubbed delicious warmth into the pit of her stomach.

She gripped his arm, meaning to encourage his efforts. As suddenly as he had begun his perusal of her responses, he

stopped. His physical condition, now noticed, froze her smile. Ipok looked as if he had been tortured. Patches of his fur were furrowed with raw-looking welts. His arm was bandaged and he stood stiffly as if it hurt to move.

"Ipok," she breathed. "Did I do this?"

"Am not you fault," Orix said.

Quick tears brimmed in her eyes, but the middle Jibarae shook his head and wiped the dampness away. Before she could say anything else, the door slid open and Erit stepped in. Ipok retreated to the further wall.

She beamed at Erit, but gasped as the Yeter followed on his heels. They were in the midst of a quiet, serious discussion and she took the moment to recompose her breathing. Erit nodded at what was, by its tone, a question. He, finally, turned his attention to Beth. After a long moment, in which his face held a fleeting series of expressions, he grunted gruffly, "You are truly better."

Beth realized his short greeting said far more than the words meant. Though he seldom advertised his feelings with overt gestures, once one knew him, the emotions were as plain as if he wore a written plaque. Plainer, she thought. His face she could read—his language she could not.

"I am," she said. Since he couldn't make the fond gesture and she could, Beth reached for his warm hand. Erit returned the squeeze and a shadow smile flittered as he looked at her.

The Yeter grumbled from his corner.

"F'yan Trelad," Erit tilted his head toward him. "Elsabeth Collins paz Forday."

It took Beth a moment to recognize the words as an introduction and another second to wonder what 'paz' signified.

F'yan rumbled a few more words. Erit translated, "He wishes to apologize for..." the Jibar paused, looking puzzled but continued, "...his earlier trespass."

Erit turned toward the Yeter and they spoke rapidly. Orix whispered, "He am making—umm—trade for use of you and medics bettering you." Beth thought about Orix's translation. Were they bargaining, after the fact, what sex with her was worth in comparison to his care and cure for her illness?

"Erit will make good trade. Not cost too much."

Beth was thoroughly confused. Trade what for what?

"Yeter say medics am worth much. Erit say you am worth more." Orix grinned. "But he happy for even."

The Yeter's eyes kept creeping back toward Beth. "They am making a worth. Yeter say okay," the young Jibar said, and held up four fingers. Both Erit and F'yan looked at Beth. "Am okay?" Orix asked.

"Why ask me?" Beth said, suddenly irritable. She would do as they ordered as she always had.

"Am your choice."

"Since when do I have any choice? I will do what you say."

Erit looked at Beth sharply, an abrupt change of expression. "Elsa?" He paused. She could see his reluctance to continue, but when Ipok whispered a question, the older Jibar nodded. Finding the right words, he went on, "Do you think we own you?"

She nodded. "A'tan gave me to you."

Erit sighed. "He negotiated a good contract for you, though he didn't wish for you to leave."

"Contract?" Beth felt the breathlessness of surprise numb everything but her hope.

Erit shrugged. "I thought he placed your value too high but Ipok promised to make good the difference from his apprentice share."

She glanced at Ipok. "Why?"

The middle Jibar wouldn't look at her. He murmured something. Orix chuckled but sobered at a stern grunt from Erit. "He wanted you very much."

That almost kept her quiet, thinking of how Ipok had always avoided her, except for his midnight visits and mealtimes.

"You never even talk to me!"

Orix did laugh then. "He not good for talking Solterran."

"No aptitude for language," Erit agreed.

Suddenly, certain statements, now in a proper context, began to make sense. Something else occurred to her, "Do I have money?"

"Funds? Yes."

"Enough to for passage to Earth—Solterra?" she asked.

F'yan laughed and said, "No."

Beth realized with a blush that he, as a medic for humans, would have to speak some Earth-derived language.

She ignored him. "Would you take me home?" she asked the Jibarae captain.

"The Forday have no license to trade in Sol system. Besides, having escaped, why would you return?"

"I didn't escape. The Yeter abducted me. I was not with him voluntarily."

Disbelief was plain in all four faces. Nervous silence reverberated from each of them.

"What did A'tan tell you about me, about how I came to be with him?"

"He said you were neglected and needed guardianship that your people did not seem willing to supply. He said he rescued you."

"No. He was the one who put me in danger. He stole me from Earth. He tortured and raped me and made me a slave. He murdered others of my race and then, instead of honoring his bargain that kept me docile, brought me into space. He tired of me, and that is why I am with you." She brushed away her angry tears, becoming angrier for shedding them.

Erit cleared his throat. Orix squeaked a little no. F'yan shook his head.

"Elsa, you were wrong when you thought the Forday owned you. You accused them unfairly, in your illness, of misusing you. You probably have more misinformed notions about what happened between us, earlier."

The Yeter spoke quietly but Beth listened to every word.

"What is your point?" she asked. "That you don't believe me?"

"I believe you but consider this possibility," he said, shaking his head. "Perhaps, if so wrong about so many things, you misinterpreted his actions also?"

A hot reply jumped to mind, but her basic honesty stopped the words from forming. Her mouth paused in the action of

speaking while she thought about F'yan's statement. Slowly she replied, "Maybe, but you saw how we fought. Could you tell how much I hated him?" The Jibarae had witnessed the final brawl between she and A'tan.

Erit shook his head. "We saw first how well you responded to his desires."

Beth felt a blush rise up from her chest, the blood settling with fire in her cheeks.

"In the morning, you argued and, to me, confirmed what A'tan had already explained."

"Explained?"

"That you were unhappy on his ship and unwilling to continue your duties with him. You came willingly with us, I thought."

She had. Though the reason had been other than what Erit had been led to believe, Beth had simply followed without struggle or complaint.

She nodded.

"You seemed content and enthusiastic."

Also true, though she had thought that there had been no choice but to obey. Her actions, in that light, had confirmed A'tan's prevarications.

"I am free to leave your ship?"

Ipok blurted, "No!" But Erit nodded.

"We hope you will not."

The possibilities whirled through Beth's imagination. Someone would be traveling toward Earth, someday. Perhaps they would need her or want her, or she would have the means to pay for the passage.

The Jibarae were kind and obviously liked her company. According to Erit, she was earning funds as well as her keep. Although most of the jewelry with which they ornamented her was returned to the cases in Erit's chambers, some had been given to her as gifts. Was it hers? Could she claim that as part of her worth?

"I will stay," she whispered. Ipok sighed his relief for her decision. "But, I do want to go home. If I get the chance, I will take it."

Erit's head tilted in reluctant agreement. "If the opportunity arises, I will help negotiate a contract for you."

The offer brought tears to Beth's eyes and a hitch to her heart. "I would be grateful for your greater experience."

"Are you settled?" F'yan asked, apparently bored with the conversation. As she nodded, Orix hugged Beth and laughed.

"Would you join me for a meal?" he asked.

"All of us?" Beth asked, with a smile for his discomfort. She was pretty sure he'd hoped to be alone with her again. The image of being with him, naked and hot, as she had been earlier freshened the blaze in her face and, for a moment, she was sorry for the impulse behind her question. The Jibarae didn't seem to understand the meaning of this blush any more than her others, but the medic looked at her with a smirk.

The Yeter shrugged. "Certainly."

Erit accepted and Beth nodded, hiding the red behind the fall of her hair.

As Pretty Girls Do
by Jolie Howard

The Yeter and Jibar reverted to their language to make plans, while Beth wished away her embarrassment, hindered by the constant invasion of her rampant imagination.

Well, Beth thought with a mental chuckle, her mother had always wanted her to date a doctor. She wanted to be with F'yan and would find a way to make it happen before leaving Verouport on the 'Fordachau'.

Chapter Twenty

The spaceport reminded Beth of a mall crossed with the walking shopping district of some European village. Everyone stared as she and the Jibarae wandered from shop to shop and from broad platform to catwalk.

Since the station was situated in an area amiably settled and frequented by both species, the populace was primarily Yeter and Jibarae. A few strange hominids, of races for which she had no name, were sprinkled among the more common brawny dappled figures or slender silvery ones. Whether lean or rotund, tall or tiny, skinned or furred or leathered, every individual she saw appeared to be obviously male, like F'yan, or slightly androgynous, like the Jibarae.

The central hub was an enclosed tube about the width of a football stadium but extending in length as far as she could see. Within the shaft, sprays of water spouted, feathering in impossible formations with prismatic shifts in color and kaleidoscopic variations in design. Fish-like animals swam in free-floating pools that were unbounded by walls or containers. Aquatic flowers emerged from any surface and were not limited to her perception of up and down.

Far above her head, Beth caught sight of faces looking back down at her, standing on the other side of the core, as if hanging from the ceiling as she, no doubt, appeared to them.

Orix seemed to be as awestruck as Beth, and his exclamations of astonished wonder echoed hers as they caught sight of yet another marvel.

The Jibarae had ornamented her tunic with bright web-like swags, front and back. Complicated clips and posts dangled from her ears, and softly jiggling bells hung from the tabs along the hemline. Beaded anklets shimmered with each step, refracting the riotous lighting of the central display. Knowing the effect, Beth tossed her chin often, and enjoyed the sensation of being the center of attention. Erit fended off polite-sounding inquiries and Ipok scowled at anyone who ventured too near.

She laughed and whispered to Erit, "You'd think they'd never seen a woman."

"Most haven't. Neither Yeter nor Jibarae females venture into space. Solterrans rarely travel so far, and never their females."

Beth said, "Why not?" but at that moment, they arrived at their destination. A single placard on a freestanding display board bore a few ornately drawn symbols. An obsequious young Jibar placed his hands together and nodded to Erit's question before opening the massive door to allow them to enter. Another Jibar led them along a carpeted passageway to a private dining compartment. F'yan had already arrived and gestured for them to be seated on the deep cushions.

Beth liked being the cause of the sudden involuntary and momentary darkening of the Yeter's mottled complexion. A familiar warmth blossomed in her belly and her muscles tensed as he looked her up and down before turning his attentions to welcoming the Jibarae.

The pillows felt like crushed velvet and were gloriously warm. Beth pulled her feet under her and basked in the

comfort and in the glitter of admiration from the Yeter's eyes. Beneath the table his knee, sheathed in some heather-lavender colored, sleekly knitted fabric, brushed hers whenever he leaned forward.

Ipok used any excuse to touch her, smoothing the links of the ornaments or untangling a lock of her hair from the earrings. His fingers would linger on her ears or caress the sensitive skin on her neck longer than necessary. Erit contented himself by watching the interactions and catching her eye with a sardonic smile.

Numerous bowls, platters and beakers covered the surface of low table. F'yan sipped from one of the cylinders and passed it to Erit. The beverage made its way around the table, each of the older Jibarae nodding approval. Her first taste confirmed Beth's guess. It was alcohol of some nature, but not the same one as she had sampled previously, and probably strong enough to send her reeling.

Orix was handed the drained container, and he jumped to his feet to carry it away. He returned with a similar cylinder a few minutes later. The youth repeated the task as often as a platter, beverage beaker, or bowl was emptied. A strictly private party, Beth mused, pleased with the idea and the naughty titillating pictures her imagination supplied for using the room to its fullest advantage.

Unlike the normal Jibarae fare, the food was spicy or strong-flavored. Beth tried most of the offerings, refusing only the one that smelled like stale popcorn and fish tank water. Her favorite drink tasted like pears and caramel but

packed a kick like the grain alcohol punch served at frat parties, so she sipped carefully.

What was the etiquette of starting an orgy? Was there even to be one? Beth wondered if she was reading the situation incorrectly, as she had misjudged so many of the things that had happened since she'd been kidnapped. Definitely kidnapped, she'd decided. A'tan had calculatingly and deliberately abducted her, but what of the interim? She nibbled on bread and let the unintelligible alien conversation go on around her, considering those issues.

F'yan's grip on the front of her tunic startled her. He pulled hard enough to tighten the swags around her neck to an uncomfortable degree.

"Don't break my ornaments," Beth protested.

"Don't resist my request," the Yeter whispered, but released her.

Beth laughed, feeling the alcohol despite her moderation. "Really? What fun would that be?" She leaned back on her cushions and stretched, letting her head drop back and setting the earrings to bobbing. Ipok slid a soft-palmed hand along her thigh, inching up the already short tunic to further bare her legs.

With a fleeting motion at the periphery of her sight, Erit gestured an order and Orix unclasped the delicate swags from her shoulders. He grunted, 'Come' and patted the tabletop before him. As if a switch had been thrown, her labia moistened and her breath quickened.

It was easiest to crawl with her head whirling and the alcohol-induced weakness in her legs. Ipok pushed her tunic

higher, cupping her buttocks in passing. His ministrations hindered her progress, but also raised the heat within by a degree or two. She collapsed on Erit's lap but he whispered, 'Stand'. Kneeling was the best she could manage, not trusting her knees to support her. Erit murmured for her to disrobe, but the twisted lengths of cloth defied her attempts. The bells snarled in her hair.

Erit finished the task, freeing the bells and lifting the clothing from her with his gentle hands. He held her wrists, still tangled in the folds, above her head and caressed her now bare body. Like feathers, she thought, loving the contrast between the velvet of his fur and the lean hardness of his muscles beneath. His crotch was at the level of her face, and she nuzzled him with her chin, earning a smile. She closed her eyes as another set of hands traced the contours of her back.

When had she crossed the line between what she had been and what she'd become? Beth reveled in the moment, no longer concerned with how she should act or respond and simply let the sensations animate nerves and muscles, vocal cords and breathing patterns. She remembered faking satisfaction in the choreographed version of lovemaking she'd experienced with boyfriends and casual acquaintances. She could moan and arch and compose a convincing parody of passion and orgasm. She had always harbored a certain resentful superiority toward her lovers, knowing, as they didn't, that for all their efforts she was unmoved.

She'd established reluctantly that sex would always be just another tool to manipulate men. She had encouraged a

lesbian relationship for a short time, experimenting with the possibility that her issues were those of gender bias and not frigidity but, though she'd enjoyed kissing a woman, decided that the attraction was in the risk not the person.

Her questions and musings percolated through her mind, but none captured her thought, and continued to roll like tumbleweeds until banished by sheer sensation. Erit knew her so well and the huh-huh-huhs popping from her throat were as involuntary as the quivering of her shoulders or the tightening of her nipples or the spreading warmth slicking her inner thighs.

Ipok's hand on the center of her back propelled her to all fours and his bulbous erection parted her nether lips. The shape of it, always odd and strange, excited her and she tightened around him. Unmoving, Beth gripped and released his cock, using only her feminine muscles. He muttered something, and caught her hips in his hands.

"Quit tormenting him, Elsa. He is young and reacts poorly to frustration."

Beth opened her eyes to Erit's grin. Sitting before her, he cupped her breasts and teased her nipples. Ipok pumped furiously to his climax, plunging his slender cock into her with amazing vigor. He rested his chest and head on her back, before nuzzling her neck and murmuring in his slow deliberate way of speaking English, "Pretty Seba."

The once familiar name cut through her glow. A'tan had called her 'Seba' but the Jibarae had never used anything but Elsa.

"What's 'Seba'?" Ipok had slowed his tempo, now using the shaft of his cock to stimulate her. Preparing her for the next occupant.

'Come,' the medic ordered. "Come to me." He had moved closer, watching her with Ipok and Erit.

"What's 'Seba'?" she asked avoiding F'yan's reach. Ipok stroked her flank and backed out of her. She pushed Erit's hands away from her breasts and sat on her knees.

"What's 'Seba'?" Beth asked again.

F'yan, as quickly as A'tan had ever moved, pounced toward her and pinned her against the table. He lifted her until her ass cleared the edge, and laid her back, shoving aside the remains of their feast. Knowing that her struggle was an aphrodisiac to the Yeter but unable to not fight when confronted with his strength, Beth clamped her knees together and pivoted them. Her legs fell over the side of the table and she brought her head sharply back. She connected with some sensitive part of his face, judging by the grunted objection.

He retained a grip on one arm and drew her closer despite her hold on the table. Half dragged, half lifted, Beth flipped down before him, wriggling like a fish on a hook. Face first, cheeks and chin covered in something sweet and sticky, the blush of her anger or arousal—even Beth wasn't sure which—cooled by the chilly marble surface, the Yeter held her motionless. The head of his erection tantalized and rubbed between her thighs until she, by some moan or flexation, submitted. The thickness stretched her to capacity, but Beth

arched to seek more. Her nipples, now painfully hard, brushed the stone as she curled upward to meet each stroke.

To please her, or himself, F'yan lifted her from the tabletop and allowed her to grind and writhe until impaled more completely. When her gasps indicated that she passed from enjoyment to irritation, he began to post, rising to meet her and driving deeper with every thrust.

Beth felt centered around his cock and her wetness that facilitated the coupling. Like a machine, operating at top efficiency, the Yeter cycled his angle and penetration until he discovered the right pace and force by judging the tone of her exclamations.

Beth felt his climax, the steady and prolonged throbbing being all her own passion required to reach its crest also. The pinprick of teeth initiated a powerful aftershock and she leapt willingly into the molten desire. Beth loved the sturdy hands that would support her quivering body securely until he had finished with her. The assurance that she would not fall physically released her to fall emotionally. She knew, like a phoenix, she could blaze in glory and be reborn in the following moment.

"What's 'Seba'?" she murmured, as he wrapped his large arms around her and cuddled, lapping at the mixture of sweat and blood on her shoulder. His tongue wiped the sticky sweetness from her cheeks, while he crooned his satisfaction.

He grumbled a sub-audible reply.

"What's 'Seba'?" she asked, tightening in butterfly quick spasms around his semi-hard and wringing a groan from the broad chest.

F'yan chuckled, a rumble that fired her imagination for another round. "At the moment," he whispered, "You are."

His reply was no answer, but before she could form another question, Erit had knelt before her and, with his knowledgeable caresses, began to distract her.

His slender erection pressed on her belly, as he gathered her in from the Yeter's embrace. Not completely willing to release her, but following some finer point of alien manners, and with a final lick on the back of her neck, F'yan relinquished his hold.

Suddenly overbalanced, Erit tumbled backwards with Beth in tow. She landed hard upon him but the amusement on his face denied any possibility of his being injured. Mischievously, she wriggled against him and jiggled the earrings for his delight. Draping the long bangles over his cock and nuzzling the length of it with her cheek, she played until, with his fingers in her hair, Erit insisted on her mouth.

With ever-deeper strokes, Beth took the rounded tip, then more and more of his shaft between her lips. Erit watched, fingering the ear ornaments, stiffening with each lightening quick flick of her tongue. She let the miniscule pressure of his hands lead her to a rhythm he preferred.

Beth welcomed the caress of soft Jibarae palms on her flanks. Ipok slicked his cock with her wetness and the Yeter's semen but hesitated with the tip nudging her anus. She wasn't sure if he awaited her permission or Erit's but, at either her throaty moan or some unseen consent by his elder, moments later he filled her, tentative at first then gaining confidence in her positive reaction.

A note of dissatisfaction crept into her groans; there would be no climax this time. Beth used her free hand to find and stimulate her fully engorged clitoris but knew the apex would still escape her. Long Yeter fingers displaced hers, rubbing and slipping into her deliciously. F'yan stroked in some counter beat to Ipok, but a third of his finger thrusts corresponded with the cock in her ass and she felt her passion leap a bit higher each time.

Tasting Erit's climax in the tiny drop of fluid, she gave him a few more sucks. She rested her forehead on his hip, losing herself to receiving pleasure. His downy fingers tweaked and rolled on her nipples and ears. Three separate tempos, Beth ascended on the tripod of their desire, imaginations and adoration. She struggled against the loss of control but they brushed aside her will as if it didn't exist. Beth rejoiced in the purity of the most basic of elemental and primitive needs. Expanding like a sail filled with wind.

In a fleeting moment lasting forever and proving the theory that time is subjective at best, Beth catapulted far beyond her climax, soaring high, borne on three wings.

* * * *

The tinkle of glassware aroused her from sleep. Orix gathered the platters and cylinders from the table in a haphazard way. He noticed her regard and grinned.

"You am waked."

"Where is everyone?" she asked groggily.

He shrugged, "Not here. Other wheres."

She laughed while sorting out her arms and legs. The young Jibar continually amused her with his interpretation of her language.

"You am ready to go?" he asked, hopefully. The sexually immature youth had probably had enough of this room.

"I need something to wear." She smelled the aftermath of the afternoon activities and added, "And a place to wash up."

Orix tossed her tunic to her and hitched his head toward the door, nodding. "Yes, you need wash up."

The Jibarae were a tidy folk, though they certainly had no problem helping to get her dirty. She slipped the clothing on and followed him to the facilities. He pointed back the way they'd come. "I am wait there."

The bathroom was pretty standard, at least for space-faring types, and similar enough to the ones aboard the 'Fordachau' that she had no trouble. Beth retraced her path, passing several identical doors, to the dining compartment and entered saying, "I'm ready." Pushing the panel closed, she took several steps into the room before realizing that she had chosen the wrong door.

A stranger leapt to his feet and then stood staring at her. A weird looking creature, she thought, covered in pale skin with fur growing in discrete patches. The way he wore his odd clothing, a long-sleeved tunic—with buttons down the front—tucked into uncomfortable looking trousers of washed-out blue. She stared, taking in every detail, until the alien spoke.

"Well," the human drawled with a broad Texan accent, "Ain't you a sweet sight for homesick eyes."

PART THREE—The Solterrans

Chapter Twenty-One

He crossed the compartment in quick sure strides, and stopped too close to her. "How did Otam git hold of you?" He brushed back her hair and examined the ornaments dangling from her ears, and fingered the fabric of her tunic. A torn nail snagged on a thread and left a pucker.

How barbaric she must appear to him in his pressed cotton shirt and snug blue jeans. The coarse well-washed cloth brushed her bare thigh and she remembered the fit of her favorite pair and how the seam rubbed nicely against her crotch. She loved walking across campus, half-aroused, knowing that no one knew.

"Jibarae stuff," he said. "But what's inside ain't."

He dipped his head slightly—he wasn't any taller than she—and kissed her. How long had it been since she'd kissed or been kissed? The Yeters had narrow lips but neither had shown any interest in kissing. The Jibarae faces were as thickly covered in fur as the rest of them and likewise that species didn't seem to have acquired the custom.

Slightly chapped, tasting of the pear liquor, but soft and full and human-shaped, Beth leaned into his kiss savoring the way her lips clung to his.

His hands found places, on her waist and on the small of her back, to rest as her arms sought his neck. His light brown hair, extending below his collar, was fine and silky. His shoulders were wiry with thin layers of muscle. His tongue flicked at her closed mouth and darted between her lips as they parted.

She felt the wall at her back, unaware of having moved or his having followed. His knee pressed between hers, and she undulated on the denim-sheathed thigh with the hand on her back encouraging the motion. The concrete evidence of his erection trapped within the zipper of his jeans punctured her awareness and she sought to free him.

Some contraption of metal and leather confused her momentarily. A belt! Beth slipped from the man's arms and knelt before him. Concentrating, she remembered the trick of a belt buckle. The jeans had a rivet button, a fastener she'd hated on Earth and found too frustrating now. She glanced up to the man's face to find him watching her with ferocious intensity. She yanked on the half-circle of his front pockets, and licked the metal of his zipper. She caught at the rivet with her teeth and tugged.

"That's a big ten-four, missy," he murmured, and with embarrassing ease undid the clasp and peeled the denim from his hips. He smelled human and, though he pulled her up before she got more than a quick lick of his cock, tasted human. Roughly, without preamble, he pushed her knees apart and entered her in one lurching plunge.

Pinned by his erection and his hands, she wrapped one leg around his waist then the other. His hands dropped to her ass to support her, and his chest pressed her even more solidly to the wall. Her tunic, bunched around her hips, slipped on the pebbled surface. Gradually his frantic bucking ceased, and his breathing slowed.

Beth squeezed to remind her partner of her existence.

"Believe me, darlin'. I know where you are." He laughed. "I'm no Yeter. Cain't quite make it happen holding us both up."

She looked more closely. She would have guessed his age at thirty at first, but now revised that upwards by a decade. Not handsome, on Earth she wouldn't have bothered to flirt with him, but here he had an extreme advantage. He was the only human she'd seen in ... She abruptly realized she had no idea how long.

"Tell me you speak English. I don't know nothin' but that and trade-speak."

"English," she whispered. "American, anyway."

"West Coast girl?" he asked, untangling her legs from his waist and setting her on her feet with a sigh of relief. He rearranged his penis and zippered his pants. His shirttails received a cursory tuck but he left his belt hang. He smoothed the shoulder seam of her tunic, and lightly brushed his fingers up and down her neck. He tapped the tiny puncture wounds F'yan had made. "Fuckin' aliens?"

"Yeah." Beth felt a blush creep up her cheeks.

He kissed the corner of her mouth. "So, how much are you costing me? Or am I getting a discount for species sake?"

Some evidence of her confusion must have shown on her face because he asked, "You work for Otam, right? You're one of his whores?"

"No. I was here for—a private party." Her cheeks blazed as a look of speculation entered his tan-colored eyes.

"Me too. Steve Robertson, at your service, m'am." He could turn the accent off and on at will, she noticed. The tip of

his tongue traced the margins of her mouth. "You need serviced?" He rubbed his crotch on her hip and slipped his hand under her tunic. He kneaded her rump, bumping her against his newly rekindled erection.

Feeling defensive, she said, "I am Elisabeth Collins paz Forday."

Steve stepped back, a hooded look coming over his eyes. "Paz? They's protecting you?"

Paz—protected by, now she knew, but simply nodded. He hooked his belt and walked back to the low table. He picked up a cylinder of pale orange liquid and took a long draught. Looking into the depths of the drink, he shifted his eyes back to her. Up and down, examining every curve and detail. He came to some decision in that inspection, and strolled back over.

"So, what can I offer to buy the right to protect you?"

Ah! The opportunity she'd hoped for. Be smart, she scolded her anticipation.

She pretended to think about his question. He waited with no outward signs of impatience.

"Match my present contract and..." she let her voice trail off.

He smirked, recognizing her ploy as an effort to manipulate him into bartering.

"And...?" he prompted. He followed his word with a lingering kiss. "What?" he asked as she groaned.

Damn, betrayed by her unruly libido. "A ride home."

"Done. To Europa station, anyway." Europa? Wasn't that a moon of Jupiter or something? Since when was there a space

station near Earth? So many questions, but she concentrated on the negotiation.

"You'll have to bargain with my ship's master."

"Erit Forday." He said it not as a question but as a fact.

"Do you know him?"

"Of him," he said, turning away and sipping from his beaker.

So he didn't like Erit, or maybe all Jibarae. But if that were so, what was Steve doing in their spaceport?

"Well, it won't hurt to try," Steve said, but his face contradicted his words and revealed his reluctance. Beth slipped her hands under his crossed arms and insinuated her fingertips under his shirt. She pressed her breasts against the firm muscles of his back. Stroking the skin of his flat stomach, she licked his neck with the tip of her tongue.

"If you succeed in buying my contract, I'll kiss where it hurts until you feel no pain."

When he muttered, "Shit," she knew she had him.

The Jibarae sold her contract, after much negotiation. Each of the Fordays tried to dissuade her from leaving.

Erit didn't trust Steve though he admitted his reasons were based on rumors and not facts. He presented her with a pair of his favorite earrings as a parting gesture.

Orix reminded her of the pleasant moments in the journey. Beth noticed a tiny stud glittering in the youngster's earlobe, all but invisible in the downy covering.

"Starting a new fashion?" she asked. He shrugged in reply, his normally irrepressible grin absent.

Ipok drew her into a corner and murmured his feelings in his own language, with the younger Jibar providing an abbreviated translation. "You am hurt him. Not am okay. He say you am home here. He say you am good partner. Erit is soon merchant-master and Ipok is master 'Fordachau'. He say stay, Elsa."

Ipok parroted Orix, "Stay, Elsa."

Not bothering to hide her tears, Beth shook her head. "I want to go home. I don't want to hurt you, I just want to go home."

* * * *

F'yan was even more blunt as he administered a series of vaccines. "I know Solterrans—males anyway."

"And one female," Beth said. He paused while the serum-laded burst of air to the back of her throat caused her to choke and cough. The medic ran his palms over her face and shoulders. Evaluating her health, she guessed, by the clinically expressionless mask of his face.

He nodded, absently, and picked up a trans-dermal syringe. He pressed it firmly to her flank and she felt the localized punch as the contents were forced through her skin.

He did another skin exam, likely checking her for fever, hives or some other adverse reaction—or just because he liked it.

"One female, yes. You have expanded my knowledge of Solterrans greatly—and pleasantly." The Yeter smiled at her. His eyes lost the professional distance and his hands lingered and explored, as they hadn't during the procedure.

His nostrils flared slightly and he leaned closer. She crossed her arms and legs as a barrier and to demonstrate her mock resistance to his overtures.

"What is it you don't like about Steve—or Solterrans?" she whispered as he nuzzled her neck. She hunched her shoulders, barring his teeth from her neck and used her knees and elbows to push him away. His eyes went a deeper purple and a dark brown blush filled the spaces between the patches on his mottled skin.

"They lack honor," he said. Honor? Beth almost laughed but, at that moment, F'yan ambushed her, pinning her wrists, and forced her to recline. "Yes?"

She knew he was referring to sex, not honor. "Yes." She kicked him solidly, hurting her toes more than his kneecap, but playing his fantasy with relish. He pinned her feet against the side of the exam bench.

"Say no," he said, insinuating a hand between her knees and wrenching her legs apart with his.

She complied, not meaning a word of it or her imitation of resistance.

* * * *

Erit, alone of the Jibarae, came to see her boarded on the "Cassiopeia". He slipped a circlet of metal into her wrist. He tapped the inconspicuous hexagonal sliver dangling from the bracelet. "This, loaded in any communication device, will send a signal to the closest Jibarae colony or space buoy." Beth looked askance at his precaution.

The Jibar frowned. "I hope your situation here is—safe. I fear it won't be."

She nodded and hugged him, wishing to be two people—one to stay and one to go. “I have only fond memories of all of you. Thank-you for your kindness.”

Beth carried her few belongings through the tube connecting the ship to the terminal, ignoring the tears that burned the corners of her eyes. She was going home.

Steve met her at the umbilicus hatch, and led her to her quarters after a nickel tour of the ship. His private rooms were just off the landing bay where the navigational and command controls, like on the other two space vessels she'd seen, were located. Various modifications had been made to accommodate human comfort in the common room. Chairs and tables, various equipment, and, to Beth's delight, chip books. She discovered later that the only chip reader belonged to Steve, and he shared it rarely.

Her room was off the common room, as on the Jibarae ship. The galley opened off the other side. Steve asked if she could cook.

“Jibarae stuff.” For some reason, they were acting as if this were a first date—a blind one at that. He seemed distant and she was uncomfortable.

“Good bread?”

“And coffee.” Beth tossed her bundle of the bed, and one of her earrings tumbled out. It rattled down the bulkhead and lodged in the tight spot where the mattress touched the wall. She leaned across to fish for it and, with her instinct for such things, knew that Steve was watching. A friendly bout of sex would break the ice.

Stretching further raised the hem of her tunic above her rump and she wriggled it higher, ostensibly searching for the bauble. His chuckle took her by surprise.

"Yes, a nice ass." His voice came from near the door where he'd seated himself during the display of her assets. "Play with it." Beth, puzzled, started to stand. "No, just like that, missy."

With a mental shrug for the request, she slipped her hand between her thighs. He whispered instructions—deeper, faster, slow down, lick her fingers—and Beth obeyed. Though masturbation had never been particularly satisfying, being watched and directed was erotically stimulating. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see him. Merely sitting there but, even in that quick look, his arousal was apparent.

She hated the part of herself that observed, though she no longer listened to its judgments and deprecations. Still, hearing the mews and uh-uh-uhs issuing from her mouth, tasting her excitement on her fingers, feeling desperate for his cock to be in her, and knowing she would do exactly as he asked to achieve it, annoyed her inner critic.

"Spread your legs a bit more, darlin'," he said. Beth heard the unmistakable sound of a buckle being unfastened and a zipper pulled, and experienced a tiny shiver of an anticipatory orgasm. The slap of leather against her sex, and the next across both ass cheeks, startled her but before she could do more than gasp, he buried his penis in her.

He remained motionless, and let her do the jerking and bucking. He'd spank her, stinging but not painful, just before she could peak, and then help her to regain the tempo to

rebuild her pleasure. In spite of his whacks, or perhaps because of them, the climax—a powerful one—shook her and the wetness escaped her to warm and slick her inner thighs. Steve supported her, with a calloused hand under her belly, until she regained some control of her muscles.

Finally, he thrust a few times and climaxed, yanking on her tunic to hold her closer. With a last, much gentler, pat, he pulled out with a slurpy pop.

Beth collapsed on to the bed, and brushed back her hair in time to see his expression change from one of sated relief to a smirk of self-congratulation. Ice not just broken—ice shattered.

“Welcome aboard.” Steve crouched to retrieve his jeans, puddled around his ankles, pulled them up and paused. He leaned toward Beth and whispered, “Very nice ass.” He kissed her softly, tickling her lips with the tip of his tongue, and tugged the blanket up to cover her.

She sighed, “You kiss nice.” Though her recent opportunities had been non-existent, she remembered how things went and, with Steve, things went well indeed.

He grinned. “Practice, missy.” He found her earlobe and nibbled it, before giving her a quick buss on her forehead.

“We shove away soon and I’ll be busy. Cain’t see nothing from the darkside anyway. Take a nap.”

Beth found the combination of heartfelt goodbyes, nervousness, and sex—slightly kinky—had drained her. She fell asleep with ease.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The 'Cassiopeia' was larger than the 'Fordachau'. Her corridors were narrow and cramped. The holds were massive, bearing Steve's livelihood—reconditioned and custom-modified agricultural and earth-moving equipment. He also had a thriving sideline of electronic and neutronic devices, which he had reclaimed and rebuilt.

"I'm a tractor salesman, trash-picker, and handy man," he offered with a laugh.

"So," Beth drawled, mimicking his twang, "Yer good with yer hands, cowboy?"

Steve chuckled. In the weeks since leaving Verouport, he'd often demonstrated his tactile talents. Rarely, he would get her all worked up and leave her frustrated, telling her to masturbate or suffer. Usually, he'd follow through. Other times, he would simply unzip and take her unprepared but, as in the time with the Yeter, she didn't require much more than his cock against her to start a minor fire inside.

He had an established and methodic shipboard routine, and never let sex disrupt his schedule. His immutable work ethic left her with many empty hours.

Beth found ways to help, fighting the boredom of space travel. She started with cooking and housecleaning—menial and, under other circumstances, demeaning but useful and necessary. As tidy as Steve was in his job, the personal spaces were grimy. Beth scrubbed and washed, progressing through her quarters, the common room, and the galley, whenever her employer was otherwise occupied.

He caught her at it once and told her that maintenance wasn't in her contract.

"I'll go nuts if I don't. Either the mess or the boredom will kill me!"

He shrugged and remarked that it was fine by him, as long as she didn't expect thanks or extra pay. Sometimes he was such an asshole, like about his chip-reader, Beth thought. Ungrateful and irritable—as crotchety as a grandmother—but then he'd make her half faint with passion, or jolly her into stupid board games like Monopoly or Chess.

He'd given her a hairbrush, after complaining about the tangles and that behavior fit her image of him. Find a problem; fix the problem—but grouse about the problem before, during, and after. She did love the resultant silky mass—longer than she'd expected—of her well-brushed tresses. On Earth, she'd preferred shoulder length styles, but now it fell to the middle of her back and covered her breasts as it tumbled forward.

Once the living spaces were clean, Steve made a reasonable effort to keep them in order, which was considerate but also made the occupation fill fewer moments, so Beth needed additional diversions. She liked being in the holds with Steve. Although he wouldn't converse or copulate, occasionally he'd show her how to do low-tech fix-its.

She sorted the junk into 'fixable', 'parts', or 'totally useless'. Steve never threw anything away and even in the useless pile he would find fasteners, snippets of wire, view screens or trace metals to be reclaimed, refined, and resold. She giggled at the frugality but learned later that these ingots

of recycled metal had astonishing value for the minimal amount of effort needed to salvage them.

So, Beth helped and learned.

Sorting and repairing, she mused. Rocks and junk—and sex, she added. For a girl who had once had far too many choices for entertainment and education, the irony of such limited ones made her laugh. That her life didn't seem more limited or cramped by the lack of them made her wonder if A'tan hadn't had a defensible point about how worthless having the wrong options could be.

Being a garbage man's sex toy and apprentice was not a alternative she would have given a second thought, but here she was—and not unhappy in the slightest—sorting through techno-trash and analyzing schematics to understand circuitry.

The junk came in large transport crates, the smallest the size of a big television and the largest bigger than a mobile home.

"How in the world do you process all this?" she marveled, eyeing the hold that was filled with them.

"Don't pick it up the whole way through my route. By the time I git back to the rendezvous buoy, I'll have this hold cleared out." He rearranged a couple to make a straighter path. He liked parallel lines and squared corners.

"Besides, I have help." Steve glanced at her, judging correctly that she doubted whether her efforts made a difference. "Not just you. Though, as long as you're volunteering, I don't mind." He stood back and used a piece of string to judge the straightness of his containers. "My

partner. He's off in the big lander. We'll meet up tomorrow or the next day." Days were subjective, depending on when Steve scheduled them to start and end.

Partner?

"Don't fret, missy." Steve scanned the markings on another crate with his chip reader and saved the lading information to the proper inventory. "He won't be fucking you, though he is part of our contract." He tugged it into alignment with the others.

Beth wondered how he could be so sure—not about the contract (should have read it, she thought)—but about the sex part. She took for granted that his partner was human. Neither Jibarae nor Yeter seemed to hold high regard for her species, though they seemed to like her well enough.

* * * *

Steve had told her not to move, but the stuff he was doing to her demanded it. His tongue, lips and teeth, so expert in kissing, had other skills. His fingers and hands had likewise. Each time she would jerk or wriggle, he would stop. Each time she promised to be still and was proven a liar.

After her most recent jiggle, more of an involuntary spasm in her opinion, he rolled to his back and picked up the chip-reader. She couldn't tell if his sudden indifference was feigned or real.

She snuggled up to his side and licked at his neck. "Come on, Steve." He pushed her hand away as she stroked his cock. "Please." Begging again. Old habits.

He shook his head no, and proceeded to make notes on the hand-held. She retreated slightly, her hip against his, his

shoulder warming hers. Absently, Beth began stroking her stomach, a comfortable mindless sensation of consolation. Her mind wandered, not settling on one thing, just browsing through pleasant memories and reviewing obligations and objectives.

Her breasts, the nipples relaxing, were tender. Ovulation, she thought, though her menses had long since ceased. Was she fertile? God, what a thought! Steve had gotten a vasectomy before leaving Earth—whenever that had been. Her nipples tightened as she did a quick and often ignored exam for lumps in the deeper tissues.

Pinching the little peaks, she realized that Steve was watching her surreptitiously. She stretched and, when she brought her arms down, rested one hand on her thigh. Inch by inch, with tantalizing slowness, she slid closer to her feminine tissue. With calculated nonchalance, she massaged the nexus buried in her folds. She rolled her hips slightly and then rubbed a little more. Beth raised her knee and arched toward her hand, dipping her fingers into her wetness and lubricating the bit of flesh. Her other hand continued to stroke her breasts and stomach, squeezing the nipples with every undulation.

She panted, breathing in genuine little gasps of pleasure. His participation, which she had hoped to coerce, seemed irrelevant as her climax approached. His cock, throbbing against her skin, seemed inconsequential, as the orgasm blossomed and flooded her passage with hot slick passion. His tongue, lapping at the opening and darting within, was not. Like a boomerang, her heat rebounded—differently but no

weaker. A second climax overcame the echoes of the first, leaving his mouth and lips glistening.

She drew his face up and kissed away the flavor of her. His hands captured her breasts and, with his tongue and teeth, pulled her nipples hard again. Now, the press of his erection—full and ready—was no longer inconsequential but imperative, exactly what she needed and wanted.

“Fuck me hard, Steve, be hard,” Beth whimpered, not certain if he could understand the words through her moans and gasps. But he had.

“Yes'm,” he whispered, sliding his hands down to her waist.

Moments later, he mounted her, ramming his cock to its root again and again. Hard fingers gripped her ass, lifting her to receive each thrust as powerfully as he could deliver. The second climax, which had never faded, spread outward like a mushroom cloud of a nuclear detonation, burning away everything in proclamation of existence, and gave birth to an impending third.

She felt the splash of his semen and let the quiver of his ejaculation lift her into the realm of ecstasy, feeling everything and thinking about nothing. Whirling.

Sticky with sweat, semen, and her juices, Beth felt well used. The usually unnoticed and completely accustomed noises of the common room—the whir of the air recycling, the whoosh of water through the conduits, and the click as the oven cooled—caught her notice. No, not those sounds—something else. An unfamiliar creak impinged on her awareness.

There, in a reversed chair with his arms resting crossed on the back, sat the handsomest man Beth had ever seen. This was the partner? Cobalt eyes looked back at her, cool and unfriendly. A lock of dark hair fell across his tanned face and he shook it away. Beth felt the ready blush spring up her face, partly in embarrassment for being found in such a situation and partly in regret because she remembered that Steve said this man would never fuck her. And she so wanted him to.

"Ah—Steve?" she whispered. Steve followed her gaze.

He gave a last pump with his quickly shrinking tool and smiled before climbing to his feet. He retrieved his jeans from where he'd shed them a long while ago, and reached down to help her up. Tossing over her tunic, he turned toward the dazzling young man. "Beth Collins, meet Jinx Morgan, my sometimes too-silent partner."

Half in, half-stuck in the process of dressing, Beth offered her hand, which was ignored. She yanked the cloth down, impatiently.

Jinx looked her up and down causing the color in her cheeks to darken a few shades. Dismissing her, he spoke to Steve and didn't look directly at Beth again.

"That's a girl." Well, duh! She didn't like his manner or his attitude.

"Yep." Steve buttoned his pants and zipped them.

"Definitely."

"I thought we agreed on a Jibbie or a Sint."

"Got a better offer." Steve shrugged.

Beth finished tying the neck of her tunic. She padded to the cooler and fished out a container of water. Despite his avoidance in looking at her, Beth was certain Jinx was keenly aware of her presence.

Jinx spread his hands and asked, "Do we have to talk about this in front of her?"

Beth saw annoyance flash on Steve's face but with a glance her way, he said, "Missy?" then he hitched his chin toward her room. "Excuse us, please."

She shrugged, "No problem." In her room, even with the panel closed, she could hear the murmur of Jinx's questions.

"Yep," Steve's usual answer was far clearer—as was his abbreviated explanation of her origins.

Finally, Steve said, "Useless? I don't think so. Look around. Has it ever looked like this before? She's done your job far better than you ever did."

Another indignant whisper from Jinx.

"Nope. She also has an eye in the sorting hold, as good as yours but without your whining." His voice dropped to a lower tone, but Beth could make out most of his words. "Lemme tell you something else. Did you see those bangles in her ears? Jibbie made. Forday marked. If she could find some one willing to trade, those trinkets could buy her a quarter share in a ship like this."

Silence, followed in the louder voice meant for her to overhear, Steve said, "Be nice until we git her home. But no fucking."

For the first time, Beth heard Jinx's reply, "That's real fair. Her pay is coming out of my share, too."

"She'll earn her keep doing your chores in here and in the sorting hold, but don't you worry. The girl gives a hell of a blowjob. Content yourself with that and treat her like a lady."

Beth covered her lips, holding in the giggles trying to escape. Lady? If Steve's treatment of her was that he considered fit for a lady, she was glad he didn't think of her as a whore. Or was it only Jinx that had to act nice?

She heard the click of the common room door and wondered which man left.

A minute later, Jinx called out, "Collins?"

Beth waited a heartbeat before opening her door.

With a smirk for her pretense, he waited for her to look at him. "You heard all that?"

It seemed pointless to deny overhearing the parts Steve meant for her to hear, so she nodded. "Some of it."

He grabbed the fresh loaf of bread from the saucer-shaped bread oven and pulled off a piece. "Not bad," he said around chewing. "Got any questions?"

Yes, mostly about her jewelry but that was the part she wasn't supposed to know about. "Why can't we make love?"

He choked a little and she felt gratified to disconcert him. She passed him the unopened bulb of water still in her hand.

"I'm fertile, you may be, and Steve isn't. Babies in space are a bad idea."

"Why?" Not that pregnancy appealed to her, but she was curious.

He shrugged. "Other species have tried it. Lots of birth defects, fetal death and maternal complications."

"Is that why they don't bring their females with them?"

He nodded and bit off another hunk of bread. "Humans are unique. We can prevent conception. With them, if they fuck babies get born."

She nodded. "So no females. It must kill them to go without."

He laughed, not amused but mean. "Damn, you're stupid."

"Am I?" she said, tossing her head to show off her bangles without admitting what she'd learned.

"Am I?" he mimicked in a falsetto. "They don't go without."

Beth could feel her face twist in confusion. "But with no females..." She stopped, abruptly seeing more of the scenario in which Orix's ears were pierced. Not a fad. The ornaments were to make him 'pretty' for the older Jibarae. "Oh, Orix," she whispered.

"Yeh. That cute little Forday Jibbie has a lollipop up his ass, right now. I wonder if he hates you for leaving them as much as I do?"

Beth sat down on a cushion, still damp from sweat and redolent with sex. Did it hurt him? His elders were always kind to her. Would they be to him?

Jinx enjoyed the telling and might be lying, but his words made sense. "The most junior member of the crew is the fucktoy, usually. Jibar boys expect it when they go starside. Sints too." Whatever they were.

"And Yeter?" she squeaked.

"Yeter? They don't deep space much. Can't. Jibbie ass doesn't get 'em hard."

She nodded her understanding but, in hopes he'd shut-up, didn't ask any more questions. Her silence evidently encouraged him to shock her again.

"Another little tidbit for you. Before you signed on, and when we don't have a Jibbie or Sint, I'm the junior crew."

Too much information. She struggled to her knees, wanting to escape and hide in her bed.

"Here's a pretty picture for you the next time the boss has you screaming." He imitated her breathy plea, "Fuck me hard, Steve, be hard," adding a moan, and then, "Oh, God. Yes, yes." He squealed an oooh and panted a few times.

Yes, she remembered saying those words. Was that what she sounded like? Her cheeks blazed like a fever and she covered them with her palms to cool down.

"At some point in his career, Steve was junior, too."

Beth hated this guy. He had the personality of a rabid raccoon or a high school sophomore.

"Collins?" he said.

She shook her head, no more.

"A small correction for you." Her face came up, hopefully. Jinx had crept closer to stand directly before her. Her eyes were level with the growing tent of his crotch. "You and I could fuck four times a day and it wouldn't be making love."

She didn't move, knowing exactly what he was going to say next, and wondering what she would say or do when he did.

"So, how about a blowjob? Show me how good you are—lady."

Bingo. She hesitated, wanting to tell him to go fuck himself.

"Don't go breaking your deal, Collins. I'm not asking you to marry me—just spread those pretty lips and suck me off."

He didn't require anything from her but the warmth of her mouth. Jinx pumped, holding her still with his hand on the back of her head, forcing her to gag more than once, but finally spending his load. He let her go and said, "Helluva blowjob, my ass," as a parting comment.

Well, it was his fault—totally. If he had allowed her participation, instead of raping her mouth, the whole process—except the identical outcome—would have been far different. His loss, though she'd have a sore throat for sure.

Later, rinsing his flavor from her mouth for the tenth time, she made a mental note about partners. Find out if there are any before signing anything.

Chapter Twenty-Three

For all that she despised him, Beth wound up spend a lot of time with Jinx.

Proving the axiom that anything extra you do becomes your job, the work she'd adopted stayed adopted and overlapped his routine for several hours a day. In addition, they both preferred the pre-breakfast hours for exercise and it only made sense to coordinate their weight circuits for maximum efficiency.

When feeling playful, he could make her hysterical with laughter. Problem was that sooner or later he'd say or do something cruel or humiliating. After making her cry, he'd be aroused, never letting her contribute and, thus, never getting the full measure of what was possible in the arrangement.

The morning had begun badly. Some power relay had overloaded, disrupting the ship's phase from night to morning. The lights stayed at dim, the water for showers and cleaning never heated, and everyone overslept. The same relay supplied the navigational timer, putting them off course by several hours. Worse yet, Steve blamed Jinx for not sticking to the preventative maintenance schedule for replacement and yelled at him, mixing in a large number of insults about his intelligence and competence.

Whenever he got reamed, Beth took abuse later. As his junior, she figured with the trickle down affect in the hierarchy of blame she could accept some degree of displaced anger but Jinx overstepped the limits every time.

When the power was restored and the ship's automatic systems were reinitialized, Beth went to the gym. With A'tan, she'd practiced her katas and dance routines, mixed with the physically demanding violent sexual interludes. On the Jibarae vessel, exercise consisted of a period of isometric stretches, controlled breathing, and daily strenuous sexual sessions.

The 'Cassiopeia's' facilities reminded her of ones at nice hotels. A treadmill, various machines for specific muscle groups, and a free-weight apparatus had been installed in an odd-shaped wedge of a room. She reestablished and exceeded her pre-abduction habits. From that, plus energetic sex with Steve and giving Jinx infrequent blowjobs tossed in, Beth obtained a leanly trim tone even in the lower gravity.

Her relationship with Jinx was something she found objectionable. Steve's partner and she had never fallen into a comfortable camaraderie about sex. In some ways he reminded her of the Yeter, unable to deny his impulses. But instead of accepting the drive, he would repress the urge. Finally, he'd let loose a barrage of foul-mouthed words at her. Only then would he demand fellatio and choke her in his fury.

She recognized that not getting along with him made the rule about no intercourse more palatable, because Beth still thought Jinx was too gorgeous with his athletic build, smooth tanned skin, raven hair, and dark blue eyes—like that guy who played Superman in the TV series, Lois and Clark. Calvin Klein model material, he radiated the tough-guy stuff that women, even exceptionally pretty ones, took to bed in their dreams but rarely found the courage to approach in reality.

In fairness, when Jinx wasn't actively trying to piss her off or embarrass her, he was interesting company. He talked about things, and explained customs, the etiquette of space travel—starside manners as he called it—and commerce in the wide empty void between habitable planets. He'd grown up on Europa station and related stories that gave Beth a vague history of the inception and construction.

"I didn't know we had a station in the outer planets."

Jinx shrugged, as if that came as no surprise. "The ones in Earth orbit are for show. The real stuff happens outsystem." She distrusted him and snorted her doubt.

"What can't you accept as true? That Europa station exists or that your government lies to you?" Put that way, Beth had no choice but to believe. Hadn't that same government dismissed the rumors of alien abduction as the product of overly imaginative or mentally unstable individuals? Yeah, it had.

* * * *

Although she was comfortable with casual nudity, Beth preferred to be clothed while exercising and had, over time, acquired a tee shirt that she tied beneath her bosom as a bra. An old pair of boxers became her shorts. She felt less vulnerable when clothed, and the soft fabric absorbed the sweat.

After her body sculpting, Beth ran on the treadmill, mulling over the conundrum with Jinx, when he came in muttering. He swore when he saw her, liking to run first, but Beth ignored him.

Jinx goosed her with a vicious pinch, where the curve of her rump met her leg. She reacted, slamming her elbow into his stomach. He doubled over, gagging and, for a moment, Beth worried he was injured internally.

Jinx eased upright and glared at her.

"Quit being an asshole or I'll kick your butt all the way back to Earth," which suddenly sounded like a terrific idea. She decided they would clear the air and get a few things straightened out. She wasn't certain she could win a brawl with her taller, more muscular, and heavier foe, but she'd get in a couple of punches that would make a lasting impression. Beth leapt at him.

To her surprise, he didn't have the slightest idea how to fight. She pinned him to the cold floor effortlessly, though he had struggled the entire way. Only when she noticed the knife of pure hatred in his face, did she consider the advisability of having overpowered a shipmate who already disliked her. A moment later the expression was gone, quickly enough to make her wonder if she had mistaken a look of unpleasant shock for malice.

"Wow. You know karate?" he said, climbing to his feet. Not karate, but close enough for her to simply nod. "Want to teach me some?"

Beth agreed, enthusiastically. Maybe in a shared interest, she could find something to like in Jinx and he in her. They chatted about martial arts and the various forms while he took a turn on the treadmill.

He followed her into the shower. He'd never showed interest in watching her before and, she admitted with an

internal grin, the idea of giving him a titillating eyeful appealed to her. Cementing their newfound bond.

Beth stepped under the spray—thank God, Steve liked his showers hot and not lukewarm like her former employers—and lathered up slowly, running her hands languidly over her torso. Lingering at the sensitive parts and firing up the feel-good process within, she smiled at him. She raised her arms to rinse her hair and felt him slip into the stall behind her.

“Wash your back?” he whispered, licking water from her earlobe. She nodded, liking the way his hands fit around her waist. He massaged the cleanser into her skin, sliding as if by accident around her ribs to graze the underside of her breasts. Each pass was a bit further until the cage of his fingers enclosed them. Beth caressed the well-defined physique of his upper legs. His erection nudged and parted her rear cheeks, chafing up and down. She tightened those muscles and he grunted.

His hands left her body and she leaned back toward him, protesting his abandonment, wanting him to touch her again.

“Wait,” Jinx said. His cock, lathered with soap, pushed between her thighs and rubbed her clitoris as if directed by radar. She sighed her pleasure when his hands returned to their prior location.

Each time he thrust, slowly enough to make her quiver in the interval, the head of his richly colored cock would bump that bit of her anatomy, and elicit a moan from her. He would pause there, applying delicious pressure for a long minute, and then withdraw.

“No fucking,” she whispered in one moment of clarity.

"You'd let me, though," Jinx wheedled. He stroked her nipples in unison with another plunge. He no longer needed soap as lubrication, she thought, as if her wetness, not finding a useful function inside, had sought out his cock and her thighs.

She shook her head, but his next thrust made her whimper again.

He kissed her neck and nibbled her shoulder. "Say you would, sweetness." Pump. Bump. His unerring aim sent a shiver through her.

"No fucking," she said, holding on to that rule.

"It's not in, is it?" he pointed out. True, but close enough?

"Still..." she argued, hoping like hell he won this battle.

He chuckled and that rumbled through his body and hers. She felt any resolve melting under the combined onslaught of his hands and his cock. "Letter of the agreement. Implications are not stipulations and are unenforceable."

"No fucking," she said, losing willingly.

"No fucking," he agreed, "But just say you would."

She nodded.

"Say it ... Say 'fuck me, Jinx'." He paused, poised to enter. If she wriggled or arched he would be in her. The proximity of the forbidden was irresistible.

Beth said the words—and meant them—but hoped he wouldn't pursue it. As soon as the phrase left her lips, he laughed nastily. He pushed her away and rinsed her wetness from his cock and balls.

"You are so easy." Jinx palmed his erection, looking at it with a smile. "Now, blow me."

Humiliated, but no wiser, Beth knelt. Was this a penalty for defeating him earlier? Or revenge for Steve's reprimand? Or punishment for saying yes to breaking a rule? Jinx pinned her head against the wall and pumped into her mouth, not touching her at all, until he climaxed. He remained buried in her throat until he felt her swallow.

"Know something else, Collins?" he asked, using her tee shirt as a towel. "I bet you didn't put a time limit on this trip, did you? It'll take good ol' Steve more than three years to get you back to Earth."

One thing about Jinx she really hated. He always told her the truth and in nastiest possible way.

When she confronted Steve, he shrugged. "I can't help what you thought, missy. My route is set. Three out, three back."

"Implications are not stipulations?" she said, feeling cheated but having enough sense not to say anything aloud. Having one enemy aboard was enough.

"Right in one," Steve said, turning her away from him for a quick dip in her still damp well. He didn't concern himself with her pleasure. There would be lots of time for that, she thought bitterly, in the next three years.

"But you're a real worker, I might shave six or eight months off—if things keep on the way they have." He zipped and patted her ass as a sign of his satisfaction and that he was finished for the time being. "And if you want."

Beth nodded, "I want." She fingered the hexagon on her bracelet. But Erit had inferred she should use it if there was danger—not disappointment.

As Pretty Girls Do
by Jolie Howard

Later, she would remember the moment and wish she'd called for help then.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Try as she might, Beth found keeping track of time difficult. She tried marking a paper with a hash mark every morning but would eventually realize that she hadn't made a mark that morning and couldn't, in fact, remember when she made the last one.

She mentioned the problem to Jinx, risking his amusement. He laughed but didn't insult her.

"Why not just check the nav-clock?" When Beth admitted not knowing how, he showed her without being any nastier than usual.

She watched as he punched a couple squares on the control panel. A date appeared, day-month-year, in the European manner. After a moment, in which she tried to make sense of the nearly forgotten symbols, their meaning came clear.

"That can't be right." By this calendar she had been in space for more than three years. Jinx nodded.

"It is."

The cruel smile appeared and Beth knew that this had been no kindness. He knew she'd be shocked by the passage of so much time.

"No." He had changed it or the numbers didn't correspond to the true Earth date.

"Yep, missy. It is." Jinx mimicked Steve perfectly. "You are the victim of extended space out. When a sentient being, and we humans are very susceptible, has no frame of reference

he—or she—falls into a meditative state lasting indefinitely. You can lose days living as a vegetable.”

She nodded, his theory explained why she would lose herself in thought and be starving when she regained the present, though she'd ‘just’ eaten.

“How do I prevent it?” she asked, hoping he'd give her a useful option.

He tapped his watch. “I set this every morning to vibrate regularly. If I take a mini-vacation, I know it can't last any more than two hours.”

A good suggestion and, if she owned a watch or knew how to get one, would be a workable one. Maybe she'd find a repairable one in the hold. Bitterly, she wondered how much Steve would charge her for it.

“I'll be twenty-seven when we reach Earth.”

He shrugged. “No big deal, Collins. You won't look much older than when you left.” He turned to the console and acted as if he was busy.

“Why?”

He ignored her questions, taking notes and humming a tune to himself.

Beth leaned on his arm and asked again, adding a ‘please’. Jinx feigned surprise at her continued presence.

“Guess my age.” He expected her to be wrong, she knew.

“Twenty-five.”

“Nope, guess again.”

She shook her head, unwilling to play the pointless game.

He relented, but only because he wanted to tell her and not because she wanted to know. “I'll give you a clue. I've

been starside since I was seventeen and have made the trip with Steve two and a half times."

Two and a half times six added to seventeen. Thirty-five? This total stud-muffin, who looked her age and acted like an adolescent bully, was thirty-five? He chuckled her chin when it dropped in astonishment. If she had a mirror, what would be her reflection?

"Steve won't tell his age. But he was a grown-up when I was born. His medical records on Europa are older than me." She didn't have a clue to how Jinx could know that, but had no difficulty believing him. Steve's knowledge of Earth events ended around the same time as the Nixon administration had. He had claimed that Watergate had been more about keeping the aliens' existence secret than about campaign irregularities.

Jinx tapped a few more controls, wrote down a reading or two on the clipboard.

"Living out here is good for you. Healthier."

"So the Jibarae and Yeter live in space to live longer?"

Jinx shook his head. "Nah. They don't get the same benefit as we do. Their planets, what I've seen of them, are paradises. Earth is a hellhole."

Beth objected. "It's not bad, and it is home."

Jinx shook his head, disagreeing. "Not bad isn't the same as good. I haven't been there since I was two, but I've seen movies. Crime, pollution, poverty. Not my home!"

She laughed aloud. "Movies? That's like me judging you starside guys because I watched 'Independence Day' or 'Predator' or 'Alien'."

The handsome face brightened with an even toothed smile. "Who says you shouldn't? Maybe, you've been lucky ... So far, anyway." He sidled closer to her, and ran a hand up her arm. His thumb settled in the hollow at the base of her neck. Nuzzling her hair, with his other hand kneading her posterior, he rubbed against her. His cock stayed limp, even as his pressure on her throat grew firmer. "Who would know or care out here? One more bit of vermin extinguished by another."

His fingers invaded her femininity, probing with brutal precision.

"Steve would know," Beth whispered, wanting him to stop and wanting him to do more. She hated him in a way she'd never hated A'tan. The Yeter was straightforward in his mistreatment of her but this man was warped and tried to twist her. She didn't fear his violent handling but the intellect behind his intentions.

"Yes. But, as long as he has a hole to fuck, would he care if it wasn't yours?"

Jinx didn't just want sex; he wanted humiliation and tears. She denied him, slapping away the hand at her throat and sidestepping the other. She whirled, dropped into a crouch, and drove her elbow in a collision course with his groin. Her blow stopped a hairsbreadth from the target. Beth sprung away, and turned to face him composing her expression into a mask of disdain. His hands hovered protectively over his penis.

"You don't scare me, asshole. Leave me alone."

"Then I can tell Steve that your contract is void?"

That was part of what he wanted, she realized, for her to break the contract. She didn't know the particulars but that there were consequences to deal breaking, she felt sure. "Yes, let's tell Steve why you won't follow the rules. Why you won't play nice." The best defense, she hoped, really was a quick and decisive offense. Her safety was a standard clause in her bargain with Steve.

She met his glare with a pleasant, impersonal smile that, she hoped, conveyed confidence and was rewarded when he looked down first.

"You have no idea of the rules here," he mumbled, striding away.

Beth felt a shiver of fear that she quickly discounted as soon as he had left the hanger. Steve wouldn't let Jinx do anything too awful to her. Would he?

By limiting her contact with Jinx, Beth hoped to minimize his hostility and opportunities to confront her. She changed her routine to avoid him. She exercised when she knew he was working with Steve or doing his maintenance on the ship's systems.

She ate in her room and cleaned up the galley and common room after power-down. If Steve noticed, he said nothing. Jinx noticed but seemed to conspire in kind to avoid her. Not a great way to spend the next thirty-odd months but, unless Jinx left or changed his treatment of her, one she could live with—if he could.

* * * *

The large tractors were bound for some agricultural planets in Sintal space. They were one of the few products

made on Earth that had a value in the rest of the union of five space-faring species in this outer branch of the spiraling galaxy. Steve adapted the machines to be run remotely or by microprocessor. Each moving part had a specific modification that had to be made in order to accept the commands of a central control device. The biggest change was that from diesel power to power-cell.

His legs and torso protruded from between the massive tires. His head, arms, and shoulders were beneath the metal frame supporting the monstrous machine. Beth sat cross-legged and handed the various tools into Steve's hands when needed. A boring, make-work task that a monkey could handle, but being here meant not being alone someplace where Jinx could find her, or where she might fall into one of those horrible time-robbing fugues.

"Spanner," Steve asked, his hand groping the rows of tools beside him.

"What does it look like?" she asked. Spanner?

"A black wishbone with wires hanging out."

She found the gizmo and slipped it into his palm. She held on a moment longer, forcing him to tug harder. She nudged his hip with her knee.

"If you want to play, go find Jinx. I'm busy."

"He plays too rough." She had decided not to bring Steve into her squabbling with Jinx. She fingered Steve's fly, letting her nail clickity-clack along the ridges.

He grabbed her hand and flung it aside. Grabbing the frame with both hands, Steve slid from underneath. He fixed her with a frown.

"Stop."

She sighed and leaned against the hub. He pulled himself back under the tractor and grunted a few times as he got realigned properly.

After awhile, Beth leaned down. "So, are these trade secrets or can I watch?"

His shoulders made a minute movement that might have been a shrug. Beth wriggled her way under. The tangle of wires and chip things hung from an open cube of black plastic. Steve would test a pair of wires, and then twist them one way or another. Gradually, four discrete bundles formed. Beth watched, occasionally brushing against his arm, or curling closer as if to see more clearly but really to nuzzle his shoulder or neck.

Finally he sighed. "Pull me off some black tape, missy."

She had to reach across him to reach the roll and lingered in the gesture. "How much?"

"Hmm. 'Bout eighteen inches or so."

The tape wouldn't tear, so Beth used a pair of clippers to snip off the long piece. "This enough?" she asked, pulling her knee up his leg, meeting his frown with a look of innocence.

The tape had stuck to her fingers, but Steve yanked it free. "Should work. Hold up that pair of tabs, please."

She grasped the tabs. Steve lifted the tape, threw his leg over her hips, and wrapped the sticky stuff around her wrists before she could pull away. He clambered out from under the machine.

Dragging her behind him, he said, "What part of 'stop' did you not understand?"

"I'm sorry. I'll stop!" Beth said.

"You betcha." Steve hauled her to her feet and 'U'ed the tape through a linchpin halfway up the back of the engine housing. One-handed, he undid his belt, snaked it through the tape loop and fastened it to another metal hasp parallel to the first. He pulled it tight, and Beth was drawn up onto tiptoes. Steve stepped back, gave her arms a yank, and grunted his satisfaction with the set-up.

Beth felt the brush of his clothing against hers, and his feather-light caress on her stomach. Without touching her further, he whispered, "Busy means busy."

His footsteps echoed as he walked away. Steve said, "No yelling. I'll be back when I'm done working."

As the lights went out, Beth almost begged him to not leave her for Jinx to find but what were the chances of that?

Beth discovered that if she stretched a little to the side her toes could reach one of the cables that anchored the tractor to the deck plating. She could lift and relieve the weight on her bindings, letting blood flow back into her hands. Another discomfort soon arose, cramps in the arches of her feet, so she alternated between hanging and balancing on the strap by her toes.

The tape stretched somewhat and she gave up on alternating her position. She tried flexing and raising her legs to warm them but the effort cost her. The tape dug deeper into the flesh on her wrists. She pulled, trying to reach the tape with her teeth, but the bindings held.

Beth ran her toes across the floor, hoping to find a tool with a sharp edge. She found a slab-like something with a

circular tab and worried at it for a while, trying to lift it, before realizing that the piece she thought was a flap, was a ring similar to the many others embedded in the deck plates where the stabilizing cables attached.

When Steve had turned off the lights, she knew the dark would be unnerving but she hadn't realized that the temperature controls would cycle down to save additional power in an unused room. Had Steve known? The cold gradually numbed her toes and made her drowsy. That she could feel sleepy amazed her.

Daydreaming was escape and she'd even welcome one of those space-outs if it meant she would wake up when this was over. In the absolute darkness, it was hard to tell whether she was sleeping, daydreaming or simply imagining the spooky rustles and ghostly pings, nor could she decide from which direction the noises were coming.

The discomfort in her wrists and the drag of the pseudo-gravity prevented complete disorientation, she mused. An uncomfortable notion occurred to her. What if, as a further conservation, the environmental controls cycled down the power to the web of wires providing the illusion of gravity. That theory seemed more plausible when she took in the evidence of the anchor straps on every piece of equipment.

She hadn't been weightless since before succumbing with fever to the mutated virus on the 'Fordachau'. A slithery worry curled in her belly and, suddenly, instead of merely chilly, she was freezing. Shivers, starting where the knot of concern lodged and spreading outward, shook her body. She wondered if a person could shake off an arm and, with effort,

forced her muscles to stop quivering but her teeth chattered on.

A bright shard of light streaked across the floor, bouncing over the various canisters, carts, and attachments parked in-between, and made zebra stripes up her legs.

An elongated shadow fell across her field of vision. "Hey, Collins. What are you doing in here?"

Her voice cracked—God, she was thirsty—as she answered, "Just hanging around."

Jinx laughed. "Yeah, so I see."

"You going to help me?" Beth asked. His abuse wouldn't be worse than this. Hell, she'd cry if he wanted.

"Thinking about it." His hands glided up the curve of her ass. "Interesting opportunity, though."

She saw his shadow kneel then straighten. "Interesting how?" Beth asked, keeping her voice from breaking.

Something cold and hard parted her thighs, not roughly but irresistibly. A handle of some kind, Beth thought, willing her tight-with-fear muscles to relax. Jinx worked the end against her nubbin before angling it up inside her. The icy cylinder invaded, making her shiver, before warming up as she did. Too hard and too unyielding, he could hurt her easily with whatever he was using, but Jinx handled it with gentle care. Beth responded, a Pavlov's conditioning, arching toward each measured and cautious thrust, welcoming the familiar wetness that made the next stroke slicker and smoother, as well as bringing a warm flush to her skin.

"You are such a whore," he murmured.

Beth replied, "My job." The sound of his zipper renewed her hope.

"Your nature." Jinx pulled the tool out and snickered as she moaned. He pressed it against her anus. "Proof." And he forced it in, wet from her but still uncomfortable. With the same careful strokes, he rekindled her heat. The contrast in temperature between passion and the air added to her excitement. Her breath, visible in the chill, floated in short-lived puffy pale clouds.

From the corner of her eye, Beth could see his shadow. He was masturbating, the tempo of his hand identical to the one wielding the cock-substitute. She could imagine watching him, finding the idea tantalizingly erotic. She felt a stab of regret that they couldn't find a way to some common ground. If weren't for his unreasonable animosity, they would be well suited to be friends and lovers. She didn't fear his violence and, if he'd let her, could help him release it and find mutual pleasure in the exercise.

"My job," Beth insisted, struggling to speak before her intellect inevitably dissolved into sensation. "I like it, but still it's just what I do—not who I am."

"Yeah, sure," Jinx said, before falling silent. In the quiet, Beth felt his passion fade. Whatever the strangely driven man needed, he wasn't finding it in this situation.

"Steve runs our lives. He ties your hands and leaves you helpless. You hang with your ass in the breeze for anyone to find and butt-fuck." He laughed a little. "Sounds like my job."

Jinx pulled the tool out of her.

"If you hate it here, why stay?" Beth wanted to keep him talking, preferring even his rough attentions than being left in the dark.

"No one will hire a human."

"They hired me."

"Cuz you're a whore..." The hard barrel traced the back of her leg and the curve of her half-covered rump.

"Yes, a whore." She arched against the touch.

"A good one?" The handle caught in her tunic and raised the hem. Beth felt the brush of his denim-clad leg on hers. She could melt him given half a chance.

"Let me show you, Jinx." Beth injected as much smoky promise as she could.

He leaned close to her ear, tickling her with his breath. "You'd be good to me?"

"So good." Because she wanted her freedom, she would say anything he wanted to hear. But she also wanted to make him want her, to let her be his lover instead of whatever he thought she was.

The floor rattled as he dropped the tool, and she heard the sound of his zipper.

"You're not going to untie me, are you?" Beth asked.

"Nope," he said. "I wasn't even tempted." As he walked away, she resigned herself to hanging here until Steve remembered where he'd left her.

"Will you mention me to Steve?"

Jinx laughed as he shut the door. "Who do you think told me where to find you, stupid?"

She understood Jinx's strangeness, suddenly, as a manifestation of Steve's eccentricities. The younger man had no other model of adult behavior. Whatever Jinx had become resulted from that which Steve had been and still was. Which partner was more dangerous? The precariousness of the situation slammed home and Beth slipped into a fugue wondering what to do.

After another spell in the dark, Steve returned and half-carried her to the warmth of the common room. He apologized for forgetting her and made coffee. He rubbed her hands and feet, and acted concerned about the red rings left by the tape. He cuddled until she was comfortable and then, with undeniable skill, set out to inflame her with his kisses and fingers. Slow fire, with consideration of her pleasure, Steve did as Steve did best. At some point, Jinx wandered through but didn't stay to watch, though he sometimes did.

Beth was relieved that he hadn't. She was pretty certain that, although she fooled Steve, Jinx would have known she was faking most of her passion.

A'tan had said she made ill-advised decisions when faced with life's choices, and so she had. She had ignored Erit's guidance, though he had never misled her, and contracted with humans based on nothing more than a naive impression that they shared a common bond. Once again, she had rushed in without thinking things through. Quite honestly, she wondered if all her decisions had been as poorly considered. Maybe, if she'd had to face the consequences instead of running away or relying on her parents to fix the mistakes, she would have learned how, by now, to make better ones.

As Pretty Girls Do
by Jolie Howard

The school of experience made for quick study, and she prayed that she'd gained enough knowledge to make her next choice one she would survive.

A lunatic or a liar, Beth had to choose again.

A liar she could handle, because ... Well, she could lie, too.

Before Beth could formulate a plan or activate Erit's emergency signal circumstances, as they often did, changed and the choice was taken from her hands.

Chapter Twenty-Five

For the first time since leaving Earth, Beth could see a planet through the bay. In a prolonged series of maneuvers, the painstaking and complicated adjustments of which contradicted every science fiction movie Beth had ever seen, the 'Cassiopeia' had achieved low stable orbit around Soranda, a Sintal agricultural world.

The contents of several holds would be off-loaded here, the demand for farm and manufacturing equipment high. The ship's partners rushed from task to task, from list to list, and from hold to hold, coordinating the process of delivery.

Beth ached to feel terra firma beneath her feet, to breath fresh air and walk along one of the bright white beaches so evident from space. She sat near whichever bay faced the planet at the moment, watching the pattern of clouds and the play of sunshine on the surface. When night fell on the visible landmasses, a sprinkling of artificial lights glittered diamond-like and she wondered about the homes and shops of the Sintal people.

Beth knew that sitting motionless would initiate a space-out, but she no longer worried about losing track of time. Eventually, she would gain access to Steve's quarters and the communication equipment there. Until then, hours were welcome to pass as quickly as possible.

"Hey," Jinx said, inches from her ear. "You look like a carrot." He was sitting behind her. She squelched the image of him, ready to do harm, poised to strike as she made like a carrot and vegetated. She couldn't be on guard every minute.

Beth shook off the lassitude and stretched. He grabbed her hands as they approached his face and leaned her back against his knees. Jinx pulled on her wrists until her head tilted far enough for him to see her face.

His beautiful eyes were only inches from hers, and his wide lips brushed her forehead. The unrecalled dreams, which had inhabited her fugue-state, must have been pleasantly erotic, because she felt sexy and slick already and he hadn't done anything to start it.

He glanced up at the green, blue and gray sphere of Soranda. "Pretty, huh?"

She liked the way his lips moved when he spoke. Giving in to an impulse, Beth touched his lower lip with the tip of her tongue. His subsequent half-smile, tightening his lips, pulled his mouth out of her reach.

Jinx released her hands, and remained motionless while she traced the bend of his elbows, the hard curve of his biceps, and ridges of his collarbones. She brushed back the hair that covered his ears, and fingered the lobes. She rested her knuckles on his cheeks and, with her index fingers at the corners of his jaw, drew his head closer.

His mouth relaxed as her upside-down lips touched his. She experimented with her tongue, discovering his waiting just behind his teeth. She was heartened by his acceptance, though he didn't kiss her back, at first.

A groan was her initial clue that he felt pleasure. Without losing her lips, Jinx slipped from under her, burying his hands in her hair with as much enthusiasm as his tongue and teeth tugged at hers.

The deck plates were cold and hard as he laid her upon them. Jinx was hard and warm as he lay upon her. His knee pressed hers apart, and she wrapped a calf around his leg. With his free hand, he stroked her breast, through her tunic, where it was squeezed tight against his chest.

Grinding against her, mimicking intercourse, Jinx moaned and growled, muffled by her lips and tongue. Beth arched against his knee, reveling in the confining weight of him as his thrusts pinned her to the floor. It felt like a car date. Like being in tenth grade and feeling hot and frustrated, limited to substitutes by mores and reason, but searching for a way to satisfy the hormonal hunger of awakening sexuality.

Jinx threw back his head with a primal sound tearing past his clenched teeth. His cock, encased by denim but solid against her groin, twitched and spasmed as his orgasm shook him. Beth gripped his belt loops and arched to meet him, vicariously enjoying his climax. This was something they had achieved together, not something he had forced from her.

He collapsed upon her and hid his face in her neck. His breathing returned to a normal pattern quickly. Nuzzling her neck, he nipped her earlobe—hard but not viciously so—and she gasped. He flexed his thigh against her crotch, and chuckled when she jerked beneath him.

“Well,” he whispered, balanced on one elbow. His free hand stroked her belly. Beth snuck a look at his face. Contemplative and calm, two emotions she had never seen in him before.

“Please, Jinx. Don't be mean,” Beth said, nipping at his chin before he raised it out of her reach.

"Mean?" His fingers circled and teased, lower now. She could feel the caress of his eyes on her mouth, and the brush of his breath against her lips. But he pulled away when she tried to kiss him.

"Help me," she murmured, straining toward his fingers, which stirred in the strands of her nether curls, but meeting only air.

"Help you?"

He was in a mood to be difficult. She turned her face and stiffened under his hands, denying that she wanted to be touched, especially by him.

He licked her neck and pinched her nipples into peaks. "Oh!" he said in a voice brassy with sarcasm. "You want me to make you hot." He accompanied the word 'hot' with a nip to the soft skin under her ear, and continued to emphasize each of his remarks with the exquisite torture. "You want me—to make you pant—and make you—scream. You want me to get—you—off." He fastened his soft lips and sharp teeth on one of her hardened points, and suckled and nipped through her tunic until Beth squeaked out 'yes'.

Suddenly, she was alone on the deck and he was reaching down to help her up.

"Okay," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "In fact, I'd love to. But later." He made a face of disgust and adjusted the front of his jeans. "I need a shower." The natural aftermath of sex with your clothes on, she thought, nearly naked was easier.

He grasped her shoulders, gave her a quick peck on her lips, and then turned her toward the door. "Let's go dirtside. Can you swim? Want to go to the beach?"

"But Steve..." Beth began, as he pushed her forward. Steve had said no landings.

"Steve is on Rala." Rala was the other habitable planet in this system. Jinx laughed. "And—you know—when the cat's away..." The mice will play, he didn't say.

Mice? Beth wasn't convinced that Jinx wasn't a rat but, for a swim in that azure ocean, she'd risk it. Besides, maybe the lander had a com-link.

* * * *

Jinx touched down in the water, startling her at first. Well, Beth reasoned, if it could travel through vacuum it was only logical the lander could float. The vessel rocked in the gentle waves.

"I thought you said the beach?" she said, wondering why he'd chosen an offshore place.

He shrugged. "Too much red tape."

She smiled. "We're breaking some law, aren't we?"

Jinx made a wry face and nodded. "No big deal, as long as we stay off the land."

He pulled her from the bench and pointed up. "Let's go."

The lander had two stubby wings. The waves washed over them, but the upper body was well above the waterline and Jinx hoisted her topside. To the left, maybe two miles off, the mainland loomed in a series of low bluffs. Opposite was a chain of islands, a little further away. The sun bathed the straights with dappled sparkles.

The hull warmed in the sunshine, Beth swam and basked, while Jinx painted scrapes and dings on the flat gray surface. He avoided the splash of the water and Beth figured that he couldn't swim. Why would a man raised in space ever need to learn how?

She stretched out, pleasantly tired by her last swim, and sighed.

"Having fun?" Jinx's shadow fell across her face.

"Yeah. Thanks for bringing me."

"No problem." Without opening her eyes, Beth sensed him lying down beside her before feeling the touch of his body along hers.

"I think it's later," she whispered and he chuckled.

"Not completely stupid, I see."

He licked the salt from her body, not stopping until the drops were her sweat instead of seawater.

She had no idea where he'd learned how to please women, but he had and she luxuriated in the firmness of his caresses and the tender aggression of his teeth and lips. He lapped her dry and wet again, prolonging her orgasm. She screamed against his palm, her cries muffled by his lips at other moments. When Beth thought there could be no more, he surprised her.

His cock, smooth and hard, drove into her. Though her mind shouted no-no-no, her voice begged him oh-yes.

"Just a few pumps, Collins, so we know what we're missing."

Beth wondered he could speak; she was far beyond the point of being intelligible. A few massive thrusts, which made

her long for more and edged her over the peak again, and Jinx withdrew.

His tongue left damp traces over her breasts and down her stomach. He drew another quiver or two from her most sensitive flesh.

"Done yet?" he asked. His voice mirrored his smile.

"Not quite," she murmured, reaching for him to demonstrate how good fellatio could be if she was given the opportunity to participate.

* * * *

The sunset was gorgeous, reflecting off the endless ocean. Jinx sighed.

"Not bad," he commented. Beth giggled. Awhile earlier he'd been groaning his satisfaction, and now her performance was 'not bad'? Yeah, right.

Instead of answering, Beth caught his nipple in her lips and scraped the tiny point with her teeth. He grunted and pushed her away.

"Okay, okay. Better than not bad. That was pretty damned good." He grinned in her direction. "Lady, you give a helluva blowjob," he drawled in Steve's voice, making her laugh. It had been a helluva afternoon, she thought.

He sighed again and sat up. Beth rolled to her back, hoping he'd touch her. Jinx brushed his fingertips across her breasts, from one to the other.

"Just think of how much fun we could have on the cushions," Beth whispered. The broad surface of the lander's topside was far from ideal. The plates and the joints had tattooed his shoulders and ribs, and she rubbed the markings

away. Her own skin—on her hips, and knees, and who-knew-where—would be bruised by morning but each spot would testify that she and Jinx could get along if they tried.

"Shit, you are making this tough." He stood and walked to the bucket of tools. He rummaged a moment before pulling out a plasma gun.

"Soranda has no large predators. The temperature at this longitude never drops below comfortable." Beth had been puzzled only a minute, but had figured out what Jinx was about to say.

"It's time for you to swim again."

The waves churned up by the lander's take-off had almost drowned her. If Jinx hadn't tossed a sealed parts bag into her hands, she would have. Owing her life to the consideration of the bastard who had dumped her here made her angry. The fury motivated her arms and legs and kept her head above the waves.

Beth had swum toward the mainland before realizing the tide made that goal a futile fight. She reversed course and let the current guide her, and then swam with it. She couldn't see them from here, but remembered the chain of islands and hoped the flow brought her close to one.

When she tired, the bag buoyed her until she regained her breath. The brush of aquatic life startled her regularly, and she hoped Jinx was right about predators.

A rhythmic crashing alerted her of a nearby beach. She scraped a knee sliding over a barrier reef similar to coral. After that, she simply let the surf wash her onto the pebbly sand shore. Losing the bag in the rough landing and unable to

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find it in the darkness, she stumbled into the dune grass and curled up under the moonless sky and unfamiliar stars.

Had she jumped from the frying pan into the fire or into the dishwater? She'd wanted off the 'Cassiopeia' and suddenly she was. A desert island sounded pretty good in comparison to the tightrope life of the past few months.

A not-too-distant howl echoed through the night, and Beth reconsidered. Not a deserted island after all. She hoped the natives were friendly.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The wind whipped strands of hair across Beth's face. When she pushed it back, the fully glory of the morning struck her. She sat up, grimacing at the dried salt on her skin. The air was sea-swept clean. She noticed a distinctive fragrance carried on the breeze, and took another deep breath to enjoy it.

She carefully repressed the worry about the presence of howling natives, as she picked her way back down to the water's edge. She'd thought about the contents of the parts carrier during the night. If Jinx had wanted her dead, the gun would have done it. If he didn't necessarily want her to die then, maybe, the bag contained survival equipment. A glance in both directions revealed an expanse unblemished by flotsam.

Much further down the beach an outcropping of stone formed a ship's prow. The waves crashed unevenly, but she detected a thin dark line leading from the forest into the sea. If she had any luck left, that was a stream of fresh water. In the firm flats of sand left by the ebb tide, Beth fast-walked toward the distant landmark. Ironical, she mused, that being naked on land felt so much barer than aboard ship.

She crossed two distinct footpaths and considered following one to wherever it led, but the long immersion in salt water and the energetic activities of the previous afternoon made finding water more important than finding people.

A third path loomed and, as she approached, a tight knot of hunched figures emerged from the trees. At the same time that she saw them, they saw her and stopped, no less startled than she.

"A-lo," one in the group called. The five squat humanoids, dressed in rags, moved down the trail. The first one paused a few feet from her. The others, she noticed with increasing concern, shuffled and shifted into a rough circle around her.

"A-lo," Beth said. The chattering leader poked at her crotch with his staff. Beth grabbed the end and pushed it away. 'Stop', she commanded in the only language she knew that they might. Another poked her from behind. His staff was sharpened, and Beth finally realized the staffs were rudimentary spears. The third jab broke her skin.

Beth kicked, connecting with the leader's knee and he fell howling. She turned and smashed the heel of her hand into another's nose and grabbed the stick as he dropped it. She lashed out, driving the spear into the closest sternum, and then reversing the blow to catch an unprotected stomach. When the last one, clutching his belly and vomiting, fell on his butt in the waves, Beth took the opportunity to run, seeing more of the squatty creatures appear at the head of the path.

She glanced back as the ship's prow outcropping drew nearer. She couldn't see them but their howls and calls grew nearer every time she slowed down. She hadn't dared pause at the rivulet of fresh water, vaulting it in a desperate attempt to forge a lead on her pursuers.

Beth waded into the surf, hoping to find a way around the base of the bluff. The waves drove her back, but not before

she saw the sharp rocks, partly submerged, littering the bottom of the cliff. She stopped at the water's edge, thinking furiously, picturing how plain her path in the pebbly sand would be.

The craggy, splintered rock face attracted her eyes. If she could inch along the rocks to the log near the tree line, she might find somewhere to hide. The beasties would think she'd gone into the water and, if there were a way to get over the outcropping they would use it and reveal the path to her as she watched from the bushes.

The rocks were sharp on her bare feet and she had to drop into the sand at two points short of the log, rather than dangle by her hands over a pair of wide breaches. The beastie boys didn't look too smart, maybe they wouldn't notice. She brushed the divots with her toes, trying to conceal them.

She dove behind the log as the first beastie loped into view. A group of them gathered at the water's edge where her path led into the surf. They stood grunting and then, to her dismay, fanned out along the beach.

Swearing under her breath, Beth crawled into the underbrush and crept behind the trunk of a huge tree. The bluff was wider here, barring her retreat, and would force her back toward the area where the beasties had come from.

A shout came from the beach. She peeked around a frayed piece of bark. The goons had discovered one of the places where she'd had to step into the sand. They were on to her trick and would find her, sooner or later. Would she be a treat or a snack?

"Shit," she whispered, looking for a weapon in the vine tangled brush.

"A good idea." A voice came from the dense foliage above her.

Beth stared into the leaves, trying to find the speaker.

"It may have worked had you not given up so easily when you were on the cliff."

Beth glanced at the beach. Some beasties were trying to climb the rocks, but others had come toward the log.

"I didn't give up. I fell," she hissed, wondering if she could have managed to swing across the gaps instead of stepping into the sand.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Where are you?" Beth asked. She saw the movement before she saw the form. Green and brown camouflage settled into tan and beige. Yellow eyes shifted from the hunters on the beach back to her face.

An involuntary and too-loud shocked squeak popped from her and he glanced back at the beach.

"That was a mistake, Seba," A'tan said. He lay down along the branch and reached toward her. She cringed away. He continued to offer his hands.

"Here are your choices, as I see them. Stay with the subs or come with me. Be their slave or my willing companion." His eyes flickered toward the ocean again. "Decide."

Beth heard excited shouts as her second divot was found, and more as her hiding place behind the log was discovered. She raised her arms and said, "Willing companion." He lifted her into the tree.

They climbed up, using several smaller branches, to another wide one and then he stopped. His camouflage darkened and he pressed her into a niche in the bark, hiding her as the subs surrounded the tree. Her scent, apparently, had lost none of its appeal. His erection throbbed against her belly. Almost imperceptibly and, judging by his grimace, involuntarily, his hips nudged forward to rub harder. Though concealed, his minute movement was enough to attract the attention of the sharp-eyed beastie boys. Rocks ricocheted off him and the tree-limbs.

"Can they climb?" Beth whispered into the space between her hands and his chest. She felt him shake his head. Another shower of stones pummeled the foliage around them.

A'tan, in a voice no louder than breathing, said, "Sussa. Good ears, good aim." A stone bounced off his shoulder, an inch from her face, breaking his skin. Red droplets welled up and trickled toward his elbow. Beth pressed her fingers to the cut to halt the flow. He made a low sound of approval.

The beasties were patient. Beth's hand went numb but the bleeding had stopped. The Yeter's blood was as red as her own, and she surreptitiously wiped the stickiness on the bark behind her. That slight movement, like any other, initiated another flurry of rocks and sticks flung with precision and force.

The sun rode most the length of the sky before the subs relented. In a spate of gruff barks, the toad-like leader posted a pair of sentries at the base of the tree. The others followed him back toward the scalloped beaches. Beth sighed as the huddled group trotted out of view. The guards chattered to

each other in low voices and, gradually, grew more interested in picking insects from the tree trunk than in watching the limbs above.

A'tan pressed his fingers against Beth's lips. "Sussa. Wait." Silently, as if he were the specter he appeared to be instead of a flesh and blood creature, the Yeter eased down to the lower branch. He crouched there, a darker shadow among the leaves. God, he was fast, Beth thought, as in one quicksilver motion her companion leapt from the bough to the ground and, in the same moment, grabbed both beastie boys and slammed their heads together.

Beth clambered down at his urgent gesture, and jumped into the waiting basket of his arms. He led through the underbrush following an obscure path, unmarked except by twisted stems, subtly arranged to appear natural to the uninformed eye. He tapped each as they passed, and Beth began to see the pattern. At the next junction, she pointed in the direction the mark indicated. A'tan studied her face, and then nodded. He gestured for her to lead.

The trail ended at the base of the cliff. Beth examined the rock face—still not climbable as far as she could see. A'tan stood with his arms crossed, watching her. His expression, amused tolerance, said that he expected the problem to stump her. Beth backtracked, looking for a missed marker but finding none. Turning to admit defeat, her eyes strayed upward and noticed a ledge halfway up the precipice. Another of the huge trees, similar to the one near the beach, poked its shoulders above the vine-covered weeping willow-like bushes of the underbrush.

She smiled and pointed at where a branch had elbowed against the stone. A vague line in the sheer face might be a narrow ledge.

"Climb the tree?" she whispered, triumphantly. A'tan nodded. He crouched and sprang upward to clutch the lowest branch. He swung on to the limb and tossed a braided rope down.

At her puzzled look of askance, he said, "Useful for hauling up what the tide tosses me from the sea," as he lifted her.

"Is that why you were on the beach today? Looking for stuff?"

"Yes, now up." He put out a hand as a stirrup and lifted her to the next branch. After that first boost the smaller boughs provided a ladder to the elbow-like limb. A narrow protrusion led to the same ledge that she'd seen earlier. At the back of the shelf was a crevice, angling toward the top of the cliff. One foot in front of the other, stepping where A'tan's had placed his. She stumbled, surprised by the abrupt end of the climb, when they reached the crest.

At the base of the escarpment, night had fallen. On top, a glorious sunset bathed them in its glow. Beth's body, now that the beastie boys were left far behind, renewed its clamor for water. Spots dotted her vision and she reached for the Yeter to steady herself.

The spots connected and she felt dizzy. Vaguely annoyed at her weakness, she scolded her contrary consciousness to stay with the program. A'tan's large hands guided her supine and her vision cleared.

Moisture touched her lips and she licked them dry. A'tan held the end of a tube to her mouth. She recognized it as a joint of one of the bamboo-shaped grasses covering the summit. The stem crackled as he squeezed, releasing the juice of the inner pulp. He reached for another.

He would continue, she realized in amazement, unflustered and patient for as long as it took for her thirst to be satisfied. In that moment, she decided something else. He would have never left her to the mercies of the subs. If she had not joined him in the tree, he would have stood beside her on the ground and fallen, though a powerful fighter and skilled hunter, to the overwhelming number of spears and rocks.

Why? Did he consider her his property, or responsibility? Or was he simply desperate for a female? How had he wound up on this planet at all? Too many coincidences and unanswered questions, too many misconceptions and doubts, Beth accepted his warmth as the sunset passed to dusk and fell asleep with anxiety sending uneasy dreams about running through the dark on a path in the park.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dappled sunlight played on the opposite side of awake, painting the inside of her eyelids with golden ever-changing designs. The sound of the ocean, the breath of breeze, and the call of seabirds and insects, allowed Beth to imagine her bedroom at her parent's vacation timeshare in Cabo. The knots and strings supporting her belied that, but could have been the lounge at the seaside pool.

Even the smooth shoulder under her head and the muscle-heavy arm draped across her ribs could have been those of a handsome local surfer or fishing guide, taken to her bed out of boredom or spite. The spicy scent clinging to her skin was unmistakable, however, as was the fragrant whiff of some unknown flower wafting in the balmy air.

"You are awake, Seba," A'tan rumbled, tasting her skin with every word.

"My name is Beth," she replied, moving her neck away from his lips.

He laughed. "No difference." He had been waiting for her to awaken, and his excitement was evident in the prodding on her hip.

She uttered, 'Stop' in the spacer tongue, and pulled away. "Not Seba. Willing companion."

A'tan chuckled again. "No difference." With his long fingers, he stroked the soft skin of her inner thighs, urging her to part them with increasing pressure and intensity.

"Oh, but there is. I agreed to be your companion not your fucktoy." She swung her legs and sat up, resisting both the

strength of his arms and the languid warmth spreading within her disloyal flesh. "You never asked about sex."

He shrugged. "Considering our former relationship, sex is implied."

Beth looked him in the eyes, loving her next words though hating the source, and wondered if he'd honor them. "Letter of the agreement. Implications are not stipulations and are unenforceable."

"I could enforce..."

"Yes, A'tan. You are stronger and could rape me. But that would negate my willingness, as well as voiding our agreement."

A dozen expressions crossed his face, and she was glad for the final one—resignation. A fleeting regret rippled through her heart and loins. She hadn't expected him to accept her argument so readily and, now, wondered if she had really wanted him to.

He watched her explore the perimeters of his rough habitat, a wide ledge on the far side of the escarpment. Roughhewn and fiber-lashed driftwood formed a few rudimentary comforts—a table, a bed—and a railing had been devised, barring the drop from accidental clumsiness. Sand covered the uneven surface, but sharp stone ridges still remained to stub the toes of the unwary.

A water bag, once a spare parts container, dangling from an exposed root, dripped as moisture condensed on the surface. She looked back at the Yeter, crouched against the bed frame, his confusion mirrored in his expression and defensive posture.

"May I?" she asked. Beth saw the shadow of his logic rippling on his face as he considered the ramifications of 'willing companions'.

"Yes. I will show you where to get more when we need it," A'tan said. She would work for her keep then, but the prospect didn't worry her. The longing in his eyes did.

* * * *

The Yeter avoided her. After revealing the path to the spring and instructing her of the myriad dangers of the beaches, he simply disappeared for long periods. If she hadn't continued to feel his eyes and guessed that he was hidden in the foliage, watching her, Beth would have thought she'd been abandoned again.

He brought food, regularly. Beth had heard a rhythmic pounding and, later, found a wide leaf holding a mound of beige mush. Some sort of tuber, she supposed, starchy and bland, but it filled her stomach.

A'tan ousted her from his bed the first night and she slept fitfully on the hard floor. A few days later, she returned from her routine morning trip to the spring to find a second rough frame and the beginnings of a hammock strung within. She recognized the fibers as the peeled remnants of the long whip-like leaves of the huge beach trees. A pile of them had been dropped in a niche at the back of the ledge. Beth heard a rustle and, turning quickly, caught sight of movement retreating toward the beach trail.

Sighing, she nibbled on the fresh tuber mush while deciding how to finish the netting that would be her new bed.

* * * *

A creak awoke her. At the far end of the ledge, Beth could see the dark on dark shadow that was A'tan, creeping to his bed. She waited until he settled.

"Why are you here?" she asked, softly. Speaking to him was difficult, he had insisted on her silence so completely that she found the habit of quiet returning.

At first, she doubted the Yeter would answer but, after rumbling a moment, he said, "I came to retrieve a—friend."

"Where is he?"

"Probably home. He stole my lander."

Beth said, "Some friend."

He laughed in the darkness. "Considering that I left him here first, his actions were quite reasonable."

"You abandoned him here?" Soranda must be the dumping place for the universe, she thought with a snort of bitter amusement.

"Yes."

"Why?" She knew why Jinx had left her—jealousy—but why would have A'tan left someone, a friend, here?

"M'ral would have argued against my going to Solterra." Beth could tell that his yellow eyes were looking at her.

"Perhaps, I would have listened. How sad it would have been to have missed meeting you."

Meeting? Beth swallowed the anger, not wanting him to disappear again. "What a coincidence that we both wound up here."

He rumbled disagreement.

"No coincidence, my pretty one. The pattern of the universe seeks balance. We were destined to meet again."

"So Jinx dumped me here to satisfy karma?" Beth giggled.

"Ah."

"What?"

"I knew the Forday would not abandon you. Why did you not remain in their care? They would have kept you safe."

"I don't want safe. I want to go home. I found a ride back to Earth—Solterra—with humans."

"Ah," he said, as if she had explained everything. "Fellow Solterrans. Did you choose well?"

Beth rolled away from his gaze, and blushed as he snorted. "I thought not."

Did all the other space-faring species consider hers untrustworthy? It bothered her even more that, so far, they had been.

The days settled into a pattern. A'tan would disappear until nightfall when he would return with tubers or pods, which they would eat in their opposing corners while exchanging a few sparse sentences.

Lacking anything more useful to do, Beth would bask and wander. One morning she discovered a pile of sea-battered electronics and wished that she knew more—enough to assemble a comm-link to send a beacon to Erit.

She puzzled over the pile, sorting as she had upon the 'Cassiopeia', until she uncovered something she recognized. Her mouth watered as she pried the base plate from the chassis and peered within. A few rotten connections, corroded by salt water, but fixable. She tinkered a few minutes, before setting it aside. She needed a heated point-tool to set the wires reclaimed from other sources. Hopeless. She lay back in

the lush greenery, waiting for inspiration. Gazing at the filigreed blue above the saw-toothed leaves, she imagined how the tuber mush would have tasted baked in the bread oven.

Beth liked Soranda's sky—deep clean blue, yes, but with a tinge of pink at the edge of every cloud. The weather was tropical and the long afternoon's heat encouraged lethargy. She wondered how the Yeter spent his time. She could hear him at times, digging and moving through the brush. The vegetation grew rapidly, his efforts covered in the course of an evening by vines and bamboo grasses so his purpose remained hidden.

Celibacy seemed easy to him. Except for the flare of heat in his bright yellow eyes, which he averted, the Yeter revealed nothing of his desire for her. If she stood too close, her scent or nearness would cause an erection of which he never spoke. She tested him, an admission that caused a worm of self-recrimination, by brushing against him.

Occasionally, when her desire blazed so bright that she could smell the changes, and feel her resolve slipping, he would glance at her and ask, "Willing companion?" His taunt always dampened her passion with anger or, maybe, shame.

Thinking of her effect on him—and his on her—Beth let imagination produce a lover to guide her hands. This time, as in others and all too often for her peace of mind, her dream paramour, rapacious and insatiable, took on the form and scent of her yellow-eyed companion.

Her many months with Steve and Jinx hadn't been completely wasted, Beth mused smugly; at least she'd

learned to masturbate effectively. She laughed aloud, and stretched in sated luxury but froze upon seeing A'tan crouched motionlessly a few yards away. His arms were crossed and his elbows rested on his knees, suggesting ease but his flesh was furrowed by the tight grip of his fingers. Barely repressed passion glowed in his amber eyes. He continued to gaze at her as she blushed and shook the last of her erotic thoughts from her imagination.

She clambered to her feet and back-pedaled away from him. His rumbling comment halted her at the edge of the small clearing.

"How amazing and unique you are."

Beth looked back at him, confused.

"This..." he said, stroking the air in the shape of her curves, mimicking the motions of her earlier caresses. "This thing you do? Alone."

She couldn't help the embarrassed giggle. He'd obviously been a spectator more than once. Why had he allowed her to see him, this time? "It isn't amazing or unique. We all can." She thought briefly about elaborating about the mores and morality of self-pleasure, but decided A'tan's passion might be too involved in his curiosity. He'd shifted his position, revealing his erection.

"Not all." He shook his head.

"Humans, I mean."

"The more I discover about your species the more I find there is to discover. We think you so—backwards and hopelessly imprudent, but I wonder if it is because there are depths to you in ways we've never encountered." He stood

slowly, as if aware that his movements put wings on her heels. "If we approach your atypical and aberrant sexuality as evidence of complexity instead of simplicity, maybe other aspects of your nature would become more clear. Perhaps, making the case against Solterrans isn't as effortless as the Union believes. Intervention may not be advisable." He spoke in a wondering tone with slow words painfully and carefully chosen.

Beth listened as A'tan expounded on his theories with a mixture of astonishment and growing anger. Who would have imagined such a debate, and what gave his species or any other the right to pass judgment on humans?

"Perhaps all you space shitheads should just leave Earth alone and let us figure out what to do about us." Beth turned and, as loudly and impressively as she could in bare feet, stomped away.

His old smirk, superior and cruel, was echoed in his voice and in his choice of comment but she didn't look to see it. "Then again, maybe your kind is exactly as simple and imprudent as you appear," A'tan said to her back.

Or maybe they were just different, Beth wanted to shout but her breath was coming in annoyed pants and saying anything would cause tears. How hypocritical of him to use her sexually but condemn her species for the ability to be used.

Not until later did it occur to her that the first part of what he had said could be construed as an apology and awareness to his inbred and undeserved prejudices.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Pride and anger sealed her lips from seeking more conversation. The trash pile of gear confounded her abilities and frustrated her patience to the point that she avoided the whole issue by avoiding the area.

Beth had grown accustomed to useful utility and found time weighing heavy on her hands. She sat on the ledge, daydreaming and twisting her long hair into braids. The aimless activity sparked an old memory of a scouting project.

Suddenly excited by an idea, Beth gathered leaves and vines, returning to the ledge with an armful. She plaited long leaves into shaggy mats to cover the toe-mashing ridges on the ledge. Satisfied with her creation, she twisted leaves, vine and blossoms into a wreath, which she hung from the crook of a tree root. She experimented with other shapes and techniques becoming certain, though many of the products fell apart as soon as they were unsupported by her hands, that with practice something useful could be accomplished. Covered with shreds, sap, and bark fragments, she made a trip to the spring to rinse off.

When she returned, A'tan stood on one of the mats, his toes gripping the ridge through the padding. He held a handful of pods. Beth fetched the piece she thought might become a sunhat. Upside down it made a fair bowl for the vegetables.

The Yeter, grabbing his share of the pods, retreated to his bed. From time to time, Beth caught the direction of his gaze, the mats, the bowl, and—most often—her wreath.

"I'm learning how to make baskets, I think," Beth said, looking at the bowl in her lap and not at him. "Could you use them if I can figure it out?"

He nodded.

"I'm always stubbing my toes," she said, indicating the mats with her chin. "Maybe, I could make the beds more comfortable." The strands left welts in her gradually bronzing skin and she'd noticed similar marks on the Yeter's dappled hide.

He shrugged, noncommittally, before glancing more openly at the wreath. Beth said nothing.

A'tan stretched out on his cot. A few moments later he sat up again. "What is that?" He pointed at the wreath above her head. She followed the direction of his finger and shrugged.

"A wreath."

"A wreath?" He parroted, not taking his eyes off the misshapen circlet. "What does it do?"

"It hangs on the wall." Try as she might to contain her amusement, his confusion made her lips quiver with an imminent laugh.

"Yes." The Yeter stood and approached, examining the wreath more closely. "But what purpose does it serve?"

Beth shrugged. "Mostly decorative."

"I see," he said, his words contradicting his expression. She laughed. "Just for pretty."

"The flowers will wilt."

"I'll pick more."

A'tan looked again at the wreath before glancing in perplexity at Beth.

"Like art. You have art and craftsmen ... Yes? Like the Jibarae make ornaments?"

He nodded, and then laughed, shaking his head. "Baskets and mats. Then wreaths. The more I learn, the more I don't understand." She laughed with him, understanding very little of his amusement but glad to be as much of a cipher to him as he was to her.

They stopped smiling at the same moment and Beth was uncomfortably aware of how close he stood and how enticing was his physical presence. The initial spark in her stomach flickered stronger and spread in the old familiar way. His nostrils flared as he caught a whiff of her desire. She slipped off the bed and backed away.

The Yeter growled and took a half step to block her path. "Taza you are to me." He reached out but she dodged his hand. One of the infernal ridges blocked her sidestep and Beth lost her balance, falling toward the railing. She had time to hope that the barrier was well built when the structure shifted and gave way.

In a continuance of his grab, A'tan caught Beth's elbow and swung her away from the precipice. He pulled her tightly to his body, every muscle and tendon taut with his snake-quick effort to prevent the mishap. In the realization that she nearly fell, chugging strangled sobs escaped her fear-choked throat.

"Sussa, taza. I have you." A'tan nuzzled her ears and cheeks, crooning soft syllables of comfort. She clung to him, rejoicing in the circle of his arms, before shrugging his

embrace away knowing that with each additional moment of intimate touch her options evaporated.

"No." Again his expressions shifted from concern to annoyance to resignation.

He stepped away willingly but with a snarl, heading for the path to the beaches.

"Why me, A'tan?" she asked, her question halting his progress. "There are plenty of girls on Earth."

The low grumble of his gruff answer barely reached her ears. "You were a living jewel in a barren desert of gray stones. The dust could not dull what you are, for eyes that can see. How could I not pluck you from that dead place?" He strode down the trail escaping a response. An unnecessary retreat, because she had none. She had asked for an explanation and gotten poetry. How unexpected.

The small moon had set before he returned. Beth acted asleep, lying still and breathing carefully, as he stood beside her cot.

"I know every nuance of your breathing and scent," A'tan said. "No need to pretend." He laid something beside her and, a moment later, she felt him move away.

Curious, Beth explored the bundle with her fingertips. A ragged spare parts bag! She sat up and undid the closure. A piece of damp cloth, some packaged food bars, a compact tool the use of which she couldn't make out in the ambient light and, when she dug deeper, her searching fingers found her hairbrush.

She alternately swore and laughed at Jinx's version of a survival kit. What was missing told her more. Her baubles.

Jinx had weighed her life and the value of the Jibarae jewelry and robbed her of both. Those earrings would buy him a place on another ship, freeing him from Steve. Maybe he wasn't as mad as she thought.

Beth loved having clothes but wondered at the Yeter's amused smirk. She looked a question when he laughed as she smoothed the hem down on her thighs.

"It will not help. I can still smell you," he said, shaking his head. A quick glance confirmed that he hadn't lost his desire for her. He averted his eyes to the tool—a pocketknife—Jinx had included.

"What is it about my scent?" she asked, tired of guessing what would arouse the alien's passion.

Though his eyes focused on the knife, she knew the Yeter's entire being was tuned to her—her scent, her movements, her expression—like always. "You always smell like readiness. Solterranean physiology is unique in that you can engage in sex without regard to a mating cycle."

"Your females can't?"

He shook his head. "No, only during their season."

"How often is a season?" she wondered aloud.

He shrugged. "They mate, become gravid and bear young. They nurture and teach. When the child is self-sufficient, only then will another season come upon them."

Beth listened in disbelief. "You're talking years, right?"

The Yeter stood and turned, testing the compass on the knife handle. "Four, maybe five if she bears twins."

"God! No wonder..." she exclaimed. He didn't pick up on what she'd left unsaid. "How many wives—mates—do Yeter have?" A'tan looked at her blankly.

"One."

"I mean, males don't just not have sex for four years. Do they?"

He nodded. "Some do." He ran the longer blade across a leaf and watched the dismembered piece flutter away in the breeze. "Most don't. On Yerat there is a semi-sapient substitute." He continued to unfold the various tiny tools of the jackknife. "The symbiotic female ruts among her own kind then, when sufficiently impregnated, emits a scent mimicking Yeter readiness. We males use the appropriately structured orifices for gratification and our ejaculate nourishes the unborn offspring." The yellow eyes flicked just once toward her face, revealing a final detail.

Beth felt bright-red rage, absolute fury, boiling up as an old question was graphically answered. Whirling, she lashed out with a tight fist. He dodged her blow, letting it land on his shoulder. She continued to kick and punch until the Yeter reached inside her guard, grabbed the front of her tunic and yanked it above her head, entangling her arms, with a low rumbling and very suggestive laugh. He caressed her rump and ran his hand up her spine, chuckling as she struggled.

"Angry?" he asked, whispering in the vicinity of her ear. "You are far more interesting than a traditional seba."

She felt the press of his tumescence against her belly and, with her mouth full of hair and cloth, muttered 'No'. Her body arched, even as she denied him verbally. The Yeter released

his hold on the folds of her clothing and she collapsed to the sandy floor. She climbed back into her tunic and spat the hair out, glaring at him.

Humiliated, Beth cried, "Why would you call me that? I'm not some—animal."

He looked through her, thinking.

"I'm not just a mindless thing to fuck," Beth hissed.

A'tan held up his hand. "No, but I wanted you to be just that and nothing more."

"Why?" So far none of his replies had satisfied her questions but Beth had begun to realize that each, when he would deign an answer, was the truth—or part of it.

"Things are easier to kill than people." He refocused on her face. "I hated you."

That statement, spoken so devoid of emotion, startled her into silence. Hate? That emotion had never crossed her mind as his motive for her abduction.

"I know, I know. You want to know why." His chuckle gently mocked her constant curiosity.

She nodded.

"Because, though very similar in scent and attitude, you are not she." Each word was a separate fight to speak and the effort painted his expression.

'Who?' she wondered, but said nothing to interrupt the flow, uneven and hesitant as it were, of his explanation.

"I delayed, though I did not know why, telling myself that the moment was wrong. I waited and watched and killed others instead. In the park, until I actually touched you, you were dead." He crouched down before her, eyes on her level.

His hand rose to her throat and lightly circled it. "I hated that you lived, when my mate did not."

His misery spilled out in the low quick words and long pauses. "I went to Solterra to find my death but, having not killed you, I created a reason to live."

His fingers stroked upward into the small hairs on her neck. "On Yerat, there is a proverb that says one's responsibility does not end with a single good deed. Children often bring home sayemta—small birds—snared by thorn trap trees. Once released, caring for the injured creature is required. They lose the ability to be self-sufficient. After saving one of these birds, it is a rare child who will free a second because the consequences are never-ending. One may choose to ignore a bird in a barbed cage but not the one rescued."

"You could have returned me, A'tan." His analogy was not lost on her but she denied the comparison. She, when he released her, missed the touch of his sleek, warm skin against hers.

He shook his head. "I tried." He stood and walked to the trail to the escarpment, poised to escape any more attempts to clarify his actions. Finally he turned back and said, with an honest puzzlement in his eyes, "I expected you to obey, or disobey. In one you would have found a center of commerce. In the other, an enclave of armed guardians for local justice."

She shook her head, not understanding.

"If you had followed my instructions or done the opposite you would have been in places of safety." A center of commerce—a shopping mall? An enclave of guardians—would

that be a police station? "You are like one of those birds, se'taza. Completely incapable of survival without a protector."

He came back to where Beth still sat, listening—absorbing every word and learning painful things about herself by his confessions.

"One or the other, I would have understood. But why would you enter the lair of beasts upon escaping from me?" A lair? The brownstone in that unknown city, she suddenly realized, where the gang had raped her. Where he had slaughtered each of the members in bloody mayhem. Had he been trying to free her and only interfered when they would have killed her?

He did leave then, having explained more than she wanted to know, but she knew he'd return—as an obligation, the responsibility for having freed her from an apparent prison still in effect. Suddenly, many of his behaviors made sense.

Oh God! Was she nothing more than an injured bird in his eyes? Was she a duty of nuisance and a never-ending good deed in progress? She would continue to refuse sex, as revenge for his kidnapping her and for her pride, but she vowed to find ways to prove her self-sufficiency and her ability to survive without a keeper.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Her weaving improved with time, and she managed a few sturdy baskets, which A'tan accepted without comment. Beth had also learned to recognize the above ground foliage of the edible tuber and made a point of collecting a few every day. Not as useful as she'd hoped to be, not proving self-reliance or competence, but a beginning, maybe.

The blossoms in the wreath faded but, before Beth gathered more, were replaced with a plant with thread-like vines that sprouted tiny amber petals. With a little water, the flower took root and thrived in its aerie. Practical plus visually pleasing, she wondered what form art took in Yeter culture.

Beth discovered, by accident, what A'tan spent his days doing while wading down the tiny stream where she filled the water bag each morning. She came across the Yeter kneeling in a patch of pale peach-colored flowers and watched. He would choose a flower that had wilted to a tiny hard core. He'd pluck the seedpod, poke it back into the soil and pull the stem out to reveal the lumpy roots, which he dropped into a basket.

The task didn't look too difficult so, in keeping with her resolution to be more self-sufficient and useful, she decide to help. A'tan didn't startle as she knelt beside him and Beth wondered if he'd been aware of her vigil all along.

As she reached for one of the plants, he reached out to block her hands and murmured, "You should not."

Insulted by his lack of confidence in her ability to perform the menial job correctly, she met his even glance coolly, and

carefully followed the procedure to the exact flip of the wrist he'd used to dislodge the humus. The small basket was almost full.

The Yeter shrugged and continued his work, picking up the basket and moving further down the banks of the trickling brook, while Beth started with an empty one.

The blooms, delicate and beautiful, drenched the air with a heady scent. A familiar fragrance, she realized, the one she'd woken up smelling every morning. The seedpods were rare and, as she sorted through the thicket of stems to find the tiny pale nubbins, the juices of the easily bruised leaves dribbled down her arms. Wiping a strand of hair from her face, Beth touched her mouth.

The sap tasted as sweet as the blooms smelled. Beth licked her fingers clean, and then her wrists. Having dined on tuber mush since her arrival, the new flavor was a treat. Instead of tossing the greens away immediately, Beth sucked the stems dry. Each was subtly different.

"Why didn't you bring these back to camp, too? I am so tired of tuber mush," she said. The Yeter had stopped gathering and watched her as she licked her fingers clean yet again. He leaned against a boulder half-buried in the forest floor. A bunch of roots, sans stems, was piled beside him. The next step in the process, she surmised, was trimming.

The almost withered plants, the ones with the seedpods, were sweetest and, giggling with delight, she found another, claiming her reward happily and greedily.

The sun warmed her shoulders and, filtered through the trees, painted a dappled design on her skin. Entranced by the

movement of her Yeter-like hands, which, like sparklers, left a blur of afterimages on her retina, Beth drew patterns on the wind, each faded but then renewed with an additional flick of her fingers or wrists. The same breeze rustled the trees and, once noticed, the fronds were as fascinating in their random and unexpected dance as her hands had been.

The sky drew her gaze further upward. Tilting her head made her dizzy and Beth blinked. Within her head, colors and shapes whirled about, creating a kaleidoscopic show until consolidating into the outline of trees against the heavens. Pink-rimmed clouds sailed through her vision, trailing lazy satin ribbons.

Lying back, Beth could feel the press of grass beneath her rump. The sun caressed her ears and cheeks like the breath of a lover.

A riot of scents wafted past, tickling her nose, but one, familiar and constant, was close by. Reaching out, her fingers laced with the long strong ones of her companion and drew him nearer. As if reading her mind, he tugged the suddenly much too coarse and far too confining tunic from her body. The sunlight buttered her breasts and belly as his hands smoothed the downy hairs flat. Every touch of his fingers was a separate entity on her flesh, each leaving its own distinct impression and sensation.

Intoxicated but hyperaware, kite-high but completely lucid, she felt no fear or concern. Revenge and conditions and implications aside, she knew what happened, what was happening, what would happen, and admitted sex was what

she wanted—had wanted every minute since seeing A'tan again.

"The flowers," she murmured. The sap, Beth realized, had done this.

"I said that you should not," A'tan said, sliding his hand between her thighs and parting them easily.

Easily, because they were so slippery from sun-butter, she mused. How did she smell to him now? Like the flowers or like his mate?

A'tan lifted her from the bed of blossoms and rubbed deliciously against the hidden seed of her flesh. His erection filled her and the flower of her desire unfolded. She let her head and arms fall back, trusting him for support, and felt the sun on her face and his hands on her body, moving her, raising her, cherishing her. Suddenly, like a bud bursting into bloom, her climax opened her.

Even in her intoxication, Beth knew that the girl she had been when first abducted would have never been able to survive this sensation of being turned inside out. Was it the alien environment or the alien? Had the circumstances in general changed or had she on some elemental plane? She had come farther emotionally than the unthinkably huge distance she'd been brought physically. Never had she known such fulfillment, never had her track been so clearly defined, never had she felt so right on Earth—though, supposedly, that world was home.

How could this experience, while stripping everything from her, leave her so completely inundated with richness?

As A'tan drew her against his chest, seeking her shoulder for the kiss of his teeth, Beth melted, molding her body to his. He whispered, "I said that you should not."

His slick fangs broke the skin and his tongue soothed the wounds.

She laughed, and replied, "But aren't we glad I did."

His chuckle rumbled through her, spawning a second tight bud of passion that, eventually, would be nurtured into another ripeness under a bright Sorandan sky.

Things were subtly different afterwards. A'tan kept his distance but, if Beth helped him in his harvest, would take what was offered. Because of the resultant headache, she rarely drank any of the sap. The mere act of joining him near the flowers served as her signal, as her invitation.

Sometimes, remembering F'yan's penchant for her struggles, Beth would put up a feigned if furious resistance. After the first time—once certain of her willingness—A'tan exhibited the same appetite for the rough foreplay. Such battles would leave her breathless but exhilarated, especially when her efforts left him as breathless as she.

Having subdued, well used, and exhausted her, the Yeter would wrap her carefully within the circle of his arms and knees and simply hold her motionless. Low rumbles of pleasure would emanate from his chest and resonate through hers. Better than a lullaby, almost as hypnotic as the crash of waves on a beach, Beth would grow drowsy and often awake, hours later, alone in her bed.

"Why do you like me to fight?" she murmured, resisting sleep.

The rumbling stopped and, with puzzlement, A'tan asked, "Would you want a weak mate? Or one who could not defend your offspring?"

"I guess not," she said, not bothering to explain that, on Earth, humans had a different set of criteria for choosing a mate. It occurred to her that only the weapons were different, not the outcome. A woman would still choose the highest-ranking male available to be her spouse. If that meant money, power, or social standing instead of ferociousness, strength, or clan affiliation, was that so very different? Men had their own set of parallel criteria, no doubt.

"A cultural anomaly, for a different evolution," A'tan said.

The creak of the fibers in the bed frame disturbed her just enough to let her realize that she had dozed off anyway. She threw a sleep heavy arm around his neck and grumbled some syllable of discontent.

'Stay', she whispered in the spacer language. A'tan chuckled and obligingly fitted himself beside her.

"Sussa, se'taza. I'll stay awhile."

Se'taza. He'd called her that before.

"Why do you call me that?"

"I must call you something and your name is meaningless."

"Is se'taza the same as seba?" she asked—ready to be annoyed.

The Yeter rumbled a moment in the alien language, but finished the comment in English, "Nothing like. Taza is a flower. Se'taza is pretty flower."

He nuzzled her ear and neck, the low rumble of contentment already beginning. Beth, forgetting he didn't, kissed the thin-lipped mouth and touched the end of her tongue to his. His purring ceased but he didn't pull away. She settled her head on the suede-soft skin on his firm shoulder and whispered an answer to his unasked question.

"A cultural anomaly, for a different evolution."

After a while, his purr resumed and she fell asleep.

* * * *

The advent of frequent rainstorms marked the change of seasons. Beth spent several uncomfortable nights huddled under the table. She couldn't lie down because of the deep puddles caught on the uneven shelf. The Yeter slept upright also, in his comfortable crouch, undisturbed through the storms, with the prominent ridges above his eyes diverting the water away from his nostrils. As she watched, envious of that useful evolutionary development, she decided to weave another mat as a shelter from the worst of the rain.

Eventually, the dryer weather returned, emphasizing for Beth that time continued to pass. She wondered how long the island had been her home and if anyone missed her back on Earth.

* * * *

"Come," A'tan ordered, shaking her awake. Beth, still partially enthralled by an erotic dream the threads of which she was reluctant to let go, nuzzled the wrist of the hand that rested on her shoulder. She licked the hairless skin and smiled as he growled.

"Is it like that this morning?" he said. She could hear the interest in his voice and an echo of her own passion. He obligingly caressed the curve of her, between shoulder and hip. With sure fingers, he tested her dampness, letting them slide across sensitive areas and within. Beth squirmed as he thrust and arched as he withdrew. What satisfaction his hands provided only spurred her desire for more of him.

Suddenly, he pulled away and said, 'Come' in spacer language, and added in English, "Later, taza. The merchants have come to the beaches and we must trade the flower roots for supplies." His hand slipped under her head and lifted her upright. "No more tuber mush, I hope."

The trip to the beach required constant vigilance. A'tan said the beastie boys did abide by the traditional truce of trading days, or so his friend M'ral claimed. They had taken a roundabout route to the ship's prow outcropping, coming from the same direction as she had on that first morning but stayed in the shadow of the trees.

Before leaving the shelter of underbrush, A'tan whispered, "You should not have come."

"A little late, now."

He nodded. "You could be misconstrued as a commodity."

She thought quickly. "Maybe you could trade me, A'tan. As a way off the island."

His suddenly averted glance told her that he'd already thought of that.

"I wouldn't blame you ... That would be a fine contract, if you could get it."

He shook his head.

"I'd get off this island, too. We'd both be closer to home."

"You've had good contracts, taza. Anything I could negotiate here would not be as lucrative or safe. You would have few options and no freedoms."

So, he wouldn't trade her because his sense of responsibility prevented him from selling her into some kind of slavery.

"Be alert. And, if something happens, run."

A'tan stepped out onto the glaring sand. Several groups of subs watched their approach and grumbled heads-together. Like flypaper the covetous looks stuck to her but, taller than any islander except A'tan, she kept her eyes focused above their heads.

Beth pretended disinterest and gazed out to sea. She listened for the telltale sound of approaching footsteps in the sand, used her peripheral vision to alert her to movement, and wished she hadn't come.

Several individuals shouted rapid comments to the Yeter. She could feel his back against hers, as he guarded from that direction. 'Naul,' he said.

A mechanical sound diverted everyone's attention from her and the Yeter to the vessel, which appeared from beyond the outcropping, skimming the waves.

The engines were powered down and the hovercraft drifted to the beach. Armed guards spilled from the ramp and a few squat individuals emerged with more decorum. At first glance, they appeared to have beards and bushy eyebrows, but then one of the warriors responded to a comment with a laugh. The 'hairs' lifted, separated, and Beth could see that the

beards and eyebrows were fleshy fingerlike growths. Reacting much as a human's facial muscles would, the newcomers' expressions were displayed in the rise, fluttering, and drooping of the knobs.

Like having a face full of worms, she shivered in revulsion.

Beth compared the newcomers to the beastie boys. "A'tan? They are the same species." The distinct facial protuberances were absent in most of the subs or, if present, were very short, malformed, or askew.

"Sintal." He jerked his chin toward the motley islanders. "Descended from first generation defectives or space-bred."

One by one, the groups approached the merchants to offer their goods, mostly dried tubers or bundles of fibrous material. A'tan hung back, having been the last to arrive he would be the last to trade.

As soon as a deal was made, the group would take the payment—plastic boxes of packaged food, simple tools, and folds of cloth—and melt into the underbrush. Any who argued were threatened with the plasma pistols.

Finally, only Beth and A'tan remained.

"A-lo," A'tan said. He uncovered the baskets of dried roots and stepped back. One of the merchants examined the goods while the other two gestured and chatted. Beth knew, as she always had, that she was the topic of the conversation.

In a whisper, A'tan said, "They want to negotiate for you, taza. Unless you want to go with them and be resold to someone else, I will say no."

"Say no." These guys didn't look like the types that liked 'Naul' for an answer but nodded good-naturedly when he did.

A'tan laughed and commented something that the guards bristled about until the third Sintal chuckled.

The baskets were carried aboard and payment, two crates of various supplies, was brought out.

Beth had drifted away from the hovercraft, putting distance between the traders and her, in case. A'tan, lifting the heavier box, motioned toward the remaining one. Anxious to get off the beach and back on the escarpment, Beth hurried forward.

One of the guards grabbed her arm as she reached for a crate. Another pointed his weapon at the Yeter, who looked surprised and then embarrassed.

"I did not expect them to steal you."

Beth looked at the Yeter. "I did. Don't be stupid. Negotiate."

A'tan grunted a few words but the merchants laughed, their tentacles waving. A bolt of cloth was offloaded as payment for her and the Sintal boarded the craft. The guards pushed Beth up the gangplank as the engines whined and the vessel lifted on its cushion of air again.

"I will come for you," A'tan shouted, clearly wanting to rush the ship but not wanting to be killed in the process. Having seen what the weapons could do, Beth couldn't blame him. She had survived as his seba, the Jibarae ship's whore, Steve's junior, and Jinx's scapegoat. That he didn't risk being shot reassured her further, in the Yeter's opinion, she would survive whatever these Sintal gangsters had in mind.

Chapter Thirty

A'tan had abducted her. She hadn't liked it then and didn't like it any better as the Sintal trading vessel powered up to do the same thing. At least the Yeter felt responsible for her, and gave every appearance of being sincerely concerned with her safety.

The rough water, indicating the reef, appeared at the edges of the gangplank. The guard, who gripped her arm, palmed a swirled pressure point on the bulkhead. Beth waited until the platform was horizontal and quickly edging upward before initiating her plan. All three of the guards had already dismissed her, more familiar with vegetables and roots as trade goods—no doubt.

When they turned into the bowels of the ship, Beth kicked the knee of her captor, pushed him into his fellows, turned and clambered to the lip of the gangway. Poised with her toes gripping the edge, she saw A'tan standing on the beach. She heard a commotion behind her as the guards tried to climb the hatch, which was nearly vertical. Through the soles of her feet, she felt the motor stop, and the motion of the door cease and then reverse. Time to go, she thought, taking in a deep breath and diving as shallowly as possible into the sea, trying to avoid the flesh-puncturing coral.

As she sliced the surface, A'tan dashed to the surf's edge and yelled, "Naul!" The water closed over her head and she frog-kicked, parallel to the beach, as far as her breath would take her. Through the churning water, bright motes of light pulsed. A school of fishy-type creatures swam through one

and several burst open like ripe tomatoes. Plasma pistol shots, still dangerous, were all the incentive she needed to ignore the burning in her lungs awhile longer.

She let her mouth break the surface, gulped another breath and swam again. When she finally felt safely out of range of the pistols, Beth eased her head up until she could see the cove. The hovercraft was far beyond the ship's prow rock and the beach was empty. A'tan was gone—as were the supplies.

Beth stumbled onshore and choked up a stomach full of brine. Tired enough to sleep on the dune again, but wary of the subs she followed the camouflaged trail to the cliff side behemoth sized tree. The bottom branch was out of her reach but she fished down the braided rope with the aid of a long stick.

The climb to the top of the escarpment was twice as difficult as she remembered but the bamboo grass was the same. She sat in the mottled shade and sucked several of the succulent pieces dry of the restorative moisture. The uneven dappling of the sun's rays through the tall grasses rippled on her arms and bare legs.

She had escaped. Beth considered her actions, reliving them, and wondered why she felt so bereft. Hadn't her plan, though quickly evolved and implemented, worked? Didn't that prove something? Or was this yet another example of leaping from the frying pan into the fire? Would have her life changed that much if she had remained on the hovercraft with the hideous Sintal? Another cliché; crossed her mind.

Better the devil you know than the one you don't—and with that she touched the source of her sorrow.

A'tan had left her.

Though he saw her escape, he left her. The thought replayed like the chorus of an annoying song, unwelcome but resistant to banishment. Yet, she was returning to him—because he was right. She wasn't able to fend for herself—here or, maybe, anywhere. Maybe she should have stayed with the merchants, but anyone who did illicit trading with defectives and criminals was probably not terribly trustworthy.

Trust, she had begun to trust A'tan. Foolishly—the pattern was so familiar. Could she make a good decision? Or would she continue to leap then look? Had she seen in the Yeter virtues that didn't apply outside her species? What had F'yan said that Solterrans lacked? Honor? Did the word have a universal definition?

He'd left. Was that honorable?

Her tunic dried and crusted before Beth, the trails of her tears clear in the dust on her face, finally stood to complete her journey back to the Yeter.

* * * *

The cartons had been stacked against the inner wall, creating shelves to hold the supplies. Packaged foods, Mylar-like bags of juices, lengths of fabric, and a few distinctively shaped cylinders had been arranged on them.

A'tan had his back to her, staring at the wreath with its tiny blossoms. His hand shot out and caressed the circlet

where it dangled from the root and, snarling, he ripped it to shreds.

"You could have just told me you didn't like it," Beth said. She had stopped at the spring to remove the salt and stood dripping at the head of the path. "I guess I'll make another."

His response couldn't have been faked. The Yeter whirled, crouched, and camouflaged to stone gray and earth brown simultaneously until he saw her in the shadow of the overhang.

"You are dead. I saw you drown." A'tan paled into his normal coloring but remained in his defensive half-crouch.

She shook her head.

"I saw you jump. I saw them shoot you. The water was bloody," he insisted.

"You left me." She had come all this way to accuse him.

"I thought you were dead." The Yeter leapt across the space between them, paused, and then lightly placed his fingers on her neck. He watched his hand while gliding it down her tunic and, crouching before her, rested his forehead on her belly. "I thought the next time I touched you would be for burial." His long fingers encircled her knees and caressed the downy hairs of her legs.

Her questions of the meaning of honor were still unanswered, but some of her faith restored. If she had indeed been dead, waiting for her would have been futile and dangerous. She stroked his neck and head, waiting for him to speak or move.

He stood. "How did you escape?"

"I swam."

A'tan ran his hands over her again and, growling, yanked the hem of the still-wet tunic over her head and away. She leaned into his chest, knowing his arms would enclose her. A moment later, they did. His erection throbbed against her.

"You swam?" He lifted her by her knees and, growling, seized her neck in his teeth. Her long legs gripped his waist as his fingers cupped and kneaded her rump.

His fangs left her neck and she felt a trickle of warmth. His tongue, long and narrow, lapped the blood away. He bit her again, a mere nip, not breaking the skin.

"You are alive!" he whispered fiercely, licking her neck and nuzzling her ear.

She nodded. He shifted her, his hard cock poised at her femininity. She strained toward it, but he held her firmly.

"You are alive and you can swim."

"Yes," she said, answering all his questions, including the ones left unvoiced.

He chuckled and then growled, driving upward into her, forcing her down on him.

A rape may have been gentler, she thought, but his desperate passion inflamed hers and she welcomed his penetration. Yeter foreplay, she thought—laughing aloud. Teeth and tears, conflict and contention, invariably followed by passionate conquest.

For a handful of days, A'tan shadowed her everywhere. She would turn from the stream and he'd be there, staring at her. Opening her eyes from a nap, his would be watching her sleep. She'd look up between bites of food—no more mashed

tubers—and catch the movement of his face turning away from her.

Beth was reminded of the time on his ship, following her rescue of him. Now, like then, sex was an afterthought but fiercely intense as if he was fighting whatever internal demons possessed his mind. Now, like then, whatever the Yeter was planning he kept it a secret. Now, like then, the unwavering attention worried her.

* * * *

He awoke her again, touching her neck with his knuckles. ‘Come,’ he said. The shadows told her that the sun hadn't risen completely.

“Too early,” she murmured, stroking him erect as a distraction.

Roughly, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet. “Up.”

The climb to the summit of the central mountain was as steep and more treacherous than the path from the beach to the top of the escarpment. Whenever Beth would slow, A'tan would pinch or poke her from behind. Her temper flared more than once, wondering at his callous treatment, wondering why they climbed. She would try to argue but he would prod her onward, lifting her with a firm hand to her rump, to the next outcropping or foothold. If she didn't catch hold, he'd slap her thigh or nip her calf. She kicked at him, annoyed and irritable, but his solemn grumble dissuaded her.

Eventually, she came to a place where the wind, at cross-purposes, whipped her hair in all directions. Ignoring it, she

continued to clamber, using her hands on the steepest part, until the Yeter's fingers around her ankle drew her to a stop.

"Look," he said. He withdrew to a ledge a few meters below.

They'd reached the summit. The far side of the mountain had collapsed. A few more steps and she would have tumbled down the exposed rocks into the ocean at the base. A tiny collection of huts huddled in a clearing and Beth could see a few figures tending a fire. The smoke made a blue-gray stain rising in the pristine air.

She looked further out. In the distance, a dark green line marked the surface of the azure water. To her left, a few smaller islands poked their heads from the waves. To the right, closer, was the strait she'd crossed when Jinx had made her swim. There, the mainland was more distinct, three-dimensional. Finally, she joined A'tan on the ledge.

Not certain of the purpose of the exercise, but quite positive there was one, Beth said, "Nice view."

"How did you get here?" he asked. He'd crouched down and was brushing the loose soil with his fingertips.

Beth told him about Steve finding her and Jinx dumping her. She recounted the swim, and the strange sensory deprivation of nighttime in the salty Sorandan ocean. She admitted that a part of her worry, mostly denied at the time, included the good chance of missing the islands and winding up in the open sea, adrift. The surf, she remembered, was strong and how, even with the buoyant spare parts bag, she had nearly not made it over the reef.

The entire time she spoke, he doodled in the dirt. Gradually, a map formed and, when she finished, so had he.

"The closest land," he said, gesturing to the strait, "Is sparsely populated." He tapped his map. "The space port is on the other continent." By his diagram, it was twice as far away as the first.

He looked up at her. "I have a ship there."

A'tan outlined his idea as they retreated from the precipice in the late afternoon. The deal was simple. In exchange for his giving her a ride directly to Earth, Beth would swim to the mainland and fly his ship back to the island.

"I don't know how to pilot a spaceship, A'tan," Beth said, feeling her hope quiver with each breath.

He made an impatient gesture. "How did you know how to access the air supply when you needed it?"

"I had just watched you."

The Yeter nodded. "Solterrans are good at mimicry. That is not my worry."

"Your worry?" she asked. He stopped on a narrow ledge in the deepening gloom and looked toward the mainland, though it was no longer visible. His immobile face revealed nothing, so Beth stepped closer. She touched his arm to get his attention.

Like a spring-loaded device, his hand darted out and encircled her arm, spinning her to face away from him. Wrapped in her own arms with his fingers like a vise around her wrists, Beth struggled instinctively. The loose stones skittered beneath her feet subdued her will to fight and she wondered if his footing was any better. Would they fall?

The precariousness was an aphrodisiac to her senses. Before his fingers even parted her feminine folds, Beth panted her desire. His knees spread hers achingly wide, as her feet left the ground. The muscles of his thighs were ridged with his effort. Her toes found anchors on his sculpted calves.

Releasing her arms, his hand sought her breasts, palming one roughly while his fingers tweaked her other nipple into hardness. The nerve ends fired, sending white heat inward to stimulate other pleasure points, while his wanton invasion of her female passage inflamed others. Beth leaned against his chest, liking the smooth caress of his skin against her back, and ran her hands along his inner thighs.

With a desperate-sounding gruff, 'Stay', he directed her to lean forward and grasp his knees. Seeking some balance, she realized, hearing the pebbles rattle off the edge of the shelf. The head of his cock bumped into alignment, and he rocked her back, entering with a groan of pleasure, and a deep growl of anticipation.

The slightest shift caused more slippage, but the simple rocking of her hips sufficed. He climaxed quickly, letting her tempo reign, while remaining absolutely still. In a final, miniscule pump, he sent her over an internal edge, holding her securely as her inner landscape shifted. In a final, careful motion he drew her head to his shoulder and nipped the tender skin beneath her ear.

Somewhere in her ambushed mind, Beth was aware that he had changed the subject, distracted her with his desire, in order not to answer the question of his worry.

Chapter Thirty-One

Island life settled into a new routine. Some days were spent learning to pilot his ship while others were used for swimming.

While she swam, A'tan patrolled the surf, watching for the island's other inhabitants. At times, he stood ankle deep and observed her exercise. The easy life on the island had taken its toll on her stamina and she tired quickly.

When Beth returned to the sand, the Yeter asked, "Is that as far as you can swim?"

She replied, "Yes."

His yellow eyes revealed nothing, but she saw displeasure in the set of his lips.

"Every day I'll go longer. It won't take long."

Beth tried to push, building her endurance, but the heat sapped her energy and, she admitted with reluctant honesty, her determination flagged for another, and more disturbing, reason. Aside from the monotony—a problem that had been mostly solved by reinitiating the sexual part of her relationship with A'tan— island life was comfortable and she was reluctant to seek change.

A'tan sketched the layout of the console in the sandy floor of the aerie and described the appearance of each touch pad and swirl. Despite listening closely, Beth couldn't picture the setup and, with each incorrect answer, her instructor lost more patience. Finally, reverting to an old habit, he slapped her.

Her frustration boiled over. Beth slammed her fist into the square of his chin, knocking him on his ass. "Don't ever do that again. You have no right." She jumped to her feet, kicked his ribs, and stormed down the path toward the spring.

The heat evaporated with each step, restoring clarity. He'd been surprised, she thought, by her speed—otherwise he would have blocked her blow. Analyzing the moment, Beth knew her response had been instinctive, not measured or planned but, in retrospect, completely justified. Maybe she spent too much time thinking about all the wrong things. Some actions should just flow without internal debate. She tried to separate decisions into categories; some required careful reflection, and others should be immediate and left to instinct. Which were which—and how could one know? Was there a third option?

Beth stopped for a quenching gulp of water before rambling onward through the foliage, watching for the rare but painfully thorny bramble bush. She could hear nothing from the camp and, more importantly, could feel no eyes or presence stalking her. A'tan had obviously decided to leave her alone. He hadn't appeared angry or puzzled when she hit him. Considering how enigmatic his thought processes appeared to her, hers must drive him crazy, especially now when her hormones raged.

During the months on the island, her cycles, disrupted by space travel, had returned. Mostly an inconvenience, her menses also served as a calendar, reminding her of time's incessant march. She'd read somewhere that people missing for seven years could be declared dead. The idea of 'being

dead' when she wasn't bothered her and, though she knew it was a ridiculous motivation, she vowed to return to Earth before that could happen.

Beth balanced across a fallen log toward a shaft of sunlight, which indicated a clearing. The junk pile hindered the re-growth of the tangled grasses and vines. She hadn't been there in awhile, having given up on the hope of rebuilding anything useful from the trash. Though A'tan regularly threw electronic flotsam from the beaches here—after determining if they worked (which they never did)—the pile was too big to have been started by him. The various occupants, involuntary or otherwise, of this part of the island had used this place for a long time.

She squatted, examining some of the recent additions. A corner of some larger piece jutted into her thigh and she yanked at it. The hunk was heavier than she thought. Tossing some of the smaller items aside, more of the flat shell was revealed. By jiggling and pulling, Beth loosened the sheet from the surrounding debris and encroaching vines. With a final vicious tug, it sprang free and she tumbled over, landing on a familiar looking surface. Touching the tiny swirls and integrated buttons reverently she smiled.

"A'tan?" she yelled. A few minutes later, he burst into the clearing, looking prepared for a battle—whether against her or some other foe, she couldn't tell.

Beth held up her find, a dented but still legibly marked navigation console, and laughed. "Now! Teach me which buttons to push."

Luckily, the basic functions were the same between most nav-comms. Some of the placement would be slightly different but the symbols were not. The swirl that looked like a rocket's flare regulated, reasonably enough, the engine output. The stack of horizontal wavy lines controlled altitude. Running her fingertip up the left curving swooshy-pictogram turned the ship to the left, and the one to the right did the opposite.

A'tan drew the numerals that would mean she was on the correct heading to return to the island. Never once did he seem reluctant to instruct her on the operations or the locking keys that she would need to release the ship's controls for her use. She wondered if he trusted her so completely—or was simply so desperate to leave Soranda.

The Yeter winced. He hadn't said anything since the beginning of her first 'solo' flight but had made several aborted motions and twitches as she manipulated the controls.

Beth caught the pained look from the corner of her eyes. The console was propped on one cot and she knelt before it. She pulled her hands into her lap and said, "What did I do wrong this time?"

He pursed his lips—angry or chagrined at her correctly gauging his expression—and grumbled something terse in the spacer tongue.

"Begin again," A'tan ordered. Beth crossed her arms and shook her head.

"Not until you tell me what I did wrong."

He stood, stretched—the muscles rippled under his mottled hide, flexing her imagination—and strode to the water bag to take a sip. Nearly empty, she noticed, making a point to remember to fill it later. Returning, he knelt behind her. Beth leaned against his leg, enjoying both the scent of his skin and the warm silky texture. He slid his hands beneath her breasts and stroked softly.

“You crashed my ship three times and overloaded the power source at least that many times.” His sleek fingers caressed the undersides of her arms. His knees were snug on either side of her hips. She liked being within the circle of his embrace.

He lifted her hands and pushed them toward the controls. “Try again. Here, I will help.” He leaned forward and tapped a key. Deep in his throat, he rumbled. “That is the power initiating,” he explained. Beth giggled and he frowned dramatically. Pressing another tab, he continued the rumbling and began to shake. “A little too much,” he said, cutting back on the engine output. The shaking subsided. “There. Ready to go. Take it.”

Laughing, Beth placed her fingers on the various controls and lifted off. A'tan tilted her to the left until she equalized the horizontal levels. As she ‘flew’ he responded as the ship would, tilting and jerking with a variety of sound effects. Once he nearly flipped her over after a poorly executed turn. The lesson had changed from frustrating to fun.

After a while, he suddenly wrapped his arms around her waist and fell back, rolling with her and coming to a stop on top.

"Did I wreck again?" Beth asked, disappointed because she thought it was going better, and her skills were improving.

He shook his head. "No, you did well." A'tan nuzzled her chin and she, finally, caught on. Confirming her theory, she pushed upwards and felt the hard swell of him.

"Ah," she said in a knowing voice. "You're jumping ahead to the part when I land successfully and we celebrate my return."

He laughed. "Yes, se'taza. I am certain you will do well then, too." The Yeter settled beside her, the length of his cock heavy on her thigh, and draped his leg over hers. Always dominating and seeking to subdue her, she mused, but in no hurry to consummate the moment this time. His fingers, well versed in the motions that brought music to her senses, moved slowly.

His arm, beneath her head, flexed as he rolled her nipples. She buried her face in his shoulder, letting him play her like a harp, trying to prolong the gentle handling by offering no resistance and by not struggling. Beth feared even her tiniest quiver would initiate the pseudo-violence of his usual lovemaking.

Some new game was afoot, she knew, as he delicately teased her breasts with his tongue and stroked her feminine flesh into heat. He found the crux of her, and focused his caresses there until Beth could no longer remain passive. She guided his fingers within and posted upon them as best as she could with his leg anchoring her to the sandy mats.

His hands mimicked her tempo and Beth reveled in the gradual climax that left her feeling sated but exhilarated instead of spent.

She could sense his yellow eyes watching her but didn't open her eyes. Whatever this was about, he'd tell her in his own way—or not at all. She wasn't the only one who used sex as a distraction from other issues.

He began his caresses again as if she'd not just had an orgasm from his touch. She didn't guard her movements and squirmed under his ministrations.

"I did it correctly," he said.

A giggle slipped out. "Where did that come from?"

A'tan chuckled. "You are not the only one who can learn from watching."

He had observed her when she had practiced her solitary pleasures. From that he had determined what she liked and how to please her.

"So, I see."

"You enjoy this?"

"You can't tell?"

"I have misinterpreted so many of your responses and thought this might be an example of the same," he said in a whisper.

She had never considered that he might share her insecurities. "I enjoy this, A'tan. Don't Yeter females enjoy sex?"

He shrugged. "I never thought to ask." Seeing some argument stir in her expression, he added, "It is not a topic of conversation among us. It is a need that is filled or not—like

hunger. When one's mate is fertile, sex follows. Technique is not the issue, the resultant pregnancy is." His palm stopped her indignant words. "For what it is worth to your strange Solterranean sensibilities, I believe my mate enjoyed it—very much." He laughed. "She fought more intensely than custom dictated and prolonged our breeding by her ferocity."

"If she fought that hard, maybe she didn't want to mate with you!"

He shook his head and murmured, "No, she chose me. I completed her..." he said and, even more quietly added, "As she did me."

Beth caressed the square of his jaw, liking the intimacy of the moment even though he spoke of someone other than herself. His having experienced love—or the Yeter equivalent—somehow made him seem less alien.

A'tan shook himself. "Back to practicing. I am concerned about landing and think your best chance is to set down in the shallow water in the cove."

She smiled wickedly and wriggled against his rigid maleness. "Let's finish practicing this first."

"Hmmm. Not a bad idea." He nuzzled her shoulder, seeking access to her neck.

Giving his chest a shove, Beth joked half-heartedly, "Maybe I can fight as ferociously as she did. Maybe you'll want to stay on the island with me."

His face went blank and expressionless for an instant, and then Beth saw the hunter who had taken her reawaken.

"No," he growled. The hands, which moments before had been gentle, gripped tightly and his caresses became

invasions, brutal and abrupt. Despite knowing her flight would serve no purpose, the adrenaline of fear galvanized Beth into struggling. Sinking her teeth into the closest chunk of flesh, lashing out with her knees and hands, and twisting free of his arms; she scrambled to her feet and sprinted toward the path. With a howl, the Yeter pursued and caught her easily.

He slung her face down across the cot, with the nav-comm hard and unyielding beneath her. Fingers in her long fall of hair and a strong hand pressing against the small of her back, arched her rump against his erection. His knees parted hers and he rubbed, rumbling in expectancy.

"Be still. Be quiet." His raping her was an old trick. The penetration, when it came, hurt less than the betrayal of his metamorphosis from companion to captor.

Day after day, week after week, he strong-armed her into following his regime. Flight practice, endurance training and, when darkness curtailed those, rough careless sex without a hint of the playful solicitude that had surfaced so briefly.

The pleasant interludes at the beach became battles of will. Beth had thought that, though A'tan could force her to do many things, swimming practice required her cooperation. As had happened before, he proved her wrong—heaving her into the surf when she refused.

"Naul," he barked, as Beth headed toward the beach. He pointed back at the water. "More. You may not want to leave Soranda but I do."

Twice he ordered her to continue. The third time, she'd had enough and ducked under his arm. He whirled, circled her throat with his fingers and tossed her into the deeper water.

She kicked at him and he captured her ankles. One wavelet and then another closed over her head before she began to windmill her arms and breathe between strokes. Gradually she established an effective pace while the Yeter did nothing but confine her feet.

Beth's shoulders burned with the effort. Each stroke sent arrows of agony into the muscles of her back. Every time she raised her hands to push forward, Beth was certain she wouldn't be able to do it again—but she did. A few times, she inhaled at the wrong moment and had to struggle her head up to cough. At no time did the Yeter relinquish his grip on her legs.

Finally, she could do no more, but forced another short series of strokes from her deadened arms, nonetheless. One more, she insisted, but there was nothing left to command. In a meter of water, she would drown. It washed through her nose and mouth, burning in her sinuses and throat—and then there was air to gulp, light on her face and, gloriously, dry land beneath her stomach.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A'tan said very little while she'd recovered on the beach and nothing on the trek back to the escarpment.

He'd left her alone at the spring to clear the salt from her skin, hair and throat but had been waiting in the aerie, lying on his cot.

In the last glow of sunset, A'tan watched her with an unreadable expression. He looked away, if she made a point of catching his eyes with hers. Beth swallowed more saltwater—her tears—and whispered hoarsely, "Do you want me dead?"

He had sat up then, to gaze directly at her. Would he answer? She'd had time to think about his actions and motives—and about his metamorphosis—but could find nothing to temporize his brutality.

"No." He had waited until the shadows had coalesced into a cloaking darkness before speaking again.

"I want you to live."

He came to her and rumbled when she cringed away. "I have learned much by watching you and not just your sexual preferences. I know that you are intelligent and clever. I know that you can absorb skills easily and have an amazing ability to adapt..." he paused, and asked, "Are these Solterranean qualities generally or yours specifically?"

She remained silent and looked away.

"Se'taza." He hadn't called her that since becoming the hunter again and it startled her into looking at him. "I have

also watched you give up or give in, and choose the wrong time to do either."

He picked up the nav-comm inset and wiped the colored touch pads.

"I fear that you will give up out there—that you will find death more comfortable than continued effort."

He sighed. "You cannot succeed if you never try." He shrugged and tossed the panel over the bank. "But neither can you fail."

A'tan returned to his cot and curled up facing away from her. "Think no more of it. I will find another way to leave this place."

Despite his request that she not think about it, Beth couldn't help but do just that. Maybe a Yeter could have and didn't realize by telling her to stop he ensured that she wouldn't. More than the swim and their escape, she considered his opinion of her abilities and shortcomings.

Did she fight all the wrong things? Did she surrender to the wrong demands? Did she give up—or give in—when she should argue or persevere? She knew he was wrong about whether she would choose death over discomfort, having lived through her viral infection, but recognized an element of truth in the accusation. Only when death loomed would she dig in her heels and pull back. Out there—in the water—how closely she allowed death to stalk her would determine failure or success.

A'tan harvested roots again and never mentioned swimming or piloting but would speak of other matters as if nothing had disturbed their island existence. Beth caught a

few speculative gazes and wondered what else the Yeter might be considering as trade goods the next time the Sintal merchants came ashore.

She waited until her companion was occupied by his daily routine before setting out. Wanting it helped, she thought, pushing a strand of hair from her eyes and glancing at the summit above. The ascent went smoothly and Beth watched the sunset from the peak as the orange and purples stained the deep velvet blue of the Sorandan sky.

Stars, diamante heaven borne, burst into their nightly glory. Appreciating both the beauty and the relative scarcity of them, Beth lay on her back and observed the alien configurations while longing for the familiarity of the North Star, Orion's Belt or the Big Dipper. Waiting for full night, worrying about the return trip in the dark, she sought patterns in the stars.

Gravel rattled below, alerting her to the Yeter's approach, but she'd already found her bearings and memorized the serpentine constellation. She sat upright and hugged her knees, waiting, but the noise ceased.

"A'tan?"

"You are well?" he asked, after a lengthy pause.

"Star-gazing." She gestured to him, knowing his eyes could discern more than hers in the gloom, and he crept silently to her perch.

"Where is Earth—Solterra—from here?" she asked, leaning against his warmth and feeling grit from the climb on his skin.

His hand, on the back of her head, directed her chin in the proper direction. Darker on dark, she made out his arm

pointing skyward, his other hand cupped to obscure all but a few minor stars. "There, the palest yellow one in that cluster." By coincidence—or by the odd design that the universe weaves—it was a star in the serpent pattern she'd fixed in her mind.

"And—your sun?" she asked, not remembering if he'd ever told her its name.

"Yera." He leaned from side to side, searching the heavens before chuckling. "Even less impressive than Sol." He moved his hand toward the horizon and through the tube of his fingers, a trio of dust fine stars appeared. "One of those. I am not certain which."

A'tan adjusted his legs, and settled on his rump after brushing away the offending skree. Beth rested her head on his knee and closed her eyes as his knuckles brushed her neck. "Why did you come back here? It is dangerous."

She knew why, but found another, equally valid, reason to confess. "To see the big picture."

He grumbled. "The island is very small, se'taza. No big picture to see at all."

She swallowed her laughter, unsuccessfully. "I meant, my place in the universe."

"Ah," he sighed, understanding more. "Where in the One Pattern of Being this solitary Solterran female fits in?"

One Pattern? From his intonation, the phrase capitalized itself. "One Pattern of Being? Do you believe in God? A supreme being?"

"Hmmm? No. We believe in a design not a creator. If there is intellect maintaining the pattern, it acts peripherally for the

inconsequential existence of a single entity—only directing the forwarding of the whole. Of the Biggest Picture.” He laughed and she joined him.

“Of course, there are those who deny the pattern, saying if it cannot be comprehended then it is nonsense.”

“And you?” Beth asked.

“I think there is no mountain high enough for us to gain the proper perspective, though at times I've partially glimpsed some portion of it while up there.” He was looking at the sky as he spoke, and Beth knew ‘up there’ meant in space.

“You had the habit of watching the stars while we traveled together. Did you ever grasp anything similar?”

“No. I was too busy surviving. You were brutal, A'tan.” Her denial was a lie but she didn't realize it until the words were spoken. Any solace she'd ever felt was while watching the blur of stars. She'd felt something of the sort in orbit above Soranda before Jinx had distracted her.

“No pattern or symmetry? No sense that the strongest of desires have a place and purpose in the universe?” he persisted. “The tide of things starting and finishing?”

Beth admitted it with an ‘ah’ of surprise. She had felt an ending when A'tan had ceased being gentle with her and became the hunter again. The same sense of completion drifted over her anew. The present state of affairs had reached a conclusion, denying it or fighting it notwithstanding, and change would come. She wondered if he felt it, too.

He drew her within his embrace, and rumbled into her hair. Beth turned in his arms, straddled his lap and gripped his waiting erection, taking the initiative. The stone hurt her knees but not enough to dissuade her efforts. His strong hands encircled her waist, lifting her until he could crouch, as he preferred.

Beth whispered in his ear. "Be brutal. Finish me." She flexed her legs and tightened her thighs against his hips.

His pre-coital growl rumbled through every point where her body touched his. Beth lay back on his knees, arching to writhe closer to him. His palms, sleek and hard, travel the length of her from her hips to her breasts—his fingers tweaked her nipples in passing—to her shoulders. His cock throbbed and prodded until the head, hot with engorgement, found her niche.

With shared intention, they pressed together—she by wrapping her legs tighter and he by grasping her arms and yanking her to him—driving the length of his passion to the base and inflaming her every millimeter of the way. The first stroke seemed endless, but was over far too quickly. As he withdrew, she uttered little syllables of bereavement. The next, equally endless, filled her and replaced the loss with delight. Each thrust thereafter confirmed two things: his lust for her and that the big picture, indeed, preferred to fulfill the needs and desires of even a solitary Solterranean female as part of the pattern of greater events.

* * * *

She awoke a breath's distance from the edge of the shelf but, since the Yeter's arms anchored her securely, the vista

was merely one to be admired. The pink glow of sunrise shimmered on the horizon. A prickling on her neck alerted her to A'tan's eyes and she shifted to look at him. How strange that she couldn't hate him anymore. The seed that she had buried so deeply no longer lodged in her heart.

Whatever else he had done to her, the Yeter had also introduced Beth to parts of herself she hadn't realized existed. She'd found strength where she thought there was only fear. She gained skills (though the talents of a ship's whore had questionable social value on Earth) that would have gone undiscovered in her cocoon there.

She wondered if he had profited in any way, besides the obvious one of their sexual relationship. The climb down was quiet and Beth decided that he too had the feeling that things, between them, were coming to a close.

Beth had hidden in the underbrush at the perimeter of the village for most of the afternoon. She napped lightly, conserving and regaining the strength spent in traveling around the island. She'd left the aerie before daybreak, certain that A'tan would first search the escarpment, and then the mountain, before realizing her plan.

As dusk settled so did the subs. They gathered around a small fire and stared as if mesmerized by the same images that the flames had inspired in her ancestors. Finally, the villagers fell asleep, alone or in pairs, and Beth crept from her concealment. The first stars twinkled, innocent though accessory to her trespass in the Sintal village.

The ocean's waves did not break on a reef here; the collapsing mountain had shattered the barrier long ago. Beth

walked far into the water before the bottom dropped away and required her to swim. She rolled to her back from time to time to rest and check her position against the pattern of the heavens.

She swam for several kilometers before discovering two flaws in her plan. The first was a setback—A'tan had never explained how to find the spaceport. She supposed that it could be found by waiting for a ship to land and heading the same way. The second flaw was a real big 'oh-shit'. Once daylight came, she would have no idea which direction to go. Though, by swimming smart, her strength might last through the night and maybe the next day, she'd never be able to swim another night.

So, if conserving her energy wasn't the answer then expending it now was. Beth put her face back in the seawater and swam harder. Make it before morning or die trying, she thought, before hastily erasing the possibility of the second option from her mind.

The water of the sea was calmer than the straits. It was possible to float serenely in the minimal swells and rest. Beth had denied the pink glow of dawn until the last star of her serpent had faded, but had continued swimming in what she hoped was the same direction. She fought the urge to drink the salt water, as her thirst grew. Eventually the longing faded and, though relieved, she knew losing it indicated dehydration had set in.

More than once, A'tan's comment about her tendency to avoid discomfort, even if it meant dying, spurred her on to another surge of concentrated effort. Still, with no reference

point was it more logical to swim on, or bide her time until darkness fell?

Trying to be philosophic about her probable death, Beth wondered if her existence was part of the One Pattern or if her passing would leave a gap? Would the design of the universe mourn for her, or find a substitute thread to weave?

About the time she'd decided that the grand designer would just have to improvise to fill her role, Beth heard something above the never-ending wind. Bemused, she let her feet drop, which she hated to do since there were things in the depths that brushed against her legs, and raised her head higher. The maneuver took more effort than she'd anticipated—another sign of her debilitated state.

A glimmer of sun on metal, and then a distinct shape appeared against the line of where the blue-pink of Sorandan sky met the aqua-blue of the ocean. A hovercraft skimmed toward her.

The aircushion churned the water and swamped her but the hatch opened and strong hands pulled at her arms, lifting her tired, water-pruned body into the cool interior of the vessel.

Opening her eyes, and blinking them free of salt water, Beth smiled at her rescuers. Though she had only seen them once, and hadn't really taken care to remember individual characteristics, the worm-filled faces were familiar.

The merchant guards grinned back at her—the protuberances lifting and waving in a Sintal smile.

Somehow, Beth wasn't surprised at all.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Beth paced the confines of the tiny storage closet again. She stopped beside the door panel and examined the all but invisible hinges. So far, her suffering had been limited to mere boredom and confinement but she hated the uncertainty of not knowing what would come next, and not having a say.

A squeegee of lightly scented oil had repaired some of the salt-water induced damage to her skin and eased the bright red heat of her sunburn. She had a blanket, a tunic, and a thin sleeping pad. She had been well treated with plenty of fresh (gloriously clean) water and fruit mush.

In her solitude, Beth had plenty of time to think. If she bought into A'tan's 'One Pattern' theology, then she'd been meant to fall in with the Sintal. Her survival, far from being attributable to her own fortitude or resources, inferred that she had some part yet to play or some function to fulfill. Her Earth-bred sensibilities disliked the pawn-like aspect of such a theory.

So, she knelt by the door and studied the hinges, hoping to find some weakness to exploit or method to escape.

A klaxon startled her from contemplation—not that her deep thought had brought any revelations. The sounds of running feet and raised voices, heading away from the cell, alerted her that something had happened, or was happening, outside. A solid reverberation through the deck plates knocked her back on her rump, from the defensive semi-crouch she'd taken when the alarm had begun.

Another tremor sent Beth scrambling for her sleeping pad and blanket to cushion the anticipated next. The hovercraft listed as another thump landed somewhere on the hull. A battle, no doubt, but between whom and whom—and should the captive be rooting for the merchants or their unknown assailants?

The deck leveled and, soon after, a silence settled over the ship. A Sintal, not shouting but clearly giving orders, commanded others to 'Go' followed by a short spate of further instructions. Booted footsteps, the Sintal wore shoes unlike the Yeter or Jibarae, stopped in the corridor outside her cell. She could hear other chambers being opened and searched. Beth crept into position behind the panel and waited. Regardless of which side had won the skirmish, her chances for escape would never be better than while the victors tried to reinforce their position.

Trying to breath normally while listening for the whir of the door latch, Beth was certain her heartbeat would give her away. The panel swung open and a Sintal entered, perhaps made less careful by the score of uninhabited chambers he'd searched. As soon as his forearm protruded beyond the jamb, Beth chopped his wrist, freeing the pistol from his benumbed hand, and pulled with every ounce of her pent-up fear and anticipation. The alien stumbled, with arms pin wheeling, across the tiny room and slammed, gratifyingly hard, against the opposite bulkhead. Beth scooped up the weapon and glanced into the corridor, hoping to determine in which direction freedom lay.

Light and fresh air streaming from the left, but several figures waited, poised in the niches of the various rooms. A moan reminded her of the other occupant of her cell.

‘Stand!’ she ordered in the spacer language, reinforcing the order with a wave of the plasma pistol. The Sintal clambered to his feet and looked wary, the protuberances of his face stiffly straight. Beth glanced into the corridor again. Two of the soldiers—she’d noticed the similarity of their costumes and decided that this was some sort of military force—had inched closer. Another few minutes and they would have clear line of fire into this room.

Beth hitched her chin toward the door and hissed, ‘Go.’ The Sintal nodded and, keeping as far from her as possible, stepped into the passage. He barked a few words, and then turned to Beth, who stood just within the protection of the doorway.

“Solla-terran. What you want?” the Sintal said, haltingly. Startled, Beth had no words.

“Is you with ... With....?” he said, finally giving a spacer word with a clear snarl of derisive contempt and a jerk of his facial lobes toward the rest of the ship.

‘Naul,’ she said.

He thought a moment. “You is—not guest? No bargain?”

Was he was asking if she were an employee, bound by contract? His attitude made her wonder if her circumstances had, again, undergone some change.

“I am a captive. A prisoner.”

The Sintal gestured to his teammates. 'Go,' he ordered. To Beth, he said, "Give to me." He pointed at the weapon. "You is no danger. Is no fear."

'You are safe. Don't be afraid.' Was that what he trying to convey? Or that she had no chance to escape and they didn't fear her?

She motioned him away from the door, and glanced into the corridor. The other soldiers had either retreated—or had hidden within the other compartments. He held his hand out and Beth attempted to judge his expression by the position of his tentacles. Tense, but not like when she had ordered him into the corridor initially. A few were raised and waved minutely—did that mean hopefulness or relief or, maybe, a tentative expression of an offer to help?

Grabbing her fear with all the courage she could find, Beth smiled and, with a mental shrug, threw the dice—letting chance and A'tan's One Pattern decide. The Sintal accepted the weapon, examined the handle and placed it in the holster beneath his arm.

"My name is Beth Collins," she said, and held out her hand.

The Sintal looked at her outstretched hand curiously, touched her fingers with his and nodded. "Nel Rhoha." He tilted his head from side to side as he examined her from head to toe and back again. "You is female?"

* * * *

Nel Rhoha shepherded Beth through the ship—breaking rules, she guessed, by the depth of indignation and the frequency of his terse commands to others. He'd had to exert

belligerence in his several orders to distance her from the pirates' guilt.

The Coast Guard, if that is what they were, tethered the hovercraft to their ship, which was yacht-like, for the short trip into a marina. Dozens of vessels rocked in their wake as the military ship approached a group of slips bearing official-looking markings. Most of the boats would have been unremarkable on Earth, and she wondered if this was a case of parallel evolution for similar environments or if the form and design been imported from her world.

The town resembled a Greek village, nestled in the steep hillsides around the harbor. More trees and greenery than in most towns, the fronts of the houses, shops, and structures were conjoined, with only differently shaped windows, or a variation in the pattern of the tan and beige building blocks to tell one from the next.

The entrances were lower and wider, and the doors were usually paired like French windows. Other small details enhanced the exotic decor.

Excitement bubbled up to put a smile on Beth's face. This was alien, but not frightening. This was not Earth, not the island—and not another damned spaceship. The air smelled of fish, like the Wharf in summertime. She couldn't wait to explore.

The ship nudged against the bumpers and the crew—not the same guys as the military contingent—rushed to secure both vessels to the large lashing posts.

"Daven. Most big—('City,' Beth supplied)—city on Soranda. Space and water ship places," Nel Rhoha said from behind

her. Beth smiled over her shoulder, trying to avoid seeing his face, which always made her stomach queasy. As long as she could just listen to his voice and ignore the rest, there was no problem.

"Seaport and spaceport."

She caught the nod from his shadow, and heard him whisper the words.

"You is go talk with most leader."

"Okay, I'll talk to your commander." Beth wondered what information he'd want.

"Cover you," Nel said, blocking her path. He held a bundle of iridescent cloth, and unfolded it with a snap.

The large square had a hole in the center for her head and loops at each corner and in-between. She slipped it on and Nel pointed at the loops.

"For..." He indicated her wrists and ankles, and she obliged. The cloth, simmering gold and lavender in the sunshine, covered every inch of her body. Nel flipped up a hood, which she hadn't noticed. The hood was wide enough to conceal her face in its folds, though she could see well enough through the ... Veil. This was a burque of some kind—modest attire for a civilization in which women were segregated.

Now Nel's question about her gender and the attitudes of some of the crew and soldiers made sense. He'd had to ask because, in his culture, no woman should be so under-clothed. His shipmates hadn't been upset by Nel's rescuing her from the pirates' fate—imprisonment. They had simply

objected to the unaccustomed presence of an unveiled female in their midst.

As much as she hated the idea of being treated in a subservient manner, offending the commander seemed like a really stupid stand. She would wear the garment—for now.

Nel indicated where she should walk, slightly behind and to his left. Another soldier followed a few yards behind. The sun-drenched dock, which was made of a porous but fairly smooth substance, singed the soles of her feet but the shaded pavement of the narrow winding street, though made of the same material, cooled them.

The pedestrians—a rare cloaked and veiled female and numerous males cloaked but not veiled—stood aside as the trio passed.

The veils varied in color and ornamentation—some of the gewgaws looked Jibarae and valuable. None of the burques were as simple as hers and she wondered at the obvious wealth. Two or three uniformed guards always accompanied the females.

Some of the younger males wore complex jewelry, knots of bejeweled finery decorating hems and necklines. Elaborate embroidering decorated the silky fabrics of their tunics. Beth watched as, judging by the tilt of his tunic, an obviously amorous sailor approached one of the gaudily attired youths and, moments later, escorted him into a nearby building. She blushed and was grateful for the veil, suddenly realizing what role the young males played in this society.

They were not stopped at the gates by the guards, and Nel grunted a greeting. The citizens of a new world would

recognize each other, she realized. Probably everyone knew everyone else, at least by reputation. So the pirates would be ... Ah! Unwelcome and uninvited immigrants. What had Jinx said about their landing? That as long as they stayed away from land there wouldn't be a problem. Illegal landings, like hers and Jinx's, were paltry infringements when compared to controlling the opportunistic larceny of the hovercraft traders.

Oddly, it made her feel better to know that, among these space-faring races, there existed a criminal element and that humans weren't the worst of the lot.

On a newly settled world, in a universe where females didn't travel much, only the wealthy or successful could afford to import a wife. Nel, though obviously an up and coming officer by the respect his shipmates showed him, probably didn't have a mate—so where had her burque come from? The pirates' coffers, most likely. Exercising a little opportunistic license in the cause of properly dressing her for the interview.

* * * *

The building was wonderfully cool after the glaring sun outside. Nel whispered to her, "Sussa. He talk first." Then he pushed the center of the door, which opened in two panels, without a sound.

The office was simply furnished, with nothing like a desk. A low, paper-strewn, table with one cushion in the center, a series of shelves—some open and some with doors—along one wall, and a small refreshment console was all. Opposite the shelves hung a variety of maps, old-fashioned-looking and hand-drawn. Across from the entrance, a line of recessed

windows ran transversely, flooding the room with indirect sunlight.

Nel stood in the center of the room and waited without comment, so Beth did likewise. She noticed that the third of their party had remained outside the open door.

A figure strode in, unwrapping a cloak from his shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. Though he dressed much in the same manner as the rest of the military, snug pants and loose short tunic, Beth had no doubt that this Sintal was in charge. Nel stood a little straighter and glanced, exactly once, at her as if to be sure she was proper.

The commander sunk into the single cushion and unrolled a scroll. He shot a rapid-fire series of questions at Nel, who answered just as quickly. He scratched notes on the scroll with a pencil. The presence of such an Earthly object startled her. Down to the bright yellow paint, the implement resembled the ones she had known and used her entire life. Maybe her race had adopted the tool, she thought. Then, like a splash, Beth knew that the lowly pencil was a human innovation, and was one of the few things worth something to the more advanced species—or at least the Sintal.

As abruptly as the interrogation began, it ended. The commander finally looked up at Beth and she averted her eyes as his tentacles wriggled in speculative thought. God, she hated their faces. Even Nel, who had shown her nothing but kindness, made her ill.

‘Go,’ the commander ordered. With a slight hand motion, Nel told her to remain.

Beth sensed the doors close and tried swallowed the lumpy worries that had caught in her throat. She hadn't even known she was frightened. The veil, instead of invisible or concealed, made her feel helplessly conspicuously naked. Though she couldn't bring herself to raise her eyes, she knew that he was looking at her.

'Come,' he said, but her feet were too heavy to lift. He sighed.

"It is the veil," he said in unaccented English. "You are unaccustomed to the feeling. Remove it, if you prefer." Beth shook the hood back, and looked at the room unencumbered. Less cryptic, more obvious, less intimidating, more welcoming.

The commander rose and crossed to the maps. He tapped one and said, "We took the hovercraft here, but their navigator said you were rescued from the ocean here." He pointed to another spot and Beth edged closer to see more clearly. He indicated a place that was only a millimeter from the land. Even with the scale of the map unknown, she felt exultation.

She would have made it! Another hour at the most and she would have succeeded in swimming across the wide expanse from the chain of islands. She smiled and it wasn't enough, so she laughed. The commander waited and his expression—bristles dangling in his patience—instead of repulsing her, added to her amusement.

She pointed at the islands and choked out, "I would have made it. I swam from here to here."

As Pretty Girls Do
by Jolie Howard

The Sintal followed her path with his eyes and nodded.
"Well done."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Having spent so long among aliens, Beth had learned to look beyond the differences to the similarities. She knew that the Sintal's answer was merely a polite response and any interest feigned.

"You are no part of the smuggling concern," he stated, returning to his scroll and yellow number 2. "There is no record of a human female on a legal transport."

Human. The commander had used the word easily, unlike the Yeter and the Jibarae who had always referred to humans as Solterrans. Immediately upon the heels of that thought came the realization that he was waiting for a response to his—accusation. Beth felt a bubble of unease—of distrust—bubble up in her stomach and decided that, regardless of his apparent straightforwardness, the meeting wasn't as innocent as all that.

'Be careful,' she whispered mentally before giving him an answer to satisfy his question while keeping a large amount of the truth secret. She told him about the 'Cassiopeia' and Jinx's treachery. He nodded as if the story was not a complete surprise, confirming her assessment. The Sintal didn't like humans.

"That will need confirmed," he said, making a note, "Veil now."

She wondered, again, if her landing been in a better place or a worse one.

The commander—his name was Nis Vorhes but she didn't find that out for several days—summoned a guard, rapid

firing a series of orders to which the subordinate bobbed his facial fingers in understanding.

Beth followed the underling without a word. They traveled down a corridor, and took a turn to go down another shorter hallway. He stopped before a waist high door with a lift latch handle. Opening the hatch, he gestured to her to clamber within. Sighing, Beth obeyed.

The chamber beyond the gate surprised her. The tile floor was inlaid with delicate and subtle designs. The stone block walls had rich hangings of strong patterns or floral motifs. Along one wall a tiny cascade of water splashed from carved leaf to flower and pooled in a shallow pond. Piles of scrolls filled a bookcase obviously shaped for them.

High windows and skylights admitted rays of sunlight, which fell on low divans and a pair of tables—one a workspace and the other set up for dining.

Several bedchambers lead off the main room, only one seemed occupied, and Beth found a bathroom. Hoping to commit no major breach of etiquette, she used the facilities but left it just as she had found it. Finally, she settled on one of the divans and waited.

She awoke to the commander striding across the tiles, adjusting his cape. Without slowing, he said, "My home. I know of no better place for you, for the moment." He left then, giving her no new information. She'd already decided that the apartment was his, and couldn't help but wonder about the rent he would expect in return.

For several days, Beth lived in an uncertain limbo. The commander tended to burst into central chamber, utter a few

words asking whether she was fed and comfortable, reminding her to remain veiled when the orderlies did their work within the apartment, and then disappearing either into his bedroom or through a full-sized door that was always locked to her—as was the half-sized door she'd entered through initially.

Imprisoned. Comfortably so—but imprisoned all the same. And bored until she discovered the scrolls. The scrolls were covered with written characters—indecipherable; she'd never been good at cryptograms—and hand-drawn maps and illustrations.

In one section of the library, she came across a text that, based on the drawings and maps, dealt with Earth and her inhabitants. Another map showed where the Solar system lay in relationship to other colonized worlds but she didn't recognize any of those planets as Soranda. Looking at that chart a while longer, Beth realized that Earth was inside what the Sintal claimed of known-space.

Other scrolls had similar maps with arcane legends overlaid. Population centers, weather patterns, geographical anomalies, and others that she couldn't determine had been illustrated with great precision. Something nibbled at a memory but Beth couldn't make the idea come clear. Something she'd seen before, and she let her mind wander.

At the height of the Indian/Pakistani Conflict, the US had prepared for an escalation in terrorism. Bio-engineered weapons like anthrax, HIV, smallpox, and Ebola had jumped from the pages of medical thrillers to the front pages of every newspaper, and the covers of most national news magazines.

The former Soviet Union had lost track of many vials of the stock strains. The Iraqi mobile labs had developed even more lethal versions and, when Saddam Hussein fell meteorically from power, subsequently 'misplaced' those. Every faction had a possible source and every Muslim faction had a splinter group pushing to use the weapon against Israel and her allies.

In every US town, on every campus, in every public and private school, and in every workplace seminars were given on how the superbugs worked, how they spread, and where they might come from. The military guys provided maps (and the much younger Beth remembered wondering 'how do they know this?') showing dispersal rates and how the microbes would spread through jet stream and public water supplies, if released in the atmosphere from a plane or a missile.

The post office distributed pamphlets to every house and mail drop depicting the basic information in English as well as Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Cyrillic, and others. Even Braille and pictographic versions were available.

Churches held prayer meetings, which were required by law to distribute the brochures. Clubs formed that assembled low-tech gas masks, mixed disinfectants, and studied decontamination procedures. Even the United Scouts of America gave badges for demonstrating knowledge of bio-engineered microorganisms. Beth had one.

TV weather reports included constantly updated prevailing winds and weather patterns and, when the breeze came from certain directions, some paranoids wore masks and gloves whenever outdoors. Though the threat had never vanished,

people calmed down after awhile and returned to their normal lives. Fear has a short half-life.

Beth glanced across the table full of illustrations; her logic circuits mired neuron-deep in memories. Her eyes focused, darted, and focused again.

Click. She found, by remembering the shapes of the subtext around the pictures, references explaining the first diagram with others. Step by step, she made sense of some of the pictograms—making her own rough translations that, though the words weren't accurately converted, the meanings seemed quite clear.

These were strategies for an intentional dissemination of a plague.

The Sintal didn't just dislike humans ... They despised them and had studied the feasibility of a worldwide cleansing of the Earth's native sentient species. Shocked and frightened by the newly acquired knowledge, fervently hoping that she was wrong, Beth didn't hear Nis's entrance.

"What are you doing?" he asked, looming above her.

One thing she'd learned in dealing with these other species was that they all underestimated human intelligence and, for the first time, Beth was grateful for their arrogant superiority.

She smiled (he knew enough of humans to recognize the expression as one of open friendliness—but maybe not know of all the uses humans had for smiling) and said, "Looking at pictures." She shrugged and pointed at the drawing of Earth. "That's my world, isn't it?"

He plucked the scroll from her hands and rolled it. "Yes. Why are you looking at pictures?" The Sintal gathered the

various scrolls that lay scattered on the table, while she helpfully rolled the ones on the floor.

"Because I can't read a damned word of it." Not a lie and, thus, easy to be convincing. Beth laughed—hating the nervous tinny edge. "On the ship, I worked on machines—and men." He knew of her duties onboard the 'Casseiopia'. "On the island, I gathered food and roots." She'd told him a carefully edited version of island life, not mentioning A'tan. "I am as accustomed to inactivity as I am—to the veil." She glanced up at him, through her eyelashes, from under her brows. She hoped the gestures were universal—projecting submissiveness but was surprised as the Sintal froze mid-motion and stared down at her.

"You are so ugly but, for a moment, I thought you were a Sinta—a female."

Ugly? 'Look in a mirror, buddy,' she thought viciously but liked getting under his skin, at last. He didn't ask any more questions about the scrolls but, while she slept, most were removed.

Over the next two days, Beth practiced her wiles on Nis—not certain how playing with his head or his passion would help, but loathe dismissing any possible weapon in her suddenly dangerous game. Things that worked were expanded upon. Things that didn't were filed away for further study as to why.

Nudity didn't work, but stretching her arms and arching her torso while wearing the burque did. Braiding strands of hair had no effect, but twisting thicker locks into head-hugging cables made his 'eyebrows' waggle. Dropping her

eyelids or glancing from the corner of her eyes got nothing, but glowering her brows at the same time made him uncomfortable and restless.

Nothing got the reaction that cupping her hand around her eyes with her fingers draped loosely got, though. That was one she learned by accident.

Nis had responded to her attempts by spending more time near her. In the course of that closeness, he spoke to her of Sintal culture and history, which fascinated her about as much as history ever did—not at all. In an effort to remain awake and attentive, Beth rested her cheekbones on her thumb pads and curled the fingers of either hand around each eye. The Sintal raised his face as she mumbled an inane question and, before she could take a breath, had her pinned beneath him.

A gruesome surprise awaited her. The Sintal kissed—with their lips, tongues, and with the prehensile phalanges surrounding their lips and eyes. Like delicate probes, they feathered about her face—no doubt seeking out corresponding ones, which she lacked.

Nis jerked away, startled, stared at her intently, and then (the what-the-hell etched clearly in a very human expression on his face), released her while climbing to his feet. He looked toward his bedroom, shook his head and pointed toward the one she'd been using. "There."

Holding his hand out and helping her stand, he gave her a little push in the indicated direction and commented on her look of puzzled innocence, "I would hate to make you think that your efforts to entice me hadn't been fully appreciated."

Beth winced. How had he figured out her plan?

"You are accustomed to sexual activity, also? You miss it?"
He thought she simply needed a lover and had (oh yuck)
chosen to seduce him!

She breathed again, but nodded, holding back relief from her face. He hadn't figured out anything.

Other than the facial protrusions, the Sintal physique was similar to a human's (and a Yeter's, and a Jibarae's). As always, the cultural differences were the ones that astounded her.

Nis led her to the low wide mat that was a Sintal bed, and lay on his back. Positioning her astraddle his groin, he fondled her through her clothing, watching her as his fingers stimulated more sensitive bits. Beth wondered if he wished for a pencil and scroll to catalogue her responses.

It was easier with her eyes closed, not seeing the rise and fall of his phalanges. His hands were human enough, broad and short fingered, and he rubbed, brushed, and pinched. His expression, when she looked, was curiosity mixed with something else she couldn't identify.

The silky fabric, through which the Sintal explored, didn't hinder the sensation of his discoveries. Beth arched and squirmed as he caressed her cloth-covered body. She reached for the bindings of his fly but he deliberately blocked her efforts and placed her hands on her own thighs one at a time, saying, "There ... And there."

She felt his hands undo the bindings, and the press of his cock against her damp readiness. Trembling with anticipation, she raised up higher, expecting his thrust to be diverted by

her burque. The sound of tearing cloth and a sharp slicing that-will-hurt-in-a-minute occurred simultaneously. Her passion turned to a gut-wrenching pain and she tried to twist away from the Sintal. His calm voice broke in, ordering 'Stay' and Beth controlled the instinct to flee from the source of the pain.

"Do that and you'll be ripped to shreds," Nis said in a conversational tone. His hands on her knees held her in place.

Beth gingerly tightened her feminine muscles, experimentally, and immediately reversed the action. That tiny flex revealed the horror of his structure. She, gray-edging in on her vision, looked at his smug (that being the emotion she hadn't recognized) face and murmured a question. "Why is it barbed?"

The explanation, which Beth listened to as a captive audience and with a sudden interest in Sintal history, made whatever sense sexuality ever made. For some survival based reason in the developing physiology of a species, certain characteristics formed. Kangaroos have forked penises because it makes sense for their continued existence. Praying mantis females bite the heads off their mates because, for whatever reason, that ensures the survival of the species.

Sintal females couldn't stray. After being deflowered, and shredded by their mate's penile spines, the reproductive tract was scarred closed until reopened by childbirth. If she had been Sintal, Nis would have continued to thrust (Beth reeled in the knowledge that sex for a female of this species occasionally killed and always caused pain) until his orgasm, and then yanked free, insuring that her offspring were truly of

his seed—a horrible but reasonable evolutionary explanation of why his cock had lancelets.

Beth listened, realizing that the Sintal didn't care if she were in pain. She wondered how bad it would hurt when he withdrew. He was trying to frighten her with the truth, and his goal was being met. But why had he forced her remain still? That wasn't clear, and nothing he said explained it, so she asked.

"The spines retract when I'm flaccid," he said, waiting for the logical next question.

"How long will that take?"

He shrugged. "It varies. You are terribly unattractive. Not long, I think."

His definition of 'not long' didn't coincide with hers, Beth decided. He finally fell asleep and limp, and she eased off and away. Her legs were trembling from holding steady, and her knees were achy from being bent for so many hours.

She had made a couple of decisions during her wait. Nis was dangerous to her, not to be trusted. She'd have to plan her escape, soon. Sintals were the worst of any species in her travels but also the most like humans in their motives. 'Be careful' she thought or he might figure her out.

Testing the damage, Beth touched her injuries. Scratches. Still, sex would be the last thing on her agenda for a while. On the edge of sleep, she remembered the sailor and his paramour from the day of her arrival. No way the boy would have been willing—for any amount—if being ripped a new asshole was the result. Therefore an alternative existed to

prevent sex from causing injury and Nis just hadn't given a damn or was playing a game with her.

A week later, Nis showed her the Sintal version of safe sex. With the device, a latex-like sheath designed to hold the bristles flat, wrapped around his cock, she rode him safely to orgasm—his, not hers. She couldn't enjoy sex; constantly worrying about whether the gadget was strong enough.

He smiled (tendrils upraised and gently quivering) at her, enjoying his satisfaction and her fear, and promised that she would never be neglected again.

And to think she'd hated A'tan.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Escape. Getting out of Nis's apartment would be easy enough. The problem of how to remain free required more thought. Every path she took in her exploration of the possibilities brought her to the same conclusion. She'd need help.

Not Nel. He was fiercely loyal to his commander. Finding someone who spoke English would be a dangerous undertaking.

The tiny chip, dangling from her wrist and glimmering in the oblique sunlight, mocked her. If only she had sent for Erit when she had the chance. She hadn't seen enough of the building, in which Nis had immured her, to know where a comm-link might be.

So, her mind wandered back to the only answer. A'tan ... Or, at least, his ship.

Beth heard the creak of the larger door and ducked into her chamber. She slipped the silky burque from her shoulders and, shrugging it to the floor in a puddle of jewel-brightness, eased the door open a sliver. The orderly didn't disappoint her. He wore what she'd expected, and followed his normal routine.

He started tidying in his master's bedroom. Beth crept across the central room and inched the heavy door shut while the servant was busy in the lavatory.

With one of the long cords that hung from the tapestry-like window shades, she lashed the handle to the marble pedestal of the fountain. Her tunic, liberated from the bottom of a

wicker basket in an unused room, matched the orderly's. The wrapped headdress didn't but she hoped that this lowly janitor was invisible to anyone who mattered. The slippers were too wide, but shuffling didn't seem to be out of character.

Twisting the long swatch of brown cloth loosely around her waist and tying the complicated knot took longer than she'd planned but, when she pressed her ear to the door, the water was still running. The turban had a tail that draped across her face and the cloak concealed every other telltale difference.

Taking a deep breath, Beth stepped through the full-sized door—one obstacle hurdled—and straight into the last place she wanted to be—the commander's office.

Nis and an officer (Nel!) stood before the wall map of Soranda, discussing something in urgent tones. Neither glanced her way so Beth forced her legs to move one in front of the other. The paired doors of the office entrance seemed to pull away, taunting her. At one point, the conversation ebbed and she felt the touch of their eyes, noticing her presence but sliding away, disinterested in the plebian.

Two guards stood outside and one of them moved to close the doors behind her. Each step smoothed the way for the next and was more easily accomplished by the one before. Once outside, the glaring sun made her feel conspicuous but no one gave her more than a passing look.

Uncertain how much time she had or where she should go, Beth had a moment of panic at the intersection nearest the harbor. Turning slowly, scanning as widely as she could, looking for spaceships landing or the noise of engines, her

tears welled up as her eyes settled on an emblem etched into the corner of one building.

Thank God for these practical alien planners, she thought, walking with confidence again. As she strode past, Beth reached out and gratefully touched the arrow with a tiny spaceship carved above it.

A'tan's lander was where he said it would be and the hatch opened to the code as he said it would. Beth yanked the cloth from her face, the turban from her head, and began pressing the buttons that would start the engines. In the corner of the nav-panel a small icon beckoned.

And beckoned throughout every pre-flight check she made. And beckoned as the panel flashed a blue light—meaning the authorities had given clearance. And beckoned as she lifted from the surface and engaged the directional thrusters. And beckoned as she set the headings to the proper coordinates.

Feeling as if she'd betrayed the Yeter—Erit had given her the chip as a life vest from Steve not A'tan—Beth slipped the sliver on her bracelet into the slot. With a click, the fragment was released from the link, and she was left with a bracelet sans bangle.

The indicator glowed white as the beacon sent out its automated signal.

Ignoring the possible consequences of that cry for help, Beth concentrated on the controls, trying hard not to look as inept as she knew herself to be.

Following the speed guidelines for onworld travel that A'tan had drummed into her memory before giving up his plan because he lacked faith in her abilities—or, at least and more

likely, her determination—Beth carefully watched every control and plotted her progress across the expanse of water.

Each adjustment took every ounce of her attention, but eventually the island appeared and gained three-dimensions. Visual references lead her to the escarpment where, whispering a fervent prayer to a God in whom she'd never completely believed, she muddled through the landing. The ship lurched, compensated, and lurched again, before finally settling on the uneven surface. Creaks and grinding groans followed. She thought—hoped—whatever strut or landing support being so violently stressed was either not wholly broken or was totally fixable.

Before she could leave her seat at the console, the hatch opened. Beth caught an unguarded expression of joy and wonderment before he could hide it.

He captured her in his arms as she leapt at him. Lifting her from her feet and whirling her, the Yeter laughed. The layers of her stolen tunic didn't conceal the press of his manhood against her. Though there was so much to say, too much to tell, and even more to discuss with him, Beth joined him in rejoicing. Words would wait. His hands, his cock, his passion would not.

Even the sturdy tunic posed no barrier to the strength of his long fingered hands, the fabric parting like tissue as he pulled it from her back and peeled her like a starving man with an exotic fruit.

In the close confines of the lander, the air was pungent with his usual spiciness and the scent of her arousal. She didn't struggle—he held her effortlessly—caught as much by

his arms as her need for them. The heat of the island sun invaded the chamber, slicking her skin with salt and her thighs with sweet. Both were tongued away as A'tan suckled, nipped, and nuzzled every inch of her.

His hands, so capable of great violence and injury, stroked and probed her feminine tenderness, wringing wordless groans of her growing desire from between her clenched teeth.

Until the moment when he actually impaled her on his erection, Beth felt nothing but desire. Upon being filled with the fantastic familiar length of him, another emotion replaced passion. Only his embrace, preventing any movement except the ones that drove his penis deeper, kept her from fleeing. Her gasps transmuted into sobs.

Her 'no'—a low whisper no louder than a sigh—stopped his thrusting.

He noticed her tears and lapped them away.

"Sussa, se'taza," he whispered, his breath a soft caress on her wet cheek. "What is wrong that your return hasn't made right?"

Though Nis was an ocean away, his barbs could still invade her imagination. "Inside." She tightened around him, remembering the spines once lodged in her flesh. "There."

"Sintal?" he asked, his cock twitching within her like an echo.

She nodded, a mere dip of her chin. "He hurt me, A'tan."

His yellow eyes locked with hers and siphoned away her fear.

"I will not." And, though wonderfully rough and not sparing her his fangs, he didn't.

* * * *

"I'm sorry," Beth murmured again, watching A'tan frown at the footers.

The ship had sustained some minor damage—enough to prevent exiting the atmosphere safely—during her inept landing. Though Daven was the last place Beth wanted to go, there was no choice. The technicians at the small spaceport could fix the ship, and A'tan had no skills with mechanical devices. In desperation, Beth clambered beneath the vessel, thinking her months with Steve might be sufficient to the job. Not a difficult repair but, in addition to the primitive facilities of their island, nothing in the junk pile fit right.

She swallowed panic, hoping that her feelings of dread were just flights of fancy and not premonition.

Beth wandered around the few square meters of stone that had been her home for the better part of a year, touching the familiar things before moving on to the next nook with its cache of memory inducing items. She sensed the Yeter's yellow eyes, though he voiced no greeting and had made no sound as he descended on the path from the escarpment.

She removed the re-built wreath from the exposed root and lifted the thin vine of blossoms with a careful gesture. Her second effort at creating something pretty had gone much better—not that it mattered anymore. The thread of stem curled around her finger and the scent caressed her nose. She hung it back where, she knew, it would die from neglect.

"I was happy here, I think." His breath brushed her shoulder and she leaned back into his warm chest. "Was I wrong to want it to last longer, A'tan?"

His fingers gathered her tunic higher on her hips until his hands touched the bare velvet beneath the fabric. Beth turned her face toward his and nuzzled his chin. His mottled skin blushed darker as he cupped a breast and the nipple tightened against his palm. What began as nearness became oneness as his body fit into the curves of hers and her softer flesh molded into the corners of him.

His knees insinuated between hers, spreading her thighs and exposing the warm damp folds to the cool evening air. She sighed with the sensation, but the sigh caught in her throat as the soft breeze was replaced with something far more substantial. He pinned her to him and crouched, driving his cock against her. Beth wrenched against his embrace, seeking to direct the pressure to her most sensitive spot. Without releasing her, A'tan shifted his angle and succeeded in fulfilling her objective.

With minute thrusts, more like twinges than movement, he churned her passion into a solid mass, weighing hot and heavy in her groin. When Beth would have begged for his cock, he covered her mouth with his hand and continued to drive her mad. In surrender, she relaxed and let him puppet master her pleasure.

She loved the slickness that tided forth from her and oiled his erection. Each spasm he caused produced another surge of her juices, and more slickness along his shaft. Finally,

feeling as if one more spasm would make her faint, Beth bit his hand and tasted his blood on her lips.

For a moment, enough time for another of his infuriating twinges, she couldn't remember why she'd wished to speak and then, "Now ... Dammit, A'tan. Now!"

On the second 'now', as smoothly as if he'd planned to do so all along, he altered his trajectory and filled her. From nothing to the hilt of him in less time than it took to wish it, Beth screamed as the sensation took her over—over the top, over the edge, falling and flying, living and dying simultaneously.

On the other side, he waited. Waited to take her slowly back up, over, and through, again, until he gained his own release at long last, his fangs and cock buried deep in her flesh—two points in opposition, with his lover burning between. For a long while afterwards he held her, crouched and growling, grinding his softening member within her and generating a fresh flare of short-lived hardness.

His fingerprints would show in her flesh in the days to come, Beth knew, so completely had he possessed her. The fury of his thrusts had similarly marked her inner thighs. Her shoulder, as deeply wounded as he had ever done, throbbed in rhythm with her heartbeat. It, too, would bruise spectacularly before healing. His bitten hand had bleed more and left streaks on her belly and breasts and a palm print where it had finally rested on her hip.

She had put welts on his flanks, where her fingernails had sought to anchor, parallel courses blazing paths through the dappled surface. She wrapped her calves tighter, and laid her

arms over his. Her head lolled back against his shoulder and exposed the tender skin beneath her ear. A'tan nipped lightly, not breaking the skin and rumbled as she fluttered her muscles around his spent member. Not a twinge remained in that organ.

His passion past, the cage of his arms became a cradle, instead.

The Yeter tucked her into his cot and curled around her, purring his contentment and irresistible lullaby.

Her voice hoarse from her screams, Beth whispered, "Was I so wrong?" The purr shifted to a rumble, his thinking noise, before resuming.

At the fleeting instance where awake became asleep, and her thoughts became dreams, he murmured, "I kept you a prisoner, se'taza. Would you keep me one?"

Chapter Thirty-Six

The flight began smoothly enough, though the sea breeze buffeted the lander through open hatches where the struts should retract but couldn't. Storm clouds appeared and Beth, glad that A'tan piloted, watched worry play on his usually taciturn face as the wind gusts caught and rolled them. The spaceport crept into view and, with a last, stomach-churning pitch, the tiny craft settled to the metal-mesh reinforced surface of the landing strip.

"Ah!" A'tan sighed. "Safe down." He looked at Beth stretching her arms and legs, which were cramped from anchoring herself against the pitch during the wild flight, in the tiny space behind the single chair, and said with a nod, "You stay here. I'll find the service area."

He opened the hatch and fresh warm air poured in, clearing Beth's mind. Immediately she identified the next problem. "A'tan?"

He paused in the opening. She held out the stolen clothing and smiled. "You may want these. The Sintal may not wonder about a damaged lander or a stranded Yeter..."

"But a naked one may attract undue attention," he finished her thought with a low rumbling chuckle.

Not questioning the impulse, Beth stroked the soft flesh of his groin plate with her free hand and, when it rose from slumber, grasped his penis. "I know a naked one attracts mine," she murmured.

He stood still for her activities for a moment, smiling at her joke, and then pushed the clothing from her grasp. He

slapped the hatch button but didn't wait for it to close before showering his attention on her willing flesh.

The horizon had claimed a large crescent from the sun when A'tan opened the hatch again. The breeze, cold in comparison with the air in the lander, chilled Beth. She curled up in the pilot's couch where the Yeter had left her, happily satisfied, and hugged her legs to her chest.

"Go tomorrow, A'tan," she whispered. He fastened the tunic (torn but serviceable) and ruffled her hair. He tossed the cloak around his shoulders. She sighed, only half-accepting that he was going in spite of her request.

The Yeter pushed a lever she hadn't noticed and the seat reclined further. Stroking her face until she closed her eyes, he said, "Sleep. I'll be back soon."

She heard the whir as the hatch closed, shutting out the sunset and throwing the interior into sudden dimness. On the nav-con readout, with a barrage of constantly changing numbers, one window indicated the location, in orbit, of A'tan's spaceship.

He had guessed, and been correct, that M'ral would have contracted passage back to their homeworld aboard a Sintal craft, rather than attempting to bypass the greater security measures there. In the center of the control panel, other instruments kept tabs on the lander's engine output, life-support (not particularly needed onworld), and power. Each had been explained to her, though she hadn't needed to adjust most of them.

In the corner of the communications console, her rescue beacon pulsed blue instead of white and Beth wondered if the

Yeter had noticed the light and, then, what the color change meant.

* * * *

Her sleep, thready and constantly interrupted when she awoke hopefully listening for the whir of the hatch, was filled with nightmares of being chased. Though she never saw her pursuer, Beth knew he followed in the dark, swirling fog of her dreamscape.

Morning came and Beth, startled awake yet again, finally gave up. Gave up the refuge of sleep, gave up trying to stay warm, and gave up on A'tan's return. Something had happened, or he had abandoned her.

The lander had no comfort facilities and Beth felt sticky from dried sweat and semen. Her neck hurt; both from the numerous puncture wounds of the Yeter's passion and from sleeping with her head askew.

About the time she decided to attempt the journey back to the island and started worrying if the wind would be as bad today as the previous trip that A'tan had piloted, she heard the door mechanism. She turned, smiling for the foolishness of surrendering to her baseless terrors. Her breath, held in anticipation, breathed a word when the stocky figure entered, "You?"

Two steps were all he needed to reach her and she had no room to retreat, no space to evade him.

Nis Vorhes nodded, his facial phalanges waving in pleasure at her shock. "Are you surprised? I am not. Now, we have something to talk about. A'tan Dystat and how it is that you know him." He lifted her chin with the tip of his forefinger,

and examined both sides of her neck. "Know him extremely well, I see. Where is he and how does he fit into your presence on Soranda?"

Beth pulled her chin from his grasp and glared fiercely. "I don't know what you're talking about. I can't tell what I don't know."

He laughed and motioned her through the hatch. Several guards waited ... And Nel, too, stood there with his eyes full of puzzled distrust.

Nis said, in his language and then in hers, "Cover her and take her back—in restraints. She has information on the smugglers."

Was A'tan one of the pirates? Did the Yeter supply them? How could that be? The Sintal traders who came to the island didn't know him. It wasn't possible—unless there were factions among the illegal merchants, and A'tan dealt solely with another group.

Nel wouldn't look at her as he placed shackles around her ankles and a burque over her head.

"I didn't do anything, Nel," she whispered. "You know I didn't."

He did meet her eyes for a minute to say, "Speak all you know." He glanced toward Nis's back as the commander strode away. "Make deal."

She thought about his advice—she had plenty of time while waiting in the bare cell that was her newest accommodation—and decided that Nis had no evidence to prove her guilt but if she knew something valuable he would pay her price. A ticket home.

Nothing broke the silence of her imprisonment except the twice-daily delivery of food, mush and bread, under the door. With no windows and a dim constantly burning light strip, Beth lost track of time. She tried to remember how many meals she'd been given but, because each was identical to the last, those blurred too.

So she waited for something new, which came in the form of voices in the corridor and boots before her cell. The mechanism whirred and Beth leapt to her feet. After mumbling thanks to the guard, her visitor stepped in. He looked her up and down and drawled, "Ain't you a sorry sight, Missy."

Startled beyond reckoning, Beth managed to whisper, "Hi, Steve," before letting her knees give way, while thinking how funny it was that the wrong person kept walking through doors at her.

Erit had contacted the 'Cassiopeia' when her beacon had reached him. He had never considered that she might leave the human ship before activating her lifeline. When Steve received the Jibar's message, he realized Jinx's story—that Beth had returned to the 'Fordachau'—was a lie.

He'd searched his partner's quarters and found Beth's belongings but not her jewelry, which revealed the younger man's motives.

"But before I could confront him, he took off and I came back here, hoping this is where he'd left you." Steve filled her coffee mug. "It took some doing, but I got you out of the jail."

After hearing from both Erit and F'yan (who had responded promptly to requests from Steve for their collaborating testimony) and having heard more of Beth's history from them (which verified what the human male had told him), the Sintal governor had over-ruled Nis's decision to imprison her.

The commander, otherwise occupied in finding the resourceful renegade Yeter, accepted the judgment but, as Steve put it, the point stuck in his craw.

"He'll be trouble down the line, no doubt," Steve predicted.

Beth nodded, totally nonplused at this turn of the wheel.

"What about Jinx?" she asked. "He's a thief."

Steve looked restless. "I hoped you'd be willing to forget that if I helped you out of your fix."

"A fix he put me in!" she said, struggling to her feet to stare out at the ocean. Steve's rooms overlooked the harbor. From the windows, she had watched two glorious sunrises since Steve had come for her. Both nights, she'd curled up on the divan rather than sleep with her former employer. He'd taken the hint and unspoken rebuke and hadn't attempted to touch her.

Finally, she turned away from the calming view. "Why do you care what happens to him? He hates you."

Steve nodded and stretched out his legs. "Yeah, I know." Looking into his coffee, he snorted. "Family is family, and I wasn't there, after his momma died, to protect him. He signed on with a Sintal ship, not knowing..."

"Wait!" Beth said. "Family? Your son."

"Grandson by a daughter I never knew I had until she died at Europa and the authorities contacted me."

He took a gulp of his hot strong brew and sighed. "I bought his contract as soon as I found him but, by that time, he'd been pretty badly used. Don't know what he was thinking. Didn't even speak the lingo much."

Beth sank into the cushions on the wide window seat. "Grandson. He told me—that when I wasn't aboard—he said ... He said that he was junior crew and you used him as ... Instead of me?" Try as she might, Beth couldn't find a good way to ask.

"No. Not that. He—lies. I don't know if he realizes they're lies, though."

"Lies?" she asked. "I think it's worse than that."

He glanced at her and nodded. "Knew he was getting more squirrely so, when I saw you, I thought..." He paused and took another gulp. "You know."

She shook her head.

"I thought, with you being so pretty and used to being around aliens and such, that you'd be good for him. Being young and horny, I thought you'd get knocked up quick as a rabbit and I could set yuse down for a couple years on some Jibbie colony. I hoped that would help him—get better. Stability ... I thought you two would fall in love. You know?"

The idea of Jinx and her falling in love was so incredibly ludicrous that though she tried to hang on to her anger she felt a smile twitching in her cheeks. He was a strange man, fucking the girl he'd picked out to marry his grandson, but sincerity rang from his every miserable admission.

"I tried to be a little mean to you, so he would feel sorry for you. I wanted him to feel like he should protect you."

The man looked so uncomfortable explaining his grand doomed plan and Beth's giggles slipped out, in spite of her feeling something like sorry for him.

"Steve, how in God's Name was I supposed to get pregnant if he and I never fucked?"

"Never?"

She shook her head. "You told us not to."

He smiled ruefully and shrugged. "Hell, Missy. You being so hot and all ... I figured that would be the first rule you two'd break."

He finished his coffee while she laughed until tears formed. The sight of him waiting patiently for her to compose herself struck her funny and her laughter, which had tapered off, renewed.

He just rocked back on his cushion and closed his eyes. Finally she stopped and he stood, and strode to the ornately decorated basin to fetch a cool cloth for her.

"Don't suppose that could happen now, though," he said, a question as much as a statement.

"No, and it couldn't have happened then. Jinx hated me from the word go."

Steve nodded. "Well, I gotta keep trying." He leaned against the window frame and smiled down at her. "What's with the Yeter?"

Beth told him everything she knew as fact, from the moment of her abduction to the present, including describing the plague plans she'd found in Nis's library. Though his face lost the smile, and his eyes grew hard and cold, she knew he

believed her. He sat down on the sill beside her. He ran his hands through his hair and scrubbed at his face.

"Sints claim Earth. Jibbies say 'Hands off', but they aren't much for confrontation. The Yeter straddle the fence. Dystat. That's a powerful family. Vorhes getting something on their wayward son would be a real feather in his war bonnet. Politics. Fuck. I thought I'd shed that bullshit when I left Earth."

"If Nis catches A'tan?"

"Depends on what the Sintal can prove."

Proof. Here she was. A'tan had committed murder. That he was unstable from grief would, probably, not aid in his defense. She couldn't think of any way to help.

"Abductions happen, of course. But usually the folks get dropped back off or dumped at Europa. From what I've heard, taking a Solterrann all the way starside without proper clearance is a bigger fuck-up than killing one. Yeah. Kidnapping you would be more 'an enough."

"Enough for what?" Beth asked. Steve shook his head.

Her stomach ached. "Enough for what?" Beth asked, again.

"Whether they follow Sintal law or Yeter. Imprisonment or death."

Beth wasn't certain if A'tan would prefer being returned to the island or dying, but suspected the latter. Her fear must have showed, because Steve patted her shoulder.

"Not your problem, Missy." He slapped his knees. "You can't stay here and you don't want to come with me?" He waited for her to shake her head. "I guess I gotta find you a ride home."

"I won't be a ship's whore anymore, even to get back home," she whispered.

"No. I owe you more than that—especially if you don't report Jinx to the cops once there." He waited for the nod that would seal their bargain. "I know a ship taking a Sintal bride to her groom. The trip will take them past Europa—or close enough that a little detour won't matter. Should arrive at Soranda any day."

'Any day' turned into 'soon now' and a week passed. Steve had cautioned Beth to lie low and avoid going outside so, as much as she would have loved to explore the town and shops, she contented her curiosity by gazing out the window. The street below was a well-traveled thoroughfare and, eventually, all the off-worlders showed up at the tavern at the corner or the various stores that lined the avenue.

For all her waiting and watching, she never sighted the one figure she'd hoped to find (but wouldn't admit to looking for) in the stream of passersby. Sleep, however, brought him back.

He'd crept into her bed and curled around her. Beth nestled her rump closer and felt the expected response, heat and hardness that nudged and throbbed against the cleft of her ass. His gentle push shifted her weight to her belly and she cuddled into the soft blankets as her lover began his conquest.

His hands slid up her thighs, over her flanks, and across the ticklish skin of her ribs. There they parted company and went separate ways.

Her breast, cradled and kneaded, tightened and he squeezed the nipple to a firmer point. The other hand grasped her pelvic mound, while his thumb rubbed and dipped, spreading the wet from the inside to the out.

Beth shoved her hips upward and he obliged by thrusting his thumb deeper. A hard knee parted hers and the other spread them wide. The thumb withdrew and the head of his cock replaced it. He gripped her hips, drawing her up on her elbows and knees. Smooth and firm, his cock charged forward and retreated.

Slowly, the sensation grew too great for her silence, each successive plunge forcing her throat to groan, her lungs to pant, and her lips to utter small untranslatable expressions of satisfaction until the burst that accompanied her climax. She writhed on his erection, the muscles fluttering and, as he—with a single massive spasm—found his release. Beth gripped the blankets and muffled her cries in the folds.

Soft kisses brushed her neck, tickling the fine hairs, and his soft, emptied cock slid from its sheath. Soft kisses?

"God dammit, Steve!" she hissed. She hadn't wanted intimacy with him but her inner critic, who had been driven into silence by neglect, regained a voice with the observation that she had certainly enjoyed it.

He didn't stop holding her, but gave her room to escape if she wanted. "You started it. I took what was offered. Earth girls are hard to come by out here." He snickered, liking his pun.

Beth huffed and slipped from his embrace. He stretched out, repositioned his cock, scratched his balls, and laughed quietly.

"Consider it a 'going away' present to me."

"What?"

"Your ride arrived. You'll be out of here in the morning."

She smiled because he clearly expected her to be excited at his news. Beth settled back on the mattress beside him and asked a few questions about the 'Portentia' and her passenger—the Sinta who was on her bridal journey to her groom's side—but only pretended to listen to his answers. Later, she would recall little of what he said but would remember more of how careful he had sounded in his choice of words. For the moment, though, her mind wouldn't settle on any one thing.

Beth was going home. Her chest ached and the skin on her head felt too tight.

Going home. Somehow she'd expected to be happier.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Steve left Beth in a small anteroom while he completed the reams of paperwork required by the Sorandan government—revealing yet another way in which the Sintal resembled humans by embracing mind numbing and make-work layers of bureaucracy.

Conversely, had she been leaving on the 'Cassiopeia' or another non-Sintal vessel, her departure procedure would have consisted of a wave bye-bye.

The anteroom was one of a dozen cubicles arranged in a block within the large warehouse-like structure that housed port control, and Beth could hear the low murmurs of the occupants of the neighboring cubbies, speaking in rapid spacer. She sighed and plopped down on the low bench to wait. Her burque billowed around her before settling to caress her arms and legs in waves of silk.

A solid thud rocked the divider against which she'd been leaning. Someone grunted 'Stay' and the wall vibrated again. Beth heard the fuzzy ripping sound of Velcro and realized that the occupant of the adjoining room had been restrained and was likely tethered to one of the benches.

Silence settled in the next compartment ending the brief respite from monotony. The words to a Willie Nelson song—the one her grandfather always whistled before each of his business trips—drifted into Beth's mind and she mumbled the chorus, "I just can't wait to be on the road again."

"Taza?" A'tan's voice whispered.

A Sintal guard barked, 'Silence' and the divider shuddered again. Had the sentry hit the Yeter? A'tan said something to the Sintal and then whispered again.

"Taza?"

"Yes," Beth whispered back, aware that Sintal had extraordinarily acute hearing.

"I told him I wished to speak to my ancestors. He will ignore me for awhile."

Beth had located the spot of wall where A'tan's voice seemed most clear and knelt close to hear him better. "They caught you?"

"Obviously. You are well?"

"I'm going home. On the 'Portentia'."

"Someone came in answer to your distress beacon, then?"

"You knew?"

"Yes. I'm glad you thought of it so soon. If you had waited you might have not had the opportunity again. That was well done, se'taza."

His compliment filled her with satisfaction. She had done well—finally done something right in his difficult-to-fulfill expectations. She rested her face on the partition and whispered, "Thank-you."

The partition rested at each corner and at even intervals on little pedestals that were fastened to the bare flagstone floor. Beth pried her fingers beneath past the first knuckle and felt the sleek warm skin of his fingertips brushing hers a moment later.

"I miss your scent," he murmured. Her scent had been the one thing that had kept him from killing her and had enticed

him ever since. Beth pulled her hand back and gathered her burque higher. The stones were cold and brutally hard against her bare knees but, closing her eyes, she conjured up the rock ledge on the island and the touch of his thighs on hers. Feeling more than a little foolish, she imagined his hand against her feminine folds and his insistent fingers slipping within as she wetted her own. She then thrust them back beneath the divider before she had a chance to reconsider the gesture.

A'tan gripped her fingertips and drew back at the unexpected slickness. She could picture him raising his hand to his nostrils and wished she could see his expression. His sharply inhaled breath told her that he'd received her parting gift.

For a moment, Beth thought she could hear the rumble of his purr and feel the vibration carried through the wall.

"Do you remember asking me if I would stay with you of my own free will?" Beth said, curling her fingers around his when they returned.

"Yes." He rubbed his palm against her fingers finding any lingering dampness he'd missed in the first caress. "Your answer was convincing."

Beth remembered her response—her threat to strangle him with his own guts—and the hard cold seed of her hatred for him. Reminded of how she'd felt then and how savoring anger had fortified her against his cruelty, Beth nearly pulled her hand from his. So much had happened since and did she regret any of it? Would she have changed anything if the change meant a different outcome?

"I would now," Beth said, putting questions of blame and remorse behind her for the moment.

He said nothing, and then, "You haven't changed."

Hadn't changed? With a fresh flare of temper, she wondered why he would think that before realizing he referred to her tendency to make poor choices and give up or give in at the worst of times.

"I wish I had then," she amended.

"Ah, how different things may have been," he said, with a chuckle.

"Could I go with you to—Yerat?" Beth asked, belatedly remembering the name of his planet.

"It would be uncomfortable for you there. Higher gravity," he said. "And, as things are now, I would be unable to protect you..." He squeezed her fingers.

Beth pictured being surrounded by Yeter males aroused by her scent and knew that A'tan had had the same thought.

He laughed, which brought a quick question from his guard. She drew her hand back in case the sentry showed any curiosity about what the prisoner had found so interesting on the cubicle floor.

He placated the Sintal soldier with a softly spoken response.

"I told him that Yeter laugh at death," he said to Beth a moment later. "Mostly true. But I am not laughing any more. I sought death and, now that I seek it no more, it has found me."

There was nothing she could say to that, and so much she wanted to tell him about how much she'd changed. Beth

considered risking the dangers of Yerat. The Yeter she'd known, A'tan and F'yan, were nominally civilized, even when tantalized by her scent. Could she go and plead with—with whatever passed as a judge or jury in that seemingly more harsh society? He didn't ask for her testimony but did that mean he didn't want it, didn't think it would help, or simply had not thought to ask her for it.

Perhaps, he had considered all the possibilities and decided that nothing she, a lowly semi-sapient Solterran, could say would change his fate. His execution would leave her stranded and defenseless on a world far more hostile than gentle Soranda. Though she could survive as a 'seba', did she want to face a lifetime of such rough playmates? Her body responded to the idea with a wave of damp enthusiasm but was firmly quashed by Beth's thinking self.

"What will happen to you?" she asked, finally.

The Yeter didn't reply but she caught the murmur of additional voices.

"A'tan?"

When she heard the sound of his straps being pulled free of the furniture, she realized more guards had entered the other cubicle and their presence had ended the brief interlude. Several sharp orders were issued and the divider tottered as the Yeter was hauled to his feet.

Beth jumped up and, ignoring Steve's warning, bolted through the privacy curtain and around the square of cubicles to the opposite side. She searched the milling throng before seeing the wake caused by the military procession. Before the

press of passengers could close, Beth darted toward the receding figures.

A grip on her arm, painfully tight despite the burque, prevented the motion and she spun angrily, wrenching her arm free of Steve's grasp. Her escort pushed her into another empty waiting room and blocked her path.

"There is nothing you can do to help him, Missy. But there is a whole lot of trouble to share if you make a scene," Steve cautioned. Knowing he was right, Beth kicked the cushioned divider and punched it in frustration, growling her pent riot of emotions. Anger toward, fear for, hatred of, confusion about and, somewhere in the middle, well buried, a smidgen of vengeful satisfaction for the consequences and just desserts for A'tan's interruption of her previously well-ordered if directionless life.

She was as unwelcome here as the Yeter. There really was nothing she could do. Beth, with her eyes burning from unshed tears, sank onto the bench, exhausted and guilt-ridden by the contrary aspects of her feelings toward A'tan as a small part of her wondered if she wanted to do anything.

Steve accepted her silence as acquiescence. He waited until she opened her eyes before beckoning for her to accompany him.

Numbly, she followed when he led her to the small lander that would lift her to the ship. She paused halfway up the hatch and begged, "Help him, Steve. If you can, help him."

He grimaced. She knew that he didn't want to get involved further, but finally he nodded. "If I can." Beth had no idea if the human would keep his promise, or what he could

accomplish if even if he tried but who knew what tiny nudge might restore the balance. A single loose stone could cause avalanches.

Having done what she could, Beth trudged up the gangway and took the couch that the pilot indicated. He fastened her harness without actually touching any part of her clothing or body. She wondered if he knew she was human, or if he would have treated any burque clothed female in the same way.

She was the only passenger but, from her berth in the back of the compartment, she couldn't see the pilot's instrument panel. The rapid acceleration into the atmosphere crushed the breath from her lungs and pressed her body solidly into the padding. Through the forward portal, she watched the blue-pink sky fade to white and then darken to purple-black. A few brilliant points of light twinkled in the ever night.

The lander lacked a pseudo-gravity generator and Beth was grateful for the secure harness holding her solidly against the couch as her empty stomach registered weightlessness with a queasy lurch. A wall of gray-silver crept across and finally blocked the view of stars. The illusion of direction returned as the vessel slipped into the bay of the spaceship.

* * * *

A stoutly square Sintal, dressed in a gray-green coverall, greeted her with a quick spate of spacer, ending his spiel with a hand gesture and a 'Come, come,' while leading toward one of the panel exits from the open bay. The woman glanced back at the blue, green and white planet. A long line of

islands spanned the deep blue of the wide ocean. One of those had been home for a while, she supposed, saying a silent good-bye.

The flooring trembled as the engines engaged and the planet was lost from the frame of the massive portal.

Beth was alone, heading into a new unknown again. At the end of this last journey, Earth awaited. A sense of unfairness, of personal failure, invaded her soul and not even thinking of home relieved her of the notion that the 'Portentia' was heading in the wrong direction.

Another Sintal, dressed in a dull gray tunic and an attitude of superiority, awaited her in a side walkway a short distance from the central corridor.

"You be Elisabeth Collins?"

Beth nodded, but the authoritative alien hadn't paused before introducing himself as, Hol Rhodall, the master of operations on the 'Portentia'. Captain, Beth decided.

"You be companion to Es Eba Vorhes."

Vorhes? Was this Sinta related to the commander on the world below? Maybe that was why Steve had been nervous about sending her on this ship. Too late. Another contract she should have read.

Beth interrupted, "The commander, Nis Vorhes? Is he related to the Sinta?"

The captain's facial appendages waved wildly. "Of course. Why else be he commander?" His answer churned up more questions but Beth remained silent, sending angry wishes of bad luck to Steve for placing her aboard. She followed as the captain opened a locked panel with a hexagonal sliver of

metal and ushered her into another corridor, which ended in a small room. The room had a small divan and a kitchen.

"No male can go on." He pulled out a hidden drawer beneath the appliance closet. In the recess, a pistol nestled. "For necessary, in defense of the 'Faquel'—lady bride."

Defense?

"Am I her bodyguard?" she asked, incredulously.

"You be companion. The other brides be carried to husbands, time ago. Be permitted for Es Vorhes to travel by self for such purpose, but not wise or easy she be alone for long journey. You on Soranda be luck-full chance."

The captain attached a sliver of metal to the Jibarae bracelet Beth wore. He demonstrated the use—a key of sorts—with his copy on the half-sized gate. "You be fail-safe, Es Collins. Unless two passes be in place door not open." Hol tapped the wall and Beth slid her key in and out at his wordless instruction, no doubt activating the fail-safe function of the mechanism's memory chip. He opened the gate and indicated that Beth should enter. "The Faquel waiting in."

He tugged lightly on Beth's sleeve to get her attention. "Be aware, Es. She be precious. You be not." He clearly meant that if the lady was unhappy with Beth's company, one of them would be removed—and it wouldn't be the Sinta.

She nodded and ducked within. The ceiling, though low, was just high enough for Beth to walk upright if she bowed her head. The floor was slick beneath her silk slippers, requiring tiny steps and close attention to navigate without falling. She wondered about the psychological impact of the constant and subtle reminders of female subservience.

The short passageway ended at another regular panel. Her sliver fit this one, too.

With a deep breath, Beth opened the door and stepped through. The panel closed behind her automatically, and she heard the whir of the lock engaging. Panicked, she searched the mechanism frantically until finding the slot for her key. Even after she was convinced the panel would open again, Beth felt the blood pulsing in her neck as her heart returned to a calmer state.

The inner chamber gradually claimed her interest. The ceiling was higher, she thought, though shrouded in shadows. Plushy cushions lined one edge of the room. Thick rugs of crystal tones, garnet, emerald, amethyst, and sapphire, were strewn to cover the metal floor plates and matched the variety and hues of the wall hangings. Not random, she decided, the carpets had been artfully arranged in an eye-pleasing pattern outside her immediate discernment. The center of the area held a pair of low tables, one supporting a covered tray near a corner, with discrete beams of recessed lighting illuminating each. The effect was comparable to the oblique natural lighting in Nis's apartments. A shelf filled with scrolls filled the space beneath a bench.

The further into the room she explored, the more similarities she found. One wall had a life-like mural from the ceiling to the floor of a rivulet of water cascading over boulders and foliage into a pool. Sintal liked looking at flowing water—and listening to it. As the blood quit pounding through her ears, she could hear the sound too. Then the water

stopped, and Beth realized that the noise was coming from the adjoining room and not the mural.

A soft voice spoke into the quiet. Beth recognized none of the words but turned toward them. Es Eba stood in the shadows a moment then stepped into the glow nearer to one of the tables. Beth, prepared to be as repulsed by the female Sintal as she was by the males, steeled her expression into neutrality.

The Sinta had phalanges on her face but, unlike the males, hers were feather delicate and less noticeable as they laid flat against her cheeks and forehead. More of the feathers formed a small crest from the middle of her forehead over the top of her head. Her skin was a dark golden brown, a shade or two darker than Nel's, but paler than Nis's, and her eyes were nearly black with specks of dark brown and a golden tint to the whites (which were white only in humans, Beth had long since discovered). She wore a poncho-like gown, which draped from her elbows to her knees in brilliant jewel tones. No breasts, but her hips flared from a slender waist and appeared feminine to the human's standards. Her bare legs were shorter than a human's, though shaped similarly. On the stumpy-looking feet, she wore soft shoes.

Beth, abruptly, realized that the Sinta wasn't wearing anything but slippers and what she thought a cloak was part of the female's body—webbing that hung from the underside of each arm like a too-large Jibarae swag ornament. Eba raised her arms and pirouetted, as if she was accustomed to such admiration. Tiny veins reflected and refracted the subdued lighting like prisms twinkling.

In back, the membrane wasn't as large. The upper edge V'ed, diving to the waist and was connected from the shoulder blades to the base of her spine. The lower margin, fluttering like a cheerleader's skirt, covered all of her buttocks.

The colors were muted iridescent hues of blue, lavender, and gold. A butterfly couldn't have had lovelier wings than this Sinta, Beth thought.

The feathery phalanges continued but were even smaller, as light as down, extending from the crest on her head to the point of the Faquel's waist.

The Sinta finished her turn and raised her hands, miming a request that Beth remove the hood of her burque. Apparently the Faquel was as curious about the human as Beth was about her.

She flipped back the veil. The Sinta examined her face and hair. Beth shrugged the burque from her pale-again shoulders and it puddled to the floor. Beth revolved—glad for the short sleeveless tunic she'd worn beneath the required cloak.

A naked human was not as decorative as a naked Sinta. Beth wished for her Jibarae bangles. Those bright ornaments would have evened the score, she thought, then wondered why she felt the need to compete at all. Feminine vanity? Was that another galactic constant? That the Sinta felt the same urge comforted Beth. Having something in common with her employer, if only gender, could be a good start. Or so she hoped.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Something about the way the Sinta stood, comfortable and expectant, led Beth to believe that this female was considered beautiful by her species standards.

Beth wondered if her own confidence in her personal appearance and desirability radiated the same aura. Conscious of representing humans, Beth raised her chin, cocked her hip, and threw back her shoulders to pull the fabric tight against her breasts and better accentuate her curves.

The Sinta blinked and made tiny circles with her hands, which stirred the veil into new prismatic glory. One upmanship? Or a gesture of nervousness?

"Welcome, Es Collins," Es Eba whispered. She gestured at Beth's tunic. "You prefer to be clothed," she stated.

Shrugging, Beth said, "I lack your remarkable wings. Compared to you, I'm boring." She tugged at the neck opening, feeling for the closure. "I'll remove it—if you'd like." The Sinta raised her hand and gesture for Beth to halt.

"Whatever comforts you, Es Collins."

Beth extended her hand, quite certain that the Sinta wouldn't grasp it in return. "Call me Beth, Es Vorhes." The Faquel slipped her fingers against the human ones, and gave a fair imitation of a handshake—fingers to fingers, instead of palm to palm, but obviously practiced.

"You've met hu—Solterrans before?" Beth asked.

"No, but undoubtedly I will again."

Beth stored that comment for future musing. Why else would Es Vorhes need to know human conventions?

The Sinta retreated a step or two and reached behind one of the tapestries. She pulled out a robe, no more than an ounce or two of sheer iridescent fabric, and slipped it over her arms. She tied the collar, and fastened the closures. The sleeves were loose, leaving room for the wings. The shape of the Sinta burque made sudden sense to Beth. It had been designed to conceal but not constrict the female's structural uniqueness.

The Sinta stood motionless, face composed. Beth waited for her to speak, and then wondered if the Faquel was waiting for Beth to initiate a conversation. Try as she might, Beth could think of nothing but questions, some of which might be impertinent or be offensive.

Into the silence, Beth's stomach rumbled, burbled, and then pinged. She covered it with her hands and felt a blush creep into her cheeks. The Sinta's eyes widened and, unexpectedly, the solemn lips parted as the Faquel laughed.

"Does that mean you are hungry?" The amusement was suddenly replaced by a look of solicitous concern and the brown cheeks turned sienna as her feather-phalanges fluttered wildly. "Or ill?" A blush, Beth thought, for laughing at her guest before inquiring about her welfare.

"Hungry!" Beth said and smiled. "How did you know?"

The Sinta glanced at Beth's abdomen before replying, "Sometimes, mine does that, too." She gestured to the table where the tray awaited. "Though never so loudly." The Faquel grinned and Beth grinned back.

Sharing a meal broke the ice between them. Es Vorhes (she hadn't given Beth permission to call her Eba) claimed to have dozens of questions for Beth, though she didn't ask any. Instead she talked non-stop, nibbling now and then, while Beth ate or sipped some warm and slightly alcoholic beverage. Part of what the Sinta said showed a great deal of accurate information about Earth and at other times she made astounding and false assumptions about life there.

At some point during the monologue Beth discovered that the Faquel had been alone for thirty-five Sintal days as measured by ship's chronometer. No wonder the woman had so much to say.

The more Beth listened, with a quick question or two when the Sinta said something particularly confusing, the more she found out about Sintal politics and society. As she had previously guessed, the Sintal culture had many similarities to human. She caught nuance of a deep schism or ongoing revolution in the central government and wondered if Solterra or, more specifically, Solterrans were the divisive issue. Beth also inferred that not everyone was in favor of the alliance with the other space-faring species. It amused Beth that these, supposedly, more civilized folk were as egocentric as her own kind.

She learned something more immediate to her circumstances, too. Vorhes wasn't a single word. Vor indicated status, and Hes was a last name. A common one among the upper echelon and, though they shared a name, Nis and Eba shared less DNA than second cousins on Earth might.

Finding out that the Faquel didn't know the commander beyond his reputation and, though never admitting it outright, gave the impression of not liking what she did know, eased Beth's mind. Nis's name was permanently chiseled in her list of 'not friends' and Eba's disapproval of him was a point in her favor.

Her stomach full and hunger sated, Beth relaxed into the cushions and, aided by the low buzz of intoxication, into a semi-aware daze. She listened to the Sinta's running commentary but the soft voice sing-songed like a lullaby.

Suddenly, feeling a cool touch and a brush of motion against her neck, Beth bolted, sitting upright and lucid. From the corner of her eye, she saw a gray-green sinuous form scurry into the shadow of the other table. The Faquel, startled by the abrupt movement, trailed off into silence, and then followed the line of Beth's gaze.

"Ah!" Eba chose a tidbit from leavings on the platter and clicked her tongue several times. From the dark cave, a lizard crept, tentatively testing the air with its darting tongue before whizzing out to hide behind an urn. The Sinta whispered, "Sussa, vishta," and chirped as before. The creature's head peeped out, and again it made a mad dash to another hidey-hole. Each oblique run brought it closer to the Sinta, who continued to murmur encouragingly, until it finally slunk onto the table to nibble the offered morsel from her hand.

The lizard hunkered, obviously content, at the edge of the table while Eba tickled its neck with a forefinger. "This is Porquena," she said to Beth. "Give her a bit."

Beth pinched a scrap of fruit and held it out. The lizard twirled an eye in her direction and the tongue, motionless during the moments of pleasure whipped into action again. Mimicking Eba, Beth made clicking noises and waggled the treat. Before Beth could blink, Porquena zipped across the table, snatched the fruit and was gone into hiding beneath the scroll bench.

"My only companion lately," the Faquel said, smiling in the direction of the lizard's retreat. "Listens well, but doesn't offer much conversation. Like you." The Sinta glanced fleetingly at Beth.

Beth laughed, "Maybe, like me, you didn't give Porquena a chance to get a word in edgewise?"

Es Vorhes's smile froze and her next glance was angry, and then she looked back at Porquena, whose head had emerged from the shadows. For a long minute she said nothing. Gradually, a twitch appeared at the corners of the thin lips, followed by a chuckle. "Perhaps. I wonder what tales she would have to tell?"

With that, Beth knew the Sinta had accepted her presence and invited whatever confidences she chose to share. Beth hadn't had a close friend since grade school, but remembered all night giggle-fests and whispered confessions. Somehow, friendship with this alien seemed possible, if not easy.

Beth sighed, rolled over, and put her chin in her hands. Eba glanced over.

"You are restless," she said before returning her attention to the bit of fabric and skein of floss. The Sinta had tried to teach Beth the technique but the knots were intricate and the

pattern difficult. Since the piece was to be a gift to her mate's mother, the Faquel wanted perfection—and Beth's attempts fell far short of that goal.

“Don't you ever get bored?” Beth asked, a little irritable that her companion always seemed content. She played with the scrolls with her toes.

Eba folded her project and slipped it into the case. “You Solterrans have developed a written language?”

Beth snorted. “Lots of them. One for each spoken one, I'd guess.”

The Sinta shook her head. “No common tongue. No wonder you are always at odds with one another.” Before Beth could object or defend, Eba stood up.

“Come, I'll teach you to read a proper language.”

The Sinta written language had several layers of meaning. The alphabet had thirty characters, some of which could be joined to create more. In addition to the letters, there were ten hieroglyphs that, like sharps and flats on a musical composition, gave the reader instructions on how the writer intended the piece to be interpreted. Each glyph referred to a parable, which Sinta learned as children in the form of simple songs and a series of yoga-like positions. The songs and parables described basic codes of conduct.

Eba insisted that anyone could learn the words and motions and, if Beth did, she would have a better understanding of the Sinta. How memorizing the words without having a translation could help Beth had no idea but doing anything was more interesting than doing nothing so she went along.

Finally, the Faquel was satisfied that Beth knew the words and positions for the first parable and declared the first lesson complete.

"So, why is this a proper language and mine isn't?" Beth asked, stretching away the kinks.

Eba clicked her tongue and thought a minute. "My name is more than a name. It describes who I am. Does yours?"

Beth shrugged, "I'm named for my grandmother."

"But does it mean something?" the Faquel insisted.

"No..." Beth said. She remembered that A'tan had told her the same thing and named her Se'taza. Of course, he'd also called her 'Seba', which, she supposed, described her function in his life, at the time.

"Someone used to call me 'Seba'," Beth said. The Sinta fluttered.

"A Yeter?" she asked.

Beth nodded, "And a Jibar once did, too." She shrugged. "I didn't mind, until I found out what it meant."

Eba smiled and knelt at the table.

"Later, the Yeter said that my real name didn't mean anything, so he called me Se'taza."

The Sinta, who had been rolling the scroll, startled, and looked at her.

"He said it meant pretty flower." Beth caught the flicker in the Sinta's eyes. "Did he lie?" Beth thought Eba wasn't going to answer. The other female fussed over tying the scroll, replacing it in the rack. She tutted about the disarray or arrangement and shuffled the collection into proper order and

alignment. Finally, the Faquel fluffed her wide sleeves and, with a nervous flip of her chin, glanced at the human.

"Perhaps I am not as familiar with the Yeter language as I believed."

"Bullshit. What does it mean? Really." Beth felt a hot blush color her cheeks, wondering if se'taza was somehow more derogatory than seba. "If not flower, then what?"

Reluctantly, the Faquel nodded. "It does mean pretty flower, I suppose ... Sometimes."

"And other times?" Beth whispered, embarrassed but determined to know the worst about A'tan's opinion of her. The Sinta tented her fingers and held them stiffly in front of her. The position suggested formality, and her expression was grim and stern.

"There is a fable about a gardener who found a seed. He planted it—not expecting anything special. When it bloomed, the flower was so incredibly beautiful to him that he wanted to keep it for his own pleasure. He built a wall but the vine climbed the bricks and blossomed freely. Eventually, he realized that some things cannot be contained or nurtured, and must be appreciated for what they are." Eba thought another moment. "If a Sintai were to call you se'taza, he would have thought of that fable."

The Sinta fluttered, and Beth realized that she was uncomfortable about suggesting that someone like the ferocious Yeter might have felt such deep tenderness for a creature he once considered 'seba'.

The Sinta frowned, as she seemed to carefully consider her next sentence. Beth knew that Eba had a profound respect for

choosing the right words. Whatever she said would be the utter truth from which nothing could be misconstrued or misinterpreted.

"I, in light of the story from which the word meaning is derived, would translate se'taza as beloved—but would a Yeter?"

Beth thought maybe one would have.

The days settled in routine of lessons, meals, quiet solitude, and long conversations with Eba about Solterra, humans, and Sintal. Beth still had no idea what the words she'd learned meant, but the Sinta provided no explanations of her methods.

Earth children learn their birth tongue without translations, just trial and error leading to understanding and comprehension. No doubt, something would eventually click—or the journey would end. In the meantime, the songs had catchy melodies and the yoga-forms toned her muscles.

Eba corrected her stance, adjusting her hands and elbows to the proper positions. In doing so, her fingers brushed Beth's breast and, even through the sturdy fabric of her short tunic, the peaks of her hardening nipples appeared.

The Faquel had adjusted the temperature of the compartment in a compromise to their different preferences. Though slightly cool for human skin most of the time, Beth was comfortable during the exercise of language lessons.

"You are not cold," the Sinta stated. Beth rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her bosom.

"No." There was no way Beth was going to admit to being so horny that any touch, including her own, set her

thrumming. In the tiny compartment, privacy was rare and the opportunity to masturbate non-existent. Time and time again, in the realm of her nighttime fantasies, her thoughts had drifted to the male crewmen on the opposite side of the walls and locked gates. Talking about sex may have helped, but she wasn't going to corrupt the morals of this sequestered virgin bride-to-be.

Eba waited until it became obvious that no further clarification was forthcoming, then restarted her instructions. "Assume the form, please."

Beth sighed. The Sinta was single-minded and determined. They never skipped a day, or ended a lesson before Beth learned it exactly. Eba wouldn't raise her voice but would 'tsk' and 'tut' until her student complied.

Raising her hands into a basket at heart level, Beth set her legs and balanced on the balls of her feet. The Faquel nodded before walking around to examine Beth from every angle. Beth felt Eba's breath on her neck and closed her eyes.

Her hands skirted Beth's waist and stroked the soft curve of her belly. When she would have reacted, Eba whispered, 'Stay.' Training and acceptance of the inevitability of the situation held Beth in place. Though she didn't fear Eba, she did worry about her voicing displeasure to Hol Rhodall. Beth had been warned of the consequences.

"Do you think me repulsive?" the Sinta asked.

Beth shrugged. "At first, Sinta males were. Their faces and those worm-things." She tried for candor but hardly expected the response of a low chuckle. "But not you. You are..." Beth

considered and discarded a dozen trite meaningless words.
"Never repulsive. Exotic."

The Faquel ducked under one of Beth's elbows and came up in the circle of her arms. The Sintal kissed like humans, and Eba's feather-like phalanges felt like butterflies alighting along Beth's cheeks.

Beth finally opened her eyes to find the Sinta smiling at her.

"Why are you doing this?" Beth murmured.

"Are you still bored?" Gently, Eba brushed her fingertips across Beth's breasts, one and then the other, before seeking her lips again. The butterfly kisses trailed along Beth's jaw to the place beneath her ear where the tiny scar remnants of A'tan's passion still lingered.

Beth groaned, "No, not bored."

Carefully, Beth closed her arms, afraid of damaging the membrane beneath Eba's arms. Pliant and silky, but strong, the webbing stretched easily. Beth caressed the tiny feathers on the Faquel's spine.

Eba arched and sighed, "Neither am I."

Chapter Thirty-nine

The Sinta demanded more of Beth than any lover had. Not so much physically but mentally. Having sex with Eba required that Beth examine and describe the result of her every response. If Beth moaned, the Faquel wanted to know why. When she squirmed against the knee that rubbed so deliciously, the Sinta questioned her at length about clitoral sensitivity, while driving her mad by caressing the tiny nexus.

Finally, Beth stopped the questions, which ended the necessity to fulfill the increasingly difficult task of providing coherent answers, by kissing her inquisitor. Beth liked the tremble of the delicate phalanges against her cheeks and, with her hands directing the tempo and rhythm of Eba's fingers, found release.

As the heat spread and throbbed, Beth's inner critic mocked her successfully for the first time in a long while. Any port in a storm, any hand between her thighs, and any body to warm her bed, there nothing was she wouldn't do, in pleasing a partner, to achieve her climax. Never so vulnerable as when she was flayed by her own faults, Beth wrenched free of Eba's arms and the mutual tangle of their legs and huddled against the wall.

Eba curled around her back, but Beth lacked the energy to push her away and the wall blocked any further retreat. While Beth quivered and tried to not sob, the Sinta stroked the tense muscles and stiff curves from her shoulder to her hip.

"Sussa, I'm sorry," the Sinta murmured. "I thought to pass the time." Her warm hands, smelling of Beth's passion,

smoothed and soothed while the human's tears overflowed and spilled onto the cushions.

"I'm sorry. I did not know that this would cause you pain," Eba whispered.

Beth's sobs ceased, abruptly, as she thought of the hurt that the Faquel faced on her impending wedding night. She shook away the selfishness of her shame and sat upright. "Wait," she said, pushing the critic back into her box and closing the lid on her self-deprecation.

Remembering her own prior injury, imagining Eba's yet-to-be trauma, knowing the physiology of Sintal mating, Beth dissolved the lump in her throat by willing it so.

She sighed. "Not pain, Eba. Shame."

The Faquel looked puzzled. "Shame?"

"I'm embarrassed that I enjoy sex with just about anybody—or so it seems."

Eba sat up, and leaned her chin on Beth's knee. "Doesn't everyone?"

Beth shrugged. How could she explain Puritanical sexual mores when she didn't understand them herself? That she defended the standards of her society and judged herself by them, without being able to abide by or even define those values seemed hypocritical.

"On Solterra, people aren't supposed to seek sexual enjoyment outside marriage or committed relationships."

The Sinta laughed. "Humans follow this rule?"

Wiping her eyes, Beth snorted. "Well, no. We try, I guess."

"And fail as often as not?" Eba asked, and took Beth's wry smile as an answer. "Why have such a standard?"

"To be certain of paternity, I think."

"Mating is different than recreation," the Sinta argued.

"Not to us. We don't have the same..." Beth paused, not knowing how much Eba knew about how the male Sinta physique insured female fidelity and offspring identity. "Does mating frighten you?"

Surprised, Eba said, "No."

Beth thought about the barbs tearing at her flesh. "Do you know what will happen to you? The male's spines and how they rip inside you?"

"Of course."

"And you're not afraid?"

"No, but it is obvious that you are. Why?"

With a little prodding and impatient noises, Eba encouraged Beth to tell her about Nis Vorhes. Throughout the story, the Sinta cuddled beside Beth, nodding and making small noises of commiseration.

"Ah, I understand your concern," Eba said, in comprehension. "But Beth, I am not the same as you." The Sinta thought a minute. "You have the capacity to achieve peak pleasure again and again?" Beth nodded. "I will feel that same climax at only two moments. Whenever I am impregnated and then again when I give birth. It is the spines and the tearing that provide the stimulation. The sheath prevents pregnancy and damage but, for a Sinta female, also removes the pleasure of intercourse."

"That is so fucking unfair!" Beth said without thinking.

Eba nuzzled Beth's neck and lightly rested her cool hand around Beth's breast. The nipple dimpled against the palm before Beth could draw away.

"Well, other amusement can be found in myriad ways. If the process causes neither of us pain, where is the harm in looking?"

No harm, Beth decided after awhile, only mutual pleasure. In that, as with everything, the Faquel instructed the human and expected perfection.

Though Eba had no one nexus of pleasure, as Beth did, she responded to kissing and caressing with joyful enthusiasm. The little tags of flesh, the feather-like phalanges, that lined the Sinta's spine, cheeks, and ran along the edge of her vestigial wings, were sensitive to stimulus, Beth learned. The blood flow increased to the vascular tissues within the webbing, deepening the colors until they shimmered.

Comfortable intimacy, Beth discovered, had a side effect of encouraging confidences. She revealed things she had meant to conceal but Eba simply listened and rarely questioned her about A'tan, the Jibar, or Jinx.

Eba gently extracted herself from under Beth's arm. "I'm thirsty." She glided toward the kitchen, humming one of the parable tunes. Beth wondered if that song had anything to do with sex or friendship or, maybe, just trying new things. Would the Faquel have chosen a lesson song to fit the occasion or did Sintal get melodies stuck in their heads, too?

Beth closed her eyes and basked in the warm afterglow of a particularly satisfying round of exploring Eba's myriad ways.

"Mmm," the Sinta murmured. "Here." Beth felt her closeness and expected the kiss, but not the mouthful of beverage. The warmed, spicy, and mildly intoxicating liquid slipped over her tongue and down her throat without a conscious effort to swallow.

"That's good. I've had something like it before," Beth said, coughing and laughing. "But not that way."

"Really? I'm surprised," Eba said. "It is quite rare."

Beth reached for the flask, but the Sinta pulled it away. "There is only one proper way to drink this."

"Proper way," Beth said, giggling from the glow already rising in her blood.

The Faquel nodded. "From the lips of your lover." With that she took a small sip, and shared it with Beth, each of them enjoying the flavor from the other's tongue.

"Very sexy," Beth whispered. The Sinta blushed, the deep brown reddening. "Ah! You're practicing the technique on me. Your mate is going to lose his mind when you do that to him."

Eba laughed. "I hope so. I'd hate to disappoint him."

Beth rolled to her stomach and frowned at the Sinta. "You've never met him?"

"No. My father has."

"How can you marry somebody without loving them?" Beth asked. "On Solterra, in my country anyway, we pick our mates because we love them."

"Does that work?" Eba asked, obviously already knowing the answer. Beth shrugged.

"All things being equal..." Beth started to argue but the Sinta interrupted.

"But things are never equal. Everyone is different, their strengths, their talents, their intellect, their weakness, and even their perceptions. Shouldn't each be judged by and be accorded esteem and privilege based on what they are?"

"How can your husband-to-be know that you and he will be happy together, or even compatible? He doesn't know anything about you—or you him!"

The Faquel stroked Beth's rump. "I know a great deal, as does he. He knows I am intelligent and well educated. By my chosen courses of study he knows I enjoy teaching, which will be a valuable quality for the well being of our offspring. He knows I am beautiful..."

"How can he know that?" Beth retorted, clambering to her knees and trying to banish the languor of her contentment. She could barely think logically with Eba's hands caressing her so knowledgeably, especially as the alcohol coursed through her blood. "Has your father described you? Has he seen a picture?"

Eba laughed. "Of course not. He knows that my father considers my mother exquisite by the quality and quantity of the jewelry, carpets, and tapestries he bestows on her. He knows the beauty price my mother has set on me—and paid it double."

"Couldn't your parents lie about that?"

The Faquel shrugged. "I suppose. But if they had, and my husband didn't shower gifts after seeing me in the flesh," she grinned at Beth, who tried to hide her own with a scowl, "then everyone would know of the deception and my family would lose status."

The Sinta placed her fingers against Beth's mouth, forestalling her reply. "He and I have exchanged letters since childhood. I know his dreams. I know his thoughts." She chuckled. "I know he is a bad poet ... But continues to try because he loves it."

Eba took another sip and pressed her offering against Beth's lips. "Don't worry about me, porquena. It is I who will worry about your future, instead."

"I'm going home. Things will be fine," Beth said. She leaned back into the cushions with a whoosh, a giggle, and a long sigh. "That stuff kicks ass."

"And you've had enough." Eba placed the stopper back in the flask and rocked to her feet.

"What is that?"

"Depends on what vintner bottled it."

"That's wine?" Beth asked, feeling the warmth spread. She hoped Eba would return quickly. Myriad ways waited. Even with the dizziness, Beth felt the cushions shift and reached out to caress the soft feathery down on the Sinta's arms.

"Wine? That's made from fruit, right? No, not wine. Distillery?" She waited for Beth's nod. "Generally, it's called 'Taza' because they make it from the roots of tazal flowers."

Eba caught her sudden startled expression.

"Why would he call me that?" Beth grasped Eba's elbow. "Is there a fable?"

"No. Just because he found you intoxicating, I expect." The Sinta nestled next to her, comforting and quiet while Beth considered the revelation.

'Taza'. A'tan's other name for her because she intoxicated him. The more Beth learned, the more certain she was that the 'Portenia' had not rescued her but simply transported her farther from where she might have happily stayed.

Through the walls, the unmistakable sounds of merriment echoed dimly. The 'Portentia' had arrived at a minor spaceport and R&R reigned, though the captain had not mentioned anything but fresh supplies. In a rare conversation, Hol Rhodall had invited the Faquel, through her companion, to make a shopping list of anything that would make the journey more amenable.

Es Vorhes had requested a few items but Beth only wanted salt. The captain had firmly denied the possibility of either female disembarking for even a few minutes. The station had a rough reputation, he said, and, unlike Verouport, had no facilities suitable for genial entertainment. Beth almost laughed at his awkward euphemisms. Dardeport, Eba had informed her, was a floating warehouse with trade goods being a very secondary consideration. Her appeal to visit the station had been a preplanned moment of mischief, designed to discomfit the taciturn officer.

Though sequestered, both females could sense the eagerness that percolated throughout the ship. One evening, the ragged breathing of enthusiastic rutting had reverberated in the next chamber. Whoever it had been, and based solely on his cry of utter relief, it had been some time since his sexual needs had been met. Though neither she nor Eba had any idea of the layout of the rest of the 'Portentia', Beth wondered aloud if the captain's quarters could be adjacent.

The thought of that dour male in throes of passion caused a moment of hysteria before they quieted to better eavesdrop.

Beth had been aware of Eba's regard for sometime and finally asked what was bothering her.

"Nothing. I'm glad you are here," the Sinta said.

Nodding, Beth agreed. "It's a long trip."

"You don't understand. Without you, I may have been tempted to..." She tilted her head toward the bulkhead.

"That would ruin you?"

Eba bowed her head.

"What if you were raped? Would he still marry you then?"

"If my attacker wore a sheath and pregnancy wasn't an issue, maybe." The Faquel shook her head. "Probably not."

"A rapist wouldn't wear one, right? And you'd get pregnant for sure?"

The Sinta nodded and concentrated on her handcraft.

"Well, we're safe here," Beth said. She told the Faquel about the fail-safe measures and about the pistol hidden in the outer chamber.

Days later, when circumstances changed again, Beth tried to remember that sense of security and wondered how she could have been so wrong to feel so safe.

Chapter Forty

'So close,' Beth thought again, letting Eba arrange the folds of the heavily jeweled burque. Less than two weeks from Earth. Only eleven endless Sint-length days until Beth could be among humans again and rejoin her much interrupted life. "So close."

Eba stopped fluttering and whispered, "You don't have to do this."

"Yeah, I think I do." But Beth hoped their captors wouldn't react too badly to this little alteration in their plans. Otherwise, this forsaken corner of endless space was as close to home as she was likely to ever be again.

* * * *

The morning had begun like every other, parables and forms, showering and making bread. Two evenings before the Captain had announced a brief detour. The Jibarae had deployed communication transmitters along all of the well-traveled routes and at junctions on the rarely trafficked byways. During a routine full-stop and space-buoy scan, a distress beacon had been detected, relaying through the next closest one.

No one ignored a request for help, even if the aid could only be offering additional supplies or a promise to send back a mechanic at the earliest opportunity. The messages weren't like radio. Some, like the one Erit had given Beth, was simply a generalized bong just to let one person know that another was looking for him. Others, like the one Hol Rhodall had

intercepted, consisted on a series of pings, which gave coordinates or other numeric information.

Though piracy and black-marketing were common on the surfaces of the newly settled planets, the practice hadn't translated to similar ventures in the wide empty regions of space. The Trojan horse either had no analogy in the space-faring culture, or was so completely dishonorable as to be nonexistent, but Beth knew, as soon as the klaxon sounded and was preemptively silenced without a corresponding clarification or placation from the captain, that the distress signal had been a trap.

She'd explained her fears to the Sinta who, at first, had been incredulous but began to believe as the captain's nonappearance lengthened. They discussed the possible reasons why someone would waylay a passenger vessel.

"No trade goods, no weapons, no valuables," Eba said, shaking her head.

Beth felt a tickle of an idea. "Would acquiring a bride, like you, from a good family be worth the risk?"

The Faquel's eyes widened. "That would be criminal!"

"No duh! These are the bad guys we're talking about here. Criminals, you know. But are you important some other way?"

The Sinta's nostrils flared, and her hands wove a nervous pattern. "My family is."

"I thought so." Beth held up her hand and waved Eba to silence. The shouting had ceased and she thought she heard the murmur of voices in the outer foyer. "You can hear better than me. What are they saying?"

Eba pressed her ear against the panel, and then shrugged. Beth considered for a second before slipping her key into the lock. She slid the door aside slowly, looking for intruders in the slippery little passageway. They crept forward, until even Beth could hear the words (but couldn't understand them) clearly.

Neither spoke, while Eba listened to the heated discussion beyond the small gate. Suddenly her eyes widened and, with urgent gestures for Beth to follow, retreated back to the inner chamber.

"Why'd we come back here?" Beth asked, complying with Eba's demand that the door remain closed and locked.

"They were talking about cutting through the gate, but someone warned them that bypassing the lock would blow the corridor, exposing much of the ship to vacuum, though this chamber would be safe—if the door is closed." She patted the panel and heaved a sigh.

Beth shivered, remembering her fear of falling into the black void outside A'tan's ship. Eba continued her nervous little gestures until Beth caught at her hands.

"They are here for me. They will hold me prisoner until my family promises support for the..." She stopped, with a flutter of her facial tags. "Some Sintal think that Solterra should be purged and resettled."

Beth nodded. "Wipe us out and steal our world. Yeah, I know. What's that got to do with this?"

"A few, the Jibarae and some Yeter, think we should invite your world to join us, but limit your expansion to the systems immediate to your Sol. Others believe the present

arrangement is best, that Solterra remain a protectorate and the general populace ignorant of the more advanced societies."

Beth snorted. "Purge? Prohibit? Protect? Fucking nice options and not one letting us chose." She shook away Eba's gesture of apology. "Where do you stand, Es Vorhes?"

Eba opened her mouth but had no answer.

Beth went on, "You aren't a purge or those guys wouldn't want you, so you must be protect or prohibit. All those options suck, Eba. How about treating us like equals?"

The Sinta averted her eyes. "Your kind are violent, some are liars and thieves, and it is proven that you cannot govern yourselves peacefully."

Beth jerked her chin toward the increasing loud conversation in the foyer, "Yours are so much better?"

The Sinta shrugged. "Maybe not. We are much alike—Sint and humans. We have more in common with you than with the Yeter or Jibarae. But we don't reproduce as quickly as you do. If Solterrans gain a toehold in space, they will dominate by sheer numbers. Fencing Solterra neutralizes that possibility and protects our interests."

"I see." And she did. The human race was facing a danger that none of them, except for a chosen few—stooges for the Sinta for the most part or expatriates like Steve—had any knowledge of. Somewhere and some when, the decision would be made and her species would pay the price, without ever having a voice in the process.

In uncomfortable silence, they listened to the ongoing argument.

"They're going to get in here, eventually," Eba said.

"You'd better hope that a ransom is all they want." The Sinta looked startled.

"What else?"

Beth tried not to care but found her mind exploring the possible outcomes.

"If your family agrees to the purge solution, what's to stop them from withdrawing their support once you are safe, again?"

"You think they mean to murder me?" Beth was surprised that the Sinta could be so calm about the thought of dying.

"By my death, my family also would be released from the agreement. So killing me would accomplish nothing."

True. Then what? "If one of the purge faction raped you, offered to marry you, and repaid your price, would that gain him anything?"

The Faquel blushed before answering the question. "That's it. That would work."

"Count on your family's honor to keep your rape and the reason for the sudden change of grooms secret, and keep their support for his cause to assure your continued safety," Beth said, slowly, tasting each word for validity.

Unexpectedly, the Sinta laughed and, when Beth looked at her in puzzlement, said, "You think like a criminal, porquena." The smile disappeared. "Should I worry that you are in collusion?"

Eba stared at Beth for a long time, waiting for her to deny the possibility. Let her believe what she wanted, Beth thought, as something else occurred to her. The bad guys

would eliminate the witnesses—and she was one. She hadn't clawed her way across half the universe and gotten this close to home to be killed without a fight.

Beth returned the Sinta's stare, coolly. "If you really think that, then nothing I can say will dissuade you. While you decide if you trust me, let's think of how we're going to throw a monkey wrench into this asshole's works."

* * * *

Wondering whether her plan would work, Beth's mind dashed from one possibility to the next as Eba put the final touches on the costume. Like a strap around her lungs, the fatal weaknesses of her solution occurred to her.

"Eba! I can't speak your language. They are going to ask me questions and aren't going ask in English," Beth said, her knees ready to collapse.

"You won't be expected to know anything. If you do need to speak, recite stanzas from the second or fifth parables. It isn't as if they want information—just a hostage."

Beth shook her head.

"As a female you are permitted to be mysterious and inscrutable."

"Another thing, though."

The Sinta stopped fussing with the veil. "That they'll search the chamber and find me?"

So Eba had deduced that problem for herself. Not stupid or completely naive. Beth wondered why any race would ignore half its population and the intellectual contributions they could make. It seemed anti-survival to her, but she said

nothing, realizing that this handicap would allow humans to overcome their jailors, given time.

The Faquel glanced at one of the tapestries. "I'll be hidden. I'm sure the captain transmitted an alert before being overrun."

Beth glared at the Sinta, glad for the hood that obscured her expression. "Would you have shared your hiding place, Es Vorhes? Or killed me to keep it a secret?"

The Sinta blushed. "I will share, of course, but..."

"If they don't find a female here, after all this hullabaloo, they'll keep looking until they do." Beth hated that every time she had a 'choice' all the options evaporated like dry ice until she was left with a single avenue.

She turned to unlock the hatch but paused as the Sinta placed fingers on her sleeve. "You hide. I'll go."

"No. Maybe they'll let the 'Portentia' go to deliver the message about your ransom. You'll be a better witness than me." Beth said it to salve the Faquel's conscience but, upon further reflection, knew that the possibility existed. Though not as morally superior as they liked to believe, the spacer-races didn't tend to kill each other for as little provocation as humans might. Also, though the authorities wouldn't move mountains—or asteroids, anyway—to save a Solterran, her sacrifice to protect the Faquel might merit negotiations to secure her release. Beth upgraded her chances of surviving from less than zero to something measurable.

"That won't help you." Also true. The life of one little human wouldn't be held as highly as that of one of theirs. Still, Beth thought, as worthless as they thought she was,

would she be worth killing if there were something else that could be done with her? The offer of sex had worked before and, considering the obvious desperation of the occupant of the next chamber during their stay at Dardeport, was a salable commodity.

"I'll be okay." Beth keyed the panel and whispered, "If not, remember what I did for you and judge my species less harshly."

The Faquel tapped her hand and covered the pale telltale flesh. "Stay concealed."

"You too!" Beth left the panel open and, when she reached the little gate leading to the anteroom, glanced back. The Sinta must have hidden already, because there was no movement or noise in the inner chamber.

The voices fell silent as the gate lock, double keyed, clicked open. With a deep breath to settle her stomach and heart, Beth exited the safety of the corridor.

When she looked upon the face of her adversary that preparatory breath caught and the next refused to come. After a long minute in which she fought faintness, her shock receded as she conceded the logic and silently swore at the repetitive nature of her fortune and fate.

Who else would need a bride from a powerful family except someone who had experience in using hostages to sway his enemies? Who else, in the scheme of things, would show up at this juncture? Who else had she hoped never to see again?

In two strides, he crossed the foyer. Beth steeled herself for rough handling, but the Sint merely bowed his head

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by Jolie Howard

graciously and said, "Ah, Es Vorhes..." Of the rest of his introduction she only understood one part.

'Nis Vorhes.'

Chapter Forty-one

For the third time, Beth glanced over to the secret drawer where the pistol was concealed. The commander had indicated for her to sit on the low divan while he issued orders to his minions. Beth was surprised to see Nel among them, having considered that Sint as more sympathetic than his superior officer.

Sitting properly, quiet and demure, wondering what Eba would have done with her hands and feet, Beth hoped docility was what Nis expected. Surely he would not reveal any plans to rape this bride nor do the deed publicly. No, the fundamental act of his plot would occur without witnesses who could contradict his story of mutual passion. If the consummation was a private rape, then neither Eba nor her family would be required to acknowledge the violation and an alliance would be made to protect the Sinta's well-being, safeguard her family's reputation, and—ultimately—purge the Earth of the inconvenient presence of its dangerously adaptive and highly competitive species.

Tidy. Clever. Beth relished her opportunity to screw it up totally.

A cursory search was conducted of the inner chamber and several trunks of clothing and bridal dowry were hauled out, presumably to Nis's awaiting ship. Her whispered replies to direct (and obvious) questions caused only minor puzzlement, usually followed by a shrug. He didn't need a smart bride, only one connected correctly.

While she silently urged the invaders to abandon the 'Portenia' hastily and without undue violence, the activity continued around her. A few soldiers threw curious glances at her still form, and were severely rebuked. Gradually though, the traffic slowed until, finally, a pair of guards escorted the battered Hol Rhodall into the crowded anteroom.

After Nis made a long speech, with frequent gestures at the imposter 'Faquel', the captain was given a scroll, which, no doubt, outline the ransom demands. Nis indicated that she should accompany him and Beth stood, blessing whatever lucky star had shone in favor of her countermeasure. Just then, one of the soldiers clambered through the low gate and tossed a bundle to the commander.

A good thing often takes time to ripen. Bad things frequently go rotten all at once.

Beth, with her emotions cycling madly from hope diluted by resignation to resignation mixed with determination, watched as whatever good thing she'd hoped to accomplish crumbled to dust. Her hands clenched beneath the long sleeves of the burque, an unconscious gesture of salvaging the situation for a little longer. Though poised to run (and wishing to be safely huddled with Eba in the hiding place), there was no island to harbor her and no friendly ocean in which to escape. Beth's heart beat frantically, and she froze as the catastrophe struck, unable to snatch it back.

Nis shook the scrap of fabric, which unrolled into her short Jibarae tunic. Her hairbrush tumbled from the folds and skittered across the bare floor with a rattle. The fingers of his face waved madly, and then settled into grim lines as his eyes

contemplated the burqued 'bride'. Beth tried not to cringe as, with a few quick steps, he approached.

The Sint reached for her hood and, as he tangled his fingers in the layers of gossamer, Beth ducked, lashed out and smashed her knee into his groin.

Her plan was in ruins, the Sinta would be sacrificed, and the threat to the Earth loomed greater but, with whatever strength she could summon, Beth intended to make him pay as great a price as she could. The Sintal were not nearly as fierce as the Yeter and she'd inflicted some hurting on one of those more than once.

Though toned by the months of parable lessons and desperate to leave a bruise or two, Beth couldn't match Nis's training or power. He pinned her easily and tore back the hood. It made her feel a bit better that he was as shocked to see her as she had been to see him earlier. His dark eyes burned with vicious anger for the deception, making him a fool was obviously a dangerous deed—and she had accomplished it twice.

"Where is the Faquel?" he hissed. She tried to bite his wrist but he avoided her teeth and shook her by the throat. His fingers dug into the grooves on either side, blocking her arteries there, and her head swam.

"What's a Faquel?" Beth said, bending his thumb away enough to restore blood flow. She would not faint, dammit.

"You will answer my questions."

Beth recited a stanza of the second parable and, though she was completely uncertain what she'd said, it must have hit home because he darkened as if blushing and the fingers

at her neck loosened. She added another phrase and enjoyed his discomfort and the shocked whispers of his coconspirators. He released her completely. Pushing her luck, the third time backfired and he slapped her face.

Beth laughed and, channeling her fear into anger, repeated the same verse. Nis clenched her arms in his fists and flung her against the bulkhead. She struggled to her feet, dodging one blow. The next caught her fully. She tumbled across the divan and landed heavily, on her hands and knees, behind it.

"Do you mock me?" Nis peered down at her.

His comrades, who had been nervous throughout the fight, murmured. Were they appalled at his brutality or did they approve? She didn't care. Let them see a Solterranean—no—a human stand firm and resolute. Let them witness how much of a fight a single human could deliver. Let them worry about pissing off a whole herd of humans by manufacturing a pandemic and attempting genocide.

Beth whipped her head up, narrowly missing his face, but slamming into his shoulder hard enough to knock him off balance. He retreated slightly as she balanced against the divan and pulled herself upright. She spat at him, splashing his chest. He didn't react and she wondered if spitting had the same connotations as it would have on Earth. Beth decided to make her contempt exceedingly plain.

"Yeah, stupid. I mock you." Beth hoped Nis would jump at her then—the couch would be as much in his way as hers—but, instead, he waited until she tried to stand.

Grabbing her hair, he yanked her over the settee and, twisting her arm and pushing hard, hurled her forward. Her

feet tangled in the bunched fabric of her veils and Beth fell. She landed headfirst, but shook off the gray that hovered at the edge of her vision. Finding control of her arms and legs, Beth crawled to the divan and reclaimed her seat there, mimicking the way she'd waited earlier, while pretending to be a Sint virgin. She looked up at the commander, and feigned calm.

"What's your question, again?"

He leaned closer until she could feel the phalanges of his chin brushing her forehead. "Where is the Faquel?"

"What the hell is a Faquel?" she asked.

"The Sinta bride," he said.

"What bride? I've been alone since Soranda. You snared the wrong rabbit."

He stood up and looked down at her. She had no idea if the Sintal played anything like poker. Would he know about bluffing?

"Right rabbit. Her dower is here." He pointed at the tattered burque.

"So I traded favors for some nice stuff. It's been a profitable trip. Ask Rhodall," she said, jerking her head (and regretting the motion that caused the gray to return and pain to flare behind her eyes) toward the captain, "Or don't. Either way, why don't you just go fuck yourself?"

Had he bought her lie? She thought maybe he had until the low chuckle rumbled from his throat.

"No, I won't fuck myself."

His stance gave away his intent. She tried to dart under his guard but he caught her by the surprisingly strong folds of

fabric and drew her back. A fist into her stomach, a strong forearm across her neck, an implacable knee between her thighs and he held her helpless beneath his greater weight and towering hate.

She saw it in his eyes. He wanted to kill her. He would kill her as soon as she gave up Eba. He wouldn't promise leniency. He wouldn't spare her life if she told. He would just continue to hurt her until she, hoping to end the pain, confessed.

"I will make you beg to tell me the truth."

"Give it your best shot, lover," Beth said between clenched teeth. 'I will not cry. I will not beg. I will not scream.' And she didn't—then.

As if he'd planned it—and he probably had but with a different victim—he was ready, effortlessly. Unsheathed, his cock tore through the burque and, guided by well-aimed anger not reckless passion, buried deeply within her feminine folds. The leading edge felt no different than a paper cut, smarting but minor. Another thrust filled her. He paused, giving a twitch to remind Beth of the particularities of a Sental penis.

"Where..." He gave a tiny thrust. As his member engorged further the spines expanded and stiffened, belying their relative length with their potential capacity for damaging her. He had been gentle, restrained even, in their first experimental encounter, she decided, swallowing her hysteria. No restraint surfaced now. Nis used her as he would a Sinta, whose physiology complemented his.

"Is..." Another short plunge. Beth felt the slickness moisten her. Not the juices of desire but the sticky warmth of blood filled the spaces around his hard. Every quiver of his cock sent shards of piercing agony radiating through her. It would take him pulling away to shred her tender flesh, these little thrusts only imbedded his spines more securely for the grand finale. Her fingers found his bare forearms and, drawing his blood in a partial compensation for her own, Beth dug her nails in and raked them free.

"The Sinta?" he asked, smirking as Beth wrapped her legs around his hips, a parody of passion, in a desperate attempt to prevent his next action. He yanked himself from her. Though she had prepared for pain, it overwhelmed her. Her scream, dragged from her guts against her will, ripped through her clenched teeth and lips, and reverberated through the chamber and the corridors. Afterwards, she couldn't inhale except in short gasps, mouthfuls, none of which reached her lungs.

The commander's cock pumped deeply again and she felt blood, spurting from the piston of his thrust, spatter her thighs and his. "Where is she?"

"She changed ships. Dardeport. She hated me because the crew didn't." Beth panted her lie. Her throat felt broken. Wet, hot blood dribbled down the curve of her ass to soak through her ornate borrowed burque into the brocade of the divan.

"Wrong answer," he whispered, ripping his way out to plunge deeper, again. An agonized 'ahhhh' was all her pain could compel and she knew there was nothing left. She couldn't have spoken if she'd tried. She wondered if she'd

achieved anything or if, in the final tally, her death would be as empty and senseless as most.

He repeated his question but Beth, becoming light-headed and lost in contemplation, ignored him.

'Odd', she thought, that everything remained so clear. The rough gemstones rode beneath her rump and the sleek embroidered threads in the cloth caressed her thighs. The shadows of her rape rippled in the ceiling above Nis's head. The horror on Hol's gruff face as he struggled against his guards to reach her. The disapproval in Nel's eyes, as he and the other soldiers stood motionless in shock. The mouse-quiet and lizard-quick patter of silk slippers in the corridor and the shine of tears on Eba's cheeks as she lifted the pistol from the compartment and fired it.

The sucking noise Nis's head made as it exploded and the sloppy mass of his turned-inside-out body falling on top of her. The realization budding that she might not die, after all. A vague worry passed through her mind about not being able to see what happened next—to Eba and the crew of the 'Portentia'—as the encompassing darkness embraced her and erased that concern and all others.

* * * *

Time passed unheeded, at least by Beth. The depth of her dreaming could take her no higher than wisps of imagination against the black of not knowing anything. A sensation of being bundled tightly and unvarying warmth told of being cared for and Beth was content to simply rest. Not dead, she was pretty sure, but not too far from it either. Time to let someone else do the worrying.

'Don't die, porquena," a gentle voice murmured. Or sometimes, "You enjoy life too well to give up so easily." The encouragements came frequently, it seemed. Often urgently enough to bring Beth back to a level of consciousness that allowed thought.

Porquena? That was the iguana's name and, maybe, another endearment she didn't understand. It sounded like an Earthly word. 'Little pig'? Or something similar. But would Eba know Spanish?

She and the iguana shared a similar trait. They transplanted readily and accepted the affection of whoever gave it. Was that why Eba called her Porquena? Or was it her greed for comfort and willingness to submit to achieve satisfaction? Maybe or maybe not.

She mused about it for a while before drifting off again.

Eba's soft-feathered kiss and whispered farewell assured Beth of remaining among the living. The sounds of activity disturbed her rest. The flickering passage of lights gave her the sense of urgent motion. A whiff of some medicinal scent gave her the knowledge of place. A hospital. A human one judging by the touch and temperature of the hands that cared for her and the words murmured about her.

Alive. And home. Or Europa Station, probably. Beth let herself float, knowing that her long journey had ended.

She found out later, when the anesthesia wore off, she'd been wrong. As usual.

Chapter Forty-two

Beth had become accustomed to being an object of curiosity and conjecture. She was used to being the topic of conversation and was comfortable with the idea that the various aliens and space-farers considered her sexual proficiency a commodity and would discuss that value as if she were not present.

In no way had those accommodations for the way things had been prepared her for the feeling of being an outsider, and the target of contempt and ridicule on Europa Station. The human population, living for years at a time beneath the surface of the Jovan moon, was a tightly knit community. Most had never left the Sol system and were content to shuffle their papers, maintain the hardware, care for the personnel, or entertain the locals—alien or human—or spaceship crews during visits from starside.

By the time she was discharged from the clinic, tales of her exploits had been exaggerated, circulated, and judged. Everywhere Beth went, whispers followed. At first, it thrilled her to hear everyone speaking English. She couldn't help but eavesdrop at the rhythm and flow of human speech. Eventually though, the meaning of their words outweighed her happiness at understanding those words.

The worst of the stories were the ones she couldn't remember but pieced together from the bits of overheard gossip.

She recognized the signs as she passed. A casual look, checking out a new face, followed by startled recognition and a quick aside to a partner or coworker.

"That's her!" one would say. The other would stare a moment too long and turn away but Beth always heard the comments.

"They say she fucked a Sint to death." Not true. She just happened to be under him when he met his.

"They say his cock had to be surgically removed." True. Nis's damage would heal, or so the medics told her, but hadn't yet.

"They say she's forgotten how to put on clothes." Partially true. She had trouble with buttons and zippers and, at first, was most comfortable barefooted. She'd adopted the jumpsuits the dockworkers wore because the front closure (and the boots) Velcro-ed. Also because the suits were pretty ubiquitous, clean ones available at every level, and, since considered part of an inhabitant's pay, free.

Unlike living aboard spaceships, where everything she needed was provided, whether she asked or not, things on the station had a price tag. The shops, while interesting and well stocked with Earthly essentials and luxuries, all required choices and giving information—like how she planned to pay. And to that she had no valid answer.

Because many in-station lower level workers engaged in casual prostitution as a supplementary income there was no bartering with the clerks using that as currency. Besides, station authorities regulated prostitution carefully. Beth, as a transient abductee, had neither working papers nor a private

residence in which to ply that trade even if she'd been physically able.

Abduction, though not a daily event, was nothing special nor did it entitle the injured party to any consideration. Her medical treatment had been the extent of official involvement but one of the three sanctioned churches ran a shelter for the abused—whether the victim was an abductee or simply a battered spouse. Two hot meals and a hard cot were provided in exchange for a few hours of menial labor so Beth had a bed and didn't go hungry.

She'd expected that reaching Europa Station would be the end of her troubles but, instead, new problems surfaced as human bureaucracy and the usual plethora of forms, paperwork, and interviews delayed her return to Earth time and again.

Her caseworker, Mona, told her that she'd have to apply for an exit visa since she'd been absent for an extended period.

"But I don't want to exit. I want to go back."

With a logic that escaped Beth's impatience, the pleasantly rounded woman said, "But to have left in the first place, you needed one. So to return we need to normalize your travel documents after the fact."

Another wait and, at the end, an unpleasant (weren't they all?) surprise. Abductees were usually granted adequate reparation by their kidnapper. The compensation paid for a flight to Earth, lost wages, and psychiatric counseling—if needs be. A'tan was beyond Solterran jurisdiction and, from what the caseworker could find out from the in-station Yeter

representative, had been tried and found guilty of numerous major crimes.

Beth firmly put that line of thought away, knowing his species were not lenient, not wanting to cry in front of anyone about his fate.

"You can sue his clan, I suppose," Mona suggested, "But there will be a delay. Maybe months."

"Can't I get my parents to send money?"

Mona laughed. "Honey, just where would you have them wire it? The banks on Earth aren't set up to transfer funds to the spacer financial system—and forget about Western Union."

Beth fingered her Jibarae bracelet, her last souvenir of her years starside. "Could I sell this? It's Jibarae made and Forday marked."

Mona shrugged. "I don't know. Not on this side of the station, but maybe the Jibar rep would know what it is worth."

Seeing the rep—a low level diplomat at an undesirable post—required a series of phone calls. After playing tag with a secretary, a communications operator, and an aide, Beth was approved for an immediate interview.

The spacer side of the station had more guards, more closed doors, and more evidence of a Sint military presence. Beth wondered that none of the humans next-door had caught on to what was obvious to her as soon as she stepped through the airlock.

These aliens weren't here to maintain diplomatic ties with Earth, but to control a potential mutiny. If the humans got

uppity or demanding, a quick solution was possible. All of the life-support controls were on this side of the moon, she guessed. Turn a valve, punch an airlock vent override button and the pest problem would be solved permanently and could, probably, be blamed on a malfunction. Oops, sorry.

Beth estimated that Sintal made up most of the personnel and wondered which camp—purge, protect, prohibit—they were. Most ignored her as they walked in pairs or gathered at junctions, a few glanced longer, but none seemed to recognize her and continued their conversations without a pause.

In the absence of spoken English, Beth no longer worried about being the topic of derision or the punch line of a joke. She found anonymity restful and felt her anxiety seep away into the cooler air.

The Jibar rep, Anir Toknay, gestured for her to sit wherever she pleased in his office. The chamber mirrored the duality of his visitors. Half the room had Jibarae cushions and low tables; the other had human chairs and a desk. Beth sank into one of the soft pillows and leaned her elbows on the nearest corner of the table. Anir covered his surprise and took a seat at the opposite corner.

He glanced at a sheet of paper he'd been carrying. "Ah, Miss Collins. What can I do for you? Something about a piece of jewelry?"

Beth held out her arm and jiggled the bracelet. Various tags still dangled from the links of, what she hoped was, Forday metal. The rep, with a glance of askance, unlatched the intricate little hasp and removed the ornament. Beth liked

the gentle caress of his pale gray-furred fingers against her wrist.

As he examined the chain, Beth wondered if he, like Erit, Ipok, and Orix, were part of a triad—quartet, she corrected, remembering the absent Forday senior partner, the merchant master, whom she'd never met. What would each of the Toknay positions be called, and which level was this pale gray individual? If this one were a representative, maybe the youngest of the cohort would be a courier, the middle an aide, and the senior one a diplomat or some upper functionary in the central government on their homeworld.

"Forday?" he asked. Beth nodded. The Jibar produced a device from his tunic pocket and tapped a few keys. He grunted, a familiar sound that made her smile. Erit used to grunt the same way when he was puzzling something out. Suddenly, the steel-gray eyes widened and his gaze jumped from the screen to his guest's face.

"Elsabeth Collins upaz Forday?" he whispered. Then, in an eerie echo of other whispered comments, he said, "That is you?"

Beth readied herself for his snide laugh or suggestive chuckle or lame joke but never for the reverent sigh.

"You rescued the Vorhes bride." He tapped the notepad. "They say you chose her life over your own." He held out the bracelet and latched it securely on her wrist.

"Something like that," Beth admitted, content that he hadn't mentioned her cock-ectomy or what she'd had to do to save Eba's life or what Eba'd had to do to save hers. "But that's not why I'm here."

Anir nodded. "Oh, the bracelet. It isn't an ornament. Not particularly valuable."

Beth tucked her feet under her rump and rocked to her knees. "I thought the metal might be. Forday metal, right?"

"Plated, yes. Strong and functional. Guaranteed not to break."

Disappointed and wondering what the hell she was going to do now, Beth thanked him for his time and prepared to leave.

"But I don't understand why you wish to sell it," Anir said, stopping her with warm fingers on her hand.

"I need money. My abductor..." she stopped, suddenly remembering that A'tan had been executed for his crimes, had probably been dead since before she'd arrived at Europa, and she would never see him again. As quickly as the thought came tears spilled.

Her grief, long immersed in her daily problems, choked her and wouldn't stay properly buried. The fabric of a gray tunic obscured her vision, and the scent of the mild cleanser filled her nostrils as she wept into Anir's shoulder. The thin wiry arms sheltered her until she couldn't cry anymore and then while she let her heart wander back to both good times and bad.

What part of her grieved for him? What part wished to relieve her guilt? She tried to measure her motives, her actions, and the validity of her sorrow. How much of her anguish was simply missing his unvarying desire for her and his soothing presence? Hell, she longed for his body and the powerful climaxes he wrung from hers, so easily and so

spectacularly. How much of her mourning was from guilt or selfishness?

His choices. Her choices.

Dammit. Which had brought them to this fate?

The Jibar cleared his throat, bringing Beth back to the present. She wondered how long he'd let her muse before interrupting her reverie. She hugged him again for being Jibar and being kind.

Wiping her face on the sleeve of her jumpsuit, Beth said, "There'll be no compensation from him. I need to get money somehow."

His confused face wrinkled like a Chow-chow. "That," he said, pointing toward her bracelet, "Gives you limited access to a third party cache." He tilted the palm-device so she could see the screen, obviously expecting the little marks to mean something to her. "Your assorted employers have been generous and the Vorhes family were extremely—and materially—grateful for your loyalty to their oldest daughter." He glanced at the figures. "Your account shows sufficient value."

"Enough to go to Earth?"

He smiled, smooth white teeth in a fuzzy face. "Enough to go almost anywhere you might want to go—if you could find a ship willing to take you and an official willing to give you travel documents." He paused and then smiled. "I would."

Beth thought a long minute about where she really wanted to go. If it still existed as it had, in that moment, she would have chosen a certain Sorandan island over any other place in

As Pretty Girls Do
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the universe. But, as she already knew, it was never a place that was home, only the people living there that made it one.

In the end, for the lack of any place better and holding a visa good for anywhere, she chose Earth.

Chapter Forty-three

'People are stupid,' Beth thought for the millionth time. No one questioned her cover story—a mugging injury that left her with severe memory loss—to explain her long absence, when any fool knew that amnesia didn't work that way.

Her parents accepted her back with open arms, open wallets, and puzzled looks for her personality changes.

The hardest part was not sharing her experiences. She'd been warned to stay silent. One of the conditions of her return was signing a gag agreement that bound her to say nothing except to her counselor—a government agent of some kind.

He questioned her frequently during the sessions in which she was supposed to come to terms with being kidnapped. His queries never had to do with her state of mind, her feelings of insecurity and alienation, or her feelings of betrayal, or whatever emotions she was supposed to be feeling.

He asked about the Jibar hierarchy and merchant economy, about Yeter physiology and attitudes about death and honor, and about Sintal marital customs and mythology. She gave him answers but never told him that he was asking the wrong questions. The authorities didn't want to know about spacer conspiracies or politics—or didn't think that a ship's whore, who couldn't speak the language, would have any information on such lofty topics.

Beth reported all her little victories, a job, school grades, or finding a place to live, to Dr. Jackson and he was her link

to the spacer funds. If he wanted to know that Sintas wore burques to cover their beautiful wings, she had no problem describing Eba's while he nodded and checked to make sure his MP3 recorder was getting every detail. She recited all the parables, but didn't sing the songs or assume the physical forms.

He never asked what she thought might be the most important things her years with spacers revealed. Never wondered about the aliens' lack of intelligent computers, and their reliance on single-use devices. They never discussed the ease in which she (and Steve and Jinx) had adapted or whether that gave the human species an edge. The ability of humans to accommodate any sexuality was equally ignored. The disadvantage of alien limited reproductive capacity never came up.

Though Dr. Jackson was aware of the wider picture, he had never met a Yeter, Jibar, or Sintal, and seemed to think that, even as different as they looked, they possessed a similar perspective and thought process. Beth couldn't explain it and, after the first session, quit trying when he didn't understand the species-centric error in his analysis. He tried to make sense of them as if they were merely odd-looking people and not aliens.

Even supposedly smart people could be really stupid.

Through luck, Beth found a job that suited her. Her temporary lodgings—a studio apartment—were above an electronics repair shop.

"No one fixes anything anymore," Stan would complain while fishing out a loose wire or fried chip. He couldn't pay

her much but, between her parent's support and her weirdly accessible alien funds, she had plenty.

She enrolled in a couple of continuing ed courses, not certain what she wanted to do but needing to fill the hours of her empty days.

Beth noticed new faces in her daily routine. The same faces turned up at unrelated places over the course of her days. Followed. How stupid. She felt like posting her schedule in the paper with the headline, "Are You Bored Yet?"

She heard strange pings from her phone and wondered who they thought might be calling her. She found drywall dust on her floors and pinholes in her walls but said nothing. If she did complain, who would believe her except whoever ordered the surveillance? She wanted to blame her parents or the government, but speculated about other possibilities.

Watching her life had to be as exciting as sorting rocks. That thought made her laugh aloud. Caught on tape, laughing for no reason, someone was going to have something to report. Beth laughed again. Wasn't paranoia a hoot?

Beth was waiting. She knew that much, but not for what she was waiting. Sometimes she got impatient—angry. Sometimes she cried—lonely. Sometimes, on restless nights, she fantasized about A'tan and, not caring who was watching, masturbated. Maybe, she admitted while dozing off afterwards, it was the knowledge of being watched as she sought pleasure, while making the little noises of excitement, which made her solitary passion more titillating.

Her voyeur stroked an erection while she writhed. His hand matched the rhythm of hers while he viewed the tape or,

better yet, a real-time live action webcam type transmission. Maybe his partner would be female and be just as turned on. She would kneel before him and, pushing his hand away from his erection, replace the caress of his fingers with the wet circle of her lips.

Would he ejaculate then or wait until she, the object of his imagination during many a long boring surveillance, lifted her skirt and straddled his lap? Would he keep his eyes on the webcam video of Beth while the other agent posted on his cock? Would her breasts be large and overflow his hands or small and only fill his mouth? Would their cries and moans drown out the ones coming from the speakers?

Would he feel like he'd done two women at once, if he timed his efforts correctly to bring his partner to orgasm when Beth reached hers?

If alone in his vigil, would he stop before orgasm and relive hers while fucking his wife or girlfriend, later?

If he worked the night shift, would he wait until his wife shooed the kids off to school before peeling off her bathrobe and ravishing her on the kitchen table amidst the breakfast dishes? Then would they shower together and start again, more slowly, touching in the relaxed, knowledgeable way of lovers familiar with the other? Beth watched her watcher as he made lingering love to another woman, imagining the flex of his ass as he pumped and the curve of her calf as she drew him in harder.

Her imagery made her laugh—and sob.

She waited. She knew that life had a tempo and hers would change again.

At least, she hoped so.

Beth shook back a stray lock and concentrated on her form. Push, hold, and slowly release pressure until the weights settled without a clank. Again.

"That's heavy. Need a spotter?" She glanced up, past her outstretched and trembling arms. His crotch was above her and his snug shorts exposed plenty of leg in addition to outlining an ample package, which twitched under the caress of her regard. Shifting her gaze upward, she saw him watching her eyes and caught a twinge of a grin for her embarrassment.

'Fuck him,' Beth thought. If he was going shove his goods in her space she had every right to check out the view.

All the straight guys, and plenty of the gay women, eventually tried to pick her up. Almost all of them started their campaign by offering themselves as a workout partner. It hadn't worked, yet, but the trend made her wonder if she was sending subliminal or pheromone-charged signals. Had her time starside changed that about her, too? Did she go around wearing a placard advertising, 'Try this'? Did something about her attitude or bearing scream, 'Fuck me!'

Beth finished her lift without answering, curled under the bar, and retreated toward the women's locker room. She knew he followed though she didn't look back.

"Hey," he called. "Yo, Collins. Stop."

She paused, involuntarily obeying his order, and half-turned, before resuming her path. She wondered how he knew her name. She'd put an alias on the membership card. Everyone did for privacy's sake.

"We need to talk." His voice sounded as if he wore smirk but she refused to glance back.

"We do? I don't think so." Beth pushed on the door and stiffened as he put a hand on her bare shoulder. His fingertips circled lightly on the skin beneath her ear.

"Yeah, we do." He leaned closer until she felt his breath on her neck. "I know how you got these scars."

"Really?" She'd been told that glass blowers had similar scars and to cite an industrial accident with molten glass as an excuse.

In a whisper more felt than heard he said, "Fangs."

"You believe in vampires?" Beth quipped, feeling her guts quiver as she wondered if he did, in fact, know the source of those faded marks.

In the breath of his word, 'Yeter', whatever answer she'd been primed to make, died on her tongue.

He named a time and a bistro. "Meet me for lunch tomorrow."

"Maybe," she said, and wrenched from under his hand, harder than she'd had to. She stumbled through the door and slipped on a damp patch of tile. When she regained her balance both he and his mocking laughter were gone.

She knew she would go. He had something none of the others who'd tried to seduce her had—knowledge of her secrets. More than the comment about the fang scars, more than knowing her name, he'd given her an order in spacer language. His saying "Stop" in English would have made her move more quickly but the years of conditioning made the 'Stop' command in the alien language unarguable. That

combination made this guy interesting and dangerous—and irresistible.

One thing really bothered her and made her hesitate to keep the meet. He reminded her of someone she didn't want back in her life.

Jinx Morgan.

Would this man be a whacked head-case, too? She briefly considered calling Dr. Jackson before deciding she wouldn't. She wanted to find out about the stranger without having the preconceived notions about his motives that the doctor might suggest.

It wasn't until she had tried on several different outfits in preparation of the rendezvous that she thought maybe the waiting for something new to happen had ended.

But, for Beth, change hadn't always brought good things. Almost never, in fact.

Chapter Forty-four

The bistro, more of an evening and weekend place, was weekday quiet. A dozen or so tables, a handful of booths, and a short bar had been tucked into a small shop in a short cul-de-sac off a larger store-lined street. The neighborhood had gone retro a few years earlier and vigorous lobbying had barred the area from a general razing. Urban renewal had reclaimed the old stone buildings from decay and prevented its demolition into a mall or apartment complex.

Beth arrived early but he was waiting. He stood and met her before she'd gotten halfway across the tiny dining area.

"I knew you'd show," he said. "I'm Matt Burke."

Beth bit back a retort when she realized he'd been relieved that she had shown up and not as certain as he'd tried to sound.

He picked a booth with no view of either window. A terrible table, the worst one possible—unless one was hoping not to be seen or spied upon. Did he know about the surveillance on her?

He sat across from her and leaned in. "They watch us, you know." Her response waited as the waitress appeared, recited the specials, handed them menus handwritten on white sack paper, and took their drink orders. Making simple choices still caused Beth unreasonable anxiety and she took the easy route and seconded Matt's request for a draft.

"Watch us?" she asked when it seemed safe to resume their conversation.

Matt glanced quickly toward the bar where the waitress stood, waiting for the drinks and where the TV news seemed to absorb her complete attention. "Abductees and involuntary re-imps."

Beth waited again until the server set down the beverages and went off to do whatever it was that they did when not serving patrons.

"What's a re-imp?"

"I'm a re-imp. Re-imported. I grew up on the ES. When my parents came back so did I." He sipped his beer. "I didn't want to." He gave her a rueful grimace.

The ES was, obviously, Europa Station. Beth opened her mouth to ask why he'd wanted to stay there when he suddenly smiled and stood. Beth leaned across the bench and looked beyond the back of it. An older woman, with shoulder-length dark brown hair, weaved between the tables. She hugged Matt and then stared at Beth with dark brown eyes. Attractive if one liked whatever type would be the opposite of Beth.

"Maddy, this is Beth Collins. Beth, this is Madelyn Burke..."

Beth wondered if the lady was his mother for a moment.

"...My wife."

Her surprise didn't offend them; indeed, they laughed and let her know that most people made the same assumption. Maddy reminded Beth of a seal on amphetamines. Sleek and hyper, eyes always darting, hands twitching as if looking for a place to rest, even standing still she seemed ready to dive in. Although she looked plush and soft, Beth sensed athleticism in the muscles of her round forearms and the tense stance.

Beth had met women like her before. Frightened by a brush with violence, threatened by a teenage tough at the mall, accosted by a drunk in a parking lot, or having witnessed a random carjacking, they took self-defense courses, female empowerment classes, or learned to use a pistol. Hell, before A'tan, she'd been one of those women.

Maddy explained. "It's just easier to have a relationship with someone who understands what you've been through. With Matt I can talk about it since the rules about non-disclosure don't apply—or the authorities don't enforce them, anyway."

"You're a re-imp, too?" Beth asked.

Maddy gathered her tresses in her fingers and lifted them to reveal a couple faint pinprick scars on her neck.

"Abductee." With nervous fingers, she combed her hair down over the marks. "It's always Yeters, you know, who kidnap females."

She hadn't, but it made sense so Beth nodded.

Maddy jerked her chin toward Beth and said, "May I look?"

Beth shrugged, twisted her hair into a rope and pulled it up. She could feel both sets of eyes on her exposed skin as if their sight had weight and texture. Beth shivered as the other woman touched the myriad overlapping scars. She dropped her hair, covering her neck and ending their study.

"You poor thing," Maddy sighed, mistaking Beth's response. "You must have been terrified." She retreated a few steps as the waitress returned, and Beth breathed easier. What did these people want from her? Sex? Money?

As seemed the normal course of this conversation, Beth waited to answer until Maddy ordered her drink and the waitress left.

"Sometimes. At first."

Maddy slid in across the table. Matt slipped into the space beside Beth, renewing her discomfort. Was he setting up his moves, or blocking her escape? Beth wondered if the tremor in her knees was fear or desire. Either way, she decided, these were the first people she'd met that might understand why she wasn't happy and, maybe, could help her find out how to fit in again.

If sex were price, she'd gladly submit to their needs to fulfill hers. Uncomfortable honesty made her admit that she hoped it was.

Between them and without actually revealing sources or methods, the Burkes explained how they knew about her. They had a mole in the agency that dealt with abductees and extraterrestrial affairs and employed hackers to access databases and personal files. They were members of an advocacy group seeking justice for the victims and greater rights of human entry to space. The alliance also wanted to publicize the issue, and achieve vindication for the scorned and ridiculed who hadn't kept their kidnappings a secret.

Maddy kept talking as the food arrived and, around bites and with Matt interjecting details about Europa Station, described the ongoing battle between their organization and the numerous government agencies designed to misinform the public by discrediting even the most reputable of witnesses.

Abductees' experiences were easily explained away because their stories sounded so absurd. Re-imps, and other supporters who came forward, were punished financially. Bank and brokerage accounts disappeared, Social Security records were tampered with, credit histories were doctored, and other assets were confiscated under drug-money seizure laws.

Beth wondered which Sintal cadre ran the Earth based agencies. She wondered if this fledgling grassroots human organization knew about the genocidal plans and decided not. Things like victim compensation and traveling freedoms seemed minor when faced with the extermination of the entire species. Beth wondered if Eba was happy, if the Jibarae missed her, if Steve had found Jinx, and if the rainy season was over on Soranda.

She firmly did not wonder about A'tan or about whether his execution had occurred yet. She wondered if her trackers had managed to listen in to this conversation or if Matt's choice of tables had prevented that.

She wondered if the guy at the end of the bar, studying the front-page of the local newspaper while nursing a beer, was the same guy she'd seen yesterday at the grocery store. He was either the world's slowest reader or he wasn't reading at all—he hadn't turned the page even once. She wondered if all surveillance guys were that obvious or whether she'd been considered worthy of the clumsiest one.

Mostly though, she wondered if Maddy knew where Matt's hand had strayed or if Matt cared that Maddy's toes had been rubbing her calf since the third round of drinks.

For once Beth forgot about the cameras and microphones imbedded in the walls, as Matt held her, tighter and more in control, as Maddy had instructed him from her vantage point at the other corner of the bed. He'd captured her wrists and twisted her in his embrace. In this, their second time, he'd not released her hands but had tipped her onto the mattress, used a knee to part her thighs and entered her readiness with his arms still entangled around her and his feet on the floor. His lips and tongue lapped the sweat from her shoulder blades as he humped and curled, impaling her firmly against the disheveled bedding.

He thrust, poised, and thrust again. Beth liked his low growl of desire, so reminiscent of A'tan's. His ragged breath caught in his throat and Beth arched to meet his final thrust, deeper and almost enough.

"No Matt," Maddy whispered, but her words came too late to prevent the inevitable and he ejaculated, his cock jumping and jerking as he spasmed. He collapsed against Beth and then tumbled to his back, patting her ass affectionately.

Neither Burke asked if Beth had climaxed, knowing she hadn't.

"Sorry, cakes."

Beth said nothing, reveling in the almost but wishing for the all the way.

Maddy smoothed Beth's hair from her damp cheek.

"He's young, you know. There'll be another next time before you know it." She chuckled, "And then one for me, I think."

Matt flopped his hand toward Maddy with a groan. "You're going to kill me ... Not that I'm complaining, though. Just stating a fact."

"Matt Burke. Died in the line of duty." She leaned toward him and kissed his forehead. "What a trooper."

Beth listened to their friendly familiar banter, letting it flow over her like warm water. Whatever else they were for each other, they did like each other.

"With my boots off. Unless you want me to put them back on?" he replied. He tickled Beth's ribs. "Boots on or off, cakes?" Matt had leaned up on an elbow and his voice came from above her and nearby. He rolled her over, she went willingly, and cupped her nipple, teasing it high and hard before nibbling its tip. A wave of desire radiated outward from his teeth through her flesh. So close.

"I thought you were wearing sneakers?" Beth whispered.

Matt and Maddy laughed at her, as she knew they would.

Already, the utter relaxation of his muscles had been replaced with a spring as his youthful body replenished and recovered. She'd already noticed his short refractory period; he'd bounced back even more quickly after the first, gentler session. His cock, spent not five minutes before, twitched against her hip.

Beth had had a moment of terror, earlier, when even the glow of several too many beers hadn't kept the memory of Nis from her mind. Maddy had soothed her, humming and murmuring, until Matt had slipped in—not unnoticed by any means, but without the pain she'd expected. Long pauses and slow lunges, waiting until she relaxed a bit more before the

next stroke, they brought Beth a long way down the path from anxious to enthusiastic.

Afterwards, Beth found out how he (and Jinx, she supposed) had become so adept at pleasuring a woman. With limited outlets for modern entertainment and unlimited amounts of privacy, most teenagers on ES resorted to the oldest means of human recreation. They experimented endlessly and refined their techniques on equally motivated partners. Since everyone took contraceptives as a matter of station policy and everyone was immunized against everything and everyone had regular health physicals, the risks were minimal.

Returning to Earth meant a huge culture shock for these precocious Casanovas and Fanny Hills as they discovered that the accustomed pastimes of the ES were discouraged and even illegal on their home world.

Beth wasn't as certain of Maddy's story of why just she watched and only rarely reached out to caress her husband. Had her abduction left her fearful of sex? If so, why had she and Matt married? Or did Matt's upbringing leave him longing for multiple partners and Maddy went along as a way to keep her husband?

"I think he's done," Maddy said. She gave Matt's shoulder a little shove and he grunted and fell off her.

He buried his face in the blankets and murmured, "Leave me alone."

Beth wheedled her hand under his leg and tested his overworked but greatly appreciated member with a squeeze.

"You are both evil greedy wenches," Matt said. "He's dead."

"It's your fault. He won't stay dead. Beth and I have buried him time and time again and you keep resurrecting him," Maddy said.

Matt chuckled and pushed Beth's hand away. He straddled her a moment, leaned over to kiss his wife's smile and then planted a wet one on Beth's nose. He fell to the bed on the other side and shoved Beth into the middle position.

"Here," he said. "You two continue without me." He snuggled into Beth's back and pretended a snore. "Bethie, meet Marie Antoinette."

Maddy snorted. "You're delirious. What are you blathering about?"

Matt raised his head, waited until both women were looking at him, winked and replied, "You know. Let them eat cake?" He grabbed Maddy's hand and insinuated it between Beth's thighs. "Here's your cake."

Awhile later, resurrected once more by watching the women explore and test, Matt and Maddy tried again to lift Beth to her peak. Nobody said anything when all efforts failed but Beth felt their disappointment as keenly as her own.

* * * *

Beth awoke to aroma of bacon, the sound of the shower, and fingers stroking her neck. She stretched and nuzzled deeper into her pillow.

Matt nipped her ear and whispered, "Time to up and at it. I'm getting breakfast ready and Maddy's waiting for you in the shower."

He kissed her cheek and whipped the blankets away. Beth rolled over and stretched again, knowing Matt was watching and enjoying the view. She wondered if he would be interested in a morning quickie and looked her invitation at him.

He laughed and shook his head. "Evil wench. You're awesome. Now go shower before Mads uses all the hot water."

* * * *

Maddy, all soapy and wet, smiled as she rinsed. She stepped back and lifted the showerhead so Beth got all the spray.

"Too hot?"

"Perfect." Beth lathered up and turned when Maddy indicated that she'd wash her back. The dark-haired woman slipped and slid her hands comfortably but not erotically, across Beth's spine. "Last night was last night, right? Today is today?"

"Right," Maddy replied and hugged Beth's back. "How do you feel?"

"Confused. I thought we were beginning something. Now I think maybe the beginning was the end and there is no more."

Maddy sighed and clambered out of the tub. She waited for Beth with a dry towel and a robe.

"What's going on?" Beth sat down on the toilet seat to dry her legs and Maddy perched on the rim of the tub. "What do you want from me?" Beth misjudged the long silence and expected Maddy to say 'Nothing'.

"I was abducted. Like most of us, I came back afraid of sex until Matt finally talked me into bed. He cured me. Sometimes, we try to help other abductees. I'm sorry we couldn't help you get over your fear."

There were a thousand answers to that, none of which expressed Beth's anger about being a charity case once more. "Thanks for trying," was the comment she chose.

Maddy smiled, missing Beth's sarcasm. "We abductees need to stick together. Join our group. Psychobabble aside, it does help to share your fear. We're trying to get the whole story out in the open. When we have incontrovertible evidence we'll go public and demand reform. Don't worry, Beth. You are not alone."

Beth sighed. She'd been wrong (and was tired of being wrong so often) about finding any answers with the Burkes. They had none that she hadn't already discovered.

"Maddy, how long did your Yeter keep you?"

"Six weeks."

"Is that the usual?" Beth asked, standing up to slip her arms into her robe.

Maddy glanced in the mirror at her neck, and the scars there, and said, "No. I wasn't lucky. He kept me a long time. Most abductees are returned in a couple days or a week or two, at most."

Breakfast was quiet. As they left, Matt handed Beth a slip of paper with an email address on it. "Write us if you want to join our cell."

"Yes, we have so much in common," Maddy added.

Beth said nothing but as the couple reached the landing she called out, "Maddy?"

The woman turned and looked up the stairs, expectantly. Abruptly, Beth pictured a ball balanced on the upturned nose and wondered if Maddy knew that she was jumping through hoops, fighting the wrong battles, and not achieving anything.

"I lost track of how long I was starside. Years and years. I was a whore for a Yeter, the Jibarae, a pair of humans, and a Sintal and though I wasn't always a willing participant I don't regret anything that happened. I learned there is a difference between being alive and just living. I don't fear sex. I fear never being that alive again."

Beth took a deep breath and held up her hand to stop Maddy from climbing up to her. "Really. Thanks. I don't blame you for trying. But not everyone who seems broken needs fixed. Sometimes the pieces are too shattered and putting things back together won't change a thing. You and I have nothing in common."

* * * *

Dr. Jackson glanced up from her chart and Beth waited.

"You've been talking to others about your abduction."

Beth laughed. "Talking, hell. We fucked like bunnies—and you watched."

He blushed.

"Did you make copies of those tapes for use at home?"

The psychologist tapped the file. "These people are barriers to your complete repatriation. They are misfits and misanthropes."

She stood and walked to the door. The only reason she came was to find out who'd been keeping tabs on her. The knob wouldn't turn so she said, "Unlock it or I'll demonstrate my hatred of certain humans." The lock buzzed and the knob turned.

"Don't do anything stupid, Beth. The authorities..."

She looked at him. "Have no authority, Dr. Jackson. Don't you see? We've been caged and studied. What do you do with your lab rats at the end of your research?"

Before closing the door she said, "Next time you guys set a tail on me, pick someone who passed Spy 101."

The doctor glanced up at her and in casual indifference asked, "How important do you think you are?" before closing her file jacket and pushing it aside.

Slamming the door did nothing for her anger.

On the bus, Matt slid into the next seat. He whispered, "You told them about us!"

Beth shook her head and stood up, gesturing for the driver to stop.

He grabbed her arm. "Then how come they've upped the surveillance? Damn it, Beth. I thought you were one of us."

"I'm not one of any 'us'. I haven't told them anything about you but they're afraid I might tell you something about them."

Matt laughed. "You aren't that important."

* * * *

The nature of paranoia, she mused, is not being able to tell where the real fears overlap the imagined ones. Was her life part of a big pattern or did she only imagine it was? Was what

she knew important? Would telling it make a difference or was it something everyone knew and just didn't talk about?

Maybe her silence was a test? If she kept quiet, they knew she had passed. But what if no one knew the things she knew? Maybe they hadn't asked because they had no idea of the right questions or of the answers she might have.

Okay, so she wasn't important. But did she know something important? She thought maybe she did.

Beth didn't want to be part of the Burke's little movement. They would instigate something they hadn't imagined when the Sints retaliated against a human revolution.

She didn't want to toe a line drawn by the pawns of the Sintel. By remaining silent, did she commit the same sin that the average German did during the holocaust?

But who would be her confessor? The advocacy group had no voice but they did have cause. The agency had power but, even if made aware of the threat, would they have any reason to change the status quo?

Well, she'd wanted her choices and now she had a big one. Rather than think about the decision at hand, she examined all the choices she'd made since the one that sent her running in the park and into A'tan's care so long before.

Before long, she started crying, knowing a thing done cannot be undone, and wishing it weren't so.

When she stumbled into the little electronics shop and asked to use his computer, Stan nodded. Beth was glad he didn't ask questions about her tear-bloated eyes, red nose, and hoarse voice.

He just signed on, patted her head, and said, "Don't worry about the access charges." She heard what he meant, that he hoped she was all right, but just nodded. She wasn't certain she'd ever be all right again. She was done. Beth felt worse than empty. She felt as if there was nothing left that could be refilled.

One letter. Two addressees. Everything she knew.

Clicking send felt like pushing the go button on a Kevorkian device.

Who would find her first? Did she care?

Finale

As pretty girls do, Beth knew someone was watching her as she jogged along the winding pathways of the riverside park. She'd known that the email, sent openly to the diametrically opposed camps, would prompt a reaction.

Eventually, every choice had a consequence, though not always what one thinks and not always unpleasant.

His night-forest camouflage fading into his normal beige and brown mottling.

"I thought you were dead," she said. It was hard not to be surprised, even after everything she'd seen and learned. Was this merely strange luck or had he been sent?

A'tan shrugged, his yellow eyes never leaving her face. "If I'm caught here, again, I will be."

"Were you sent to deal with me?" Beth asked.

"Deal with you?" He sounded confused by her question. "I came to find you, yes. But not sent."

"Hunting, again?"

"No. Your plea for leniency succeeded with my judges. They considered taking you away from this place," he gestured widely, "an act of kindness and the more honorable course open to me under the circumstances."

She walked further into the shadows, wanting to see his face more clearly. The flickering streetlight concealed more than it revealed.

"Why come back?" she asked. "To thank me?" Maybe not everything that happened was entangled in her fate. Maybe some of it had to do with his.

A'tan looked at the few stars visible through the clouds. "Thanks? Your meddling denied me a respectable death for my crimes so I will never be free of your revenge."

"My revenge?" Was that what he thought motivated her?

"I can't go home. That is my punishment for taking you from yours. Satisfied?"

"You want sympathy from me?" Wasn't she living in a kind of exile, separated from most humans by her experiences and inability to speak of them?

"No. Not sympathy. I want to ask..."

"What?"

He opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, and closed it. Finally he said, "Why are you here?" He gestured at the trees, the park, and the night.

Why was she here? Though a lie would have been easy, Beth struggled to answer honestly, as much for her as for him.

"Tempting fate, I guess. They—my friends, my parents—want too much of me, but not enough. I'm restless,

disconnected." Beth paused and inhaled the cool night breeze. "I am no longer a part of..." She gestured vaguely at the park, the darkness, and everything beyond, "Anything. Maybe I never fitted in but, if so, I never knew it." She sighed. He waited without interruption. "I need to belong so I can find some way—some place—to feel safe." Beth shook her head, unhappy with the incompleteness of her answer. "I lost something I need to be happy here."

The Yeter nodded. "I took that from you?"

"Not just you," Beth shrugged, thinking that he had only begun the process, but unsure whether he'd done all the harm. Like bottled sand art, her life had been shaken and there was no way to separate the mixture back into the distinct layers she'd been so careful to maintain before her abduction. She no longer had the capacity to disconnect from one part of her emotions, and felt diluted fear all the time. Whatever self-sufficiency she'd acquired in the years starside didn't extend to adapting back to her old life. "That's why you came back? To ask me why I run in the park?"

He harrumphed, "No. I came ... I came to offer a choice."

"A choice?" He'd always said that she made bad decisions when offered choices and wondered what he'd think about her last one.

"You like choices."

He reached towards her then drew back as she said, "Not any more."

The Yeter seemed willing to take her bitter words as her answer—his coloring began changing to hide him in the dark—but she wasn't.

Life required choices. "Ask me your question, A'tan." Would he offer compensation for her suffering? What were those years worth? Beth waited for the sum that his guilt had totaled.

"Come with me," he said. His request left her dumbstruck. He wasn't offering money. He offered freedom or, at least, an escape. A path away from the dead end that her life had become. Was that what she wanted?

"Though it means my life to be caught here, though you may prefer your revenge to my retribution, though you may laugh at my offer, I decided to give you a choice."

His skin colors varied between camouflage and beige. Whatever else he wanted wasn't something easy to ask. Would her decision be any easier to make?

"The first time, I gave you none. In my arrogance—and because I, like everyone else, consider Solterrans inferior—I ignored your right of free will. I saw you and, in my grief and anger, thought nothing of the consequences that you would face by my decision. I took you, without first learning what you are. I regret that."

A'tan crouched and wrapped his fingers around her legs, not tightly, just making contact with her skin. His forehead rested on her stomach and Beth felt the flicker of life in her flesh.

"But, my pretty one, I cannot regret taking you." His fingers stroked the skin behind her knees. As if her body had never been absent from his touch, heat flared in her innermost self, responding with damp longing for more.

A'tan inhaled deeply, and then suddenly, as if burned, he leapt away. Almost growling, he said, "The choice is the one you had on Soranda but didn't have here. Stay with them or come with me. Be their slave or my willing companion."

He crossed his arms as she stepped closer. "Companion or seba?" she asked, wondering if his rigid position served to impede his intentions or prevent her approach. Beth stood as near as his forearms allowed, and almost laughed as he trembled.

A'tan looked over her head at the slowly moving river—or at the city lights reflected in the barely rippled surface—but aware, solely, of her.

"Or is that not my option?" she said.

"Do you demand that choice?" he growled. Since his Yeter physique was incapable of denying his response to her proximity, she knew he wanted her, whether she desired him or not. "Do you want that as a stipulation in our contract? Must I seek your permission for my desire?" His features settled into the poker face he wore for negotiation. "Or is it your passion that you are guarding against?"

Beth's hand clenched of its own accord. Drawing back for the punch, she saw the decision in his eyes not to block her blow, and her arm fell numbly to her side. The burn of tears blurred her vision and, before she blinked, his face seemed to ripple with concern. When Beth could see again, his expression was still the impassive mask.

"I don't want to make a deal." Beth turned and started back the way she came. Back to the gym, back to existing day-to-day, back to going mad under the suffocating scrutiny

of her parents and the not-so-subtle spies the authorities set upon her. Back to feeling half dead, half mad, half anything, back to denial and pretension.

The long fingers of one hand encircled her neck, preventing her from departing, from running away. The other hand splayed across her stomach, urging her into a backward step. His chest warmed her spine, and he released her neck, sliding his hand down her shoulder and under her arm to rest on her ribcage. The tips of those fingers, if brought together, would encage her breast. The thought made her quiver, but he said nothing and held her more securely.

A purr rumbled in his throat and Beth was glad that he felt the same contentment as she did in the embrace. She rested her head on his shoulder, welcoming his breath on the sensitive skin beneath her ear.

In words more exhaled than spoken, he said, "What do you want?"

"I..." Beth stopped, waiting as much for an answer to form as for the pinprick of his fangs in her neck. In neither was she disappointed. "No contracts, no settlements, no deals." She turned in his arms and laid her cheek on his chest. "I want you to cherish me, as if I were the mate you lost."

He growled again. "I cannot." Beth tried to pull away, knowing that he would leave her now, but he drew her back. "I can, however, treasure you as the unexpected flower I have found."

The hard pressure of unshed tears, lodging in her throat, dissolved as they flowed, her laughter and happy sighs punctuated by an occasional sob. Better than a tissue, A'tan

caught the salty drops on his tongue, savoring each as if they were made of wine.

Before long, his hands distracted her from her weeping and her sobs became gasps as he caressed her, ripping the fabric of her shirt as he sought access to her bare skin. Careful nips, gentle for a Yeter, covered her breasts. She struggled, never fully submitting but finally dominated by him. Her shorts joined her shirt; the lacy panties and bra beneath making him chuckle.

"What purpose do these serve?" he wondered aloud, yanking them away.

"Mostly decorative," she whispered, laughing. He covered her lips with his hand, muffling her cry as he filled her.

"Just for pretty. As you are," he murmured, smiling for the joke. She liked the idea of being mostly decorative. Her skills could be secondary to his passion for her. No relationship should be based on logic when nature provided a far better measure of compatibility between males and females.

His hands, strong on her waist, provided the rhythm of his pleasure—exactly hers. His muscular legs lifted him into her, deeply and again. Letting him be as rough as his nature required and hers demanded Beth exalted in the sheer joy of sensation. The ride, ever upward, needed no chemical or intoxicant. Just him—his hands, his cock, his passion—altered her in ways that she had longed for, even before she knew of his existence and the possibility of such fulfillment. Within the cage of his arms, she knew utter freedom. Never leaving the ground, she gained the stars.

They would talk about Beth for a long time on Europa Station. If her first stop there hadn't insured a lasting place in the gossip the second would. Arriving naked with a Yeter, seeking travel permission from Anir (and getting it), and her single purchase of a Jibarae tunic created enough stir to keep the rumors humming about the willing abductee. Beth noticed that most faces held longing and not loathing.

There were no laws to cover the situation and A'tan would have ignored them anyway but both were relieved when their departure wasn't challenged.

Much later, with his ship far beyond Sol's influence, Beth had a sudden stab of doubt and whispered, "How can this ever work? Don't you remember? We don't always get along." She cuddled in the hard circle of his embrace in the riot of cushions that was his preferred bedding.

Placing a careful experimental kiss on her lips, to fulfill her customs not his, A'tan chuckled. "Yes, you can be difficult." He caught her hand, which aimed a mock blow at his face, mid-swing and held it to his chest. She could feel the steady sturdy beat of his heart beneath her palm. Like a biological metronome, her pulse slowed to match his and an unfamiliar but oh-so-restful feeling settled on her soul. The opposite of violence is not more violence, she realized. On the other side lies peace.

Then he continued in a serious tone and, by his choice of words, gave Beth everything she had ever wanted or would ever need.

"Yes, se'taza, living with you can be difficult ... But not so as difficult as living without you."

As Pretty Girls Do
by Jolie Howard

In some ways—the ones that truly counted—she was important, indeed.

The End

* * * *

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